

Trends in Electoral Participation in Latin America¹

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Electoral participation is central to the functioning of democratic systems: people otherwise scarcely involved in a nation's political life nonetheless express their preferences among competing candidates on Election Day.

Democratic political participation is a much broader concept than voting, which is a more formal and episodic form of citizen participation. Political participation connotes ongoing involvement in the formulation, approval or implementation of public policies--a level of commitment and engagement in public affairs that rarely attracts more than a quarter of the adult population (CAPEL, 1989). In contrast, of the various forms of citizen participation—including involvement in political campaigns or party meetings, membership in community organizations, joining protests, or communicating with legislative representatives--voting is the only one in which more than 50 percent of the citizenry of democratic countries usually take part.

Since quantitative and comparative data are available for electoral participation but are more uneven and sparse for the broader notion of political participation, the evaluation of trends and levels in the region in this chapter will examine only the former. There is evidence that suggests, however, that voters are more likely than non-voters to be interested in politics and to participate more regularly in other forms of political activity (Putnam, 2000). One factor that will not be measured directly, but which clearly affects the quality of political participation, is the degree to which citizens acquire information about politics through newspapers, television and other media. Thus, from a conceptual standpoint, political participation should be measured in at least two dimensions: the *level* of participation, meaning the number of citizens that vote or otherwise participate to some degree in the political system; and the *intensity* of participation, meaning the extent to which citizens engage in the more demanding forms of participation and acquire information about politics (IDB, 2000).

Of course, when one refers to electoral participation and its value for democracy, implicit assumptions are being made about the nature of the voting process. It is assumed that elections are held in a context in which democratic freedoms are fully protected, and that the voting process is fair and honest. Considerable progress has been made across Latin America during the period of this study in terms of improving the fairness and credibility of elections. Electoral management bodies now exist in every country of the region, and in many countries these entities have taken on a more permanent character and assumed a growing number of functions. As a consequence, only in relatively few cases over the past decade have the procedures followed on Election Day or the tabulation of votes been perceived as fraudulent by objective observers.

¹ This article is based on the original version "Trends in electoral participation in Latin America", published in M. Payne, D. Zovatto, F. Carrillo and A. Allamand. *Democracies in Development: Politics and Reform in Latin America*. Washington: IADB-IDEA ed. 2002. Chapter 3.

Despite this important accomplishment, developing more permanent professional and managerial capacity in these electoral bodies could further enhance the electoral process. That would enable them to maintain accurate voter registration lists and effectively enforce regulations with respect to electoral and party financing and access to the media. The fairness of elections depends on more than simply guaranteeing an unbiased expression and counting of voter preferences. The broader issue of electoral fairness entails ensuring relatively equal access to campaign resources for candidates, a politically independent media, and transparency in the origin and use of campaign donations (see Chapter Seven). Efforts have been made across the region in these areas but, as is the case in even some of the more established democracies, serious problems remain. As a consequence, citizens in some countries remain skeptical about the integrity and fairness of the electoral process.²

Importance of Electoral Participation

The extent to which citizens exercise their right (or duty) to vote clearly affects the degree to which elections perform the functions expected of them in a modern democracy. Among the functions commonly mentioned are: 1) legitimizing governmental authority; 2) forming governments; 3) recruiting political leaders; 4) fostering public discussion and debate about issues; and 5) facilitating the development and exercise of citizenship (Heywood, 1997). While all of these functions are important, this chapter will focus on two that are central to the notion of democracy: *1) providing citizens a means to signal their preferences with respect to public policies* and *2) providing citizens a means to hold public officials accountable for their performance*.

Democratic representation entails a kind of bargain between citizens and elected officials. Citizens confer authority (by voting) in exchange for promises by politicians to pursue a given package of policy goals, serve the public good, and respect the law and the constitution. Given the informality of this transaction, the infrequency of elections, and the deficient information possessed by citizens, this process never produces fully responsive or even always honest politicians. But the effectiveness of democracy can be traced in part to the quality of this two-way exchange (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998).

The likelihood that elections will produce effective and accountable political representation hinges on a range of institutional factors, including the nature of the electoral and party systems, the capacity of the legislature, and the independence and effectiveness of agencies of horizontal accountability. However, it can be argued that at the foundation of “good” government is a well-informed and highly participatory citizenry.

The fewer the number of citizens who participate individually and as members of civil society organizations, the more probable it is that the public’s needs and demands will be ignored, and that public officials will give in to the natural inclination to pursue private interests at the expense of the public good. There are two broad dangers from low levels of electoral participation. First, they often result from relatively low participation by certain groups of citizens, such as the poor, the less educated, women, the young or the old, or people of particular ethnic backgrounds or geographical regions. If certain groups of citizens tend not to participate, it is likely that public policies will be biased against them.

² See Figure 4 for survey information on public opinion regarding this issue.

A vicious circle may arise in which under-participating groups are ignored in decision-making, thus further alienating them from the political system and reinforcing the bias in public policies. The second danger of low levels of political participation is that it means that the actions of public officials will be less subject to public scrutiny, thus increasing the possibility that unresponsive or corrupt behavior will fail to be noticed and consequently punished at the polls (IDB, 2000). Societies with low levels of political participation and knowledge will be less able to foresee and signal to public officials the policies that will lead to good performance, and less determined to press for implementation of those policies.

A low or declining level of electoral participation may not only hinder efficient democratic representation, it also may reflect a lack of confidence in democratic institutions, which could delay consolidation of the democratic regime or even threaten its stability.

Low electoral participation is of particular concern in societies where the transition to democracy is recent and a broad foundation of democratic values and practices is lacking. If large numbers of people do not vote, it is difficult to build a democratic culture and strengthen the legitimacy and functional capacity of democratic institutions such as the legislature and the judiciary. Further, it is difficult to foster transparent and responsible management of public funds and ensure that public officials are responsive to citizen concerns and refrain from illicit activities. In sum, low levels of electoral participation can set off a deteriorating cycle in which disappointment in the performance of politicians breeds further distrust and political alienation, in turn further reducing participation and the incentives for better performance. Disenchantment with democratic actors and institutions can open the doors of power to leaders and movements more willing to rule unconstitutionally.

Factors Affecting Electoral Participation

The question of why citizens participate actively in civic affairs in some countries or regions and not in others has been studied extensively.³ While it is not the intention of this chapter to review this literature or to explain voter turnout levels in the region, it is useful to briefly consider the main forces that have influenced levels of electoral participation. Though these factors have been found to shape turnout to some degree, a large portion of the variance remains unexplained in most studies.

Factors that have been fairly stable over time and could help explain comparative levels of electoral participation (though not sudden shifts in turnout) include political culture (that is, the level of interpersonal trust and civic cooperation); educational levels of the population; the level of economic development; the extent of the linkages between political parties and salient cleavage groups in society; and the degree of ethnolinguistic homogeneity (Powell, 1980).

Clearly, citizens would be more likely to vote in large numbers in societies where people place greater trust in others and are therefore more inclined to join civic

³ See Almond and Verba (1965), Nie and Verba (1975), Verba, Nie and Kim (1971), Powell (1980), Powell (1986), LeDuc, Niemi and Norris (1996), International IDEA (1997), and Jackman (1987).

organizations. More years of education and higher incomes would be expected to enhance citizens' political awareness as well as their capacity to participate in politics. However, given the minimal educational and resource demands of voting, income and education might have a greater effect on the intensity of political participation than on the level of electoral participation per se.

It would also be expected that when parties represent important lines of cleavage in society--such as religion or social class--the electoral outcomes take on a more readily identifiable significance and parties can more easily mobilize their more poorly informed and less interested supporters. Finally, greater ethnolinguistic diversity would likely reduce electoral participation, since the sense of national community is weaker and linguistic or cultural barriers may impede political activity and voting by those from minority groups.

An additional factor that is structural in nature pertains to legislation in place regarding to the process of registering to vote and voting itself. First, more citizens would be expected to participate when voting is obligatory rather than purely voluntary. In fact, studies of relatively established democracies suggest that compulsory voting laws result in somewhat higher levels of turnout (Powell, 1980; Jackman, 1987). The degree to which legal requirements make a difference, however, depends on the severity of the penalty and the likelihood of being caught and punished. If the penalty is minimal or rarely enforced, then the law will likely have little effect. Such conditions would be more likely to prevail in democracies such as those in Latin America, where the rule of law is less well established.

Second, the number of citizens who vote may be affected by whether election registration is automatic, mandatory or voluntary. If it is an obligation of the state to maintain updated lists of registered voters or periodically canvas citizens to create or update lists, then registration itself should not impose a significant obstacle to voting. One would also expect mandatory registration to encourage more citizens to register and vote. But if it is up to citizens to apply to the authorities to get on the registration lists, then a larger number may not become registered and therefore not vote.

