Microfoundations of Social Capital: Membership to Associations in Latin America

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Introduction

Social capital theory tries to explain the existence of cooperation among citizens. “Social capital refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 67; 1995). It contributes to augment society’s efficiency in allocating resources and organizing cooperation by enabling individuals to combine personal and collective goals. Actually, social capital is all about making collective action profitable and attractive to individuals. Hence, high levels of social capital decreases the burdens of collective engagement by minimizing the possibilities for opportunistic behavior- behavior oriented only to immediate, private gain in detriment of communal well being. Put simply, life is easier in societies rich in social capital.

The main hypotheses about the determinants of social capital were originally tested using aggregate-level data (Putnam, 1993). A recent trend of studies has focused on verifying if the collective manifestations of social capital are sustainable at the level of individual civic engagement (Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Booth & Richard, 1998; Seligson, 1998; Uslaner, 1998; Stolle, 1998; Shaw, 1998; Rahn & Transue, 1998). This trend has contributed to the discussion of social capital by refining the conceptualization and operationalization of variables central to this theoretical discussion. New hypotheses about the causes of social capital, which were inappropriate to be tested using aggregate data, can now be analyzed. Therefore, it seems that there was an overall gain in precision and generalizability by moving the level of inference from aggregate to individual.

The main purpose of this study is to operationalize and test different explanations for the emergence of social capital in Latin America. The focus is on individual
motivations to engage in collective action. The dependent variable used is an index of membership to associations.\(^1\) This index probes the extent of voluntary cooperation, therefore of the stock of social capital, in society. Where there is a high level of membership to associations, it can be said that there is also a strong commitment to solving communal problems and strong controls of the action of the state. Dilemmas about engaging in collective action have been minimized and opportunistic attitudes limited where there is voluntary mobilization around public issues. Similar measure has been employed in other studies (Brehm & Rahn, 1997: Booth and Richard, 1998), and is central to Putnam’s discussion of social capital (1993: 1995).

The independent variables can be grouped under two main categories. Social capital can be a consequence of social norms and networks that stimulate tolerance and interpersonal trust, interest in politics and diffusion of information, and/or of formal institutions that permit the establishment of minimal expectations of behavior predictability.

It is not the objective of this study to dismiss existing hypothesis, only to test their explanatory power in the context of Latin America. The discussion about social capital is still too incipient to dispose possible explanations. I will start by offering a brief definition of social capital and the hypotheses that explain participation in civic associations. Finally, these hypotheses will be tested using data from Latinbarometer 96.

But why would it be necessary to test the assumptions of social capital in Latin America if it has been done before (Booth & Richard, 1998: Seligson, 1999)? The approach proposed here differs from previous discussions. Booth and Richard’s and Seligson’s pieces in Central America are still bound by the causality vectors going from

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\(^1\) All variables used in the model are described in the Appendix.
society to the state defined by Putnam. Despite Booth and Richard’s attempt of adding political factors as intervening variables between social capital and evaluation of the regime to the equation, they do not evaluate the state’s capacity of affecting the emergence of social capital.

Having said this it is necessary to make one point clear about the relation between social capital and policy outcomes of the political system. Putnam’s fundamental argument is that the functioning of democratic institutions is conditioned by the presence of social capital. In the case of the Italian regions, the north is a richer soil for the flourishing of efficient democratic institutions because it is well irrigated by networks of civic engagement (Putnam, 1993). This idea has also been pivotal in other studies (Inglehart, 1988; Booth and Richard, 1998).

In this study, the causality posed by Putnam is reversed. As will be seen in more detail up front, one of the key hypothesis about the determinants of social capital emphasizes the role of formal institutions in creating an environment that enhances behavior predictability. Thus, it will be argued that perceptions of the efficiency of legal parameters established by state institutions facilitate individual engagement with public issues by creating a context where opportunistic behavior is limited. The impact of the law on everyday life plays a central role in influencing political mobilization and social coordination by restraining the spectrum of possible behaviors to those that are considered socially and legally acceptable. This sense of predictability is fundamental to stimulate activities that involve interaction among citizens.

