

Party Lethargy as an Obstacle to Direct Democracy

Eli Rau, Radha Sarkar, and Susan Stokes*

July 1, 2022

Abstract

Some theorists extol mechanisms of direct democracy as enhancing the legitimacy of representative governments. Yet referendums are plagued by low turnout, which diminishes their legitimizing role. Prior scholarship attributes low turnout to the low salience and low perceived importance to citizens of referendums. We posit, instead, that low party effort plays a large role in depressing referendum turnout. Ironically, then, political parties are barriers to direct democracy. Since control of public office is not at stake, party operatives have weaker incentives to mobilize voters. Parties' capacity to get out the vote is weaker still when they are uninstitutionalized or clientelistic. We offer evidence from an original dataset covering all world regions, and from closer study of two Latin American countries. Our qualitative field research in Colombia, and systematic study of turnout across municipalities in Brazil, confirm the role of party-related factors producing sluggish turnout.

*Thanks to David Altman, Emily Beaulieu Bacchus, Francisco Gutierrez Sanin, Alisha Holland, Adrienne LeBas, Alejandro Sanchez Lopez de Mesa, Emily Sellars, and Guillermo Toral, and to participants in seminars at Yale University, the Chicago-Yale Latin American Politics Group, Universidad de San Andrés, Universidad Icesi, Texas A & M University, Boston University, Comparative Politics Workshop at Vanderbilt University, and APSA for comments. We are grateful to Yale's MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies and Council on Latin American and Iberian Studies, and the Tinker Foundation for financial support. The research reported here was deemed exempt by the Yale University Institutional Review Board, protocol #2000023046.

“The peace deal was a wish shared by many Colombians but it was not going to be realized through the parties ... It probably would not have been possible to mobilize political parties without concrete electoral incentives.”

– Humberto de la Calle, Colombian political leader, authors’ interview 2019

Introduction

In October 2020, Chile held a referendum on whether to write a new constitution. The government had announced the vote amidst a 2019 national strike, which began as a protest against public-transit fare increases and grew to encompass demands to make the country fundamentally more fair and equal.

The questions posed in the October 2020 referendum were whether Chile’s constitution should be re-drafted, and whether the body re-writing the constitution should be a constituent assembly (elected solely for this task) or a mixed constitutional convention (with 50% constituent assembly and 50% current members of Congress). The 51% turnout rate was higher than in any election Chile had held since the abolition of compulsory voting in 2012. Of Chileans who cast ballots, 78% voted in favor of a new constitution; 79% favored of an elected constituent assembly over a mixed convention.

Eighteen months later and four thousand miles to the north, Mexico held a referendum on whether to recall the president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Curiously, the April 2022 vote was called by the president himself, in a move to demonstrate his political strength. Fewer than one in five Mexicans went to the polls. Even though this was more than the seven percent who cast ballots in a referendum on corruption in 2021, turnout in both referendums¹ was a fraction of the 63% of Mexicans who had voted in the 2018 national elections.

Both referendums reflect the common perception that the people’s voice remains a distinctly powerful factor that can boost a government’s or leader’s standing. But they also demonstrate sharp differences in levels of participation — robust by recent standards in Chile, paltry in Mexico.

At a moment when representative democracy is on the defensive, there is renewed interest in mechanisms of direct democracy — government-initiated referendums like the ones held in Chile and Mexico, citizens’ initiatives, deliberative processes, and social movements — that may bolster and enliven democratic systems. Scholars and observers have extolled the participatory function of referendums (Barber 1984; Budge 1996) which are widespread in representative democracies. A majority of democracies holds national-level referendums; the proportion grows when we include countries, like the U.S., that hold them at sub-national or local levels.

Yet theorists also note potential drawbacks that could limit the legitimizing effects of referendums. Voters may be ill-informed about the questions they are asked to decide, having

¹We follow Butler and Ranney (1994), and others, in using referendums rather than referenda as a plural form. Those authors note that the interpretation of the Latin referenda is “things referred to.”

to choose “among unfamiliar alternatives that perhaps lack reliable voting cues” (LeDuc 2003: 165). Their votes may reflect (dis)satisfaction with the government rather than their opinions on the referendum issue (see Franklin, Marsh and Wlezien 1994; Svensson 2002). These mechanisms are also highly majoritarian, inviting the abuse of minority rights. Critics point out that populist and autocratic leaders may use mechanisms of direct democracy to grab power, side-stepping courts and legislatures. Recent autocratic leaders have used referendums in this way in Russia, Turkey, and Venezuela.

Another facet of referendums that can reduce their legitimizing effect is lackluster voter participation. Empirical research demonstrates this fact. An experimental study from Norway found that low referendum turnout led citizens to view referendums as less legitimate and less binding on legislators (Arnesen et al. 2019). Future research might determine whether citizens in other countries are similarly prone to downgrade the legitimacy of referendums when participation is low, but it seems likely that the phenomenon is general.

Scholars have observed low referendum turnout in individual countries or world regions (see, e.g., LeDuc 2015; Butler and Ranney 1994; Qvortrup 2013; Szczerbiak and Taggart 2004; Lutz 2007). As we show in Figure 1, low referendum turnout is a global, not just a regional or national, phenomenon. The figure draws on our original *Global Referendums Data Set*. We include 115 referendums held in 36 countries, taking place from 1961 to 2020.² We refer to the measure in Figure 1 as *relative referendum turnout*. This relative quantity is a more useful measure than raw referendum turnout; analyses of the latter risk confounding drivers of referendum participation with system-wide turnout effects, likely to also be at work in candidate elections in any given country and time period.

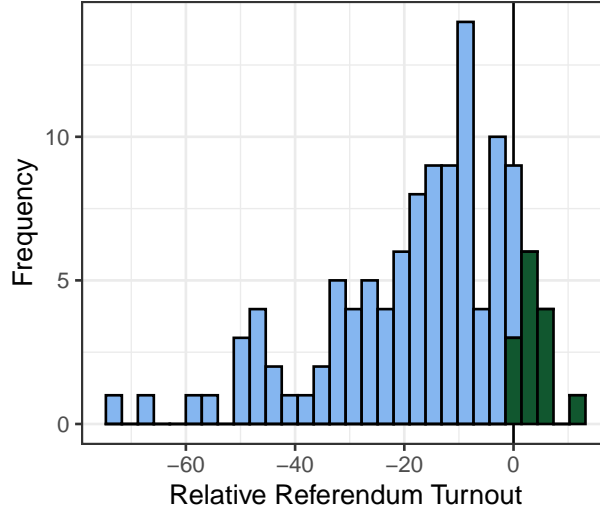
Bars below zero on the x -axis in Figure 1 indicate referendums in which turnout was lower than in the most recent national candidate election; 86% of cases fall below zero. On average, referendum turnout lags candidate-election turnout by 16.9 percentage points. The turnout gap is thus both widespread and large.

What, then, are the factors that drive — or depress — participation in referendums? Is low turnout symptomatic of lackluster interest among citizens? Voters might not care much about the question under consideration (Franklin, Marsh and Wlezien 1994). Certainly, turnout in candidate elections often declines when the office to be filled is seen as of low importance. In the U.S., turnout is much higher in presidential contests than in mid-term legislative elections — even in safe states in which presidential campaigns do little to turn out the vote (see Doherty et al. 2017). Perhaps referendums are usually viewed as low-salience and low-importance votes.

However, low salience and low importance, they don’t seem to be the whole story. After all, not all referendums are low-salience affairs. Brexit was an extremely high-profile contest, and one that indeed generated turnout of 72% — high by recent British standards. A few months later, in October 2016, another high-salience referendum was held — the Colombian referendum on peace accords between the government and rebels. (We discuss this in detail later.) Salience, as measured in polls, was not much lower than Brexit had been for British

²We exclude referendums held simultaneously with candidate elections; citizens’ initiatives and abrogative referendums; and referendums held in non-democracies.

FIGURE 1. Turnout in Referendums vs Candidate Elections



Note: Comparison of turnout in each of 115 national referendums with turnout in the previous national candidate election. Negative values indicate that turnout was lower in the referendum. The referendums in the sample were conducted between 1961 and 2020.

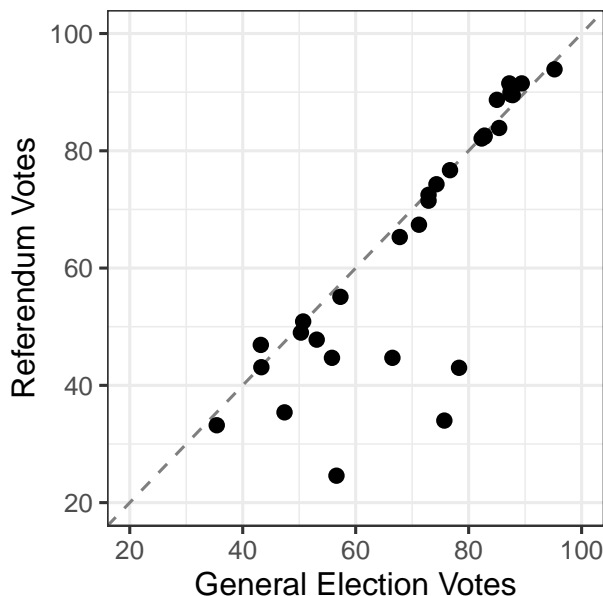
voters; but turnout was a paltry 37%.

More systematic evidence that salience is not the whole story can be gleaned from referendums held jointly with candidate elections. If voters simply did not care about referendums, we would expect to observe substantial ballot *roll-off*. That is, when referendums are held simultaneously with candidate elections, we would expect many voters to cast ballots in the candidate contests but then leave the polling place without casting a vote in the referendum. This is precisely the behavior scholars of American politics have unearthed in U.S. candidate elections. They find significant roll-off — on the order of 10 to 30 percentage points — between top- and bottom-of-ballot races (Bullock and Dunn 1996; Wattenberg, Mcallister and Salvanto 2000; Marble 2017).