In Latin America, registration and voting in most countries is currently mandatory, although this requirement is hotly debated. Advocates of penalties for non-voting view voting as a public duty and believe that such legislation can increase electoral participation above what it would otherwise be. Critics of legal mandates believe that voting is a right, and that including votes of citizens who participate only for fear of being penalized may spoil the election process.

In Brazil, Costa Rica and Ecuador, voter registration is automatic, while in 12 other countries it is compulsory. Registration is voluntary in only three countries: Chile, Colombia and Peru. Voting is compulsory in 16 of the 18 countries in this study. In Chile, voting is compulsory only for those who are registered to vote, and in Colombia and Nicaragua, voting is not mandatory. Colombia, then, is the only country where both registration and voting are fully voluntary.

Table 1. Compulsory Registration and Voting

	Registration			Voting	
	Compulsory	Automatic	Voluntary	Compulsory	Voluntary
Argentina	X			X ¹	
Bolivia	X			X	
Brazil		X		X ²	
Chile			X	X ³	
Colombia			X		X
Costa Rica		X		X	
Dominican Rep.	X			X	
Ecuador		X		X ⁴	
El Salvador	X			X	
Guatemala	X			X	
Honduras	X			X	
Mexico	X			X	
Nicaragua	X				X
Panama	X			X	
Paraguay	X			X	
Peru			X	X ⁵	
Uruguay	X			X	
Venezuela	X			X	

¹ Voting is mandatory up to the age of 70.

² Voting is mandatory for those 18 to 70 who are literate, and optional for those who are 16-17 years old, over 70, or illiterate.

³ Voting is mandatory only for citizens who are registered to vote.

⁴ Voting is mandatory for those who are literate and 65 years or younger.

⁵ Voting is mandatory up to age 70 for citizens who are literate.

Given that in some countries electoral turnout varies considerably from one election to the next, it is evident that more than just structural factors play a role in electoral participation. Factors that might cause episodic or more persistent upward and downward movements in turnout include changes in 1) the political regime; 2) the popularity of the candidates or the perceived importance of the issues at stake in a given election; 3) the level of confidence in democratic political institutions and practices (including the perceived integrity of electoral processes) or in the degree of respect for politicians; or 4) in the degree of institutionalization of political parties.

For example, turnout might be unusually high in the elections that mark the transition to democracy, since such changes in regime are often characterized by considerable citizen mobilization and enthusiasm for the exercise of new democratic

freedoms. When this extraordinary period wanes and the populace experiences the realities of governing in complex circumstances, turnout might decline in subsequent elections. Aside from this initial possible decline, electoral participation may oscillate in response to circumstantial factors, such as the attractiveness of particular candidates, the competitiveness of the electoral contest, or the perceived seriousness of the issues at stake.

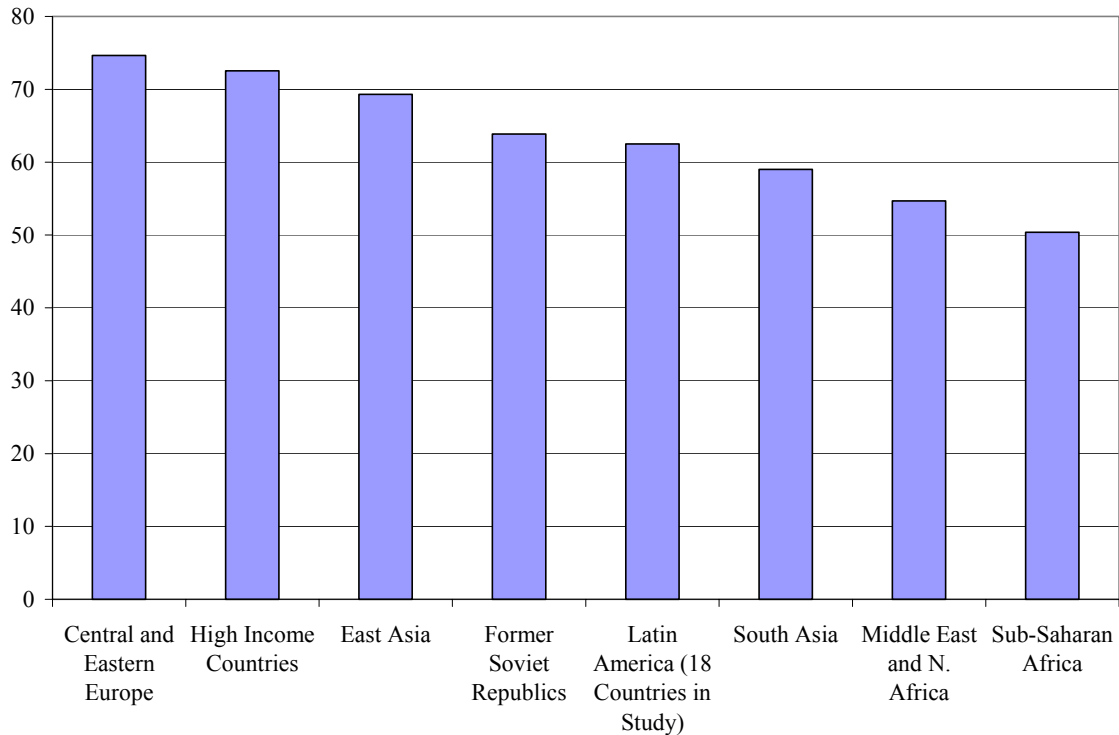
More systemic and enduring trends in electoral participation may be caused by the degree of faith that citizens have in their political leaders and their trust in representative and other governmental institutions. Thus, to some extent, long-term trends in electoral participation may reflect changes in public perceptions of the operation and performance of the democratic system. However, low turnout in one country relative to the regional average does not necessarily indicate a lack of confidence in democratic institutions. Rather, low turnout could be due to a more constant structural feature of the society, such as those discussed above.

Voter Turnout in Latin America

How does the level of electoral participation in Latin America compare with that of other regions of the world? The average *percentage of the eligible population* that turned out to vote in elections over 1990-95 in the 18 Latin American countries in this study was 62.5 percent. Figure 1 shows that this turnout is less than that in Central and Eastern Europe, the high-income countries, or East Asia, where more than 70 percent of the voting age population generally turns out to vote. Average turnout among the countries of the former Soviet Union is roughly comparable to that of this sample. Lower turnout was reported in the three remaining regions: South Asia, Middle East and North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa.⁴

Figure 1. Electoral Participation by World Regions, 1990-95 (Total votes as percent of voting age population)

⁴ The relative positions of the regions with respect to electoral participation does not change substantially if one restricts the sample of countries to only those whose political systems are reasonably democratic, as measured by the indicators of Freedom House.



Source: International IDEA (1997).

Average turnout for the region, however, masks a large degree of variation between countries. Table 2 shows the average percentage of registered voters and of the voting age population who participated in Latin American presidential elections from 1978-2000. For legislative elections, the percentage of registered voters who participated is shown.⁵ The average turnout in presidential elections measured as a share of registered voters ranges from a low of around 45 to 55 percent in Colombia, El Salvador and Guatemala to a high of around 90 percent in Chile and Uruguay. Electoral participation in legislative elections is somewhat lower in most countries.

When the more meaningful measure of voting as a share of the voting age population is considered, there are a few countries for which the turnout figure changes significantly. Given the optional nature of voter registration in Chile, turnout as a share of the voting age population is 10 percent less than turnout that is measured as a share of the number of registered electors. Turnout is also considerably lower in terms of voting age population in Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay, Guatemala and, to a somewhat lesser extent, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela and Ecuador. In these countries, there are a fairly large number of citizens who are not registered to vote. When voting age population is used as the denominator instead of the number of registered voters, the regional ranking of Chile, Peru and Bolivia goes down by more than two places, while that of Costa Rica goes up by three places.