Latin America is an interesting place to test hypotheses about the causes of social capital, first, because lack of social capital is commonly seen as a problem of this region
of the world (Inglehart, 1988). Data from Latinbarometer 1996 confirm in part the results of previous studies. 62% of all Latin Americans do not participate in any kind of association, while 28% participate in only one, 10% participate in two, and only 8% participate in more than two. However, when the level of membership to associations is disaggregated by country it ranges from 25% in Argentina to 71% in Ecuador. The widespread view that Latin America is uniformly alike in its weakness of civic bonds and engagement is misleading. There is variation in the levels of membership to associations in the country level as well as in the individual level. Country-specific characteristics might affect the existence of social capital.

Theory

According to Putnam, there are a couple of ways in which defection from collective action can be constrained (1993). The first is through the presence of external coercion. The State, or any other institution that has the monopoly of the use of violence, legitimate or not, may impose an order that allows for the emergence of cooperation among individuals, and hence for the functioning of society. This is basically the induced cooperation option, which in fact is very close to the idea of hierarchy. The problem with this remedy is that the costs of coercion can be very high. Instead of solving the problem, the argument goes, it might create a new one: How will opportunistic behavior by those in power be limited?

Putnam argues that this option does not consider the possibility of the emanation of voluntary cooperation. In fact, conciliatory solutions like trust and community, as Robert Bates puts it, will allow for rational individuals to overcome the problems of collective dilemmas (1988). The frailties of the lack of collective action and of resulting
opportunistic behavior depend upon the overall general social context in which interactions among individuals are carried out. Voluntary cooperation is more common in contexts that have higher levels of “social capital stock” (Putnam, 1993). “Social capital facilitates spontaneous cooperation” (Putnam, 1993; 177). It is an alternative to induced cooperation offered by the state.

But what factors are related to stimulating individual participation in civic associations? Latinbarometer 96 offers an interesting opportunity to evaluate the correlates of civic engagement because it contains various questions that assess some of the theoretical explanations of this phenomenon. There is one specific question that aims at appraising the declared justifications for not participating in civic associations. 45% of those who don’t participate allege lack of time for getting involved with these associations. 33% blame it on lack of interest. The remaining 20% argue that their lack of participation is due to problems with the associations, either due to a frustrated previous engagement or lack of organizations that stimulate participation. It is evident that the majority of the population uses excuses that are related with themselves, and not the associations, to avoid engagement with public issues.

However, both lack of time and lack of interest are very superficial explanations for avoiding participation. They do not tap the underlying causes of what motivates individuals to participate. It is not a sufficient explanation to assume that those who participate do so because they have the time and the interest. They probably participate also because of other personal characteristics that lead them to get involved. This is where theory that attempts to explain collective mobilization steps in.2

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2 I will be focusing exclusively in one approach that studies collective action. For a good review of a distinct perspective about this topic see Green and Shapiro (1994).
Participation in civic associations is affected by the predisposition of involvement in public issues. Widespread concern about public problems and willingness to help solve these problems are requirements for the increase of horizontal cooperation. Preoccupation with collective issues is a basic factor that stimulates participation in associations according to Putnam (1993).

Social capital theory states that a central element that helps understand the spreading of associational ties among individuals is the existence of interpersonal trust (Putnam, 1993).

“Trust implies a prediction about the behavior of an independent actor (...) one only trusts because by knowing the disposition of another individual, their alternative actions and consequences, and their capabilities, one expects that the other individual will prefer to act according to what is expected from him/her” (Putnam, 180; 1993).

One trusts not merely because he is intrinsically a “good person”, but because it is in his material interest to trust others. To trust others implies gains to an individual.

Political tolerance is another element that influences membership to associations. Respect and acceptance of divergent opinions is a fundamental criterion for the emergence of cooperation. Even though citizens may have contrary opinions, communitarian solutions are only possible when individuals are able to sit together and discover common ground. The absence of political tolerance impedes cooperation and mines the chances of arriving at consensual resolutions. Intolerance fosters conflict and defection.

Finally, an issue that Putnam addresses in a later article is the impact of television watching habits in the decline of social capital in America (1995). The main idea behind this point is that television takes people away from interaction with others by consuming
time and by positing a negative view of the world. TV programs emphasize a harsher side of life, based on dishonesty and taking advantage of others’ frailties. Hence what people do with their free time directly affects their motivation to act politically. TV “privatizes” and “individualizes” the use of leisure time, disrupting opportunities for social capital formation (Putnam, 75; 1995)

Other studies compliment Putnam’s identification of the causes of social capital. Brehm and Rahn (1997) add some new explanatory factors to the equation. Perceptions about economic instability are related to one’s certainty about other actor’s incentives and behaviors. Economic instability can lead to mistrust among individuals. “Scarcity increases the risks of misplaced trust, so hard economic times may lead people to be less generous in their views of others…”, therefore hindering engagement in collective action (Brehm & Rahn, 1009; 1997).