When it comes to referendums held simultaneously with candidate elections, roll-off is, in fact, small. Drawing again from our global dataset, Figure 2 reports on 31 national referendums that were held simultaneously with a candidate election. It compares the proportion of voters that cast a vote on a referendum question to the proportion that cast a vote in the highest-level office up for election that day. In 77% of cases, the difference was less than 5 percentage points. The median difference was a drop in the referendum vote of only 0.4 percentage points. In 29% of simultaneous referendums, *more* citizens cast a vote on the referendum question than on the highest-office candidate election.

We do observe substantial roll-off in a handful of cases — in seven referendums, turnout was at least five percentage points lower on the referendum question compared with the highest-office candidate election. But in a majority of these referendums, at least one major party or coalition called on their supporters to boycott the referendum question.

FIGURE 2. Valid Votes in Simultaneous Referendums



Note: Referendums held simultaneously with candidate elections. The y-axis indicates the number of valid and non-blank votes for referendum questions, as a proportion of registered voters. The x-axis indicates the number of valid and non-blank votes (as a proportion of registered voters) cast for the highest-level office on the ballot in the same election. (The dashed line marks where $x = y$.)

In most simultaneous referendums, once voters get to the polls, they are about as likely to cast a vote on a referendum question as in a high-level candidate election. Yet, as Figure 1 showed, when referendums are not held simultaneously with candidate elections, voters are much less likely to get to the polls — on average, 17 percentage points less likely.

Thus, while the salience of the referendum question undoubtedly plays a role in voter decision-making, arguments focused on salience leave much unexplained — about the overall decline in turnout for referendums, and about variation in turnout across referendums.

In studies of referendums in Europe, low turnout has also been linked to participation quorums (Aguiar-Conraria and Magalhães 2010). Rules establishing minimum levels of turnout for referendum approval can create incentives for citizens to abstain. Our cross-regional empirical analysis, reported later, indicates that the presence of quorum rules — though undoubtedly important in some cases — does not play a significant part in determining turnout.

What other factors might depress referendum turnout? In contrast to behavioral accounts that center on voter (dis)interest, we take an institutional approach and explore the organization and incentive structures of political parties. Typically, parties engage in get-out-the-vote drives in candidate elections, and their efforts can have a substantial impact — especially when they engage in door-to-door canvassing and in “ground campaigns” more

generally (Gerber and Green 2000). When it comes to referendums, these efforts materialize on some occasions but not on others.³

In this article we demonstrate the importance of factors internal to parties for driving referendum turnout. The relevant features include parties' cohesion and levels of institutionalization, as well as the degree to which they are clientelistic versus programmatic in nature. These features shape the strength (or weakness) of incentives that party operatives have to invest in turning out the vote.

The scholarship on mechanisms of democracy is rich, much of it focused on European experiences. The scope of the theoretical considerations we set forth is all democracies that hold national referendums, and we offer global evidence in support of this theory. Our closer empirical studies are focused on Latin America. In that region, it is possible to observe a good deal of variation on both explanatory and outcome variables — and not just across countries but within them. For that reason we delve more deeply into the experiences of Colombia and Brazil, and build on the work of Latin Americanist scholars, including Altman (2019), Lissidini (2020), Tuesta and Welp (2020), and Welp (2016). Another reason for our regional emphasis on Latin America is that referendums and other mechanisms of direct democracy are increasingly popular in the third-wave democracies of this region, as well as Eastern Europe.

Substantively, we focus on referendums initiated by governments, which differ from bottom-up measures such as citizens' initiatives (Altman 2019). We are interested in understanding the role of party organizations in direct democracy and so, limiting our investigation to cases where (at least) governing parties have a clear stake in the outcomes makes sense. In the case of citizens' initiatives, issue ownership becomes muddled across citizens' groups, social movements, non-profit organizations, and political parties, and the stakes for incumbent governments to mobilize become less clear.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. We first offer general propositions about why referendum turnout might often lag behind candidate-election turnout, and the kinds of political parties that might exacerbate this trend. Parties that are less institutionalized and less programmatic will face higher obstacles to getting out the vote in referendums. In the next section, analysis of cross-national data from our original global dataset offers initial evidence that uninstitutionalized and clientelistic parties hamper turnout in referendums.

To flesh out the mechanisms involved, in the following section we study, in depth, a referendum in a Latin American country in which diverse political parties invested — or failed to invest — in voter mobilization in just the ways suggested in our discussion. That country is Colombia. The Colombian experience allows us to explore the impact of clientelism, programmatic appeals, and party institutionalization on parties' get-out-the-vote efforts. We interviewed more than 50 politicians, party operatives, and experts. Public-opinion data confirms the parties' differential capacity to turn out the vote.

³That parties' efforts are crucial for referendum participation has not gone unremarked. Hartliński (2015) pointed to weak party mobilization efforts to explain the mere eight percent participation rate in the Polish referendum of 2015. More broadly, Kriesi notes that “participation in direct-democratic votes is expected to be a function of the *intensity of the campaign preceding the vote*” (Kriesi 2007: 121, emphasis in the original).

For more systematic evidence for the link between party organization and turnout, we turn next to another Latin American country, Brazil. In this case we leverage comparisons across thousands of municipalities. We are able to link features of parties with referendum turnout, all at the local level.

Having demonstrated the relevance of party organization for turnout with cross-national and within-country quantitative data, as well as with cross-party qualitative information, we return in the conclusion to broader questions. What are the lessons from our study for positive and normative democratic theory? What does it tell us about the prospects, and limitations, of one mechanism of direct democracy for the legitimacy of representative systems?

Party Structure and Incentives to Turn Out the Vote

Saliency plays an important role in shaping voter turnout in referendums, as in other elections. But explanations focusing solely on the individual voter are missing a major structural feature of referendums: political actors typically have less at stake in referendums than in candidate elections, which in turn depresses turnout.

Politicians tend to view candidate elections as life-or-death events. But for many political actors, less rides on the outcome of referendums. For those who are office-seekers — who are motivated by a drive to win elections and hold power — this is obviously true. They will typically feel less urgency about, say, garnering public support for the ratification of a treaty or for the reversal of a privatization scheme than for becoming the mayor or legislator or president. But even for policy-oriented political actors — those mainly motivated by a desire to shape legislation and government actions — gaining or retaining office may seem more important than individual referendums. Holding office allows politicians to pursue a range of policy objectives. However seriously they take a referendum, it is a one-off decision on a limited range of issues.⁴ So even they may be less motivated to get out the vote in a referendum than in a candidate election.

These considerations help explain why referendum turnout often lags candidate-election turnout, in general. But the gap will also grow or shrink depending on varying features of political parties. Parties that eschew ideology or programmatic stances, opting instead for a transactional approach to electioneering and governing, are expected to fall especially short in spurring referendum turnout.

We anticipate lower referendum turnout — other things being equal — when parties are clientelistic, meaning that they offer discrete material benefits or public employment to generate electoral support.

Clientelistic party brokers, the low-level operatives who are in charge of getting out the vote, will tend not to be especially adept at making arguments based on public policy. These

⁴Of course when prime ministers and presidents call referendums that their side goes on to lose, the loss can be career-ending, as it was for the UK's David Cameron after the Leave side prevailed in the Brexit vote. But such instances remain uncommon.

parties are typically staffed not by people who are focused on public policy but by office-seekers (Peterlevitz 2020). Clientelistic party workers will need to pivot sharply if they are to get out the vote in a referendum. The local machine broker who tries to substitute policy arguments for her usual largess may find herself unable to appeal to voters. For their part, voters who are used to vote buying and clientelistic campaigns might be unaccustomed to focusing on abstract and distant matters of public policy.

In addition to limits on brokers' abilities, they may be less keen to invest much effort in turning out the vote in referendums. The anticipation of spoils of victory, so important for stirring party machines to action, are absent in referendum contests. Party operatives' access to employment and discretionary benefits — either for their own consumption or to hand out to others — will not, in general, grow or shrink, depending on which side prevails in the referendum.

Of course, to the extent that clientelistic parties are motivated to get out the vote in referendums, they could simply buy turnout, as they often do in candidate elections. But the resources they are able to marshal are likely to be more limited in referendum campaigns. The Colombian experience suggests that the material resources that grease the wheels of party machines might flow more sluggishly or dry up altogether in referendum campaigns. In Colombia, a sizeable portion of campaign financing in candidate elections comes from private donors who anticipate access and influence. Candidates offer them kickbacks — future contracts in exchange for campaign contributions. Deprived of such resources in referendums, clientelistic parties in Colombia are less able to buy votes or turnout.

In contrast to clientelistic parties, programmatic ones are better equipped to mobilize for referendums. They tend to be staffed by policy-seeking candidates and actors. Programmatic parties typically adhere to ideological blueprints and promote policy changes, for instance introducing same-sex marriage or approving membership in international organizations. Since referendums mainly involve policy or institutional reforms, a candidate who customarily asks potential voters to think about what's at stake, in policy terms, in a candidate election will have an easier time mobilizing voters in referendums.

A second feature of political parties that we expect to influence turnout in referendums is their *strength* or *weakness*. A party is strong, in our usage, when its leaders can use carrots and sticks to influence the behavior of the organization under it. This matters since party leaders often have more at stake in the outcome of referendums than do lower-level operatives. To the extent that the leader can use incentives, such as career advancement and candidacies, to stir those who oversee ground campaigns to action, they can close the referendum turnout gap.

It has been shown that clientelistic parties are especially prone to poor alignment of interests between leaders and their subordinates. They hence suffer from agency problems, with leaders depending on local brokers whose compliance with the leadership's wishes is limited (see, e.g., Stokes et al. 2013). But even among clientelistic parties there is variation in the degree to which leaders solve these agency problems vis-a-vis brokers. Leaders of strong clientelistic parties are better able to stir their brokers to getting out the vote. And party strength also varies among programmatic parties.

Hence the degree of party strength is a factor distinct from degrees of clientelism. Where parties are strong — where they are internally cohesive and well institutionalized — they are more adept at effectively carrying out mobilization efforts to get voters to the polls during referendums. Where parties are weak, they lack the institutional capacity for leaders to impose lines of action on lower-ranking party actors and referendum mobilization effort — and consequently, participation — declines.

