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# POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: INFLUENCES AND IMPLICATIONS

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From the understanding of topical issues to activism, education has been said to play a major role in promoting political participation. Past research has shown that the educated would display stronger tendencies to vote, join political parties and engage in civic activities. However, if education predicts political participation, why do some countries with lower education rates face higher chances of political unrest? For instance, the average schooling in East Asian countries exceeds the average for Latin American countries. Yet, Latin America experiences higher levels of political unrest.

Attempting to solve this “obvious puzzle” in political science literature are professors Davin Chor from Singapore Management University, and Filipe R. Campante from Harvard University. In their paper, “Schooling, Political Participation, and the Economy”, they drew attention to how factor endowments influence the relative productivity of human capital in political versus production activities.

## **Schools and politics**

A large body of existing political science literature has shown a positive correlation between schooling and political participation. It has also linked the micro-level of individual characteristics to the macro-level of the type of governance in the country, showing that education and democracy are positively correlated. But, it has not been able to sufficiently explain the cross-country anomalies like in the oft-cited examples between Latin American and East Asian countries.

A popular explanation for this has been attributed to the prevailing “Confucian values” or “Asian values” in East Asian countries, which places a heavy emphasis on education, while maintaining that order and harmony should be held above personal freedom and political leadership must be respected. Such a unique cultural trait of East Asian countries has been traditionally accepted as the reason why highly-educated citizens of these countries are seemingly much less politically-active than theory would have predicted them to be. While not wanting to debunk the culture and values idea, Campante and Chor said they do not present the whole picture.

In their paper, Campante, a Brazilian and Chor, a Singaporean, argued that several pertinent country characteristics have to be examined in terms of how they affect the link between individual schooling and political participation. More specifically, they chose to focus on a

country's factor endowment mix - the economic variables that affect the productivity of human capital in the production sector. Their premise is that the human capital required for political participation and activities often require a considerable amount of time and energy.

From election campaigns to voting, from keeping abreast of political developments to attending political events like rallies and demonstrations, these activities require three types of resources – time, civic skills and money – all of which are related to human capital. Each citizen is hence faced with an allocation decision between their production roles (roles that yield personal income), and their political roles (roles that constrain the ruler's ability to tax or expropriate). "Citizens trade off the benefit of increased political participation, which is needed to contest the power of the government to tax or expropriate, against the cost of production income foregone," the authors noted.

### **Level and elasticity effects**

To support their arguments, Campante and Chor used respondent data from the World Values Survey (WVS) and the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) on measures of political participation. The data was then regressed against the interaction of the respondents' schooling and country-level variables. They highlighted two key effects of the factor endowment mix on political participation, namely, a level effect and an elasticity effect.

A level effect describes an individual's level of political participation. An elasticity effect describes the relationship between schooling and political participation. Based on the study, the level effect showed that the greater the abundance of the factor used intensively in the least skill-intensive sector (e.g. in the case of agriculture, the abundance of arable land), the greater the individual's level of political participation.

The explanation behind how factor endowment mix affects the citizens' decision between production and political activities is rather intuitive: in a country where production is less skewed towards skill-intensive sectors, its citizens will have less incentive to devote their human capital to production, thereby lowering the opportunity cost of participating in political activities.

The elasticity effect showed that "a higher per-worker land endowment also raises the responsiveness of each citizen's level of political participation to an increase in schooling".

Citizens in East Asian countries are less inclined to channel their energies towards political activities because their comparative advantage has been in skill-intensive production activities. Citizens of the more resource-rich, land-abundant Latin American countries have lower opportunity costs from production forgone. As such, they may be more inclined to participate in politics.

### **A complementary explanation**

Campante and Chor also measured attitudes towards obedience. This provides an indication of how citizens might respond to authority. They found countries that placed a greater emphasis on obedience had correspondingly lower levels of schooling.

The authors were careful to stress that their study presents a complementary explanation rather than a direct conflict to the cultural views commonly used to rationalise differences between the Latin American and East Asian countries in the schooling-political participation dynamic. They maintained that both factor endowments and culture "are relevant and jointly at play".

An interesting application of the model developed by Campante and Chor is its ability to offer a potential explanation for time variations. Take for example, the case of the decreasing voter turnout in the US and other democracies, even as education levels climbed. They proffered as reason "the onset of skill-biased technological change, which has made human capital relatively more valuable in production activities in the US".

The model by Campante and Chor also advanced existing literature by shedding some light on why some governments invest more heavily in education than others. According to WVS data, the average total years of schooling in the population (above 15 years old) in East Asia was 8.0 in 2000, more than the Latin America average of 6.7. Moreover, other studies have shown that the quality of education differs greatly between the two – educational standards in the best of Latin American nations fall below that of East Asian standards.

If education predicts political participation, rulers could potentially engineer a country's education to protect his or her political office – by means of lowered political participation. The authors thus extended the model to consider a utility-maximising ruler who decides from the start how much education to provide, while anticipating how citizens will choose to allocate their human capital. The study showed that any variable above the ex post equilibrium level of political participation will lead the ruler to decrease human capital provision at the ex ante stage, even if this means a reduction in the final production output.

“In particular, a greater abundance of the factor input used in the least skill-intensive sector will lead the governing regime to opt for less human capital provision,” the authors noted. They pointed out that countries, initially well-endowed with arable land relative to labour, do indeed see smaller subsequent increases in average years of schooling. However, they also noted that this effect is strongest in countries that are not fully democratic, where an autocratic style of government is more prevalent.

Finally, the authors suggested that more research was required to better understand how factor endowments and other initial conditions can bring an understanding to how cultural and institutional elements (like attitudes towards obedience and compulsory voting laws) arise.

Perhaps, another area to be examined further is to study the onset of technology, such as political blogging and twittering, as well as transmission of political messages via Short Messaging Systems (SMS). These technological advancements provide mass reach with minimal effort. As such, political participation has become more accessible, requiring less time and human capital. Could this change the calculus of opportunity costs when evaluating one's production and political roles in society?