

The Political Participation of the Poor

Local Social Context and the Impact of Social Ties on the Political Engagement of Poor Individuals

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Abstract

Research on political participation finds that poor citizens engage less in politics than wealthy citizens. Yet, recent survey evidence also suggests that there is crucial variation in the poor's level of engagement within the same country and across neighborhoods and villages. However, most of the existing literature falls short in explaining variation between poor citizens living in different communities. Therefore, we still do not fully understand why some poor citizens are more or less likely to participate than others and the extent to which this may be driven by the local social context and, more specifically, the density of social ties in the community. This dissertation aims to fill this gap in the previous literature by providing a theoretical framework to explain political participation by the poor. Acknowledging a wide range of existing research on social context and political behavior, I argue that poor individuals should be more likely to participate in activities based on social interaction between neighbors or when a social norm of compliance exists within the community. The theoretical expectations suggested are in line with previous scholarship showing that poor individuals are more oriented towards others in their local community and act more pro-socially than wealthy individuals. They are also more reliant on social norms of reciprocity and community-help than the wealthy. Empirical evidence from three individual research papers on Tunisia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the UK highlights the importance of community norms and social ties for the poor's political participation. It also suggests that social sanctioning, bandwagoning and solidarity may explain this relationship.

Key Words: Political Participation, Political Behavior, Poverty, Local Social Context, Social Ties