Parties and Referendum Turnout Worldwide

Analysis of cross-national data offers initial confirmation that the features of parties just discussed do indeed play a part in referendum turnout. To carry out this analysis, we turn to the *Global Referendums Dataset*. This original dataset includes variables observed at the national level, at moments of (and about) national referendums. We study 115 referendums, spanning the years 1961 to 2020. We include only referendums held by democracies.

The cross-national analyses presented here lack the richness that our country studies will offer, and the process of aggregation at the country-level introduces some noise. The analysis reported here measures party strength and type at the system- or country-level. This level of analysis masks variation across parties and within countries — variation of the very sort that we leverage later in the paper. Even so, this cross-national analysis represents an important plausibility probe. Were we to uncover no evidence of a link between party types and relative referendum turnout in a global set of cases, we would be concerned that our theory was country- or region-specific.

To estimate the party-system factors identified earlier, we also draw on the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset. The key variable here is V-Dem’s Party Institutionalization Index (PII). The index includes measures of party strength (e.g., ideological and policy cohesion and party discipline) and party type (programmatic versus clientelistic).⁵ Cases that score higher on the PII are ones in which party cohesion and discipline are greater and in which clientelistic strategies are less common.

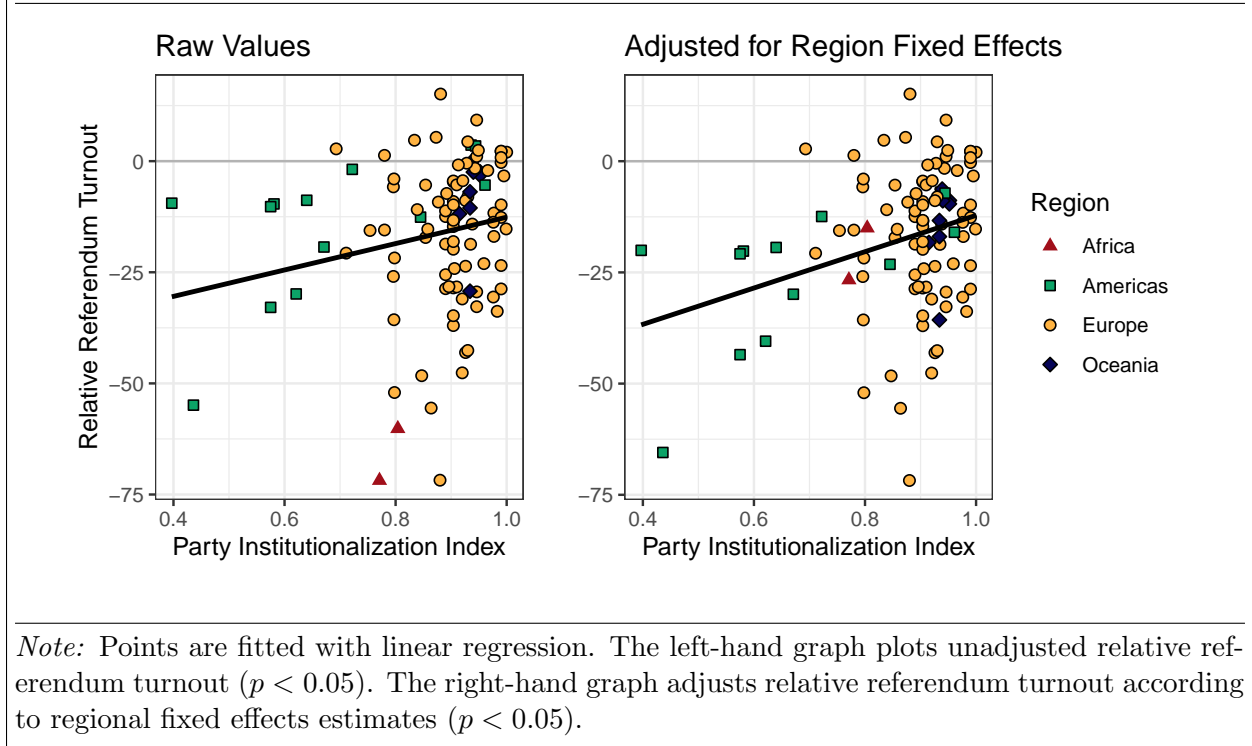
Our key outcome variable is *relative referendum turnout* (RRT). It reflects turnout in referendums and simulated turnout in a hypothetical candidate election held on the same day, where the estimate reflects time trends in turnout between the most time-proximate candidate elections held before and after the referendum.⁶

To test for an effect of the nature of political parties on referendum turnout, we regress relative turnout, RRT, on party-system institutionalization, PII. And indeed, PII is a significant predictor of RRT. In a bivariate regression, the effect size is 37 ($p < 0.05$). When we incorporate region fixed effects, the effect size is 44 ($p < 0.05$). In substantive terms, a move from the most-institutionalized party system in our sample to the least-institutionalized party system corresponds with a 22-point decline in relative referendum turnout (27-point

⁵See appendix for full description of each variable included in the index.

⁶See the appendix for a detailed discussion of our method for estimating RRT, as well as a series of alternative specifications (all of which produce results consistent with those presented in the main text).

FIGURE 3. Party Institutionalization



Note: Points are fitted with linear regression. The left-hand graph plots unadjusted relative referendum turnout ($p < 0.05$). The right-hand graph adjusts relative referendum turnout according to regional fixed effects estimates ($p < 0.05$).

decline when estimated with region fixed effects).⁷

Figure 3 illustrates the relationship between the party institutionalization index and relative referendum turnout. The left-hand graph plots relative referendum turnout against PII (overlaid with an OLS estimate). The right-hand graph plots the OLS estimate from our main regression model (regressing RRT on PII with region fixed effects). In this rightmost graph, we include region-adjusted values for RRT. Europe is the reference category and provides more observations than any other region.⁸

We present a series of robustness tests in Tables A.1 and A.2 in the appendix. We estimate the model with multiple alternative measures of RRT. We also estimate the relationship between RRT and PII in the sub-sample excluding cases from the Americas. As is clear from Figure 3, the region with the greatest variation in PII is the Americas; analyzing the non-Americas cases separately provides assurance that our results are not driven by a single region. We also estimate the model with control variables for participation quorums and compulsory voting. Our results are robust to all of these alternative specifications.

In sum, cross-national data confirm a connection between party discipline, cohesion, and clientelism, on the one hand, and relative referendum turnout, on the other. We now turn to in-depth country studies to confirm these relationships and delve into the mechanisms

⁷See Table A.1 for full details.

⁸For non-Europe observations, we simply subtract the coefficient estimate for the relevant region from the RRT value. For example, the coefficient estimate for the dummy variable “Americas” is 10.589. For each observation from Americas, the right-hand graph plots the value $y = \text{RRT} - 10.589$.

involved.

Parties and Turnout in the 2016 Colombian Referendum

The Colombian experience illustrates the advantages and disadvantages that different types of parties face in turning out the vote for referendums. Major parties in Colombia vary in their degrees of programmatic and ideological emphasis, clientelism, and strength. A deep dive into this case allows us to examine individual party features and how they are related to parties' efforts to get out the vote.

The Colombian case also allows us to set aside other factors expected to influence turnout. Voting in Colombia is voluntary, rather than compulsory, in both candidate elections and referendums. The referendum on which we focus was not held simultaneously with candidate elections. In referendums held simultaneously with candidate elections, it becomes difficult to distinguish mobilization for candidates and mobilization for the referendum.

Our fieldwork in Colombia revolved around the important referendum (or plebiscite) on peace accords, held in 2016.⁹ As mentioned, our fieldwork included more than 50 interviews. We spoke with national and local-level politicians, campaign managers and staffers from the various referendum campaigns, bureaucrats active in referendum issues, and local experts and academics. The fieldwork was carried out in 2018 and 2019, thus beginning 18 months after the plebiscite. But the plebiscite was still highly salient and not easily forgotten by key actors. A portion of our 2019 fieldwork took place against the backdrop of campaigns for candidate elections held in October of that year. During this phase of fieldwork, we observed campaign events and meetings, geared in part at getting voters to the polls.

Our fieldwork revealed that differences in the internal features of parties — their organizational coherence and leadership strength, and the degree to which they rely on programmatic versus clientelistic mobilization — had a powerful influence on their ability and incentives to get out the vote. In candidate elections, these features were much less of an obstacle to voter mobilization.

The 2016 Referendum

The question posed in the 2016 Colombian plebiscite was whether voters favored ratification of peace accords signed by the government and the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, or FARC). The FARC is an insurgent group that has been active in Colombia since 1964. Traditional parties led the campaign on the

⁹Colombian law provides for both “referendums” and “plebiscites.” The 2016 vote was a plebiscite, in which voters are asked to vote “Yes” or “No” on a single question. In this section we use the terms interchangeably. Moreover, no form of popular ratification at all was required by Colombian law. Indeed, it was both legally and politically possible for the peace accords to have been approved by the Colombian congress, via routine legislative processes. Yet President Santos opted for the agreement’s approval via referendum. While the definitive account of his decision has yet to be written, our research suggests that a major factor was Santos’s desire to insulate the agreement from future reversal by opposing political forces.

