

# **Community Size, Social Capital, and Political Participation in Latin America**

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## **Abstract**

Political participation is often conceived of as a largely individual act. That is, the decision to participate in politics is one made by an individual and, hence, explanations grounded in individual level attributes such as socio-economic status are central to understanding political participation. In this paper we emphasize the context in which that choice is made: features of that context make some choices more likely than others both in terms of the decision to participate but also in terms of the kinds of participation in which to engage. We examine the role that social capital plays in shaping political participation in Latin America and show that higher levels of social capital promote more conventional forms of political participation such as contacting elected representatives. On the other hand, lower levels of social capital help to promote protest behavior. Given marked differences in levels of social capital across rural and urban areas we are therefore able to show that there exists a geography of political participation across Latin America. Individual factors such as SES attributes are still important in shaping participation but so, too, is the context in which individuals live.

## Introduction

Political participation is often framed in terms of an individual level choice and action. In this paper we emphasize the context in which that choice is made: features of that context make some choices more likely than others both in terms of the decision to participate but also in terms of the kinds of participation in which to engage. We examine the role of social capital in shaping the context of political participation. More specifically we highlight the difference in social capital that exists between larger and smaller communities and that shapes participation in quite different ways.

We show differences in forms of political participation that are brought about by differences in social capital between areas. Several forms of conventional political participation such as contacting elected representatives or attending meetings of the municipality are more common in more rural/less urban areas, where social ties are stronger and citizens tend to trust one another and trust local political authorities. Indeed, in addition to highlighting the role of social capital, one of our contributions emphasize acts of political participation over and above voting. Actions such as contacting local officials tend to be much less studied as compared to voting. Yet, as Dalton (2008) notes, there is a strong argument for why these kinds of acts of participation are very important:

non-electoral methods of political action expand the potential influence of the citizenry. For instance, citizens can focus on issues of greatest concern. The issue might be as broad as nuclear disarmament or as narrow as the policies of the local school district – citizens, not elites, decide. In addition, when participation expands beyond elections it allows citizens to select how and when they participate, since they do not have to wait until the next election to be active. (Dalton, 2008: 93)

Some forms of political participation such as voting receive the bulk of scholarly attention while other – important – areas receive much less attention.. But Dalton's point is that other forms of participation are consequential and yet often over-looked. Moreover, the factors that drive these other forms of participation is often different from the factors that drive voting. For example, we know that a sense duty to vote is a powerful driver of turnout (Blais, 2000; 2006). But it seems to be the case that this sense of duty does not seem to be associated with other kinds of acts such as contacting politicians (Dalton, 2008: 87) or engaging in protest. These other forms of participation

such as contacting politicians thus seem to have different, and less well-understood, drivers. Importantly, those other factors may not be individual level ones such as duty to vote but may be tied to the broader context in which an individual lives. There may, in other words, be community level factors that help drive some forms of political participation. In this paper, we assess how differences in social context between smaller and larger communities affect many participatory activities beyond voting with particular emphasis on the role of social capital.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we present a brief overview of the (very large) literature on political participation. Second, we present our theoretical arguments regarding the link between social capital and the geography of political participation in Latin America. Third, the research design and the empirical strategy used in the paper are discussed before the main findings are presented. The final section discusses some of the key findings and concludes.

### **Participation in context: the role of social capital**

The literature on political participation is a very large one and we do not (in fact cannot) review such a large literature here. Rather we will focus on one part of that literature – the part that grants a role to social capital in helping to explain participation. Part of our point here is to try and differentiate between types of political participation: social capital is likely to be more useful in supporting some forms of participation than others.

Patterns of political participation are often understood in terms of an individual level decision to take part and write to the mayor, sign a petition or to take part in a protest. Often, political participation is framed in terms of arguments that emphasize an individual's resources, skills, and motivations (see for example Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Other work emphasizes the context in which political action may take place and there are several different, but related, research traditions that take account of that context. Explanations which place individual participation within a broader context, are especially important within the literature on participation in Latin America. One particularly successful strand of scholarship has been that which places participation within the settings of political institutions or policy programs. Fornos et al.'s (2004) study of turnout, for example, emphasized that it was institutional variables such as compulsory voting or concurrent elections as well as factors such as political freedoms that drives turnout more than the socio-economic factors seen in studies of Western democracies. Other

scholars have noted that participation in Latin America is often seen as a response to the low quality of institutions (Moseley, 2015) or as a response to neo-liberal policies (Almeida, 2007; Bellinger & Arce, 2011; Solt, Kim, Lee, Willardson, & Kim, 2014). Within this literature two points are worth highlighting. First, with some notable exceptions (for example Booth & Seligson, 2005; Carlin, Singer, & Zechmeister, 2015; Carreras & Castañeda-Angarita, 2014; Córdova & Hiskey, 2015) protest as a form of political participation has received somewhat more attention than the more conventional types of participation (for some examples see the discussion in Seligson & Booth, 1976; see also Eckstein, 2001; Stahler-Sholk, Vanden, & Kuecker, 2007; Wickham-Crowley & Eckstein, 2015).

One literature which sees individual level acts in a broader context is the social capital literature. Putnam defines social capital as ‘social networks [among individuals] and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them’ (Putnam, 2000: 19; see also Campbell, 2013; Portes, 2000 and examples cited there). A social capital approach is not new to the study of Latin American politics. Both Klesner (2007) and Seligson (1999) anchor their understanding of participation in Latin America to a social capital approach. We build on that literature, and we focus on how variations in social capital contexts provide different, and often very different, opportunities for participation.

We begin by noting the differences that exist between urban and rural areas. Arguably, large cities and smaller, or more rural, communities are likely to have different social compositions as well as differences in social capital. Large cities are, by and large, likely to be more cosmopolitan and, again in general, are likely to have a younger age profile in part brought about by in-migration from rural areas. But over and above compositional differences urban and rural areas are likely to provide differences in context. These contextual differences have rarely been exploited to explain the patterns of political participation in Latin America (but see Remmer, 2010). Within the literature on political participation in the region, many scholars have attempted to explain political participation in urban areas (Bruhn, 2008; Roberts & Portes, 2006; Salgado Bueno & Mendes Fialho, 2009) while other works have focused on analyzing political engagement in rural areas (Carter, 2010; Horton, 2013; Pallares, 2002). This division of labor has led to a very rich understanding of political participation (in particular contentious participation) in certain urban or rural areas in Latin America, but very little is known about how social capital affects the participatory choices of individuals across the range of acts they may choose.

Rural settings have more settled communities and families. Such variations in context will translate into different kinds of settings that will, in turn, shape political participation. Rural areas and smaller communities are likely to see stronger social ties that mean political participation through personal relationships are a viable means of pursuing political action. In fact, the notion that rural areas and small communities produce higher levels of social capital was introduced by classical sociologists such as Tönnies (1887/1957) and Durkheim (1893/1984); and later repeatedly confirmed by modern social science research (Hofferth & Iceland, 1998; Sampson, 1988; Sørensen, 2012; Ziersch, Baum, Ngurah Darmawanm, Kavanagh, & Bentley, 2009).

There are several theories that explain why social capital is higher in rural areas and smaller communities (see Amato, 1993). The *social disorganization* theory suggests that people in large urban areas experience general deficits in the quality of interpersonal relations because of the heterogeneity of urban populations and the continuing residential mobility. As Wirth (1938: 12) famously wrote in a classic study in urban sociology, the contacts of the city tend to be “impersonal, superficial, transitory, and segmental.” The *environmental overload* theory suggests that the excessive level of social stimulation in large communities leads to adaptive mechanisms (Milgram, 1970). Urban dwellers manage this overload by reducing social contacts with strangers, and reserving their cognitive capacity for interactions that serve their personal needs. Another theory advances that the level of interpersonal trust is higher in smaller communities because the costs of cheating or giving false information are much higher (Sørensen, 2012). In the words of Fisman and Khana (1999: 85): “In larger urban communities, social ties may be too diffuse to effectively blacken a cheater’s reputation through word-of-mouth communication. (...) By contrast, in a rural village, ostracism is easily facilitated.”