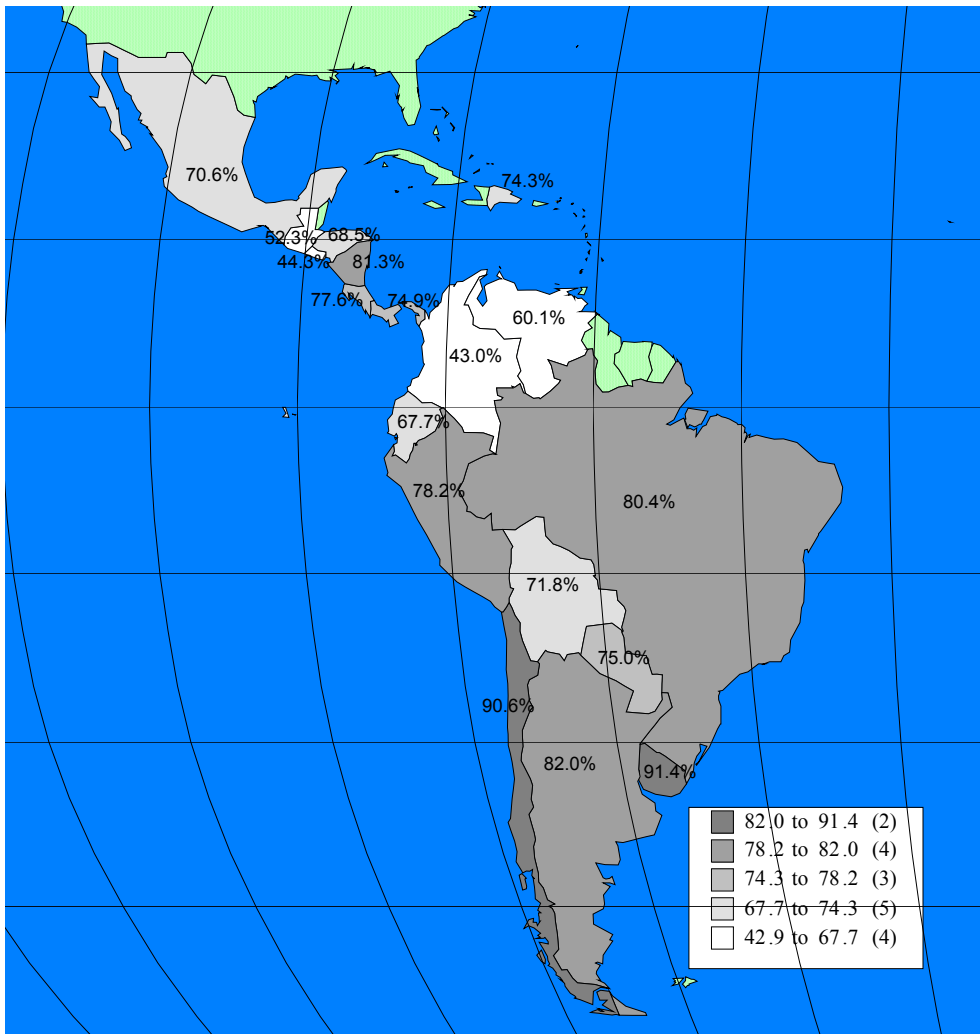
⁵ Turnout in legislative elections measured as a percentage of the voting age population is shown in Appendix B.

Table 2. Electoral Participation, 1978-2000

Country	<i>Presidential elections</i>			<i>Legislative elections</i>	
	Elections included	Turnout (% of registered voters)	Turnout (% of voting age populatio n)	Elections included	Turnout (% of registered voters)
Chile	1989, 93, 97	92.0	80.3	1989, 93, 99	92.0
Uruguay	1984, 89, 94, 99	89.8	95.6	1984, 89, 94, 99	90.0
Argentina	1983, 89, 95, 90	83.6	81.9	1983, 85, 87, 89, 91, 93, 95, 97, 99	83.0
Brazil	1989, 94, 98	82.9	76.0	1986, 90, 94, 98	85.3
Nicaragua	1990, 96	81.3	75.9	1990, 96	81.7
Peru	1980, 85, 90, 95, 00	80.9	67.8	1980, 85, 90, 95, 00	73.4
Costa Rica	1978, 82, 86, 90, 94, 98	79.6	79.8	1978, 82, 86, 90, 94, 98	79.1
Panama	1989, 94, 99	75.6	71.1	1994, 99	74.0
Honduras	1981, 85, 89, 93, 97	74.7	70.9	1981, 85, 89, 93, 97	72.3
Bolivia	1980, 85, 89, 93, 97	74.7	58.0	1980, 85, 89, 93, 97	74.7
Dominican Rep.	1978, 82, 86, 90, 94, 96, 00	73.2	61.2	1978, 82, 86, 90, 94, 98	67.0
Venezuela	1978, 83, 88, 93, 98, 00	72.9	61.8	1978, 83, 88, 93, 98, 00	71.0
Ecuador	1978, 84, 88, 92, 96, 98	72.7	61.7	1979, 84, 86, 88, 90, 92, 94, 96, 98	69.4
Paraguay	1989, 93, 98	68.0	54.2	1989, 93, 98	65.5
Mexico	1982, 88, 94, 00	66.5	58.3	1982, 85, 88, 91, 94, 97, 00	65.0
Guatemala	1985, 90, 95, 99	56.6	41.4	1985, 90, 95, 99	49.0
El Salvador	1989, 94, 99	47.7	41.9	1988, 91, 94, 97, 00	50.2
Colombia	1978, 82, 86, 90, 94, 98	44.1	39.3	1978, 82, 86, 90, 91, 94, 98	41.1
LAC average		73.2	65.5		71.2

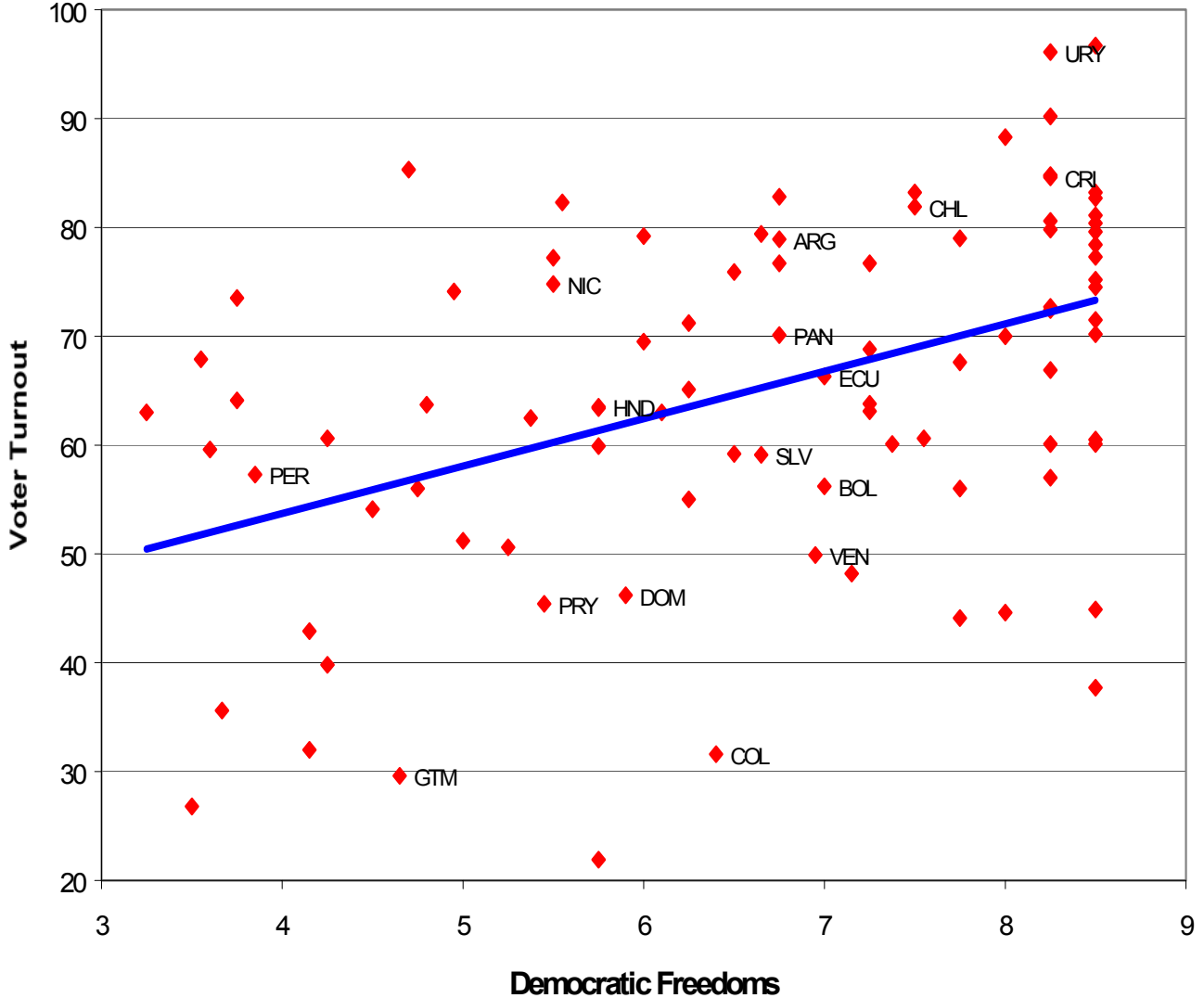
When just the 1990s are considered (Figure 2), most countries are clustered in the range between 68 and 80 percent of registered voters participating in elections. However, in four countries--Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala and Venezuela--turnout is 60 percent or below. In the 1990s, turnout has averaged above 80 percent in Uruguay, Chile, Argentina, Nicaragua and Brazil. Turnout has generally been at this level in Costa Rica as well, except for 1998, when it dipped to close to 70 percent. El Salvador and Guatemala had the lowest level of electoral participation, with fewer than 45 percent of registered voters exercising their right to vote.