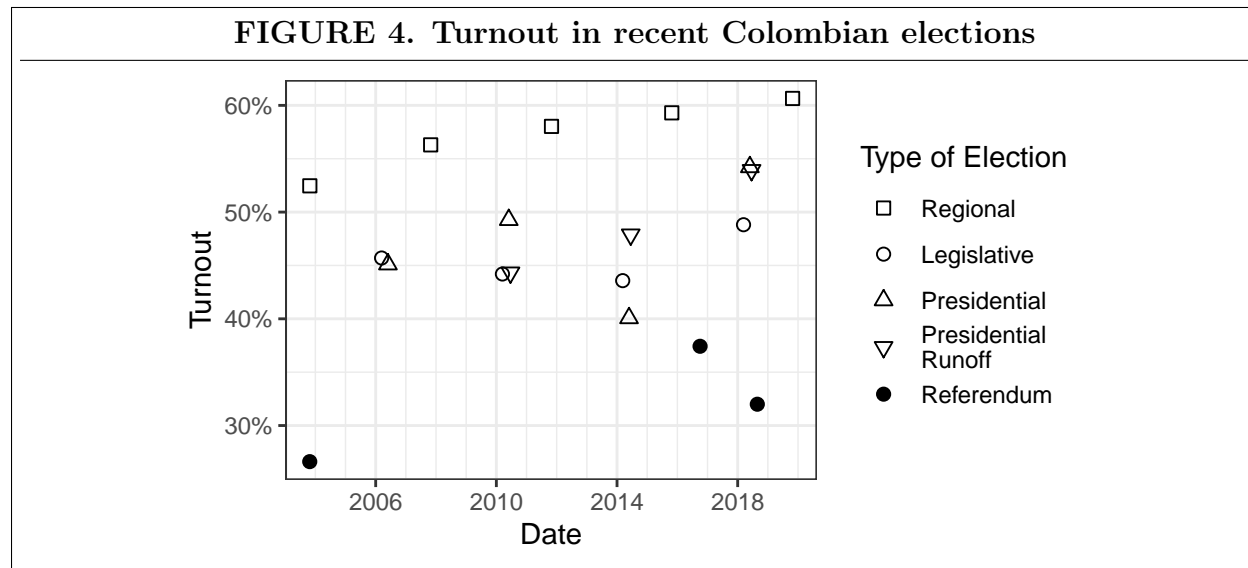
Yes side: the U Party (*Partido Social de la Unidad Nacional* or *La U*), with President Juan Manuel Santos at its helm; the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party, and the Radical Change party.¹⁰ In candidate elections, these parties rely on clientelism rather than policy appeals to mobilize their supporters. They feature high rates of party switching among party elites and operatives, and weak internal linkages between local and national levels (Milanese, Abadía and Manfredi 2016; Botero and Alvira 2012; Gutierrez Sanin 2001).

Several leftist parties and figures also favored approval of the peace accords. They worked independently for their passage, with little coordination with the government-linked pro-Yes parties.

On the No side, the major party was the Democratic Center (*Centro Democrático*, CD), led by Álvaro Uribe. Uribe is a former president and a towering figure in Colombian politics. Compared to most parties on the Yes side, the CD has a clearer ideological profile, emphasizing law and order and pro-market economic policies.

To the surprise of many — the government, international observers, and even those who opposed the peace deal — the referendum failed. The margin of defeat was narrow: the No side won with 50.2% of the vote.

At 37%, turnout was low, even by Colombian standards. Figure 4 plots the turnout rate in every Colombian referendum and candidate election from 2003 to 2019. Turnout was lower in the 2016 referendum than in any candidate election between 2003 and 2019. The only recent elections with lower turnout were two other referendums, held in 2003 and 2018.¹¹

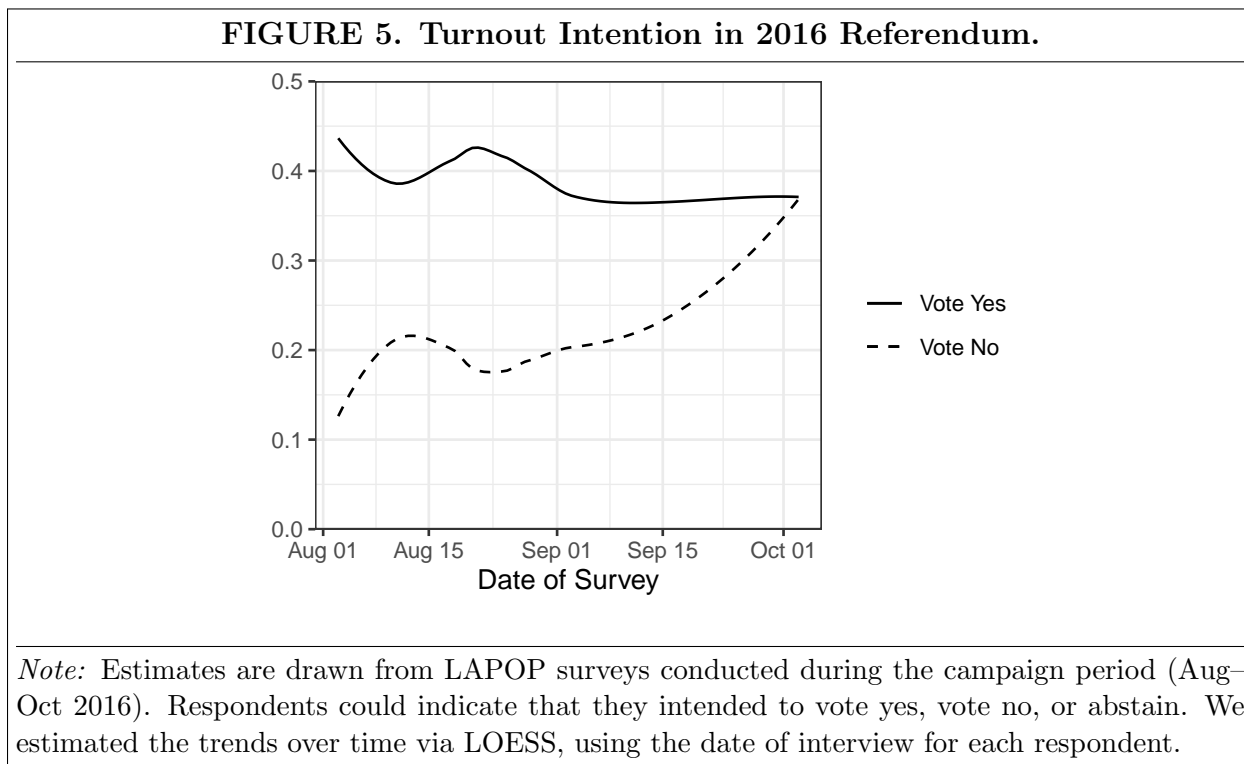


¹⁰Together, these three parties held 105 of 166 seats in the House of Representatives. They were joined by the Greens and a handful of smaller leftist parties. Some of these small parties were ideological organizations, but in general the “Yes” coalition was comprised of clientelistic parties.

¹¹These votes were in fact referendums as described in Colombian law, that is, provisions were narrow and detailed and each required sufficient turnout and sufficient approval, individually.

Survey Evidence of Differential Effectiveness of Mobilization

A first piece of evidence that the No side beat the Yes side in the get-out-the-vote effort comes from public-opinion data. In the months of the campaign leading up to the referendum, the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) asked Colombians whether they planned to vote yes, vote no, or abstain. We estimate time trends in these responses, using the date of interview for each respondent to predict their likelihood of turning out for the Yes or No side, as shown in Figure 5.



The data reveal that, over the course of the campaign, the No side had steadily moved Colombians out of the bucket of abstainers and into the bucket of No voters, whereas the Yes side failed to turn abstainers into supporters.¹² At the start of the campaigns, the Yes side held a strong advantage — 40% of respondents supported the Yes. But by election day, the No campaign had mobilized enough voters to bring the two sides into a dead heat.

On their own, these data are merely suggestive. They cannot be taken entirely at face value. For instance, they far overstate the numbers of voters who would turn out for the referendum.¹³ But together with the evidence from our fieldwork, the figure reinforces a consistent story of disproportionate mobilization on the No side of the referendum.

¹²An alternative interpretation of these data is that social stigma against declaring oneself opposed to the peace accords declined through the campaign period. But even in this explanation, increasing the social acceptability of publicly stating one’s opposition to the accords is a sign that the No campaign was effective.

¹³Turnout in the referendum was far from 75%, as these self-reports would suggest. Only 37% of eligible voters turned out on election day. It is well-documented that social desirability bias leads to over-reporting of turnout in surveys (Corbett 1991; Blais, Gidengil and Nevitte 2004; Karp and Brockington 2005; Holbrook and Krosnick 2010).

Qualitative Evidence

Several features of political parties on the Yes side inhibited their ability to get out the vote in the referendum. One was their uneven organizational presence. Colombian experts have observed that even relatively large state capitals lack permanent party branches of parties that supported the Yes side (Botero and Alvira 2012).

Leaders of parties on the Yes side are also institutionally weak. The party brokers who are cogs in machines operate somewhat independently in Colombia. Partisanship plays a limited role (Felipe Botero, Interview, June 13 2019). Party leaders lack the tools to stir brokers to action, especially in what the brokers view as non-essential votes, like plebiscites and referendums. In these off-cycle polls, brokers perceived few concrete benefits for themselves and their local operations.

In candidate elections, these factors are less of an obstacle, since local brokers have stronger incentives to get out the vote – their access to resources and patronage depends on their candidate winning.

One party leader complained about the lethargy that the referendum campaign encountered among local operatives:

The leaders [of the party], here in Bogota we all agreed [that the peace deal] is important. But now I have to take this idea down the vertical scale [of the party], to the leader of the smallest and furthest village, he has to get the idea that the party is supporting the Yes. . . . These are people who in other circumstances mobilize their families, their friends, express their desires. [In the referendum], at best the [local] leader would vote. (Germán Córdoba, Interview, June 19, 2019).

He went on to attest to the weak incentives to campaign when the prize is not political office:

When you carry out a campaign for yourself [...], you invest time, effort, resources, whatever you need. In a plebiscite, you don't see your personal benefit, and so there is much more apathy, and it was very difficult to get people to work together.

The reliance among pro-Yes parties on clientelism, a loose network of brokers, and quid-pro-quo relations with voters and donors, created problems in the referendum campaign. They had more trouble with funding than they would in a candidate election. Campaigns for public office are usually financed by a mix of reimbursement from the state as a function of the vote share they received (Salazar Escalante and Pabon Castro 2016); personal bank loans taken out by individual candidates (Sánchez Torres N.d.); and corruption, for instance, in the form of promises of future government contracts or other favors in exchange for campaign donations (Graf Lambsdorff and Hady 2006).

But in the referendum, since assumption of office was not at stake, kick-backs and other illicit forms of campaign funds were also unavailable (Member of Corpovisionarios, Interview,

June 18, 2019). Nor were individual politicians willing to run the risk of taking out loans, and there was no official reimbursement for votes won.

For these reasons, according to politicians, academics, and experts, the Yes side lacked material resources needed to buy votes and induce voters to turn out. Without the resources that typically grease the wheels of Colombian machine politics, operatives from the pro-accords parties did not deploy the customary selective incentives for voters in the referendum vote: *TLC*, a Spanish acronym for steel construction rods, roast pork, and cement (Tatiana Duque, Interview, July 8, 2019).