Uslaner revisits Putnam’s discussion about the effects of television watching, but adds a new facet to the problem. According to him, “optimism shrugs off bad experiences with untrustworthy people as exceptional events” (Uslaner, 450; 1998). Innate optimism is an antidote to the deleterious effects of television watching posed by Putnam. The effects of television watching wash away in the presence of optimism.

Also dealing with the distribution of information throughout society, Shah (1998) focuses on the effect of media, but he disaggregates television content. By doing this he finds that some kinds of programs, news in the TV for example, positively affect the emergence of social trust.

The articles mentioned above implicitly follow Putnam’s option of excluding the possibility that order imposed by an external entity can positively affect the existence of
civic associations. The logic of the argument is that external incentives to participate in associations can prove to be more expensive than spontaneous or group-endogenous mechanisms. In fact, as Putnam puts it, induced cooperation is the anti-thesis of social capital. Where there is a strong state, there is little space for social norms and for active communities.

Putnam’s argument stresses only the advantages of behavior predictability enhanced by social norms. Order imposed by the state or any other external factor to group life will have a negative impact in social capital. This obviously includes the role of law, which is an external constraint to human behavior that imposes a set of rules of conduct and enforcement mechanisms.

The capability of predicting the behavior of others is conditioned by the range of accepted alternative actions available for individuals. If the spectrum of possible strategies is unlimited or includes actions that can be seen as harmful to others, then the attitudes of other individuals tend to be seen as unpredictable. On the other hand, if the social context is clearly constrained by recognized parameters, the range of possible actions is not so diverse. The basic idea is that unexpected, opportunistic behavior is seen as unlikely to happen when there are accepted boundaries to action.

I’m arguing that the law, when respected by all, creates order and limits the possibilities of opportunistic behavior. Respect of the law should also be a variable that affects membership to associations and engagement with public issues because it enhances behavior predictability. The rule of law is a form of imposition of order that can positively affect engagement with public issues, in opposition to Putnam’s perspective. The vectors of the relation might as well be in the direction of the state towards society.

This is exactly the foundation of Tarrow’s criticism of Putnam’s theoretical discussion. Inspired by Pasquino (1994), Tarrow argues that the “operative cause of the performance of the regional institutions in both northern and southern Italy is neither
cultural nor associational but political” (394; 1996). The kind of state intervention in both Italian regions was diametrically opposite. The state was always externally imposed to the south, representing colonial exploitation based on illegitimate political practices. Tarrow concludes, “the lack of state agency in the book (Making Democracy Work) is one of the major flaws of his (Putnam) explanatory model” (395; 1996).

Notwithstanding Tarrow’s valuable contribution to the debate, he avoids identifying forms of analyzing the impact of state action. Some insights offered by studies about the impact of institutions in political mobilization can help clarify ways in which state intervention through law enforcement can be analyzed.

A first point to be made about this discussion is the role of institutions in the formation of expectations. Institutions are understood following North’s definition of rules of the game (1990). Institutions structure social interactions (Knight, 1992). They can be formal, such as laws, or informal, such as norms and conventions. Expectations about the behavior of other actors are central to engagement in activities that require interaction between individuals. Making predictions about the future behavior of others is conditioned by the presence of rules that constrain the array of possible attitudinal choices. Institutions are a source of information for political actors (Epstein & Knight, 115; 1998).

There are two factors that Epstein and Knight point out that affect institution’s ability of playing its role (115; 1998). First, only widely known and generally accepted rules by a community will be respected. Second, institutions ensure compliance by imposing credible threats. When these conditions are met, institutions have a greater chance of limiting the range of acceptable behavior. They become visible boundaries for choices of action.