Figure 2. Average Turnout in Presidential Elections, 1990s
(Total votes as percent of registered voters)



It is readily seen, then, that registration and voting laws alone cannot account for the varying levels of electoral participation in Latin America. Even though voting is compulsory in all countries except Colombia and Nicaragua, there is still a large range in voter turnout. Despite the presence of such laws, in several countries as much as 40 percent of registered voters still do not vote. Though not compelled by law, more citizens in Nicaragua turn out to vote than in all but three of the countries where voting is mandatory.

Figure 3. Turnout vs. the Democratic Freedom Index



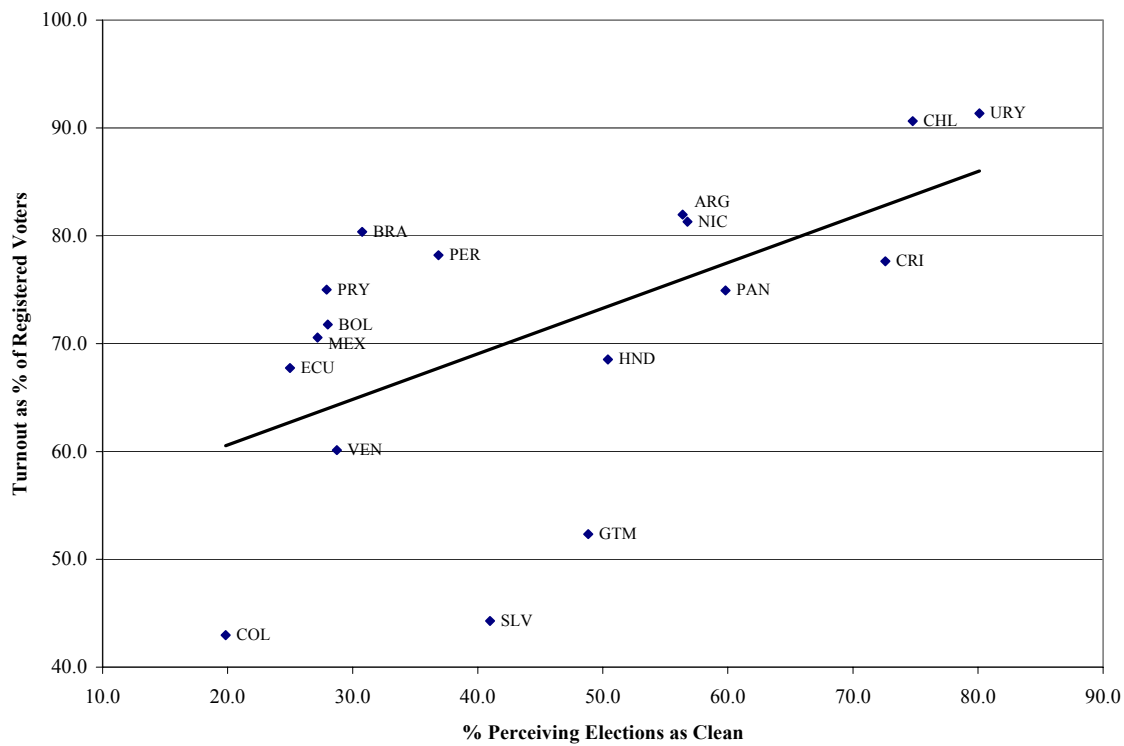
Note: This figure plots for each country the average percent of the eligible population that voted in elections from 1990-95, the average of Freedom House ratings for political rights and civil liberties (rescaled from 1 to 10), and the democracy indicator provided by Jaggers and Gurr (1995) in the Polity III database.

Two factors associated with the level of electoral participation are the degree to which political rights and civil liberties are protected, and the perceived integrity of the electoral process. As shown in Figure 3, countries across the world where democratic freedoms are more highly respected have higher rates of turnout. Even when other control factors such as income levels, literacy rates and the degree of ethnolinguistic fragmentation are considered, the influence of the scope and depth of democratic freedoms remains

robust.⁶ Thus, the extent of political freedom and competition, and perhaps the depth of respect for democratic principles, appear to motivate electoral participation.

Data from the 18 Latin American countries in this study clearly show that electoral participation in presidential elections (as a percent of registered voters) is associated with the perceived integrity of the electoral process (Figure 4). Despite efforts across the region to reduce or eliminate fraud in the election process, citizens in a number of countries are not convinced that such processes are sufficiently clean and fair. The association with electoral participation suggests that if steps could be taken to increase public confidence in elections, turnout might increase.

Figure 4. Turnout in Presidential Elections vs. the Perceived Integrity of Electoral Processes



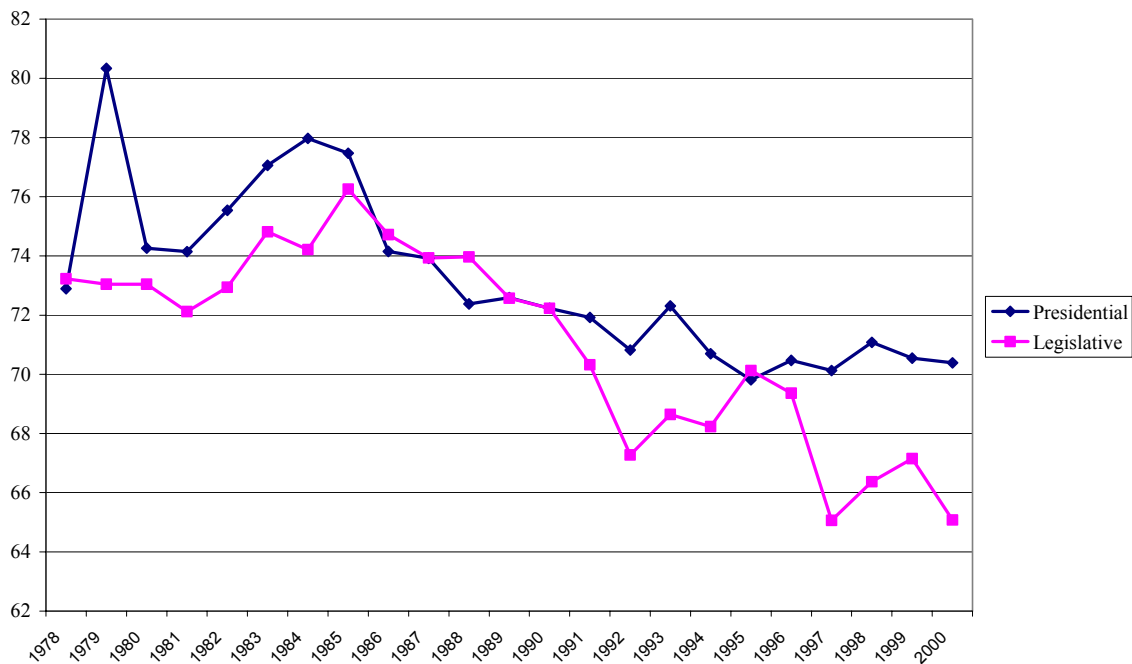
Note: The percentage perceiving elections as “clean” is an average of the responses from each country to the 1999/2000 Latinobarometer surveys.

⁶ The index of democratic freedoms remains statistically significant when any combination of per capita GDP, the literacy rate and an index of ethnolinguistic diversity are included as variables in the regression analysis. When all of the variables are considered, ethnolinguistic diversity and GDP per capita are not statistically significant, while the literacy rate and the index of democratic freedoms are. The association between the index of democratic freedom and the turnout level is more statistically significant when the least free countries (those with an index rating less than 3) are excluded from the analysis. This finding is consistent with the hypothesis that greater political freedoms encourage participation. In the case of highly restrictive authoritarian regimes, one might expect citizens to participate in large numbers despite the absence of real competition and open political debate, since abstention is more likely to result in harsh penalties and voting may be more directly coerced.

Trends in Electoral Participation

How has the level of electoral turnout in Latin America evolved over the past two decades? Is there a clear and persistent upward or downward trend in electoral participation? Figure 5 plots the average turnout for 18 Latin American countries in presidential and legislative elections from 1978-99. Given that elections occur only every four or five years in most countries, the turnout value for one election is included in the computation of the regional average for a period of four years: the year before the election actually took place; the year of the election; and two years following the election. In this way the figure computed for the average regional turnout is not distorted by the differences in the particular set of countries included in each year's average.