In the Latin American context, criminal violence might also contribute to lower social capital in large urban areas. Violence is one of the most compelling and seemingly intractable problems confronting Latin America today. Latin America is typically described as the most violent region in the world (Parkinson, 2014); and criminal violence tends to be concentrated in large urban areas (Vilalta, Castillo, & Torres, 2016). Violence leads to interpersonal distrust because in violent environments attitudes of confidence and reciprocity are substituted by attitudes of distrust and fear, leading people to rely on their own resources rather than engaging in social networks (Ayres, 1998; Carreras, 2013).

Differences in social capital also translate into differences in individual attitudes that shape political participation. First, citizens' feelings of *political efficacy* are likely to be lower in larger communities. The concept of political efficacy can be described as the perception citizens have of being capable of acting effectively in the political arena. Efficacious citizens perceive that they are capable of influencing government and politics (Craig & Maggiotto, 1982). The concept of "political efficacy" comprises two different dimensions: "internal" and "external" efficacy. Whereas internal political efficacy refers "to beliefs about one's own competence to understand, and to participate effectively in, politics", external political efficacy refers to "to beliefs about the responsiveness of government authorities and institutions to citizen demands" (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991: 1407-1408). We have good reasons to believe that both internal and external efficacy should be lower in large urban areas.

Individuals tend to feel less competent to participate in government in larger communities because "as the number of citizens increases, any particular citizen's share in power, influence, or decision making necessarily declines" (Dahl & Tufte, 1973: 43). Moreover, navigating the political and bureaucratic system is more manageable for individuals in small cities. Verba and Nie (1972: 231) point out that it is easier to "know the ropes of politics" in smaller communities. Finally, in smaller cities political discussions and policy decisions often concern very specific issues that citizens can understand. In larger communities, political discussions tend to be more abstract and general which might negatively affect citizens' internal political efficacy (Dreyer Lassen & Serritzlew, 2011). Taking advantage of a quasi-experiment in Denmark –the central government increased the size of some municipalities but not others in a municipal reform in the mid-2000s–, a recent paper shows strong evidence of a negative link between municipality size and internal political efficacy (Dreyer Lassen & Serritzlew, 2011).

External efficacy should also be higher in smaller cities. Larger communities have more complex bureaucracies which tend to be less efficient; and have elected officials who represent more people which makes it harder for citizens to have a personal relationship with their representatives (Gerring, Palmer, Teorell, & Zarecki, 2015; Oliver, 2000). Citizens are therefore likely to perceive the government (in particular the local government) as more distant and less responsive to their demands (Hansen, 2013). In the same vein, in rural areas and/or small communities an individual citizen may well know the mayor, or know someone who knows the mayor, and so be willing to approach them. Finally, the perception that municipalities are more

responsive and efficient in small cities leads to greater trust in local government and satisfaction with the performance of local authorities (Hansen, 2015; Mouritzen, 1989).

All these arguments point in the same direction: social capital should be higher in rural areas and in small towns than in large urban areas. In turn, these differences should lead to differences in patterns of participation. We should see engagement in more conventional kinds of political participation in smaller communities. Joining efforts with others to participate in community meetings or to attend events organized by the municipality should be easier in smaller communities where people know and trust each other. As discussed above, social capital in smaller communities also influences political participation indirectly by increasing political efficacy and trust in municipal government. There is ample evidence suggesting that more politically efficacious citizens participate more in the political arena (Finkel, 1985; Karp & Banducci, 2008). Since citizens in small cities feel they can influence political decisions and that the government is more responsive, they are more likely to be politically active. Turning out to vote or attending meetings may well offer viable forms of ‘voice’ within smaller communities where a given individual may have more scope for affecting the result by taking part: one voice among a hundred or a thousand is likely to be more influential than one vote in a hundred-thousand.

The discussion so far has proposed that political participation should be higher in smaller communities, due to the fact that social capital is higher in rural areas and smaller cities. However, this expectation should hold only for ‘conventional’ political participation (i.e. voting, contacting politicians, attending political events, etc.). Another variant of participation is protest; and for this particular form of participation our expectation is reversed. In large cities, even in sub-districts of large cities, personal contacts between citizens and politicians may not be feasible. Similarly, what we might see as the more regular forms of political participation – turning out to vote, attending meetings and the like - may well offer viable forms of ‘voice’ within smaller communities where a given individual may have more scope for affecting the result by taking part. By contrast, city halls in larger urban areas may not offer as permeable or friendly an environment. More populous cities may offer more fertile ground for less regular or ‘unconventional’ forms of participatory “input” – notably protest. Once a protest is formed and begun then the high population density and often younger age profile of urban dwellers will provide a pool of protestors from which to build a demonstration. Arguably, such means of participation are all the more valuable in cities where the lack of social ties means that city dwellers will not have access to solutions available in smaller

and more rural communities (for example calling one's cousin who works for the council). Moreover, media coverage from the TV and radio companies likely based in the larger cities will bring attention to the cause (BBC News, 2016a). Furthermore, protest action – such as blocking roads or public transport networks – are likely to be events that are both possible to accomplish and gain the attention of very many people (for some recent concrete examples see BBC News, 2016b; The Guardian, 2016). To be sure, capital cities in themselves will attract protests and so will be the location of protest. It is common the democratic world over, for example, to see protestors travel to a capital in order to protest in front of national leaders, institutions, and cameras. But people may also travel to protest in regional cities, especially within federal or decentralized societies (Johnson & Magalhaes, 2016). In a sense, then, protest activity is available (an opportunity) even for residents of smaller communities or in rural areas, but other forms of participation are more relied upon in their own community.

In sum, we are likely to see persistent differences in patterns in political participation between small communities on the one hand and larger urban areas, even after we control for the well-known correlates of political participation. Our theoretical discussion leads to three main hypotheses that will be tested in the empirical section below.

H1: Individuals are *more* likely to engage in 'conventional' political participation in smaller communities than in larger urban areas.

H2: Individuals are *less* likely to engage in protest participation in smaller communities than in larger urban areas.

H3: Social capital is the key mechanism explaining the effect of community size on conventional political participation.

## **Research Design**

### *Data*

Data for the subsequent empirical analysis are drawn from the 2012-2014 waves of the Americas Barometer. The survey is administered by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University. The sampling process involves multistage stratification by country and then

sub-stratification within each country by major geographic region to increase precision. Within each primary sampling unit (PSU), the survey respondents are selected randomly.<sup>1</sup>

LAPOP surveys are ideal to test our theoretical intuitions because they include a battery of questions about different forms of political participation. This set of measures captures the range of political participation and include both unconventional forms of participation (protest) as well as the more conventional forms which include both voting and contacting local officials (Dalton 2008). They also measure very precisely the size of the place of residence of respondents, which is critical for this study.

Our goal is to analyze the effect of the place where respondents live (in particular the distinction between small communities and big cities) on their choice of different participatory actions in the political arena. Hence, we estimate eight models with eight different dependent variables capturing various forms of political participation. One of these variables measures protest participation, while the other variables measure conventional forms of political participation. All these variables are described in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

The key independent variable in our analysis is a survey item that measures the size of the place of residence of the respondent. This information is recorded by the interviewer before the actual interview starts. This variable has five response categories: rural area, small city, medium city, large city, and national capital.<sup>2</sup> We created dummies for each of these categories and we include them in the statistical models below, with “rural area” as the reference category. This procedure is useful for this analysis because it allows us to have a more fine-grained understanding of the impact of size of place of residence on political participation, which would be obscured by a simple rural-urban dichotomous variable.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> More technical information can be obtained from the website of LAPOP: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/core-surveys.php>.

