Political Science

Social Capital and Political Participation:
An Examination of Georgia Counties

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Over the last 70 years, Americans have experienced extreme changes in their culture. U.S. citizens have experienced over five wars, baby booms, hippie movements, civil rights movements, terrorism, a plethora of wealth, and a collapse of the housing market. In 2012 the United States experienced another historical presidential election between the incumbent Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney. In 159 Georgia counties, 3,897,893 voters cast ballots and reelected the incumbent (Boatright 2013). The voting process is an act of political participation on the individual level. Many political scientists argue that people are influenced to register and vote by education, wealth, age, or other various factors. The biggest influence of politics in the community is social trust. Social trust is a measure of community trust in politics. Political participation is very important to elected individuals because it is a direct representation of social capital. Although some people only care about the total number of votes cast, social capital has a significant impact on the amount of political participation in a society. Social capital may expose citizens to potential benefits for others and increase their incentive to vote (Atkinson 2012). Throughout the last 70 years, there have been drastic shifts in voting participation. During the 1990s it was apparent that the new generation of voters was not following in their parent's footsteps of active participation in politics. The decrease of voter turnout in recent elections has political scientists wondering why people are not as invested as the previous generation. The trends of the past quarter-century, however, have apparently moved the United States significantly lower in the international rankings of social capital (Putnam 1995).

It may seem odd that political participation can explain a lot about a state, but there is strong evidence to support this claim. If people are not invested in their society, it will be harder for them to improve their quality of life. When a political office is filled, that individual is in charge of improving society based on the wishes of their constituents. However if they are not being held accountable by voters, officials are not motivated to keep the best interest of the people in mind. There have been many examples of this, such as in Italy during the 1970s. The Italian peninsula was going through a period of rebuilding. A large number

of regional governments were forming in southern Italy, and the officials elected to run them were very corrupt. Putnam describes the lack of power structure as due to large amounts of social capitals accrued by individuals. As stated in an exchange between an Italian official and his subordinate, "You can't give me orders; I'm well protected" (Putnam 1993). This represents the lack of power that government officials had to develop their institutions. Although the officials were given power, the application of this power to the people ran into serious road blocks due to the corruption of the people in charge. In the 15 regional governments that Putnam examines, there is a "spoils system". Bureaucrats are essentially bringing in a bunch of yes men that are not going to challenge their authority on anything. This kind of government creates a certain type of advantage for one class over the other.

In order to increase political participation, society must have certain factors present. Social institutions such as community leadership programs, public school, and town hall meetings encourage political education, which naturally leads people to become more invested in their community. Without any accountability, the few in power have a blank check to do things such as wage war, or accrue more political power using the property of the less educated or serf class. We see this practice in communist countries such as former Soviet Russia, China and North Korea. These countries in the 20th and 21st century followed the belief that it was imperative to take from the lower class in order to build a stronger country. These practices have been failures, with the Soviet Union eventually collapsing due to a crumbling economic sector, and North Korea having one of the lowest standards of living in the world. China has rebounded from these struggles by mocking capitalist economic methods under Deng Xiopeng. Without freedom for the common man and accountability for the leaders, it is highly probable that there will be corruption, and the lower class will pay the price.

Measures and Methods

My research is a comparison study of Daniel Ruberson's (2012) study of social capital and voter turnout. We both share the same hypothesis that an increase in social capital will lead to higher voting participation.

In order to see the relationship between social capital and political participation in 159 counties, I needed to select one dependent variable and three control variables. To measure social capital, I used a Human Development Index (HDI) for Georgia counties developed by Jordan, Anil, and Munasib (2010). They found that HDI was strongly related to social capital. HDI is a great measure of quality of life. It ranks counties based on factors such as employment, education, housing stability, etc. Theoretically, if a county has higher HDI scores, its people will be more invested in things such as politics and vote more. Without an educated population, it is impossible to install democratic institutions because power is installed in the hands of the few with almost no accountability from the common

people. HDI is the best measure of social capital, and therefore my dependent variable indicator. I used the factors of median age and percentage of the black population in the counties as my first two control variables. I also needed to account for social disorganization in my model; I calculated the alcohol tax revenue per capita in each county as my third control variable. My test I centered my hypothesis on social capital have a direct effect of political participation. My study is perfectly described by Ruberson (2012):

> "We are especially interested in how an individual's relationship with a community might affect their decision to vote. We see social capital as community resources that bring individual benefits to people and thus collective to the community in terms of oiling various wheels of social life (including developing trust). This capital is built up of the individual social investments that people bring to their community."