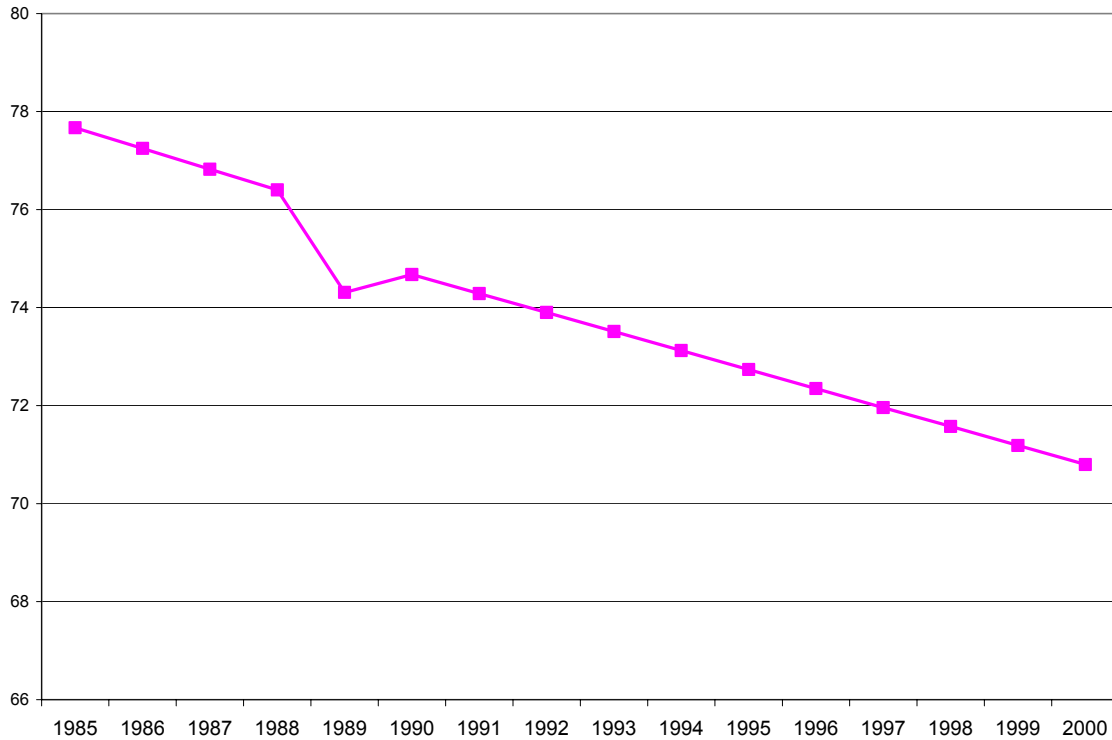
Figure 5. Evolution of Electoral Turnout in Latin America, 1978-2000



Note: The computation of the regional average for a given year includes turnout figures for countries considered at that time to be “democratic.” The elections included are the same as those in Table 2.

Figure 6 shows the trend in average turnout in a somewhat more rigorous manner. It first estimates a linear trend line for each country that plots “predicted” values for each year of the study. These predicted values are derived from the actual values using a statistical procedure. A regional average for each year was computed on the basis of these predicted values.

Figure 6. Trend in Electoral Turnout in Presidential Elections, 1985-2000
(Average percentage for each year based on predicted values)



Note: For each country, a least squared regression procedure was used to estimate a best-fit trend line from the actual turnout values. The regional average plotted in the figure is computed on the basis of the individual country estimates for each year.

Figures 5 and 6 show a clear but not precipitous declining trend in electoral turnout. However, some caution must be exercised in interpreting these figures, since the trend line potentially captures two types of developments. On the one hand, the trend line reflects the average of the changes *within* countries across time. If this were the only phenomenon at work, a downward trend would unambiguously point to a decline in turnout in most countries of the region. But on the other hand, the lines show the effects on the regional average of the gradual inclusion in the study sample of new countries in which elections were previously not held, or where democracy was insufficiently established to be included in the study.

Starting with 1985, when 14 of the 18 countries are considered “democratic” and are included in the computation of the regional average, Figure 5 shows that the average turnout in presidential elections fell by about 7 percent--from 77 to 70 percent. Turnout in legislative elections declined by a somewhat more sharp 11 percent--from 76 to 65 percent. Whatever its interpretation, this aggregate trend, while significant, is not yet a cause for serious alarm. Supporting this benign assessment is the fact that average turnout as a share

of registered voters for presidential elections has remained fairly steady since 1991, hovering between 70 and 72 percent.

Figure 6 plots the average of the estimated (predicted) turnout values for each country. It shows a trend that is similar in terms of its overall direction and magnitude.⁷ The average of the estimated values declined from about 78 percent in 1985 to about 71 percent in 2000.

According to the reasoning above, the downward trend that appears in the figures may not reflect a general decline in turnout in most countries of the region. Rather, the decline in the regional average could have resulted from the gradual inclusion after 1985 of four additional countries characterized by lower levels of turnout than the 14 countries included previously. In that case, turnout might be fairly constant across time in most countries. The only change would have been in the composition of the sample. A more careful analysis, however, shows that the downward trend does indeed reflect a decline in turnout in countries of the region. The average turnout of the four countries added to the sample after 1985 is, if anything, larger than the 14 countries previously included. Thus, the average decline in turnout could actually be slightly over 7 percent.

How much of this decline is due to the post-transition election effect discussed earlier? It might be expected that turnout would be unusually high in the inaugural election of a democratic system. Most countries in the study experienced a transition from authoritarian to democratic systems during the period under consideration. Therefore, the aggregate decline could be a product of these individual country descents from an unusually high initial turnout figure. However, this possibility is only weakly supported by the data. On average, only 1 percent separates the rate of electoral participation in inaugural presidential elections from that of the succeeding election. Thus, the decline cannot be attributable solely to this effect.

As always, however, the aggregate trend line conceals widely diverging patterns in different countries across the region. Individual countries do not show a neat conformity to the aggregate trend of gradual decline. Some show unambiguous declines or increases in turnout, while others show relative stability and unpredictable upward and downward movements (Figure 7 and Table 3; see also Appendix B).

Turnout has clearly fallen during the period in Venezuela, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Brazil. Of these, Venezuela, Ecuador and El Salvador show the sharpest drops. In Venezuela, turnout as a share of registered voters went from about 87 percent in 1978 to about 56 percent in 2000. In Ecuador, turnout fell from 81 percent in 1979 to 64 percent in 1998. In El Salvador, turnout dropped from 55 percent in 1989 to 39 percent in 2000. Given the complexities of the ballot in legislative elections in Brazil, there was an extraordinarily large proportion (around 30 percent) of blank or invalid votes cast until the 1998 election. With an improved voting system, 15 percent more ballots in legislative elections were validly cast for a party or candidate in the 1998 election. Thus, this increase could be seen as offsetting the decrease in votes cast as a share of registered voters.

⁷ For each country, a best-fit linear regression line is computed from the actual turnout values. On the basis of the equation describing this best-fit line, estimated values are computed for each year, even those in which elections were not actually held. This trend is more stable than the actual trend since a linear fit is assumed, when the actual turnout values may not follow such a pattern.

Aside from these six countries where the turnout trend is unambiguously downwards, there are two additional cases where there is a visible, but provisional, negative trend. Turnout in Costa Rica was stable at around 80 percent until the most recent two elections (1998 and 2002), when it fell to around 70 percent. Turnout in Nicaragua fell 10 percent between 1990 and 1996, but we must wait for definitive results from the most recent election (November 2001) to see if this trend continued. Relatively minor negative trends in electoral turnout have also occurred in Argentina, Bolivia and Chile. In the Chilean case, turnout fell slightly from an extraordinarily high initial level of over 94 percent in 1990 to about 90 percent in 1999. In Argentina, turnout fell from 86 percent to 82 percent from 1983 to 1999. Similarly, turnout in Bolivia declined from about 74 percent in 1980 to about 71 percent in 1997.

Only in three countries was there an increasing trend, but in no case was it very profound. In Paraguay, turnout as a share of registered voters rose dramatically from 54 percent in 1989 to about 81 percent in 1998. But given that the number of voters who went to the polls actually decreased between 1989 and 1993, the apparent increase between the first two elections in the democratic period was due to the inflated voter registry used in the 1989 election. As a consequence, turnout as a proportion of registered voters was underestimated for the 1989 election (Riquelme and Riquelme, 1997). Nonetheless, there was a real increase in absolute and relative turnout between the 1993 and 1998 elections, since turnout as a share of the voting age population reached close to 60 percent after having been in the 50 percent range. In the Dominican Republic, turnout appears to have fallen from 1978 to 1990, but to have then risen again in the subsequent three presidential elections to a level above that of 1978.⁸ Turnout also rose slightly in Uruguay from an already impressive 88 percent in 1984 to about 92 percent in 1999.

