



Political Participation and Civil War

Based on Crisis States Programme Working Paper no.38: Miguel García and Gary Hoskin, 'Political Participation and War in Colombia'. This is intended to provide a summary of the principal findings, and an indication of the implications these may have for debates over policy.

This study analyses the impact of the war on political participation in the March 2002 elections to the lower house of the Colombian Congress. The specific research question is whether the dynamics of violence in Colombia has affected the way voters behaved in those elections. In order to provide some answers, this article seeks to pinpoint the relationship between war and democracy by focusing upon a key component of democratic regimes, namely political participation. The article is organized in five sections. The first consists of a theoretical overview of democracy and political participation. The second section, drawn principally from the press, provides evidence of the impact of the war upon the congressional and presidential campaigns. The third part discusses the evolution of electoral participation in Colombia. The fourth section is a quantitative analysis of the relationship between violence and electoral participation. Finally, the last section offers some conclusions about electoral abstention and violence in Colombia. Although Colombian democracy is under assault from armed actors and undermined by socio-economic factors, its viability has not been contested to the point of regime collapse, nor is that likely to occur in the near future. While it is appropriate to label Colombia a crisis state, neither the parameters nor the intensity of the crisis permit either theoretical or empirical conclusions as to the calibre or endurance of its democratic regime. For the past fifty years or so, the Colombian State has been characterized by perpetual crisis, and that is not likely to change in the foreseeable future.

- **Ambiguity of political participation in democratic regimes**

The impact of political participation in democratic regimes is ambiguous, in part because of differing conceptualisations of both participation and democracy. Most definitions of democracy fall within three categories: i) a formal definition focusing on the mechanics of liberal democracy; ii) a substantive definition that includes the first definition, but also emphasizes the socio-economic component; iii) an approach that underscores the creation of and emphasis upon an active citizenry. These have differing implications for political participation and the promotion of democratic consolidation, and the degree of desirability of popular participation depends upon the particular 'democratic' perspective used.

- **Political participation serves multiple functions in a democratic system**

At the macro level, participation is conducive to the election of political leaders, the expression of individual and group interests, and the generation of regime legitimacy. At the micro level, participation offers individuals an opportunity to develop and express civic virtues, to identify with the rules of the game, to manifest their satisfaction or disgruntlement with political leaders and, in some cases, participate directly in decision-making. For those groups of people who are relatively dispossessed, political participation may offer an avenue of socio-economic advancement. Likewise, those who enjoy economic and political status may further augment their advantageous positions through political participation.

- **People participate in politics for diverse reasons.**

Some become involved for instrumental reasons, in which participation is intended to promote or defend their goals with the minimum of costs and the maximum of effect. Another motivation is communitarian, in which actors express a non-instrumental concern for the community of which they

are a part. There are also educative factors, in which participation is viewed as an educational experience leading to self-development of citizens. The act of participation may also be an expressive experience, with people participating in order to display their feelings without any expectation of having an impact on policy.

- **Extent of political participation dependent upon several factors, and takes different forms**

The extent of political participation is dependent upon a combination of four factors: i) the opportunity structure associated with the political system; ii) the strength and development of civil society; iii) micro level attitudinal syndromes; iv) the incidence and salience of issues in specific contexts. Political participation assumes distinctive forms, and four conventional modes of participation have been identified: voting, campaign activity, communal activity, and contacting officials on personal matters. Non-conventional modes of participation are assuming greater significance in democratic regimes, reflecting an increasing disillusionment with traditional politics. Irrespective of the form of political participation, it should be emphasized that most people do not participate in politics for a variety of reasons.

- **Contextual factors can reduce political participation, even when formal opportunities are present**

Even in societies, such as Colombia, where the constitutional foundations of the political system offer ample opportunities for active participation in the electoral process, contextual factors may contribute to higher abstention rates. In the case of Colombia, this has occurred due to the elevated levels of political violence associated with guerrilla, paramilitary, narco and common criminal activities. In addition, a tradition of electoral abstention, related in part to the non-obligatory vote, represents a factor tending to elevate the abstention rate.

- **Violence challenges, but does not necessarily delegitimise electoral politics**

The dynamic of violence generates negative effects upon the electoral process, and the impact of political violence upon electoral participation suggests a growing challenge to democratic institutions and organisations. However, in a country such as Colombia, with a long tradition of institutionalised elections, the political institutions may show a remarkable resilience to the assaults of armed groups, which, while taking their toll, fail to undermine the legitimacy associated with the electoral process.

- **Both political and non-political violence have a significant effect**

The Colombian example suggests that abstention rates increase with guerrilla presence, high rates of homicides and massacres, and high incidences of guerrilla activity. In contrast, abstention tends to decrease in localities with higher living standards. One of the significant findings of this study suggests that non-political as well as political violence affects involvement in the electoral process. Unlike the guerrillas, non-political agents of violence have not formulated a strategy to undercut the electoral process, but their actions discourage active citizen involvement. Thus public policy designed to reduce homicidal violence not only would defend life, but the robustness of the democratic system as well. Linkages between violence and electoral abstention pose questions that are as yet unanswered as to the differential impact of political and non-political violence upon electoral abstention.

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