Having said this, it is necessary to specify some characteristics of the effects of the law- that is, formal institutions- in political behavior. Micro-level discussions of social movement pose that rational citizens are attentive to costs and benefits when deciding to join collective action. The level of participation in social movements decreases with increases in the costs of participation (Van Dyk, 1998; 137). As Van Dyk

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3 Putnam’s discussion, in North’s terminology, is restricted to informal institutions. This study adds to the debate perceptions about the impact of formal institutions.
argues, when the law imposes costs to participation in civic disobedience movements, these movements tends to disappear. In a similar way, if the law limits opportunistic behavior, then citizens will be more prone to trust others and hence to engage in collective mobilization. When the law minimizes the risks of engaging in interactive activities it stimulates the formation of social capital.

Another way the state can affect citizen’s motivations to engage in collective action is by having its agencies recognized as legitimate and efficient. The discussion now shifts from institutions understood as rules, to a broader definition of institutions, including the materialization of these rules into organizations (Elster 1994). A necessary distinction to be made when talking about institutional evaluation is between specific and diffuse support. The former refers to “a set of attitudes toward an institution based upon the fulfillment of demands for particular policies” (Caldeira & Gibson, 637; 1992), while the latter is related to a “reservoir of favorable attitudes or good will” persistent despite the evaluation of the outputs offered by the institution. The distinction is between the level of commitment to the institutional framework of a state and the evaluation of its efficiency in specific issues.

Positive evaluations of both efficiency and legitimacy of institutions certainly increase the perception of a regulated policy that offers clear parameters for everyday action. In this case, high levels of diffuse and specific support, along with positive views about the efficacy of the law in regulating everyday behavior stimulate public mobilization in the form of membership to associations.

**Dependent and Independent Variables**

The dependent variable of this study is an index of the number of associations in which citizens participate, ranging from zero (no participation) to participation in all nine kinds of associations included in the Latinbarometer 1996.

From the previous theoretical discussion some hypotheses can be operationalized using data from Latin America. The tested hypotheses can be divided into two sets. This distinction is based upon Tarrow’s criticism to Putnam’s work. The first set of hypothesis involve variables that are based on social and economic values, including the effects of leisure activities, interest in political and public issues, optimism, interpersonal trust, political tolerance, and perceptions of economic instability and life satisfaction.
The second set is inspired by Tarrow’s plead to bring politics back to the analysis of social capital. Therefore it includes evaluations of institutional legitimacy and efficiency and impact of the law.

The first hypothesis is that spending leisure time in individualized activities hinders involvement with collective enterprises. Individuals who spend their free time doing things that do not require interaction with other citizens will be less inclined to participate in activities along with others. This hypothesis is related to Putnam’s discussion about the effects of television watching in the declining American social capital. Shah and Uslaner also explore similar ideas in their discussions about the media. Latinbarometer offers the opportunity of testing this hypothesis because it contains a battery of questions about the activities respondents do in their free time.

The second hypothesis, also inspired by Putnam’s work, is that an individual interested in politics and in public issues is more motivated to engage in collective action. In his work about Italy, Putnam uses newspaper reading and voting in referendums as his indicators of concern with public issues. Using individual level data, interest in politics can be measured by replies to questions about how much attention one pays to political news in the media, declared willingness to work for community issues, and more directly, the declared intensity of interest in politics.

The third hypothesis, this time raised by Uslaner, is that optimism positively affects involvement with public issues. Those who see life in a positive vein will tend to see others in a trusting way and hence will be motivated to engage in activities based on interaction with other citizens. There are questions in Latinbarometer that permit the differentiation between two different kinds of optimistic behavior: One related to prospect views about one’s own future and the other referring to the future of one’s children. Both forms of optimism should affect positively membership to associations.

Hypothesis four is related to the central components of Putnam’s discussion about social norms: Interpersonal trust and political tolerance should positively affect political mobilization. Citizens that are more trustful and tolerant will be more motivated to participate in collective action because they are open to interaction with strangers. Trusting behavior stimulates civic mobilization because it creates certain expectations about the action of other citizens. When there is trust, opportunistic behavior is
minimized, because the accepted patterns of behavior are limited. This variable is measured by a dichotomy.

Political tolerance indicates an inclination to accept differences and to respect others despite their ideologies and political preferences. A tolerant individual seeks common ground and is prone to conciliation, both important attributes to participate in collective action. A dummy indicating if the most important characteristics of a democracy are respect of minorities and freedom of speech measures political tolerance.