In the remaining four countries in the study, no clear trend can be discerned. In Mexico and Colombia, turnout has moved up and down erratically with no clear trend in either direction. In Panama, it has been relatively constant over three elections. In Peru a declining trend that started after the second post-transition election of 1985 was reversed in 2000, as turnout rose from about 74 percent in 1995 to around 83 percent in 2000. The turnout figure for 2000 is suspect, however, since the results of this election were heavily disputed by the opposition and by international observers. In addition, another factor, particularly in the 1995 legislative and 2000 second round presidential election, was a large share of invalid or null votes in the total. Though voters went to the polls in similar numbers, an unusually large percentage (31 percent in the 1995 legislative elections) either did not specify a preference or spoiled their ballots.

Thus, taking all the countries into account--even those where the trend is not very significant or long-term--we find that turnout has declined in 11 countries and risen in three countries. In the remaining four countries, no clear trend can be discerned.

Figure 7. Trends in Turnout, 1985-2000

⁸ The dramatic fall in participation in the 1998 legislative elections can probably be attributed to the fact that beginning in that year, elections for the president were not held concurrently.

(Best-fit linear regression line)

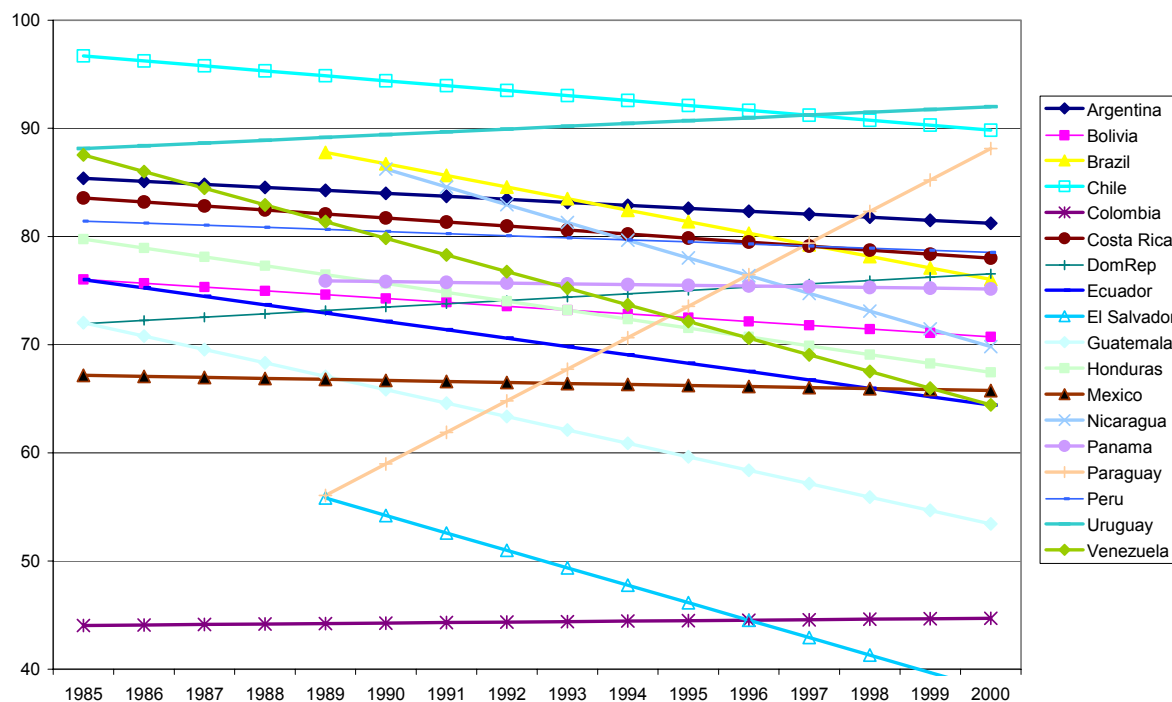


Table 3. Trends in Turnout in Presidential Elections, 1978-2000

Country	Avg. turnout (% of registered voters)	Slope of trend line	Description of trend
El Salvador	47.76	-1.61	Clear, sharp negative trend
Venezuela	72.85	-1.54	Clear, sharp negative trend
Guatemala	56.57	-1.24	Clear, sharp negative trend
Brazil	82.93	-1.07	Clear, sharp negative trend
Honduras	74.71	-0.82	Relatively clear negative trend
Ecuador	72.67	-0.77	Relatively clear negative trend
Nicaragua	81.31	-1.64	Only two elections, but 10% drop from 1st to 2nd

Chile	92.00	-0.46	Relatively small negative trend from very high initial level
Costa Rica	79.61		Drops in most recent two elections
Bolivia	74.69	-0.35	Clear, relatively small negative trend
Argentina	83.58	-0.28	Clear, relatively small negative trend
Uruguay	89.81	0.26	Relatively small positive trend
Dominican Rep.	73.29	0.31	Ambiguous, slight upward trend
Paraguay	68.01	2.92	Upward trend between most recent elections
Colombia	44.12		No clear trend
Mexico	66.54		No clear trend
Panama	75.56		No clear trend
Peru	80.86		Ambiguous; if data correct recent election reversed negative trend

Note: Only those elections that took place during the “democratic” period for each country (as defined in Table 1 in the Preface) are included in the computation of the average for the period and of the slope.

Conclusions

Focusing narrowly on the question of electoral participation, this chapter does not permit more far-reaching conclusions about the effectiveness or equity of democratic delegation and representation in Latin America. Although the level of electoral participation may be related to the level and intensity of participation conceived in more general terms, the two factors do not necessarily go together. What can be said is that on average about 62 percent of eligible citizens vote in major national elections. Whether this is considered to be high, moderate or low turnout depends, of course, on the basis for comparison. That is, turnout relative to what other countries or sets of countries and what periods of time?

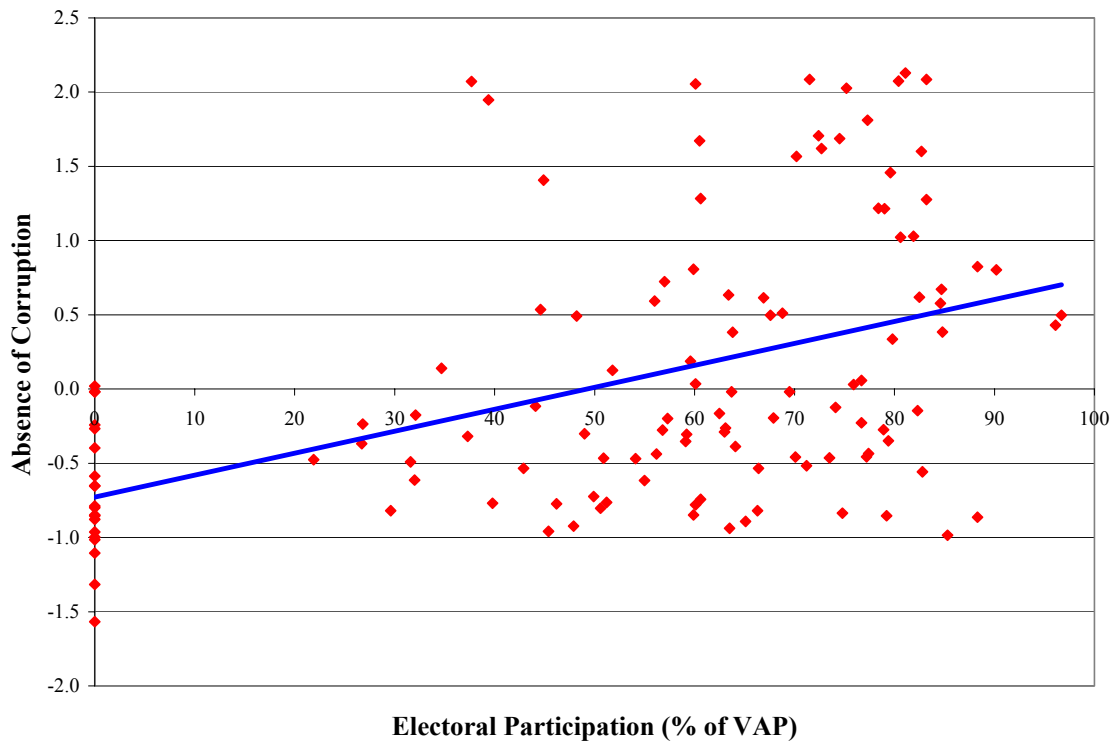
In absolute terms, the regular abstention of almost 40 percent of the eligible population from taking part in a process so fundamental to the working of democratic systems would appear to suggest a substantial deficiency in Latin American democracies. However, given that a far lower proportion of citizens vote in some stable and apparently successful democracies, such as the United States (50 percent) and Switzerland (45 percent), this fact by itself may not be cause for serious concern. Relative to other regions, Latin American turnout is roughly in the middle of the pack: below the countries of Western and Central Europe, but above the poorer and less democratic regions of Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa and South Asia. If the participation levels of the more established democracies are taken as the standard, then Latin American systems clearly could benefit from higher levels of voting.