<sup>2</sup> While this survey item was included for the first time in 2006 in some countries, we limit our sample to the last two waves of the AmericasBarometer because there is a lot of missing data on this variable (i.e. countries that did not include this item) in earlier waves. However, we also estimated the statistical models with all the available data (2006-2014), and the results are identical to the ones we report in the empirical section below. These models are available upon request.

<sup>3</sup> Another useful variable capturing community size measures the size of the respondent’s municipality and has three categories: 1) small (<25,000), 2) medium (between 25,000 and 100,000), and 3) large (>100,000). All the models of

The empirical models also include a battery of control variables that are traditionally associated with political engagement. Previous research has consistently shown that income and education are positively associated with political engagement at the individual level (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995; Carlin & Love, 2015). Other studies have shown that sex and age are related to political engagement. Male and older citizens are more likely to engage in political activities (Carreras, 2016; Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 1997). Finally, psychological engagement with politics is a key predictor of political participation. Citizens who feel more efficacious (Finkel, 1985), who are more interested in politics (Carreras & Castañeda-Angarita, 2014; Moseley, 2015), and who have more trust in political institutions (Seligson, 2002; Smith, 2009) are more likely to be politically active. All these variables are included in the statistical models below, and are described in Table A1 in the Appendix.

We also include in the empirical models important contextual factors that might explain aggregate levels of political participation at the country level. We consider the effect of several institutional and contextual variables that are often mentioned in the literature: GDP growth, GDP per capita, the level of socioeconomic inequality (GINI), the level of democracy, government effectiveness, and market reforms (Bellinger & Arce, 2011; Carreras & Castañeda-Angarita, 2014; Moseley, 2015; Solt, 2015). The level of democracy is measured by using the Polity IV score, GDP data was obtained from the World Bank Indicators, inequality is measured with GINI data from the Standardized World Income Inequality Database (Solt, forthcoming), the measure of government effectiveness comes from the World Bank Governance Indicators, and the Heritage Foundation Index of Economic Freedom is used as a proxy for market reforms.

Our dependent variable is measured at the individual level. Our independent variables are measured at the individual, survey (or country-year), and country levels. Ignoring the hierarchical nature of the data would result in underestimated standard errors which might lead to type I errors (Steenbergen & Jones, 2002). We therefore specify multilevel models with random intercept coefficients to take into account the three-level nature of the data (country, country-year, and individual). Hierarchical models are useful to correct for the within country dependence of observations (intra-class correlation), and adjust both within and between parameter estimates in relation to the clustered nature of the data (Gelman & Hill, 2006; Snijders & Bosker, 1999).

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the paper were also estimated with this alternative variable as the main independent variable. The results are almost identical, and are reported in the online Appendix (Table A2).

Because most of the dependent variables used in the empirical analysis are binary (protest, turnout, attend municipality, contact MP, contact local official, and contact municipality), these models were estimated using a multilevel logistic regression with a Gaussian link function. The other two models (attend party meetings and attend community meetings) were estimated using mixed effects random intercept models.

## **Findings**

We specify eight models and the results are reported in Table 2. These models address a range of participatory actions. Model 1 is the protest model; models 2-4 estimate the determinants of citizens' participation in town meetings, meetings of political parties, and meetings of a community improvement association in their community; model 5 is the turnout model; and models 6-8 estimate the determinants of citizens' decision to contact different political actors. These models also include theoretically relevant control variables at the individual and country levels.

[Table 2 about here]

The results of the statistical models suggest several interesting findings regarding the geography of political participation. As expected, the models reveal a contrast in the patterns of political engagement between citizens living in rural areas (and in small cities) and citizens living in large cities. While rural dwellers and individuals living in small urban areas are more likely to use conventional (i.e. institutional) channels to express grievances and make political demands, people living in the capital cities of Latin America are more likely to participate in protest demonstrations.

Model 1 assesses the determinants of protest participation. Among the dummy variables measuring individuals' place of residence, only "national capital" is positive and statistically significant. This result (which is in line with our theoretical argument) suggests that the structure of political opportunities in large urban areas and the higher policy impact of mass demonstrations in capital cities increases the likelihood that citizens will participate in protests.

Models 2 to 4 analyze the determinants of citizens' participation in town hall meetings, political party meetings, and meetings of civic associations in their communities. While protest behavior often, and for good reason, attracts a great deal of attention, these other acts of participation are important in themselves. Not least because they are also attributes of "engaged" citizens and are ways in which citizens may have more influence (Dalton 2008: 93). These three models show something very similar. All the coefficients of the variables measuring respondents' place of residence are negative and statistically significant (except the coefficient for "small city" in model 3). Since "rural area" is the reference category in all the models, this shows that conventional political engagement is more common in rural areas. The size of the coefficients increases as the size of the city increases, which suggests that differences in political participation are particularly remarkable when we compare rural areas and large cities.

The turnout model (model 5) similarly suggests that electoral participation decreases as the size of the individuals' place of residence increases. In fact, the coefficients for three of the variables measuring place of residence (medium city, large city, capital city) are negative and statistically significant. Again, there is no statistically significant difference in electoral participation between people living in rural areas and people living in small cities.

The last three models estimate the determinants of contacting politicians, and they provide additional support for our main findings. As in the previous models, the results suggest no statistically significant differences in the level of political engagement between individuals living in rural areas and individuals living in small cities. However, the results also show that the likelihood of contacting politicians decreases as the size of the respondents' place of residence increases, and these differences are always statistically significant.

Since it is impossible to assess the substantive impact of respondents' place of residence on political participation simply by looking at the coefficients of the dummy variables in the multilevel logistic regressions we estimate the marginal effects of place of residence on the different forms of political participation analyzed in this paper, which can be observed in Figures 1 and 2.<sup>4</sup>

[Figure 1 about here]

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<sup>4</sup> Marginal effects measure the expected change in the dependent variable as a function of a change in a certain explanatory variable while keeping all the other covariates constant.

Figure 1 presents the marginal effects of place of residence on protest participation and electoral participation. In addition to the direct unconditional effects of place of residence, these figures (panels b, c, e, and f) show the marginal effects of place of residence for different subsets of the population (low political interest vs. high political interest; and young vs. middle-aged adults). The unconditional effect of place of residence on protest participation is quite small (panel a). Individuals living in medium cities appear slightly less likely to join demonstrations than people living in rural areas, but these differences are not statistically significant (see model 1 in Table 2 above). The only significant difference that we observe is that respondents living in capital cities are about 1% more likely to participate than citizens living in other parts of the country. However, we hypothesized that this effect should be stronger for certain subsets of the population. We know from previous research that younger and more politically interested people are more likely to participate in demonstrations, so place of residence should have a more marked influence among these groups. That is exactly what we find (panels b and c). Place of residence does not have a discernable effect on the protest participation of middle-aged adults and individuals who are not interested in politics. On the other hand, politically interested individuals are about 6% more likely to participate in demonstrations in capital cities than in rural areas, and young people (age group 18-24) are about 3% more likely to engage in protests in capital cities than in rural areas.

We now turn to the electoral participation estimations. Panel d in Figure 1 shows a stronger unconditional effect of place of residence on turnout than on protest participation. The effect is also more gradual, as the probability of voting decreases as the size of the city in which people live increases. The estimation of the marginal effects shows that individuals living in medium cities are 1.5% less likely to vote than individuals living in rural areas; but people living in capital cities in turn are 1.5% less likely to vote than people living in medium cities. The size of this effect is not conditional on the level of political interest of the respondents (see panel e). However, the effect of place of residence does appear to be conditional on the age of the respondents. The impact appears to be much weaker for middle-aged adults than for young adults. People in the 18-24 age group are 8% less likely to vote when they live in large capital cities than when they live in rural areas.