The fifth hypothesis mainly posited by Brehm and Rahn, but also by Rahn and Transue, defend that as economic instability raises and life satisfaction decreases, civic engagement will decrease. Both variables affect views about the actions of other citizens. The basic idea behind both is that a situation of scarcity stimulates immediatistic and selfish behavior. Individuals, as Brehm and Rahn argue, see others as competitors when resources are scarce, therefore minimizing chances of conciliating interests. Situations of scarcity also make individuals more oriented to their immediate, private interests and necessities, instead of motivated to participate in long-term collective endeavors.

The second set of hypotheses includes two suppositions. First, diffuse and specific support of state institutions will both affect positively participation in civic associations. As was argued before, these variables indicate that citizens believe that institutions are necessary to help solve their daily problems. Consequently these institutions aid in establishing visible parameters for civic action. Diffuse support will be measured by an index of trust in institutions. Specific support will be measured by an index of trust in political actors that work in these institutions. A better measure of specific support would be satisfaction with the outcomes offered by institutions, but such an indicator is not available in Latinbarometer. Hence as a proxy to specific support, I will use the evaluations of trust in those individuals responsible for carrying out work in the institutions they represent. The point here is that trust in the institution itself is an evaluation of its popular acceptance and legitimacy, trust in those that work for the institution is related to the everyday practices of the institution, and therefore indirectly to the outcomes it offers.

The second hypothesis of this set involves perceptions about the impact of the law on daily life. Latinbarometer includes two questions that can be used to evaluate how
citizens view the law in establishing an environment of civil and political equality. The first one refers to perceptions of how demanding individuals are of having their rights respected. This is measured in a four-rank scale. Expectations of having their rights respected should vary positively with civic mobilization because citizens see others as conscious of their rights, therefore aware of legal parameters to action, along with seeing themselves as active participants in the political system. The same can be said about evaluations of equality before the law, which is measured by a dummy variable. If citizens believe that all are treated equally by the law, this represents a positive evaluation of the state’s ability of imposing a legitimate order. In the presence of enforced boundaries to action, citizens will be more motivated to engage in collective action.

The model will control for socio-demographic and economic characteristics of the population studied. The variables included as controls are gender, age, educational level, ideology, and an indicator for economic status. It is assumed that younger men with higher educational level and political orientations more to the left of the political spectrum will be more inclined to get involved in associations. These individual characteristics are considered most fit to foster engagement with public issues for a series of reasons. First, they are related with higher levels of political information. Higher education tends to augment the capacity to understand and obtain more information. Independence of stable ties with family or business and hence more free time, also make young men more prone to participate in political activities. In Latin America due to strong sexist orientations of the population, women tend to be less independent than men and tend to have stronger ties and obligations with family life, therefore limiting their predisposition and time to engage in civic organizations. Those with political preferences to the left of the political spectrum because of their links to grassroots politics, tend to be more motivated to engage in public issues in the case of Latin America.

Finally, the model will also control for country specific characteristics of the population. Dummy variables identifying the country of the respondent will be used as a proxy to factors specific to each country that are not measured by the previous variables. This is a measure of the setting in which the individual is embedded and how this setting might affect his motivations. The idea of setting includes the history of the country, its
institutional framework, and its insertion in the international system (Pzeworski & Teune; 1982). As was said in the introduction, the levels of membership to associations vary widely in Latin America, this being an indication that country specific factors might affect individual dispositions to participate in associations. Theoretically, it is expected that countries with a longer tradition of democratic rule, such as Costa Rica and Venezuela will affect membership to associations positively. Democracies are more open to civic engagement than less stable regimes that vacillate in its institutional history between authoritarianism and democracy.

**Findings**

Table 1 presents the variables that survived the null hypothesis test. This means that some variables are not included in the final model due to their lack of correlation with the dependent variable. Even though they are not presented in Table 1, I will briefly mention some of them in this section.

As can be seen by the $R^2$, the model explains 17% of the variation in membership to associations. The value of the adjusted $R^2$ is the same as that of the $R^2$, indicating that there isn’t a loss in explanatory power by considering all the variables included. All variables in the model play a role in explaining civic engagement. This means that there are various complementary causes of membership to civic associations. The overall explanatory capacity of the model is of secondary importance to the evaluation of each independent variable correlated with membership to associations.

The first three variables in the model refer to allocation of free time. Devoting time to obtain information through newspapers and knowledge through books is positively correlated with membership to associations. Even though these are individualized activities, they seem to stimulate interest for public issues. Television watching, not included in the final model did not survive the null hypothesis test, which in a sample of this magnitude has substantive implications to Putnam’s original statement that TV watching has a negative impact in engagement in public issues.