More extensive and intensive political participation might enhance the fairness of representation, improve the efficiency of government, and reduce corruption. The level of voter turnout likely corresponds to some degree to measures of this broader notion of political participation. To the extent that this is true, we would expect higher turnout figures to be related to these other positive outcomes. The analysis of available cross-

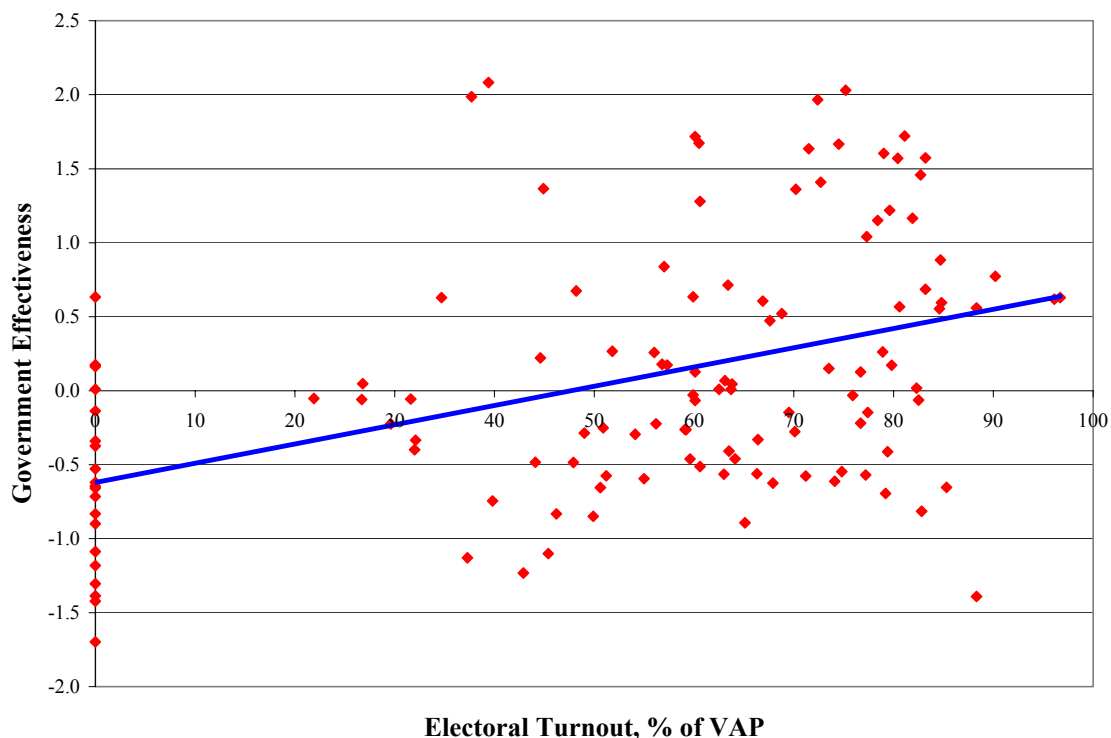
national data suggests that turnout is associated at least to some extent with the absence of corruption and better governmental performance (Figure 8a and 8b). If the level of respect for democratic freedoms as well as political knowledge (or inquisitiveness) of citizens are also taken into account, this relationship becomes stronger (Adser, Boix and Payne, 2000).

Figure 8. Electoral Turnout vs. Government Performance

a. Turnout vs. the Absence of Corruption



b. Turnout vs. Government Effectiveness



Sources: Data on the absence of corruption and government effectiveness from Kaufmann, Kraay and Zoido-Lobaton (1999a and 1999b); electoral participation data from International IDEA (1997).

Note: The turnout of countries scoring an average of 2.5 or below in terms of (an inverted scale) of Freedom House's ratings of political rights and civil liberties (categorized "not free") is considered to be zero in Figures 8a and 8b. It is assumed that in cases of minimal democratic freedom, turnout is not valuable from the stand point of controlling leaders. If anything, a high level of turnout in such cases may reflect a higher coercive capability on the part of the political leadership.

Electoral participation varies considerably from one country to the next in Latin America. In seven countries, turnout as a share of registered voters has been close to or above 80 percent. In three countries, less than 60 percent of registered citizens vote on average, while in the remaining eight countries turnout has ranged on average from about 65 to 80 percent.

Though the level of electoral participation across the region has declined modestly since the mid-1980s, it appears to have stabilized more recently. On the whole, turnout appears to have declined in 11 countries. Of these, the decline was significant in six countries and especially sharp in three others. Only in three countries has the trend been at least modestly positive. In the rest, there has either been little change or an ambiguous pattern of change.

Thus, in the region as a whole, the trends in turnout do not point to either a clear crisis of representation or to a growing legitimization of democracy. While the trend in the regional average does not indicate serious troubles, the sharp decline in several countries (particularly Ecuador, Venezuela and El Salvador) does appear to reflect increased disenchantment with democratic politics. The legitimacy crisis has in some cases resulted

in political instability, the ascent to power of political outsiders, the virtual collapse of the political party system, or significant constitutional changes. Thus, such a pattern extended into the future could entail problems for the institutionalization of democracy for a significant portion of the region.

POST SCRIPTUM

Electoral participation in Latin America in 2001-2002

a. Presidential Elections

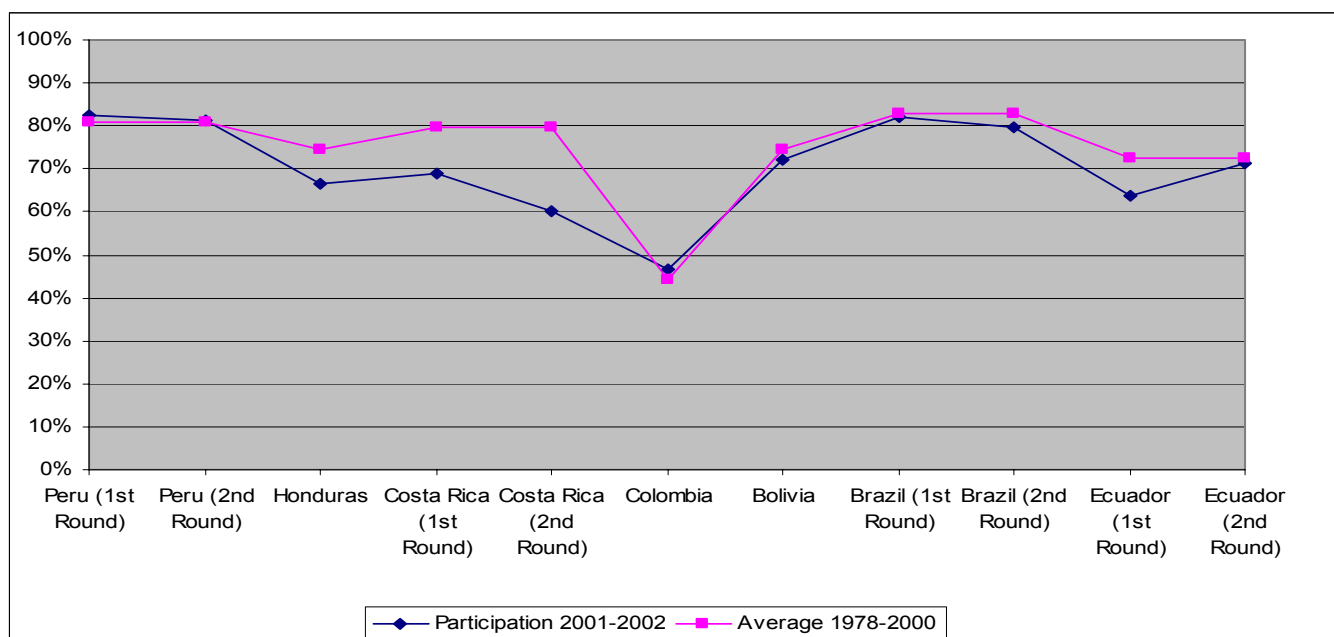
In 2001 and 2002, eight countries in the region held presidential elections (Peru, Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa Rica, Colombia, Bolivia, Brazil and Ecuador). On average, participation in these countries, with the exception of Nicaragua,⁹ was 70%, very close to levels registered throughout Latin America during the 1978-2000 period (73.2%).

A country by country comparison of data on the latest electoral process held reveals that no drastic changes have taken place in levels of participation, with the exception of Costa Rica, where the 2002 runoff elections registered a 10% decline in electoral participation as compared with the last election held there (1998). Other countries such as Peru, Honduras, Colombia and Brazil have maintained levels of electoral participation very close to those of the preceding electoral process. It should be stressed that Colombia continues to have the highest abstention rate of all the countries in the region (53.5%).