[Figure 2 about here]

Turning to look at the effect of community size (our proxy for social capital) on other forms of citizen engagement we see Figure 2. This Figure presents the unconditional marginal effects of

place of residence on participation in political meetings at different levels and on contacting politicians and government agencies. Due to space constraints, we do not present the conditional effects of place of residence for different subsets of the population. But we estimated marginal effects for young and middle-aged adults, and individuals with low and high levels of political interest. The results of these estimations are presented in Figures A1 and A2 in the online Appendix, and briefly discussed below.

Panel a in Figure 2 shows a gradual decrease in the probability of attending political meetings in the municipality as the size of respondents' place of residence increases. Individuals living in medium cities are about 5% less likely to attend meetings in the municipality than individuals living in rural areas, and people living in large or capital cities are about 2% less likely to attend town meetings than people living in medium cities. Panel b in Figure 2 shows a similar effect of community size on the probability of attending meetings of political parties. People living in medium cities are 3% less likely to attend party meetings than people living in rural areas, and individuals living in the capital cities of Latin America are about 2.5% less likely to attend party meetings than individuals living in medium cities. Panel c in Figure 2 shows that the effect of place of residence on attending community meetings is larger. The probability of attending community meetings is .35 in rural areas, .23 in medium cities, and .22 in capital cities. In other words, individuals are increasingly less likely to attend meetings in their communities as the size of their place of residence increases. Interestingly, however, this effect is not linear. Individuals appear to be much more engaged in community meetings when they live in rural areas than in urban areas (whatever their size).

Panels d, e, and f in Figure 2 present the marginal effects of respondents' place of residence on contacting MPs, local officials, and the municipality. Panel d shows that the probability of contacting MPs gradually decreases as the size of individuals' place of residence increases. This effect is in line with our theoretical expectations, although it is substantively small: people living in large urban areas are 1.3% less likely to contact MPs than people living in a rural area. Panels e and f show much stronger effects of place of residence on contacting local officials and seeking assistance from the municipality. In both estimations, we observe that respondents are increasingly less likely to report having contacted local officials as the size of their place of residence increases. People living in rural areas are 8% more likely to contact local officials and 6% more likely to contact the municipality for assistance than people living in large urban areas –the estimations do

not show an important difference in political engagement between capital cities and other big cities for these two variables.

We also estimated interactive effects (community size\*political interest and community size\*age) for all these different forms of conventional political participation. Due to space constraints, we do not present all these estimations here, but they are available in the online Appendix (Figures A1 and A2). While the size of individuals' place of residence affects the level of political engagement of all social groups, many of these estimations reveal that community size disproportionately affects the people who are more likely to participate (older adults and politically interested individuals). This leads to less marked differences in political participation between individuals with higher resources/political interest and people with lower resources/political interest as the size of the community increases. For instance, individuals with a high level of political interest are about 12% more likely of contacting local public officials than people with low political interest in rural areas, but only about 7% more likely of doing so in large urban areas.

### **Is Social Capital the Mechanism at Work?**

Results from the preceding analyses provide evidence consistent with our larger claim about the geography of political participation in Latin America. The results confirm that citizens living in rural areas/small urban communities are less likely to participate in protests, but more likely to participate in a variety of conventional political activities (e.g. voting, attending political events, and contacting politicians). We argued that these differences reflected differences in social capital that, themselves, related to geography.

But is social capital really the mechanism at work? Social capital refers to the ability of people to engage socially and to develop attitudes of interpersonal trust within their communities. Social capital is often associated with political engagement and higher levels of trust in government (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1994), and in general social capital is measured in a variety of ways (for some examples see Brehm and Rahn, 1997; Paldam, 2000; Posner and Boix, 2016; Van Deth et al., 2016). For this reason we examine several different operationalizations of social capital in order to help us explore the questions of mechanism. We used different dependent variables which are traditionally associated with social capital: interpersonal trust, trust in local

government, participation in meetings of non-political associations, and providing help in the neighborhood. Table 3 reports those measures.

[Table 3 about here]

Table A3 (in the appendix) shows the relationship between these measures of social capital and the measures of place. Plainly we need there to be not just a statistically significant relationship between those measures but also a substantively significant one, too. In order to provide a better sense of the substantive relationships we present graphical versions of the results in Figure 3 (panels a to d). These results strongly support our argument that the level of social capital is higher in smaller communities than in large urban areas across four different measures of social capital. Social capital, in other words, differs in significant and substantive ways between rural areas (smaller communities) and urban areas (larger communities). Our larger point is that these differences help us to understand differences in patterns of political participation.

[Figure 3 about here]

The evidence suggests that social connectedness is more developed in smaller communities. In fact, the results show that interpersonal trust and trust in local government is considerably higher in smaller communities (in particular in rural areas). Similarly, individuals are more likely to attend meetings of non-political associations and to provide help in their neighborhoods when they live in smaller communities. These rather large effects are both statistically and substantively important. We also observe that social capital decreases gradually as the size of the respondents' place of residence increases, which is what we expected. The effect of place of residence on interpersonal trust is particularly striking. In fact, the estimation of the marginal effects shows that individuals living in rural areas are 16% more likely to have a high level of interpersonal trust than people living in capital cities.<sup>5</sup>

While the findings reported in Figure 3 and in Table A3 suggest that social capital is a plausible causal mechanism linking community size and political engagement, they do not directly show an effect of social capital on political participation. Showing causality with cross-sectional observational data is always a challenge, but we estimated several multilevel structural equation models that suggest that social capital is indeed the main mechanism explaining the strong

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<sup>5</sup> For this estimation, we considered that individuals who answered 4 in the 1-4 interpersonal trust scale have a high level of interpersonal trust.

correlation between the size of the community in which respondents live and their level of political participation.

We first created a social capital index using the four dummy variables analyzed above in the following way:

*Social capital* = high interpersonal trust + providing help in the neighborhood + attending meetings of professional organizations + high trust in municipal government

The social capital measure goes from 0 (low social capital) to 4 (high social capital). The multilevel structural equation models we estimated have two observed endogenous variables (political participation and social capital) and six observed exogenous variables (age, sex, income, education, political interest, and community size). As can be observed in Figure 4 below, one of our models postulates a direct effect of age, sex, income, education, and political interest on political participation; and an indirect path going from community size to social capital, and from social capital to political participation. An alternative model eliminates the indirect path described above, as can be observed in Figure 5 below –this model has only one exogenous variable (political participation)–. Both models also include a latent variable at the country level to account for possible unobserved country effects on political participation.

The structural equation models would support our theoretical intuitions if two patterns are present: 1) there is a negative and statistically significant effect of community size on social capital, and a positive and statistically significant effect of social capital on political participation; and 2) the direct effect of community size on political participation is considerably weaker when the indirect path (community size ---> social capital ---> political participation) is included in the model.

[Figures 4 and 5 about here]

We estimated these multilevel structural equation models for each of the dependent variables included in Table 2. Due to space constraints, we only present below the results of the turnout models; but the results of the other models are very similar and can be observed in the online Appendix (Figures A3 to A14). The results of the SEM models reported in Figures 4 and 5 are very much in line with our hypotheses. First, Figure 4 shows that the causal mechanism we propose is supported by the empirical evidence. Community size is negatively associated with social capital; and in turn social capital leads to an increase in political participation. Both effects

are large and statistically significant. The same pattern holds for all the other forms of conventional political participation, as can be observed in the online Appendix. Second, Figure 5 reveals a negative effect of community size on turnout (the same effect we showed in Table 2 above); but this effect disappears once we include the indirect path into the model (see Figure 4). In other words, the effect of community size on social capital appears to be the main factor explaining the negative effect of community size on turnout. In many of the SEM models we estimated for the other dependent variables, community size remains statistically significant after the inclusion of the indirect path (community size ---> social capital ---> political participation), but the size of the coefficient is always much smaller than when that indirect path is excluded. Again, this suggests that social capital largely mediates the effect of community size on political engagement. All these models are included in the online Appendix.