The pro-No CD party was a more vertically integrated organization. Although parties are organizationally weak across the board in Colombia in comparison to other countries,¹⁴ the CD has stronger internal organization and cohesion than its rivals. Where other parties are prone to factionalism (Sánchez López de Mesa 2018) and party switching among elites (Botero and Alvira 2012), the CD is more disciplined and cohesive (Losada and Liendo 2016). It has active members at the neighborhood and municipal levels, a strong corps of social media volunteers, and legislators who take initiatives that are then supported by the top leadership (Gutiérrez, Interview, June 17, 2019; Botero, Interview, June 13, 2019).

During the referendum campaign, the CD sustained a presence throughout the country, including in remote, rural areas. One CD party worker recalled the campaign he conducted alongside a congressman in the department of Meta:

Almost everything was door-to-door, we walked through the department, door-to-door, *voz-a-voz*. We went to villages. We went to all the departments of Meta. [...] We moved around a lot. (Juan Felipe Iregui, Interview, July 5, 2019).

Another dimension on which Colombian parties differ is in the degree to which they emphasize ideology and policy in their internal operations and their appeals to voters. The major party at the time of the peace accords referendum with the clearest ideological and policy profile was the CD, the major pro-No party. This feature worked to the CD's advantage in getting out the referendum vote in 2016.

Owing to the stature and power of Álvaro Uribe within the party, the CD has elements of personalism and *caudillismo*. Still, Uribe's force of personality is not a substitute for ideology and policy stances. On this dimension as well, the CD was distinct from traditional parties on the Yes side, in ways that were advantageous for getting out the No vote.

On the Yes side, there were some ideologically well-defined parties on the left, mirror images of CD on the right. But the largest parties espousing the Yes position — Santos's U Party, along with its allies, the Liberals the Conservatives, and Radical Change — had neither a strong ideological profile nor experience using policy appeals to turn out their supporters. These parties struggled to retool their campaigns for referendum messages.

¹⁴In terms of the Party Institutionalization Index (PII), discussed above, in 2016 Colombia scored 0.58; the regional average in our sample of Latin American referendum-years was 0.66. For all the countries included in our sample, the median PII is 0.91, and 95.7% of cases have a higher PII score than Colombia.

The CD — the only major party on the No side — came into the referendum campaign with a well-defined ideological profile as a pro-business, law-and-order party. Little adjustment was needed to mount an ideological campaign against the peace accords. As a CD senator explained to us, in a referendum campaign, “you are selling ideas, you don’t have to talk about the person.” In the CD, “we are more ideas than people, and that’s very different from other parties in Colombia” (Senator Paloma Valencia, Interview, June 20, 2019).¹⁵

The No campaign offered programmatic arguments against the peace accords. Uribe and the CD consistently criticized the accords as too lenient on the FARC. The CD brought to the No campaign its law-and-order stance and a desire to win in a high-stakes national vote. Supporters as well as opponents of the peace accords expressed this hunger for a fight in interviews.

When asked why the CD devoted so much effort to a campaign that they thought they would certainly lose — mistakenly, as it happened — the CD’s campaign director stressed the importance of communicating a message, regardless of the referendum outcome:

What we wanted to leave was a record, that we do not agree [with the peace accords]. We [knew we were] going to lose, but we [were] going to leave [a] record... that many Colombians do not agree [with the accords]. (Carlos Vélez, Interview, July 8, 2019)

In contrast, several Yes-side party leaders we interviewed noted that their parties were unaccustomed to making policy appeals, and that this inability did not serve them well in the referendum campaign. A senator of the governing U Party noted that “in a campaign, a candidate can ‘sell’ themselves, their qualities”, whereas this is not the case for referendums. He characterized the referendum as an “opinion vote,” where voters on the Yes side did not take cues from parties (Senator Roy Barreras, Interview, June 18, 2019).

A Radical Change director echoed this criticism. In a candidate election, he observed, “it’s easy to personalize the vote. In a referendum, you are selling an idea, and this is very complicated.” Whereas campaigning for a candidate is “tangible,” campaigning for an idea is more challenging because it is “abstract” (Córdoba, Interview, June 19, 2019).

The Yes side displayed comparatively low ideological motivation, a hindrance to local efforts to turn out voters. As a campaign director for the government noted, politicians on the Yes side lacked a programmatic platform that united them (Alfonso Prada, Interview, July 16, 2019). And, as a former interior minister observed, not all politicians formally on the Yes side were equally committed to the peace accords (Guillermo Rivera, Interview, June 19, 2019). In candidate elections, many local actors mobilized for the sake of their own career advancement or allegiance to individual politicians. But these incentives were absent in the referendum.

In sum, the CD mounted a No campaign in which it drew from its “high combat morale” (Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, Interview, June 17, 2019). The CD, and hence the No side, was

¹⁵It would be wrong to suggest that clientelism is absent from the CD, which indeed is known to bring material inducements into the mix, as needed.

more ideologically cohesive and driven by policy critiques. It deployed its party organization to work hard in many parts of the country to get out the vote against the accords.

On the Yes side, given their organizational and ideological shortcomings, these parties were relatively lethargic motors for getting out the vote in 2016. A peace-deal negotiator and high-level Yes campaign leader shared with us his skepticism about parties as a vehicle for the campaign:

The peace deal was a wish shared by many Colombians but it was not going to be realized through the parties, that is to say, it was outside the traditional mobilization mechanisms of parties. It probably would not have been possible to mobilize political parties without concrete electoral incentives (Humberto de la Calle, Interview, July 15, 2019).

Party Type and Turnout: Evidence from Brazilian Municipalities

In this section we turn from mainly qualitative evidence to quantitative evidence that weak and clientelistic parties fare badly at turning out voters for referendums. The evidence comes from Brazil and is related to a referendum on gun control held in October 2005. The referendum was proposed by the federal government and carried out throughout the country. We are able to distinguish strong and programmatic local parties from weak and clientelistic ones, and assess referendum turnout in comparison to candidate turnout, in more than 5,000 municipalities. Our analysis reveals that towns and cities with weak and clientelistic parties experienced systematically lower average turnout, as well as a larger gap between referendum and candidate-election turnout, than did in towns and cities governed by strong, programmatic parties.

A possible obstacle in this analysis is Brazil's compulsory voting law, which requires all literate citizens between the ages of 18 and 70 to go to the polls. Voting in the 2005 referendum was also compulsory. Yet even in compulsory voting systems, many people abstain, and we observe variation in turnout from election to election. This is especially true in countries, like Brazil, in which compulsory voting is only weakly enforced (Panagopoulos 2008). Countries with strictly enforced compulsory voting, such as Uruguay, reliably see turnout rates above 90%; but in Brazil, turnout frequently falls below 80%. Turnout in Brazil also varies over time. For instance, turnout in the 2005 referendum was 7.7 percentage points lower than in the 2004 municipal elections. In short, despite *de jure* requirements for compulsory voting, *de facto* there is substantial variation in turnout.

The 2005 Referendum

In 2003, the national legislature approved a series of gun-control measures, meant to deal with the very high rates of gun violence that plagued the country. In 1996, the United

Nations had declared that gun deaths in Brazil outpaced that of any other country in the world (Soltis 2018). The 2003 package of reforms included a ban on firearms and ammunition, which would go into effect if approved by popular referendum. The eventual referendum was held on October 23, 2005.

The ban on guns was supported by the federal government, the ruling Workers Party (PT), the Catholic Church, and most of the news media (Maia 2009). Early polling suggested the proposal was headed for a resounding victory, with 80% of citizens supporting the gun ban (Cavalcanti 2017). But a strong opposition took shape in the run up to the referendum, buoyed by support from right-wing and Evangelical media outlets, and financial assistance and strategic advice from the US National Rifle Association (Cavalcanti 2017).

In the end, gun control went down to defeat, with 64% of voters supporting the No side. Turnout nationwide was 78%.

Data and Empirical Expectations

We have argued that party strength and type shape the level of effort that party operatives are willing to invest in mobilizing for a referendum. In this section, we systematically assess this proposition with municipal-level data in Brazil.

Our analysis takes advantage of path-breaking research by Peterlevitz (2020), which demonstrates a connection between party switching, on one side, and patronage and clientelism, on the other, at the municipal level in Brazil. Politicians switch parties at relatively high rates in Brazil. In the Chamber of Deputies between 1991 and 2003, at least one-third of deputies switched their affiliation to a different legislative party (Desposato 2006).

Local politicians also changed parties with some frequency. In our sample of mayors, approximately 26% of the mayors were party switchers. Peterlevitz demonstrates that their motives in doing so are mainly opportunistic. Typically, local politicians switch parties when they fail to secure candidacies in their former party. Peterlevitz shows that politicians rarely make this move in search of a better ideological or programmatic fit between themselves and their parties.

Whether parties are generally weak in Brazil is a topic of debate. Scholars have traditionally characterized Brazil as a very weak and fragmented party system (Carey and Shugart 1995; Mainwaring 1999; Samuels 1999; Ames 1995). But recent work has challenged this notion, arguing that Brazilian parties exhibit greater party discipline than often assumed (Hagopian, Gervasoni and Moraes 2009; Cheibub and Sin 2020). We do not seek to adjudicate this debate; we only note that the literature suggests that Brazilian parties vary sufficiently in type and strength to constitute a sound test of our theory.¹⁶

If parties are strong in the sense we use that term in this paper, then party leaders are able to harm a local aspirant's career by denying her the opportunity to run for local office. Party

¹⁶These debates are somewhat orthogonal to our analysis here, which simply probes for systematic differences in referendum vote shares in municipalities governed by mayors that have switched parties, and those who have not.

switching by candidates indicates party weakness, in this respect. But Peterlevitz’s analyses go beyond this point. Using close-election regression discontinuity designs, he demonstrates that party-switching candidates who barely eke out a win go on, as mayors, to use patronage in public employment to a greater degree than do mayors who barely won and who are not party switchers. The switchers also engage more in vote buying. Peterlevitz concludes that party switchers are “opportunistic politicians,” motivated by their drive to attain office and with a “disregard for policy.” They therefore “rely on mobilization strategies with more immediate payoffs, such as patronage appointments and vote buying” (2020: 3). In sum, party switching by mayors is a good proxy for party weakness and for clientelism.