In spite of this divergence from theoretical expectations, another variable related to allocation of free time confirms Putnam’s hypothesis that activities that stimulate

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4 Results for variables that are not statistically significant are available upon demand. These were not included in the paper for presentational reasons.
interaction between individuals positively affect collective mobilization. Practicing sports, which is related to teamwork and coordination between individuals, increases the possibility of participating in associations.

**Table 1. OLS Regression of Membership to Associations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Beta</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.567*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read Paper</td>
<td>0.091*</td>
<td>0.052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read Book</td>
<td>0.059*</td>
<td>0.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice Sports</td>
<td>0.374*</td>
<td>0.131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in Politics</td>
<td>0.042*</td>
<td>0.039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work for Public Issue</td>
<td>0.201*</td>
<td>0.151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics on TV</td>
<td>0.043*</td>
<td>0.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Trust</td>
<td>-0.059**</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Tolerance</td>
<td>0.054**</td>
<td>0.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Stability</td>
<td>0.127*</td>
<td>0.048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Satisfaction</td>
<td>0.036*</td>
<td>0.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Support</td>
<td>0.968*</td>
<td>0.113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diffuse Support</td>
<td>0.062*</td>
<td>0.038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights Conscious</td>
<td>0.049*</td>
<td>0.038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Equality</td>
<td>-0.098*</td>
<td>-0.037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>-0.001*</td>
<td>-0.033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>0.095**</td>
<td>0.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraguay</td>
<td>0.352*</td>
<td>-0.069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>0.557*</td>
<td>0.109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
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<td>0.075</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>0.847*</td>
<td>0.167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>-0.204*</td>
<td>-0.040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>0.244*</td>
<td>0.048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>0.221*</td>
<td>0.069</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( R^2 = 0.17, \text{ Adjusted } R^2 = 0.17 \)

Sign., 0.000, N. 15850

*Significant at 0.001, **Significant at 0.05

Involvement with public issues and interest in politics confirm some subliminal implications of the previous findings about how individuals spend their free time. The effects of interest in politics and engagement with public issues are in the expected direction. Both enhance membership to associations. Interest in political and public questions play a central role in fostering engagement in collective mobilization.

Even though television watching in general is not correlated with membership to associations, watching political news in the television positively affects engagement in civic associations. Confirming Shah’s findings, what people watch on television makes a
difference. Those who are interested in politics and get information about politics through the television are still motivated to engage in civic associations.

Looking now at the variables identified by Putnam as being central items of civic communities, interpersonal trust and political tolerance, both are only statistically significant to the 0.05 level, which is not too impressive considering the size of the sample. The impact of these variables in comparison to other variables, as is indicated by the standardized coefficients, is also disappointing. They rank among the variables with the weakest impact in membership to associations. Even worse, interpersonal trust has a negative effect in membership to associations, in complete odds to what is expected theoretically. In Latin America it seems that trusting others inhibits involvement with public issues. This is quite a puzzling finding. It makes no sense that to trust others will hinder participation in activities that require interaction between individuals, but that is exactly what seems to be occurring. Certainly this issue requires further, more detailed investigation. What can be learned from this finding is that perceptions about the behavior of other citizens dictated by social norms don’t really affect engagement with civic issues that strongly.

Also in disagreement with theoretical expectations is the lack of statistical significance of optimism, both towards one’s own future as well as that of younger generations. Having a positive view about life and the prospects of having a better future don’t seem to stimulate interaction among citizens. Maybe it isn’t views about the future that affect mobilization with civic issues in the present. What might affect this is current evaluation of the present.

In order to verify this hypothesis it is necessary to look at evaluations of the present, in the form of satisfaction with current economic situation. The results support what is expected theoretically. As one gets more satisfied with life, the more inclined he/she is to engage in collective action. It seems that an environment that creates positive views about the economy will increase the generalized perception that individuals will not act selfishly.

Furthermore, perceptions of economic stability, measured by one’s preoccupation with loosing his/her job in the following year, also affect mobilization as expected. It seems that uncertainty created by the economic environment does decrease one’s interest
in participating in public issues. Economic issues are translated to political mobilization not as reasons for protest but as requirements to diminish opportunistic behavior. Evaluations of the economic environment are related to how one believes others will act. When there is scarcity of resources behaviors become more self-oriented. The above two variables, evaluations of the economic situation in the present and of future economic instability appear to supplement the lack of relation of optimism and membership to associations.