In sum, the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that social capital is higher in smaller communities than in large urban areas, which corroborates the findings of previous research (Putnam, 2000; Sørensen, 2012; Ziersch et al., 2009). The higher social connectedness and the high level of interpersonal and political trust in smaller communities appears to be critical to understand why citizens living in those areas are more likely to vote, contact politicians, and attend political events (especially at the local level). In fact, social capital has been found to be a key determinant of civic and political engagement. Individuals who are embedded in rich and diverse social networks (i.e. individuals with high social capital) are more likely to possess high levels of interpersonal trust and to acquire the civic skills that are required to engage successfully in the public arena (Klesner, 2007; La Due Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998; Putnam, 1994). All the evidence presented in this paper is consistent with this causal story.

## **Discussion**

We have shown that patterns of political participation respond significantly and in predictable ways to context. In particular, we have shown that there exists a distinct geographical pattern of how political participation may be conducted. Political participation is not a purely individual level decision: people who live in bigger urban areas exhibit quite different patterns of political participation than those who live in rural areas. Smaller communities help to promote the

development of social capital which, in turn, promotes ‘conventional’ political participation. On the other hand, larger communities do not see this effect but see protest as a more regular form of political participation. These findings may strike some as simply showing a rather conventional wisdom to be true. Even if that is the case we see these findings as demonstrating a conventional wisdom that has, to date, not been demonstrated. But we believe that this study as a whole makes several contributions above and beyond that point.

First, even if we see the different pattern of participation between urban and rural areas as unsurprising it is the case that we have advanced a particular explanation of that pattern: social capital. It is true that government buildings and TV stations are in capital cities – and these attract protestors. But the absence of TV reporters is not, we argue, the reason why people in rural areas do not protest but instead engage in more regular forms of participation. One contribution we have made, then, is to have identified a mechanism – social capital – which affects the patterns of political participation in substantively meaningful ways.

Second, and following on from that first point, our findings underscore the importance of the context of political participation. That is, while the decision to participate or not, and the decision of how to participate, are both taken at an individual level there are factors beyond the individual which shape those decisions. In that sense, Latin American models underscore their relevance for our understanding of political participation more broadly. But they do, also, have implications for how we conceptualize participation in Latin America. Discussion of Latin American patterns of political participation should then be cautious about the spatial boundedness of the behavior. Protest behavior, for example, is more clearly associated with the bigger cities in Latin American societies rather than being a general attribute of Latin American citizens. Clearly the patterns we see will be more pronounced in societies in which the level of urban development is uneven: where instead of a distribution of medium size cities the country has one (or just a few) very large cities surrounded by more rural and sparsely populated areas. This latter is certainly a pattern that characterizes Latin America. Still, while this pattern may be seen in Latin America, and our empirical examples in this paper come from there, the implications would seem to be quite general. While recent trends such as the internet or growing suburbanization may, in effect, mute or flatten some of these differences, our evidence show that such differences as remain can be consequential for the way in which citizens interact with the political system.

This point underscores a final contribution we make. In terms of broader debates about the development of more conventional forms of democratic politics in Latin America, our results suggest that there may not be one solution that will work nationwide. As we noted, capital cities will always act as a focal point for marchers and demonstrators seeking to make their point if only for the cameras of the TV networks located in the capital. But those events do not need to be a model for political participation more broadly and those events, and an over-focus on protest, are in some senses distortive. Arguably, ‘conventional’ politics work as they should in smaller communities, the goal facing reform and reformers, then, should be to find ways to break cities down into neighborhoods and smaller communities that will encourage the development of social capital and – hence – foster conventional politics

**Table 1. Political Participation Variables (Americas Barometer)**

Variables	Survey Items
<b>UNCONVENTIONAL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION</b>	
Protest	In the last 12 months, have you participated in a demonstration or protest march? (recoded into 1=yes, 0=no)
<b>CONVENTIONAL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION</b>	
Turnout	Did you vote in the last presidential elections of (year of last presidential elections)? (recoded into 1=yes, 0=no)
Attend municipality	Let's talk about your local municipality... have you attended a town meeting, city council meeting or other meeting in the past 12 months? (recoded into 1=yes, 0=no)
Attend meetings	Meetings of a political party or political organization. Do you attend them...? (recoded into 1=never, 2=once or twice a year, 3=once or twice a month, 4=once a week)
Attend community	Meetings of a community improvement committee or association. Do you attend them...? (recoded into 1=never, 2=once or twice a year, 3=once or twice a month, 4=once a week)
Contact MP	In order to solve your problems have you ever requested help or cooperation from a member of congress/parliament? (recoded into 1=yes, 0=no)
Contact local official	In order to solve your problems have you ever requested help or cooperation from a local public official (e.g, a mayor, municipal councilperson, provincial official)? (recoded into 1=yes, 0=no)
Contact municipality	Have you sought assistance from or presented a request to any office, official or councilperson of the municipality within the past 12 months? (recoded into 1=yes, 0=no)

**Table 2.** Determinants of Political Participation (multilevel models)

	<b>PROTEST</b>	<b>ATTEND MUNICIPALITY</b>	<b>ATTEND PARTIES</b>	<b>ATTEND COMMUNITY</b>
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>SMALL CITY</i>	.060 (.061)	-.126* (.050)	.006 (.009)	-.162** (.012)
<i>MEDIUM CITY</i>	.022 (.056)	-.535** (.051)	-.041** (.008)	-.191** (.011)
<i>LARGE CITY</i>	.100 (.055)	-.693** (.052)	-.043** (.008)	-.198** (.011)
<i>NATIONAL CAPITAL</i>	.168* (.053)	-.853** (.053)	-.077** (.008)	-.227** (.011)
<b>AGE</b>	-.055** (.015)	.170** (.014)	.011** (.002)	.067** (.003)
<b>MALE</b>	.082* (.035)	.099* (.033)	.037** (.005)	.020* (.007)
<b>INCOME</b>	-.022* (.006)	-.028** (.006)	-.012** (.001)	-.012** (.001)
<b>EDUCATION</b>	.145** (.014)	.110** (.012)	.010** (.002)	.010** (.003)
<b>POLITICAL INTEREST</b>	.419** (.018)	.323** (.017)	.143** (.003)	.089** (.004)
<b>EFFICACY</b>	.108** (.010)	.099** (.010)	.020** (.001)	.025** (.002)
<b>TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS</b>	-.082** (.009)	.016* (.009)	.003* (.001)	.002 (.002)
<b>GDP GROWTH (T-1)</b>	.016 (.028)	-.007 (.017)	-.009 (.006)	-.003 (.007)
<b>GDP PER CAPITA (LOGGED)</b>	-.089 (.190)	-.072 (.102)	.009 (.049)	-.080 (.066)
<b>GINI</b>	.007 (.025)	.007 (.014)	.001 (.006)	.007 (.008)
<b>POLITY IV</b>	.128* (.046)	-.067* (.029)	.013 (.010)	.004 (.013)
<b>GOVERNMENT EFFECTIVENESS</b>	-.135 (.291)	-.576** (.157)	-.193* (.075)	-.141** (.100)
<b>ECONOMIC FREEDOM INDEX</b>	-.023 (.015)	.025* (.008)	.003 (.004)	.000 (.005)
<b>CONSTANT</b>	-3.204 (2.514)	-4.696** (1.344)	.339 (.654)	1.391 (.874)
<b>N INDIVIDUALS</b>	46,170	43,398	46,109	46,249
<b>N COUNTRY-YEARS</b>	36	34	36	36
<b>N COUNTRIES</b>	18	18	18	18