We combine data on mayoral party affiliations, party switching, and turnout in 5,471 Brazilian municipalities.¹⁷ Our main explanatory variable, *Party Switcher*, takes a value of one if the mayor (elected in 2004) had switched parties in the prior four years. That is, she scored one if, between 2000 and 2004, she belonged to a different party than the one she was affiliated with when she ran for mayor in 2004.¹⁸

Results

The first model in Table 1 regresses referendum turnout on the party-switcher variable. In municipalities with party-switching mayors, turnout was 1.9 percentage points lower than in municipalities with mayors who were not party switchers ($p < 0.001$). As predicted, in municipalities where the governing party is weaker and more clientelistic, referendum turnout falls considerably compared with those municipalities where parties are stronger.

How confident can we be that it is the nature of municipal parties that is depressing referendum turnout, rather than some other factor that produces both weak parties and low turnout? Poverty might be a confounder, as clientelism feeds on voter poverty (Stokes et al. 2013) and poor people are at higher risk of abstaining (Lijphart 1997; Schafer et al. 2021). As shown in Model 2, our results are robust to controls for poverty rate, per capita income, infant mortality, population size, and percent rural population. The estimated effect of party switchers on turnout, though smaller, remains substantively significant at about -0.71 percentage points.

Yet we can’t be sure that we have controlled for every possible confounder. We therefore deploy an alternative dependent variable: *Relative Referendum Turnout*. (This is a similar measure to the one used in the histogram in Figure 1 to illustrate that the referendum turnout gap is worldwide.) Here, the measure is the difference between turnout in the referendum and in a recent candidate election at the municipal level.¹⁹

¹⁷Turnout data for the 2005 referendum was retrieved from <https://www.tse.jus.br/>. Turnout data for the 2004 municipal election and all control variables come from <http://www.ipeadata.gov.br/>. Party switching data was shared with us by Tiago Peterlevitz.

¹⁸The party-switching dataset we use was created by Peterlevitz (2020). Peterlevitz defines a “party switcher” as a candidate who ran under a different party label in any prior election since 2000 (the earliest year for which data were available).

¹⁹If turnout is already low in candidate elections, there is less room for it to drop in a referendum. To take an extreme example, suppose municipality A has 90% turnout in candidate elections and municipality B

TABLE 1. 2005 Brazilian Referendum

<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Referendum Turnout			Relative Referendum Turnout	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Party Switchers	-1.919*** (0.222)	-0.710*** (0.183)	-0.668*** (0.183)	-0.545*** (0.150)	-0.575*** (0.149)
Homicide Rate			-2.662*** (0.524)		3.309*** (0.410)
Constant	76.317*** (0.114)	95.098*** (1.029)	94.571*** (1.032)	-12.247*** (0.077)	-12.544*** (0.086)
Demographic Covariates	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Observations	5,471	5,370	5,370	5,464	5,412

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Note: Relative Referendum Turnout uses turnout in the 2004 municipal elections as the benchmark ($Y = 2005 \text{ referendum turnout} - 2004 \text{ municipal election turnout}$). For full regression details, including all covariates, see Table A.4 in the appendix.

$$\text{Relative Referendum Turnout} = \text{Referendum Turnout} - \text{Candidate Election Turnout}$$

Potential confounders in this case are more difficult to imagine. These would be factors that influence both party strength or type, and the *difference* between turnout in candidate elections and referendums, rather than high rates of abstention across the board.

The results from the regression model using party switching to predict relative referendum turnout (the second column of Table 1) reveal a smaller but still substantively and statistically significant effect. Comparing turnout in the 2005 referendum and the 2004 municipal elections, municipalities with a party-switching mayor saw turnout decline by an additional 0.55 percentage points compared with municipalities governed by a mayor who did not switch parties ($p < 0.001$).

has 40% turnout in candidate elections. In municipality B, the maximum turnout deficit is 40% (turnout can't drop below zero). In municipality A, the maximum deficit is 90%. With this problem in mind, we also estimate the models using percent change in turnout (rather than percentage-point change). These results are in line with those reported here. For ease of interpretation, we present the main results as percentage-point changes.

As an additional robustness test, we estimate all five models reported in Table 1 with party fixed effects. The results are substantively unchanged in all models (see Table A.5).

We have suggested with anecdotal evidence and with data on roll-offs that the usual explanation of low voter turnout in referendums — low salience of low perceived importance of the contest — is not wrong but is unlikely to tell the whole story. The Brazilian experience offers an opportunity to further explore salience effects on turnout. The 2005 referendum was aimed at reducing gun violence, a problem that we would expect to be more salient in municipalities with more violence. In model 5, we control for the local-level homicide rate. That rate (measured in homicides per 1,000 population) is positively associated with higher turnout in the referendum, relative to candidate-election turnout — an estimated effect size of 3.3 percentage points ($p < 0.001$).²⁰ But the effect of party-switching candidates remains: the estimated effect is a reduction in relative turnout of 0.58 percentage points ($p < 0.001$).

In sum, systematic comparisons of parties and referendum turnout across thousands of municipalities in Brazil underscore the importance of political parties — how disciplined and programmatic they are — in opening up (or closing) a gap in citizen participation, between referendums and candidate elections. In addition, municipal comparisons in Brazil support our claim that the salience of referendum issues, though relevant, does not tell the whole story of lackluster citizen participation in referendums.

Concluding Remarks

Political scientists are not surprised by low participation of citizens in collective action. Regarding elections, they have for decades been at pains to explain not abstention but the puzzle of participation. Our individual votes have close to zero chance of changing the outcome of an election, and our experience of policy will not depend on whether we voted or abstained. But there are costs to voting, in time, resources, and attention.

Yet millions of people around the world do bother to vote. They do so in part because they care about the outcome of elections, and because parties, campaigns, and social networks work to get them to the polls.

Our study of referendum turnout places the phenomenon squarely in this framework. The low salience of some referendums has been identified as a reason why turnout often lags behind normal levels in these elections. Our study adds mobilization to the picture. In candidate elections, citizens are more likely to go to the polls if they are encouraged to do so by parties and campaigns. This is also true of referendums, just as it is in candidate elections. The difference is that parties and campaigns are less likely to try to get people to

²⁰The homicide rate has a negative estimated effect in model 3, where the dependent variable is referendum turnout. This is likely a result of the same omitted variable problems that lead us to use relative referendum turnout as our main outcome variable. The homicide rate is relevant as a factor specific to the referendum issue at hand; but it is also associated with other municipal-level characteristics that might decrease turnout in general. Indeed, a bivariate regression of 2004 municipal election turnout on the homicide rate yields an estimated effect size of $\beta_1 = -4.5$ ($p < 0.001$) — substantially larger than the estimated effect from a bivariate regression of 2005 referendum turnout on the homicide rate ($\beta_1 = -1.3$, with $p < 0.05$).

the polls for non-candidate elections. More so if the parties are scattered and undisciplined, if they downplay program and ideology, and if their usual modus operandi are to pay voters or offer them individualized benefits in exchange for their participation and support.

What is the message from our study for those who see in mechanisms of direct democracy potential sources of much-needed legitimacy for representative systems? One message is that referendums are less likely to enhance the legitimacy of systems that are plagued by clientelism or that feature weakly institutionalized parties. Turnout in such systems is likely to be low, and low turnout delegitimizes referendums (Arnesen et al. 2019). More promising are referendums in places with highly institutionalized parties and ones in which the upper echelons can create incentives for action at the parties' bases. Another is systems with ideological and programmatic parties, and another in systems with compulsory voting laws. As we have seen, even systems with compulsory voting on the books are liable to run into the perception that voters are unenthusiastic about opportunities to make their voices heard, directly, on policy matters if those compulsory voting laws are weakly enforced.

Ironically, our study shows, the perception that voters are unenthusiastic about making their voices heard is somewhat misguided. It is not the case that citizens fail to participate in referendums because they do not care about the matter at hand; or, at least, it is not the case that they care less than they do about who will govern them. The gap in turnout between the two kinds of elections will often signal not citizen apathy, but party apathy or disarray. Stated positively, leaders who hope to restore luster to representative systems by giving their citizens more opportunities to choose for themselves will need to work hard to get those citizens to the polls. At least as hard as they do when leaders' hold on office is at stake.

References

- Aguiar-Conraria, Luís and Pedro C Magalhães. 2010. “Referendum design, quorum rules and turnout.” *Public Choice* 144(1):63–81.
- Altman, David. 2019. *Citizenship and Contemporary Direct Democracy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ames, Barry. 1995. “Electoral strategy under open-list proportional representation.” *American Journal of Political Science* 39(2):406–433.
- Arnesen, Sveinung, Troy S. Broderstad, Mikael P. Johannesson and Jonas Linde. 2019. “Conditional legitimacy: How turnout, majority size, and outcome affect perceptions of legitimacy in European Union membership referendums.” *European Union Politics* 20(2):176–197.
- Barber, Benjamin R. 1984. *Strong Democracy: Participatory Polics for a New Age*. University of California Press.
- Blais, André, Elisabeth Gidengil and Neil Nevitte. 2004. “Where does turnout decline come from?” *European Journal of Political Research* 43(2):221–236.
- Botero, Felipe and David Alvira. 2012. Fulano de tal va por su aval. Desconexión entre los niveles nacionales y locales de los partidos políticos en Colombia. In *Política y territorio: Análisis de las elecciones subnacionales en Colombia, 2011*. Bogota: PNUD-IDEA Internacional-NIMD pp. 131 – 162.
- Budge, Ian. 1996. *The New Challenge of Direct Democracy*. Wiley. Google-Books-ID: ebB9QgAACAAJ.
- Bullock, Charles S. and Richard E. Dunn. 1996. “Election Roll-Off: A Test of Three Explanations.” *Urban Affairs Review* 32(1):71–86. Publisher: SAGE Publications Inc.
- Butler, David and Austin Ranney. 1994. *Referendums around the world: The growing use of direct democracy*. American Enterprise Institute.
- Carey, John M and Matthew Soberg Shugart. 1995. “Incentives to cultivate a personal vote: A rank ordering of electoral formulas.” *Electoral Studies* 14(4):417–439.
- Cavalcanti, Roxana P. 2017. “Armed Violence and the Politics of Gun Control in Brazil: An Analysis of the 2005 Referendum.” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 36(1):36–51. .eprint: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/blar.12476>.
- Cheibub, José Antonio and Gisela Sin. 2020. “Preference vote and intra-party competition in open list PR systems.” *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 32(1):70–95. Publisher: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Corbett, Michael. 1991. *American public opinion: Trends, processes, and patterns*. Longman Publishing Group.