When a comparison was made with the average for the 1978-2000 period, a downward tendency in electoral participation was clearly noted in Costa Rica (11% and 19% below the average), Honduras (8.3%), Bolivia (2.6%) and Ecuador (9% and 1.5% below the average). A slightly upward trend was observed in Peru and Colombia (7% and 2%, respectively), as well as a similar phenomenon in Brazil, where average participation remained steady at 82% (Graph 9).

⁹ Even though over a year has gone by since elections were held (4 November 2001), the Supreme Electoral Council has yet to publish the respective official data on electoral participation.

Graph 9
Country by country comparison of participation in 2001-2002 presidential elections
with average participation for 1978-2000



Source: Prepared by the author based on information provided by the respective Electoral Bodies.

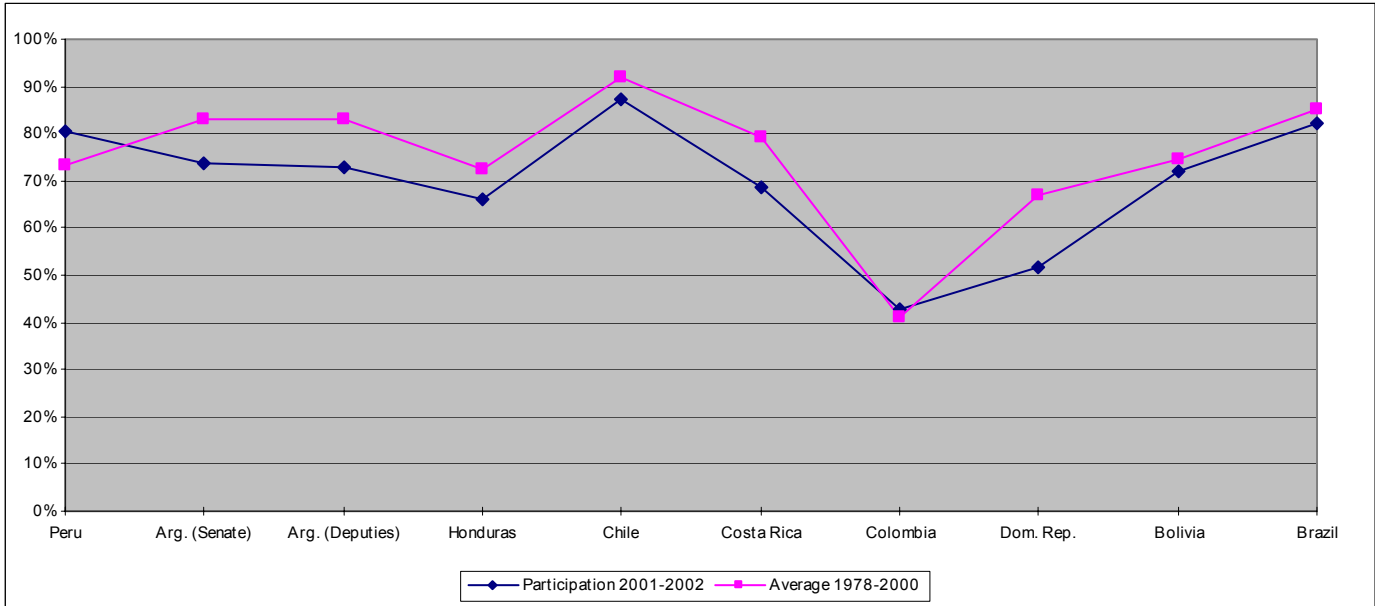
b. Parliamentary Elections

During the 2001-2002 period, legislative elections were held in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Honduras, Peru and the Dominican Republic.¹⁰ When observing the electoral participation data of these countries, Colombia and Dominican Republic stand out as exhibiting the lowest levels of electoral participation, registering 42.9% and 51.6%, respectively.

When participation in 2001-2002 is compared with the average recorded for the 1978-2000 period, results show a greater decrease in electoral participation in the Dominican Republic, with 12%, and in Argentina and Costa Rica, with 10% each. Positive recovery is also apparent in Peru with 7% participation. Nevertheless, looking at the region overall, no significant difference is observed between the average participation registered in the electoral processes in 2001-2002 (68%) and those of the 1978-2000 period (65.5%). Participation levels for each country appear in Graph 10, which again draws attention to Colombia as the country with the lowest level of electoral participation in parliamentary elections.

¹⁰ National participation data for the 2002 parliamentary elections in Ecuador 2002 were unavailable at the time that this article was being prepared; therefore, they are not included in this analysis.

Graph 10
Country by country comparison of participation in 2001-2002 parliamentary elections
with average participation for 1978-2000



Source: Prepared by the author based on information provided by the respective Electoral Bodies.

As we pointed out at the beginning, to gain an appreciation of electoral behaviour in Latin America, nuances in and distinctions between electoral behaviour in each country in the region must be introduced. To do this, deeper analysis must be made of the motivational, structural, socio-economic, political and cultural issues that affect abstentionism at a given historical juncture.

Thus, attention should be drawn to the cases of Costa Rica and Argentina in an analysis of the 2001-2002 period. In the former, despite its reputation as a well-established (not transitional) democracy, the deteriorated credibility of the citizens in institutions, political parties and leaders ended up eroding the political party system, leading to deeper problems with stability, governability and participation. The 2002 elections signalled an historical change in the makeup of the country's political forces, revealing the effects of the citizens' discontent with their traditional political parties, and with politics in general.

In the case of Argentina, the effects of the economic crisis asphyxiating the country, and the resultant discontent with political leadership, are apparently being reflected at the polls. Since voting is mandatory in Argentina and penalties are stipulated for those who fail to cast their vote, electoral participation could conceivably be even lower if legal force were not involved. Likewise, we must bear in mind that figures for null votes and blank ballots were very high (21.89% altogether), which made a negative impact on participation.

In short, we could say overall that, with the exceptions of Costa Rica, Argentina and the Dominican Republic, participation in the electoral processes carried out in this period¹¹ closely follows the average electoral behaviour recorded in Latin America during the 1978-2000 period.

¹¹ The specific data for each country are presented in the Appendix.

APPENDIX

Table 1
Electoral participation in presidential elections in Latin America (2001-2002)

Country	Date	Electoral Roll	Participation		Abstention	
			Absolute	Relative	Absolute	Relative
Peru (1 st Round)	April 2001	14,898,435	12,264,349	82.3%	2,634,086	17.7%
Peru (2 nd Round)	June 2001	14,899,292	12,128,899	81.4%	2,770,393	18.6%
Honduras	November 2001	3,437,454	2,281,095	66.4%	1,156,359	33.6%
Costa Rica (1 st Round)	February 2002	2,279,036	1,568,603	68.8%	710,433	31.2%
Costa Rica (2 nd Round)	April 2002	2,279,036	1,372,128	60.2%	906,908	39.8%
Colombia	May 2002	24,208,311	11,249,734	46.5%	12,958,577	53.5%
Bolivia	June 2002	4,155,055	2,994,065	72.1%	1,160,990	27.9%
Brazil (1 st Round)	October 2002	115,254,113	94,780,545	82.2%	20,473,568	17.8%
Brazil (2 nd Round)	November 2002	115,254,113	91,590,537	79.5%	23,663,576	20.5%
Ecuador (1 st Round)	October 2002	8,154,425	5,298,581	64.9%	2,855,845	35%
Ecuador (2 nd Round)	November 2002	8,154,425	5,807,109	71.2%	2,347,316	28.8%

Source: Zovatto, Daniel and Aguilar, Ileana. Prepared by the author based on information provided by the respective Electoral Bodies.

Table 2
Electoral participation in parliamentary elections in Latin America (2001-2002)

Country	Date	Electoral Roll	Participation		Abstention	
			Absolute	Relative	Absolute	Relative
Peru	April 2001	14,898,435	11,987,641	80.5%	2,910,794	19.5%
Argentina (Senate)	October 2001	24,883,991	18,348,013	73.7%	6,535,978	26.3%
Argentina (Deputies)	October 2001	24,883,991	18,153,874	73.0%	6,730,117	27.0%
Honduras	November 2001	3,437,454	2,279,366	66.3%	1,158,088	33.7%
Chile	December 2001	8,075,446	7,034,292	87.1%	1,041,154	12.9%
Costa Rica	February 2002	2,279,708	1,569,401	68.8%	710,307	31.2%
Colombia	March 2002	23,998,685	10,297,405	42.9%	13,701,280	57.1%
Dominican Republic	May 2002	4,594,941	2,371,691	51.6%	2,223,250	48.4%
Bolivia	June 2002	4,155,055	2,994,065	72.1%	1,160,990	27.9%
Brazil	October 2002	115,184,176	94,741,583	82.3%	20,442,593	17.7%

Source: Zovatto, Daniel and Aguilar, Ileana. Prepared by the author based on information provided by the respective Electoral Bodies.