Finally, the variables related to evaluations of institutions and the law offered intriguing results. A first thing to be mentioned is that both diffuse and specific support of the system varied in the expected direction with membership to associations. It seems that those who are satisfied with the efficiency of the political system, as well as view the institutional framework of the country as legitimate, tend to believe that it is worthwhile engaging in collective action. Institutions that function well positively affect the emergence of social capital as pointed out by Tarrow. If we compare this finding to the mixed results offered by social norms (trust and solidarity) it appears to be that formal institutions play a more significant role in explaining voluntary civic engagement in Latin America.

With this in mind, it is necessary to look at popular perceptions of the rule of law in Latin America. Also in accordance with Tarrow’s criticism of Putnam’s causal vectors, views about consciousness of legal rights positively affect social capital. When citizens are more demanding of their legal rights, they tend to be more prone to engage in associations.

But the other measure of state intervention in creating a context bounded by legal parameters offered unexpected results. Favorable perceptions that the law treats all citizens equally have a negative impact in membership to associations. This is not in accordance to Tarrow’s hypothesis. According to him, civic engagement should increase when people have positive views about the state’s capacity of enforcing a legal system based on equality of rights. This is due to the fact that positive evaluations of the state in guaranteeing order increase behavior predictability and consequently stimulates interaction between individuals. But a change in one unit in this indicator represents a slight decrease in membership to associations.
Finally only one control variable, political ideology, affects participation in collective action. The more to the left in the political spectrum one is, the more prone he/she is to get involved in civic associations. Participation in civic activities occurs equally among distinct social classes, as well as gender and age cohorts. If we recall the previous finding that political information through the television positively affects mobilization, then it can be inferred that obtaining information about political issues is not conditioned by educational level in Latin America.

The initial expectation that country variables affect political mobilization was confirmed. Living in a specific environment does affect in some cases the disposition to participate in collective action. Historical aspects of these countries as well as their institutional designs, such as electoral system and the functioning of political parties, may be considered possible explanations for these differences. Even when controlling for all of the individual level attributes included in the model, aggregate characteristics of the countries still seem to play a significant role in explaining the variation in membership to associations.

In order to increase the robustness of the findings, a similar equation was tested using a distinct dependent variable. A dummy variable comparing those who participate in civic associations with those who don’t was tested using logistic regression.\textsuperscript{5} Table 2 contains the results of a trimmed logistic regression of membership to associations.

This second model confirms most of the findings of the first. All of the variables continue to present effects in the same direction and with similar strengths. There are two substantial differences though. The central determinants of social capital in Putnam’s discussion, interpersonal trust and tolerance, are no longer statistically significant. This result is quite impressive taking into consideration the size of the sample. It seems that social norms do not play a role in stimulating actual membership to associations.

\textsuperscript{5} This technique is more appropriate when the linearity assumption of OLS is not met, possibly offering more efficient estimators. The linearity assumption in OLS tends to be commonly relaxed whenever the dependent variable has more than 5 categories; this was the case in Table 1. However, the index of membership to associations appears to be negatively skewed, possibly affecting the linearity assumption. Due to the intuitive interpretation of OLS coefficients, I chose to present the results using that estimation procedure, but confirming them with the logistic regression results.
Table 2: Logistic Regression of Membership to Associations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.122*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read Paper</td>
<td>1.183*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read Book</td>
<td>1.391*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watch TV</td>
<td>0.915*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice Sports</td>
<td>2.102*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest Home</td>
<td>0.827*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in Politics</td>
<td>1.089*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work for Public Issue</td>
<td>1.409*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics on TV</td>
<td>1.063*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Stability</td>
<td>1.230*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Satisfaction</td>
<td>1.186*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Support</td>
<td>1.898*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diffuse Support</td>
<td>1.145*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights Conscious</td>
<td>1.056**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Equality</td>
<td>0.797*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>0.997*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>1.249**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraguay</td>
<td>2.334*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>3.178*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>2.741*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>3.125*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>0.824*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>1.410*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>1.277*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pseudo R², 0.17, Overall Prediction, 66%
Significance, .000, N, 12795
*Significant at 0.001, **Significant at 0.05