- Desposato, Scott W. 2006. "Parties for Rent? Ambition, Ideology, and Party Switching in Brazil's Chamber of Deputies." *American Journal of Political Science* 50(1):62–80.
- Franklin, Mark, Michael Marsh and Christopher Wlezien. 1994. "Attitudes toward Europe and referendum votes: A response to Siune and Svensson." *Electoral Studies* 13(2):117–121.
- Gerber, Alan S. and Donald P. Green. 2000. "The Effects of Canvassing, Telephone Calls, and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment." *The American Political Science Review* 94(3):653–663.
- Graf Lambsdorff, Johann and Fink Hady. 2006. "Combating Corruption in Colombia: Perceptions and Achievements." *Passauer Diskussionspapiere - Volkswirtschaftliche Reihe* 44(06).
- Gutierrez Sanin, Francisco. 2001. "¿Se ha abierto el sistema político colombiano? Una evaluación de los procesos de cambio (1970-1998)." *América Latina Hoy* 27:189–215.
- Hagopian, Frances, Carlos Gervasoni and Juan Andres Moraes. 2009. "From patronage to program: The emergence of party-oriented legislators in Brazil." *Comparative Political Studies* 42(3):360–391.
- Hartliński, Maciej. 2015. "The 2015 Referendum in Poland." *East European Quarterly* 43(2-3):235–242.
- Holbrook, A. L. and J. A. Krosnick. 2010. "Social desirability bias in voter turnout reports: Tests using the item count technique." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 74(1):37–67.
- Karp, Jeffrey A. and David Brockington. 2005. "Social Desirability and Response Validity: A Comparative Analysis of Overreporting Voter Turnout in Five Countries." *The Journal of Politics* 67(3):825–840.
- Kriesi, Hanspeter. 2007. The Participation in Swiss Direct-Democratic Votes. In *The Dynamics of Referendum Campaigns: An International Perspective*, ed. Claes H. de Vreese. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK pp. 117–141.
- LeDuc, Lawrence. 2003. *The politics of direct democracy: Referendums in global perspective*. Broadview Press.
- LeDuc, Lawrence. 2015. "Referendums and deliberative democracy." *Electoral Studies* 38:139–148.
- Lijphart, Arend. 1997. "Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma." *The American Political Science Review* 91(1):1–14.
- Lissidini, Alicia. 2020. Democacia directa en Uruguay: apertura de agenda con restricciones. In *El diablo está en los detalles. Referéndum y poder político en América Latina*, ed. Fernando Tuesta and Yanina Welp. Lima: Ediciones PUCP.

- Losada, Rodrigo and Nicolás Liendo. 2016. “El partido ”Centro Democrático” en Colombia: Razones de su surgimiento y éxito.” *Análisis Político* 29(87):41–59.
- Lutz, Georg. 2007. “Low turnout in direct democracy.” *Electoral Studies* 26(3):624–632.
- Maia, Rousiley. 2009. “Mediated Deliberation: The 2005 Referendum for Banning Firearm Sales in Brazil.” *International Journal of Press-politics* 14:313–334.
- Mainwaring, Scott. 1999. *Rethinking Party Systems in the Third Wave of Democratization: The Case of Brazil*. Stanford University Press.
- Marble, William. 2017. “Mail Voting Reduces Ballot Roll-Off: Evidence from Washington State.” Working paper.
- Milanese, Juan Pablo, Adolfo A. Abadía and Luciana Manfredi. 2016. “Elecciones regionales en Colombia 2015: Análisis de las nuevas gobernaciones y asambleas departamentales.” *Revista Uruguaya de Ciencia Política* 25(1):1–26.
- Panagopoulos, Costas. 2008. “The Calculus of Voting in Compulsory Voting Systems.” *Political Behavior* 30(4):455–467.
- Peterlevitz, Tiago. 2020. “Who Turns to Clientelism? Opportunistic Politicians, Patronage Appointments, and Vote Buying in Brazil.” Working Paper.
- Qvortrup, Matt. 2013. “The Referendum Challenge to Constitutional Sovereignty: The Case of Scotland.” *Jus Politicum* 9.
- Salazar Escalante, Luisa and Marlon Pabon Castro. 2016. *Entre reglas e incertidumbres: financiación de las campañas políticas y la rendición de cuentas en Colombia*. Misión de Observación Electoral.
- Samuels, David J. 1999. “Incentives to cultivate a party vote in candidate-centric electoral systems: Evidence from Brazil.” *Comparative political studies* 32(4):487–518. Publisher: Sage Publications Thousand Oaks.
- Sánchez López de Mesa, Alejandro. 2018. A buscar Uribismo. La Construcción del Centro Democrático en un Sistema de Partidos Hiperfragmentado. El caso del Valle del Cauca. Medellín: .
- Sánchez Torres, Carlos Ariel. N.d. “La financiación de la actividad política.” .
- Schafer, Jerome, Enrico Cantoni, Giorgio Bellettini and Carlotta Berti Ceroni. 2021. “Making unequal democracy work? The effects of income on voter turnout in Northern Italy.” *American Journal of Political Science* .
- Soltis, Katherine. 2018. ““Biting the Bullet” and Banning Guns: The Brazilian National Referendum of 2005 and Its Defeat at the Polls1.” *The Latin Americanist* 62(1):6–25.
- Stokes, Susan C, Thad Dunning, Marcelo Nazareno and Valeria Brusco. 2013. *Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism: The Puzzle of Distributive Politics*. Cambridge University Press.

- Svensson, Pelle. 2002. "Five Danish referendums on the European Community and European Union: A critical assessment of the Franklin thesis." *European Journal of Political Research* 41(6):733–750.
- Szczerbiak, Aleks and Paul Taggart. 2004. "The politics of European referendum outcomes and turnout: Two models." *West European Politics* 27(4):557–583.
- Tuesta, Fernando and Yanina Welp, eds. 2020. *El diablo está en los detalles. Referéndum y poder político en América Latina*. Lima: Ediciones PUCP.
- Wattenberg, Martin P., Ian Mcallister and Anthony Salvanto. 2000. "An Analysis of American Voter Rolloff: How Voting is like Taking an SAT Test." *American Politics Quarterly* .
- Welp, Yanina. 2016. "Recall referendums in Peruvian municipalities: a political weapon for bad losers or an instrument of accountability?" *Democratization* 23(7):1162–1179. Publisher: Taylor & Francis.

Appendix

Data Collection, Recruitment, and Ethical Considerations

This project was deemed exempt from ethical review by the [Anonymized] Institutional Review Board (Reference Number: 2000023046).

Our participant pool began with a convenience sample that comprised legislators and academics. Subsequently, we enlarged the sample by snowballing.

Potential participants were contacted via e-mail and Whatsapp messages with a description of the project and the request for an interview. This initial communication also detailed how we obtained their contact information if they were referred to us, subject to the approval of the person who referred them.

The authors requested an hour of interviewees' time but made clear that this was subject to the participants' preferences. As a result, some interviews, especially those with senators, lasted approximately 15 minutes while others lasted over an hour.

Participants were free to choose the date and time of the interview, subject to coordination with the authors. They were also able to choose the location most convenient and comfortable for them. If the interviewee chose to meet at a cafe, the researchers offered to pay for coffee or a snack.

Consent was obtained verbally at the start of the interview. At that point, participants were also asked if they were comfortable with the researchers audiotaping the interviews on their cellphones or if they preferred notes to be hand-written. Participants could refuse to answer any question they chose and end the interview at any point.