To test my hypothesis I used data compiled from the 2013 Georgia County Guide provided by the Carl Vision Institute at the University of Georgia. The alcohol tax revenue statistics were provided by LaGrange Grocery Company, a member of the Georgia Wholesale Brewer Association. I used a cross sectional multivariate linear regression model to determine the relationships, and the results were not surprising.

Results

As expected, the HDI score of the county had a significant impact on the amount of voter turnout in 2012. A 0.5 unit increase in HDI led to an 8% increase in voter turnout in Georgia counties. It is a safe presumption that because higher HDI is correlated to higher levels of housing stability, employment, and education, that these people are more invested in their society. What was interesting is the effect HDI had on registered voters. Our model revealed that higher HDI scores had a negative relationship (-.08) on the percent of registered voters in Georgia counties. This means that in counties with a higher quality of life, less people are registering to vote than in other counties. This effect may be attributed to higher levels of social trust in these counties. Perhaps the people believe that the current status quo is in their favor, and the elected officials will take care of their needs without them having to vote.

Table 1

Social Capital and Political Participation in Georgia Counties 2012-2013

Independent Variables	Voter Turnout	Voter Registration
HDI	16.81**	-.08*
	(5.43)	(-.14)
Alcohol Tax Per Capita	-.016	.002
	(.01)	(-.002)
% Black Population	-.019	-.001
	(.11)	(.002)
Median Age	.76**	.000
	(.11)	(.0002)
Constant	38.7	.596
R^2 (adjusted)	.26	.01
F	14.17**	1.27
N	159	159

* $p < .10$ ** $p < .05$

Of our three control variables, there was only one that was significant. As expected, median age in Georgia increased voter participation. There is no surprise that when people get older they tend to participate more. They believe they have the most to benefit from voting and influencing government.

Racial factors had no significant impact on voter participation in Georgia. Many political scientists believe that minority races may not participate in politics as often because they believe there is nothing in it for them. If a minority population is living in cheaper housing, receiving smaller income, and does not have a high level of advanced education, they may believe it is not important to vote. Although this is a popular view, I think the election of 2008 may provide some an-

swers for the race results. In 2008, the Democratic campaign did a tremendous job of recruiting first time voters and earned the majority of minority votes. Perhaps they believed with a minority candidate in the white house, their interest would be considered more heavily than the previous Caucasian candidates. A similar effect took place in 2012 when Barack Obama was reelected and those first time voters returned to the polls in an attempt to protect their interest. If the Democrats continue recruiting these minority voters they will have no problem protecting their position in the white house and the senate.

People's behavior is directly affected by the type of environment they were raised in. As Lorrain Hannesberry wrote in her play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, "People will always drink even if they can't pay the rent". I was very interested in how alcohol sales would affect voter participation in the 2012 election. I reasoned that if a county had increased levels of alcohol revenue perhaps its citizens would not care about voting. The individuals might be more interested in instant gratification through alcohol than referendums. I formed this prediction through a theory known as social disorganization. The concept of social disorganization was applied to the explanation of crime, delinquency and other social problems (Kurbin and Weitzer 2003). I was surprised that alcohol tax revenue per capita was not a significant factor in voter participation. Originally, I thought that in counties with more alcohol tax revenue people would not participate as much. As discussed earlier, alcohol revenue is a social disorganization indicator, and because of this, I thought there would be a negative relationship between the two. Our multivariate model revealed that my guess was misinformed.

Conclusion

My findings revealed that although Daniel Ruberson conducted a similar study, our conclusions are very different. He argues that social capital does not influence voter participation, but it is clear that in Georgia counties it does. When the human development index increases, people are more willing to cast a vote. It is clear that when the government can provide measures to increase education and employment people will try to influence their society. It is no secret that people with more money and education have a vested interest in politics and vote more frequently. No political scientist would be shocked that older people vote more as well. This study has only scratched the surface of examining social capital. If we want to understand how social capital effects voter participation, the study will need to be expanded to a much bigger sample size and ideally a national sample.

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