\*\* p<0.01 \*<0.5

**Table 2.** (Continued)

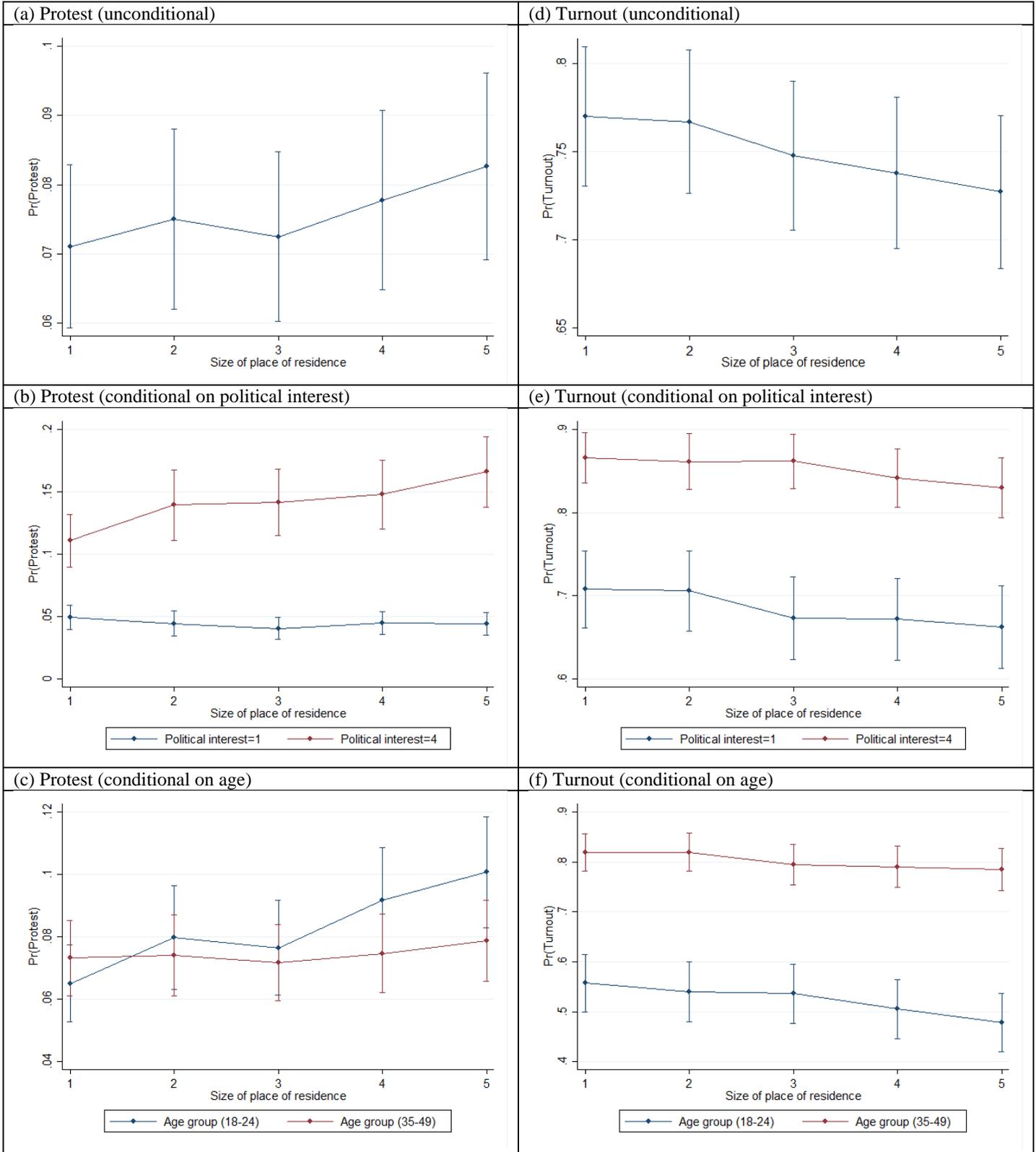
	TURNOUT	CONTACT MP	CONTACT LOCAL	CONTACT MUNICIPALITY
	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
<i>SMALL CITY</i>	-.020 (.042)	-.140 (.098)	-.130* (.042)	.004 (.045)
<i>MEDIUM CITY</i>	-.144* (.038)	-.239* (.093)	-.320** (.041)	-.305** (.044)
<i>LARGE CITY</i>	-.204** (.038)	-.173 (.094)	-.633** (.043)	-.589** (.047)
<i>NATIONAL CAPITAL</i>	-.270** (.037)	-.278* (.091)	-.705** (.043)	-.596** (.046)
<b>AGE</b>	.711** (.011)	.170** (.026)	.139** (.011)	.145** (.012)
<b>MALE</b>	-.126** (.024)	-.085 (.060)	-.095** (.027)	-.102* (.029)
<b>INCOME</b>	.016* (.004)	-.029* (.013)	-.035** (.005)	-.026** (.005)
<b>EDUCATION</b>	.143** (.010)	.033 (.023)	.015 (.010)	.075** (.011)
<b>POLITICAL INTEREST</b>	.374** (.014)	.271** (.031)	.252** (.014)	.254** (.015)
<b>EFFICACY</b>	.027** (.007)	.078** (.018)	.051** (.008)	.065** (.008)
<b>TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS</b>	.004 (.006)	-.021 (.016)	.016* (.007)	.006 (.008)
<b>GDP GROWTH (T-1)</b>	.039 (.047)	-.041 (.039)	-.015 (.023)	-.026 (.016)
<b>GDP PER CAPITA (LOGGED)</b>	.823* (.293)	-.160 (.200)	-.077 (.144)	.085 (.104)
<b>GINI</b>	-.040 (.037)	.017 (.024)	-.026 (.017)	-.015 (.014)
<b>POLITY IV</b>	.119 (.077)	.057 (.052)	-.001 (.041)	.037 (.028)
<b>GOVERNMENT EFFECTIVENESS</b>	-1.115* (.454)	.177 (.318)	-.126 (.224)	-.281 (.159)
<b>ECONOMIC FREEDOM INDEX</b>	.008 (.023)	-.014 (.017)	.015 (.011)	.020* (.008)
<b>CONSTANT</b>	-9.076* (3.858)	-2.752 (2.600)	-1.570 (1.871)	-4.438* (1.368)
<b>N INDIVIDUALS</b>	46,079	24,165	46,273	43,521
<b>N COUNTRY-YEARS</b>	36	19	36	34
<b>N COUNTRIES</b>	18	18	18	18