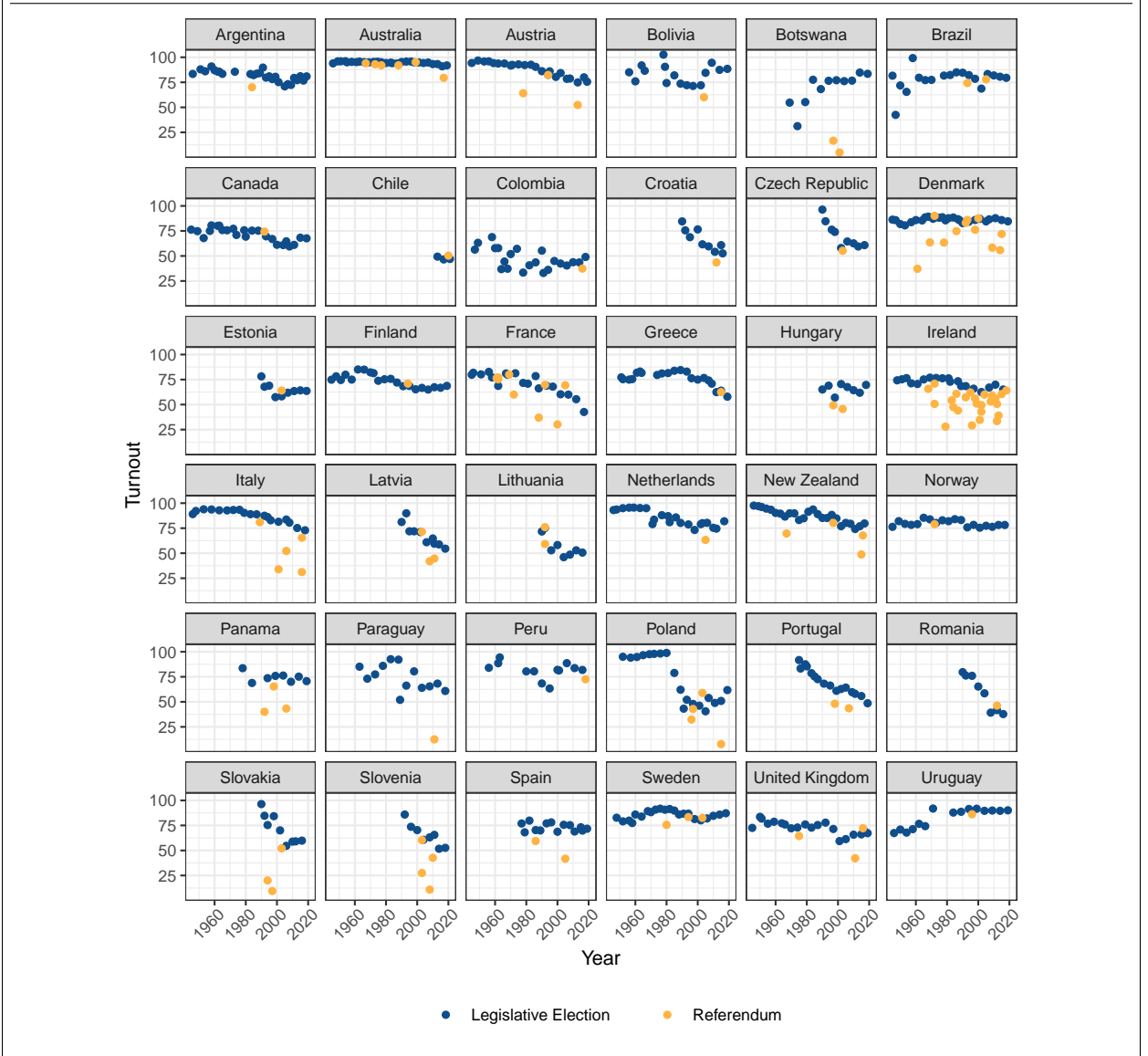
Several key informants were interviewed more than once, either on the same research trip or on multiple trips. In such cases, the above procedure was repeated for each interview.

All quantitative data used was publicly available. The referendums dataset was compiled from publicly available electoral data and historical record. Other quantitative data was drawn from publicly available surveys/datasets.

Country-level Turnout Trends

When we consider within-country comparisons more closely, we see that turnout in candidate elections tends to exceed referendum turnout.

FIGURE A.1. Turnout in Referendums versus Candidate Elections by Country



Global Trends in Referendum Turnout and Party Structures

All cases included in our sample meet three criteria:

- The vote was a referendum called by the government (not a citizens' initiative or abrogative referendum)
- The referendum was not held simultaneously with a national candidate election
- The referendum was held in a democracy (all cases must score about 0.5 on V-dem's 0 – 1 liberal democracy scale)

To account for heterogeneous time trends in turnout and variation in the gap in time between a referendum and a country's most recent election, we draw on turnout data from the most proximate candidate elections both before and after the referendum. To calculate RRT, we estimate an OLS regression in which turnout is the dependent variable and the date of each election is the independent variable. This procedure yields estimated turnout trends over time in a country. We use this trend line to estimate the expected turnout for a hypothetical candidate election on the day the referendum was held. We then calculate the RRT as the difference between the actual referendum turnout and the predicted value from the regression.

As noted in footnote 19, we present results in terms of percentage-point change in turnout, for ease of interpretation. However, we also calculate the same models using percent change in turnout as a robustness check. If turnout is already low in candidate elections, there is less room for it to drop in a referendum. To take an extreme example, suppose country A has 80% turnout in candidate elections and country B has 30% turnout in candidate elections. In country B, the maximum turnout deficit is 30% (turnout can't drop below zero). In country A, the maximum deficit is 80%. Thus, we also present results from models using a percent-change measure of RRT.

Where \hat{T}_c is the predicted turnout from the candidate-election regression and T_r is the actual turnout in the referendum, the RRT-percentage-point variable is calculated $T_r - \hat{T}_c$. In the alternative percent version, we calculate RRT as $(T_r - \hat{T}_c)/\hat{T}_c$. Results using this alternative RRT specification are in line with those presented in the main text (see model 1 in Table A.2).

As further robustness checks, we present two additional sets of measures for RRT. In models 2 and 3 of Table A.2, we use a LOESS model to estimate turnout trends. Each hypothetical turnout figure is estimated from a model including between three and 29 elections (varying according to how many national legislative elections occurred during the period where the country was continuously democratic). Finally, in models 4 and 5 of Table A.2, we simply use the difference between turnout in the referendum and the most recent preceding national legislative election.

TABLE A.1. Cross-national Analysis

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Relative Referendum Turnout		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
PII	36.902* (15.504)	44.026* (18.321)	45.558* (18.642)
Africa		-44.961*** (11.415)	-45.483*** (11.548)
Americas		9.641 (6.029)	6.708 (7.244)
Oceania		5.771 (5.264)	2.530 (6.544)
Quorum			-2.291 (3.325)
Compulsory Voting			4.138 (6.202)
Constant	-48.667*** (13.837)	-55.721** (16.694)	-56.405** (17.079)
Observations	113	113	113

[†] $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Party Institutionalization Index

Variables included in index:

Party organizations

How many political parties for national-level office have permanent organizations?

0: No parties.

1: Fewer than half.

2: About half.

3: More than half.

4: All parties.

Party branches

How many parties have permanent local party branches?

TABLE A.2. Cross-national Analysis with Alternative RRT Measures

	<i>RRT Measure:</i>				
	LM (%)	LOESS (PP)	LOESS (%)	Diff. (PP)	Diff. (%)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
PII	0.748** (0.258)	40.120* (18.486)	0.692** (0.260)	28.897† (17.073)	0.561* (0.240)
Africa	-0.551*** (0.161)	-44.312*** (11.518)	-0.554*** (0.162)	-45.346*** (11.258)	-0.557*** (0.158)
Americas	0.161† (0.085)	9.296 (6.083)	0.154† (0.086)	10.159† (5.958)	0.164† (0.084)
Oceania	0.092 (0.074)	6.505 (5.311)	0.100 (0.075)	8.032 (5.194)	0.117 (0.073)
Constant	-0.897*** (0.235)	-52.386** (16.844)	-0.848*** (0.237)	-43.460** (15.572)	-0.744*** (0.219)
Observations	113	113	113	115	115

† $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

TABLE A.3. Cross-national Analysis: Americas vs Non-Americans

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	RRT (PP)	RRT (%)	RRT (PP)	RRT (%)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
PII	50.246† (25.832)	0.832* (0.359)	74.264** (20.463)	1.129** (0.286)
Constant	-61.686* (23.509)	-0.975** (0.327)	-67.517** (14.898)	-1.007*** (0.208)
Observations	101	101	12	12
Sample	Non-Americans	Non-Americans	Americas	Americas

† $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

- 0: No parties.
- 1: Fewer than half.
- 2: About half.
- 3: More than half.
- 4: All parties

Distinct party platforms

How many political parties with representation in the national legislature or presidency have publicly available party platforms (manifestos) that are publicized and relatively distinct from one another?

- 0: No parties. 1: Fewer than half. 2: About half. 3: More than half. 4: All parties.

Legislative party cohesion

Is it normal for members of the legislature to vote with other members of their party on important bills?

- 0: Not really. Many members are elected as independents and party discipline is very weak.
- 1: More often than not. Members are more likely to vote with their parties than against them, but defections are common.
- 2: Mostly. Members vote with their parties most of the time.
- 3: Yes, absolutely. Members vote with their parties almost all the time

Party linkages

Among the major parties, what is the main or most common form of linkage to their constituents?

- 0: Clientelistic. Constituents are rewarded with goods, cash, and/or jobs.
- 1: Mixed clientelistic and local collective.
- 2: Local collective. Constituents are rewarded with local collective goods, e.g., wells, toilets, markets, roads, bridges, and local development.
- 3: Mixed local collective and policy/programmatic.
- 4: Policy/programmatic. Constituents respond to a party's positions on national policies, general party programs, and visions for society.

TABLE A.4. 2005 Brazilian Referendum

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>				
	Referendum Turnout			Relative Referendum Turnout	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Party Switchers	-1.919*** (0.222)	-0.710*** (0.183)	-0.668*** (0.183)	-0.545*** (0.150)	-0.575*** (0.149)
Poverty		-0.276*** (0.012)	-0.277*** (0.012)		
Per Capita Income		-0.015*** (0.003)	-0.015*** (0.003)		
Infant Mortality		0.039*** (0.008)	0.039*** (0.008)		
Log Population		-0.670*** (0.091)	-0.581*** (0.093)		
Percent Rural		2.846*** (0.445)	2.798*** (0.444)		
Homicide Rate			-2.662*** (0.524)		3.309*** (0.410)
Constant	76.317*** (0.114)	95.098*** (1.029)	94.571*** (1.032)	-12.247*** (0.077)	-12.544*** (0.086)
Demographic Covariates	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Observations	5,471	5,370	5,370	5,464	5,412

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Note: Relative Referendum Turnout uses turnout in the 2004 municipal elections as the benchmark ($Y = 2005$ referendum turnout $-$ 2004 municipal election turnout). All control variables were measured in the year 2000.

TABLE A.5. 2005 Brazilian Referendum (with Party Fixed Effects)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>				
	Referendum Turnout			Relative Referendum Turnout	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Party Switchers	-1.472*** (0.224)	-0.509** (0.186)	-0.468* (0.186)	-0.420** (0.153)	-0.445** (0.152)
Poverty		-0.272*** (0.012)	-0.273*** (0.012)		
Per Capita Income		-0.015*** (0.003)	-0.015*** (0.003)		
Infant Mortality		0.036*** (0.008)	0.037*** (0.008)		
Log. Population		-0.652*** (0.091)	-0.561*** (0.093)		
Percent Rural		2.727*** (0.445)	2.688*** (0.444)		
Homicide Rate			-2.739*** (0.523)		3.145*** (0.410)
Constant	75.102*** (0.257)	95.029*** (1.049)	94.476*** (1.052)	-12.960*** (0.175)	-13.213*** (0.177)
Party Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	5,471	5,370	5,370	5,464	5,412

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$