\*\* p<0.01 \*<0.5

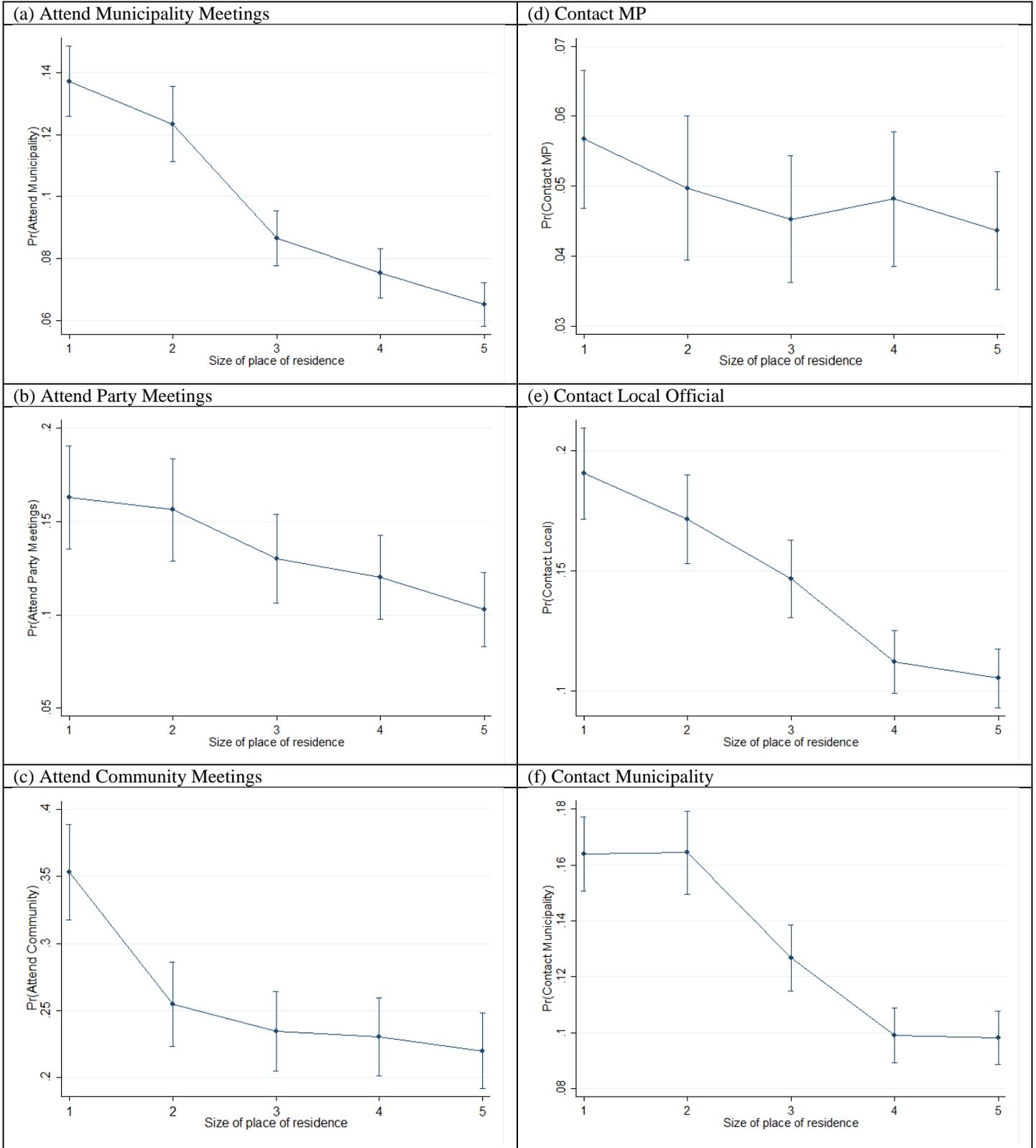
**Table 3.** Operationalization of Social Capital in Models Testing Causal Mechanisms (LAPOP Surveys, 2012-2014)

Variables	Survey Items
Interpersonal trust	And speaking of the people from around here, would you say that people in this community are very trustworthy, somewhat trustworthy, not very trustworthy or untrustworthy...? (recoded into 1=untrustworthy, 2=not very trustworthy, 3=somewhat trustworthy, 4= very trustworthy)
Trust in municipal government	To what extent do you trust the local or municipal government? (1=not at all ... 7=a lot)
Provide help in neighborhood	In the past year have you contributed or tried to contribute toward the solution of a problem in your community or in your neighborhood? (0=no, 1=yes)
Attend meetings of professional associations	The meetings of an association of professionals, traders or farmers? Do you attend them... (recoded into 1=never, 2=once or twice a year, 3=once or twice a month, 4=once a week)

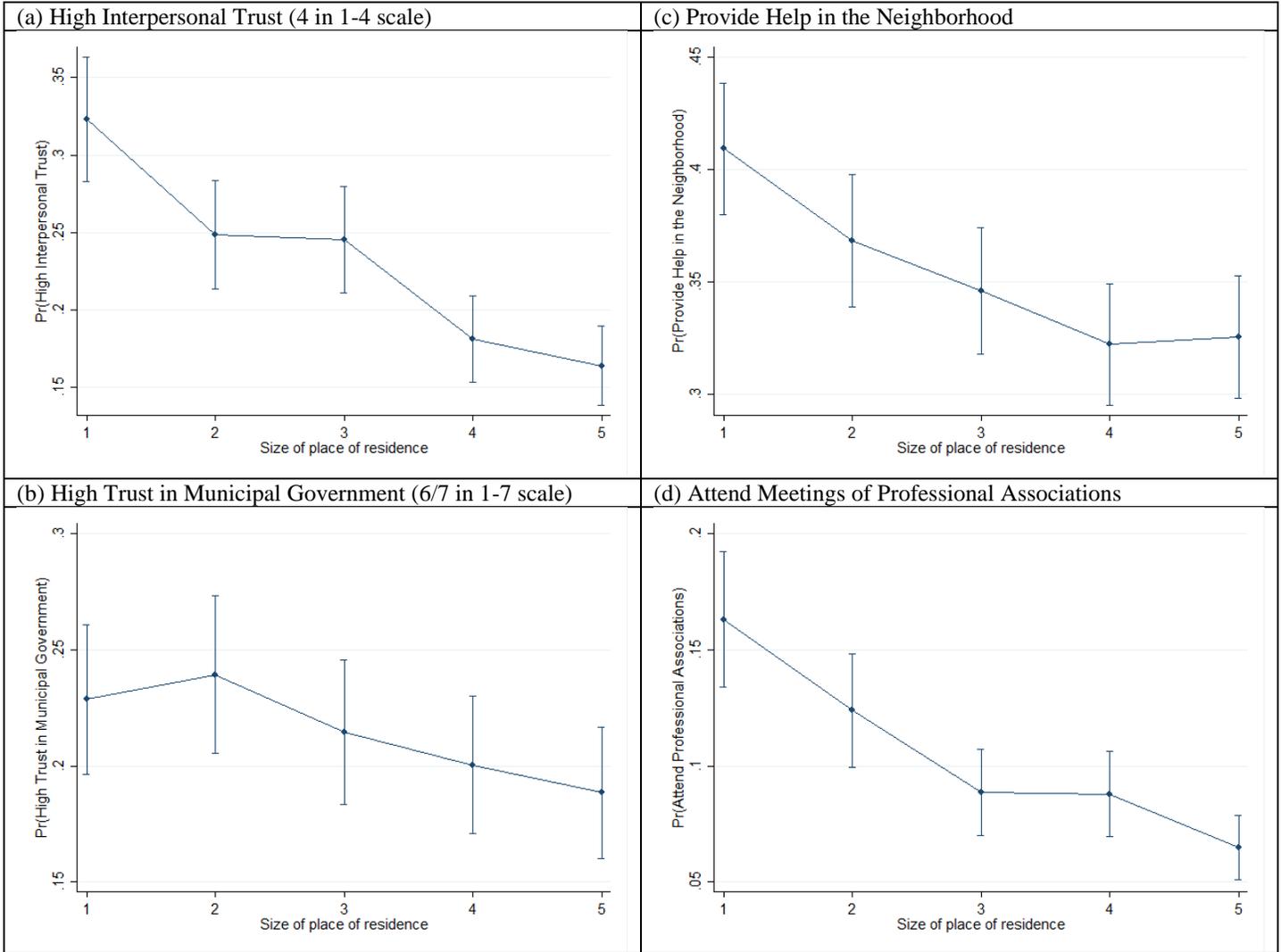
**Figure 1.** Predictive margins of size of place of residence on protests and turnout



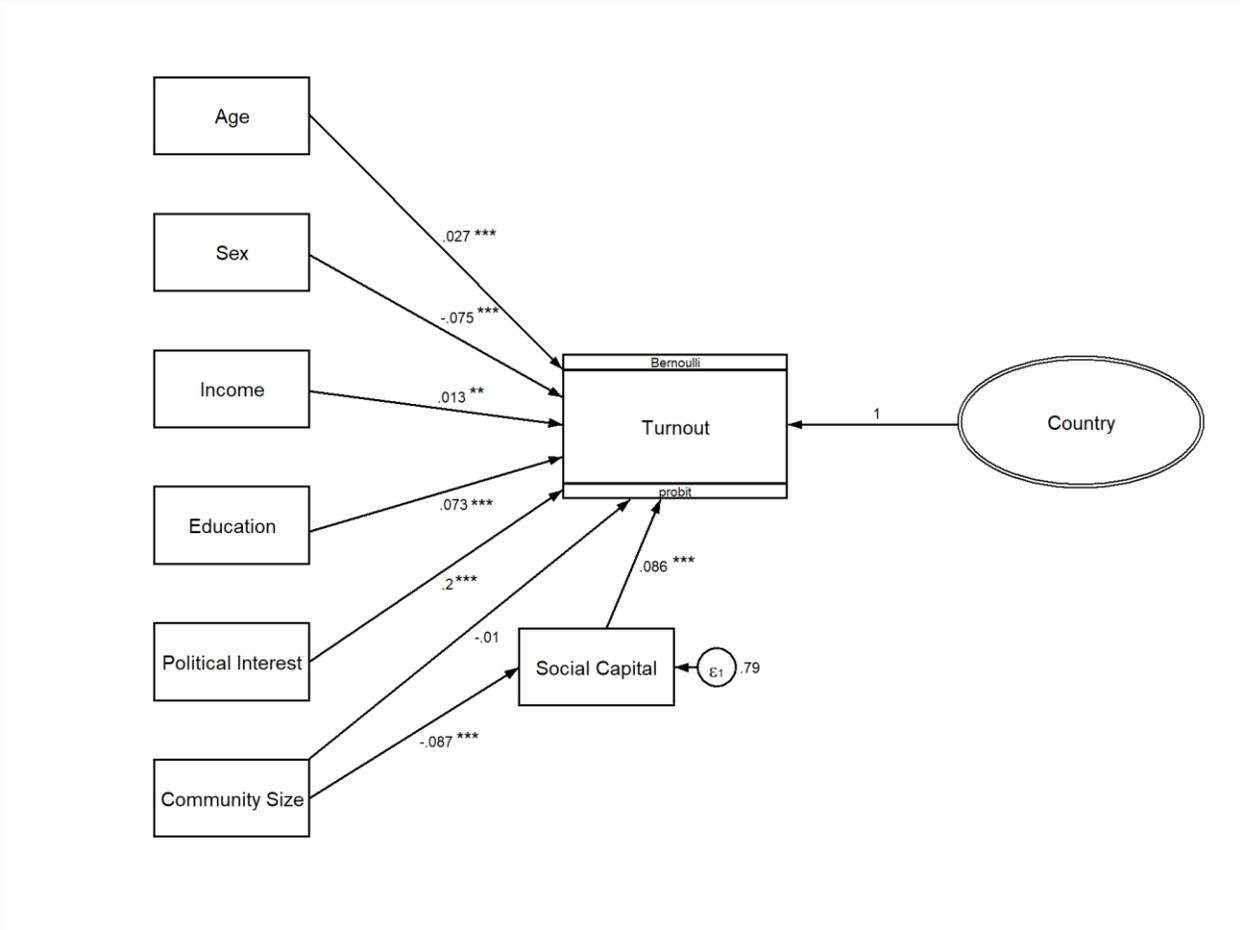
**Figure 2.** Predictive margins of size of place of residence on conventional political engagement



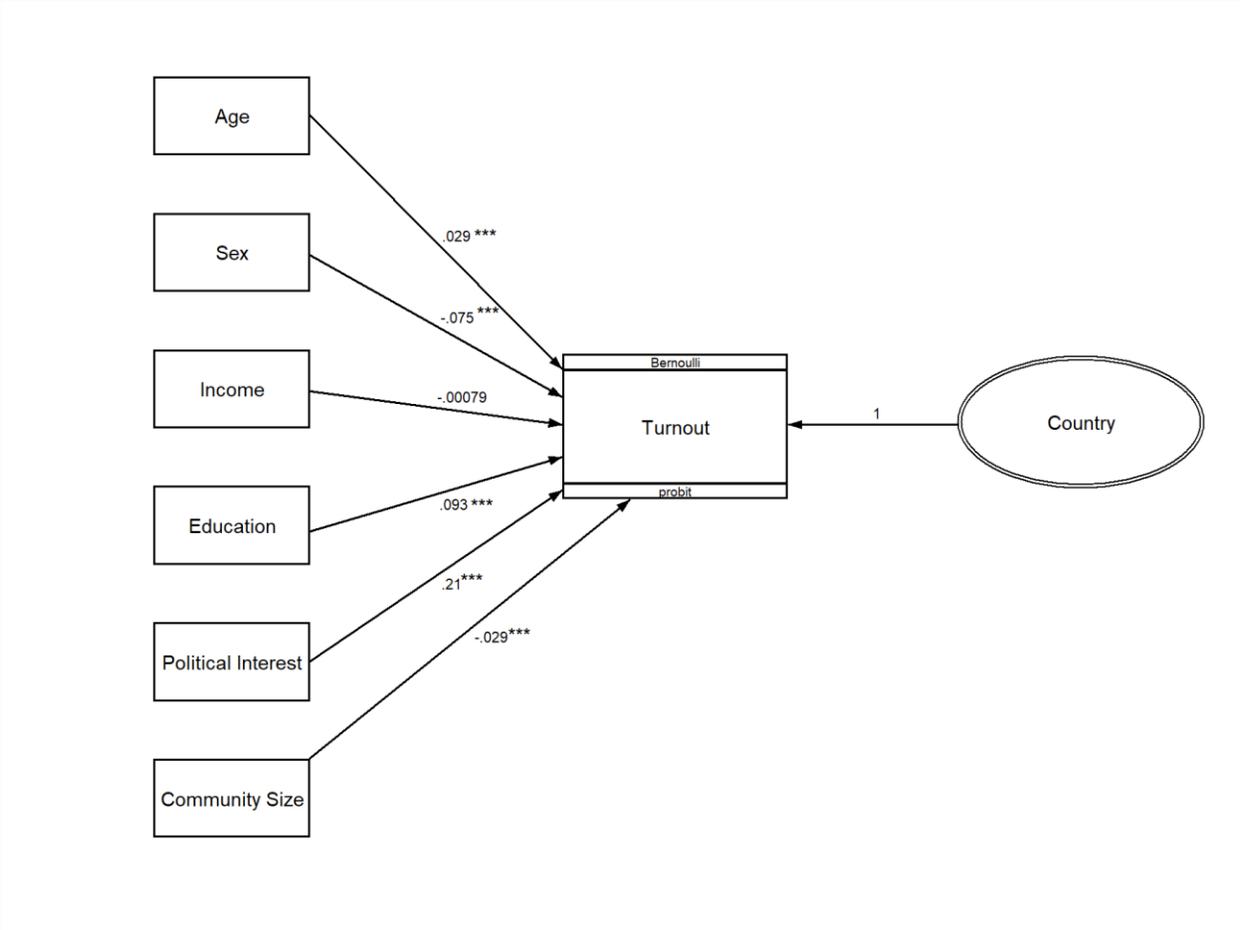
**Figure 3.** Predictive margins of size of place of residence on social capital



**Figure 4:** Multilevel SEM with indirect path community size ---> social capital ---> turnout



**Figure 5:** Multilevel SEM with direct path community size ---> turnout



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