A second difference, however, is in accordance to Putnam’s insightful discussion about what one does with his leisure time affects his involvement in collective mobilization. Watching television decreases the likelihood of participating in associations in about 8% and is statistically significant. Resting at home during free time also decreases the odds of participating in associations by 18%. Allocating free time to activities that do not involve interaction with others or gaining information about public issues hinders engagement in collective action. But then again it must be highlighted that the effects of television watching are not uniform. Those who use the TV to obtain information about political issues are still more inclined to get involved in civic associations.
The most important finding in the second model is that the conflicting and contradictory results found about social norms, when using OLS, vanishes in the second model, indicating that trust and tolerance, in the way they are currently measured, are not associated with increase in membership in voluntary associations. Factors such as the functioning of institutions and stability of the economic context appear to represent stronger incentives to engage in collective action.

**Discussion**

Some lessons can be learned from the preceding findings. First, social capital is not only formed by social norms of reciprocity. Long-lasting cultural characteristics of a society such as political tolerance and interpersonal trust are much less effective in stimulating participation in civic associations than issues such as allocating free time to activities with an interactive and informative nature.

Putnam’s interpretation about the causes of social capital also are challenged by the confirmation of some of Tarrow’s hypotheses about the role of the state in creating an environment that enables behavior predictability. The state, by enforcing a legitimate order, constrains opportunistic behavior, leading to a generalized feeling of confidence in the public sphere and in interactions with other citizens.

Latin America, as was argued before is a most likely case of negative evaluations of the state restraining participation in civic associations. That is, critical views about the functioning of the state should have a negative impact in membership to associations. This supposition is confirmed by most variables analyzed. But some doubts were also shed over Tarrow’s argument that the state plays a central role in affecting the emergence of behavior predictability and consequently of social capital. The likelihood of participating in associations decreases when individuals think that all have equal access to the law. This is in contradiction with the theoretical expectation that a generalized perception that the law is equal to all should lead to increase in participation. The relation should be positive, but in fact it is negative.

But most political indicators do vary as expected. The belief that citizens are more demanding of their rights generates an increase in membership to associations. When citizens are seen as more active in relation to their views about the law this provokes a positive effect in membership to associations. In addition, specific and
diffuse support indicates that both efficiency and legitimacy of formal institutions are related to increases in membership to associations. The state does seem to play a role in establishing an environment propitious to social capital. Overall, this effect seems to be more pervasive than that of social norms such as interpersonal trust and political tolerance.

Finally, there are country specific factors that affect social capital. Some countries of Latin America are more fertile for participation in social movements. These countries pose an intricate question that needs to be addressed in future research. What are the characteristics of these cases that make some of them more prone to higher levels of social capital? From the above findings we know that individual interest in public issues, allocation of free time to activities that stimulate engagement in interactive practices, economic stability and satisfaction, and formal institutions play a significant role, whereas social norms seem to have a limited, contradictory impact. Notwithstanding these findings, other country characteristics also seem to affect membership to associations. A research design that combines aggregate and individual level variables, or that is capable of getting a stronger grasp of the historical characteristics that distinguish these countries, might be more appropriate to indicate the missing links. It seems that this is where the research about social capital in Latin America should be heading.
References:


Appendix:

Dependent Variable:
In table 1, an index of membership to associations: Composed by 9 items referring to participation in distinct kinds of associations: Neighborhood associations, youth groups, parent-teacher association, sports club, labor union, political party, cultural group, and church groups. This index is just a count of the number of associations an individual has participated in; therefore measures of internal consistency are not necessary.
In table 2, a dummy variable distinguishing between those who have never been members of civic associations from those that have participated in a association.

Independent Variables:
Indicators of allocation of free time:
Dummies indicating allocation of free time to watching TV, reading books and newspapers, practicing sports or just resting at home.

Interest in Politics:
Four-range scale of declared interest in politics ranging from low to high interest.
Four-range scale indicating frequency of having worked for a public issue in the past ranging from low to high frequency.
Five-range scale indicating frequency of watching political news on the television ranging from low to high frequency.

Optimism:
Dummy indicating if interviewee is optimistic about his future economic situation.
Dummy indicating if interviewee is optimistic that the future will offer better living conditions for his children.

Interpersonal Trust and Political Tolerance:
Dummy indicating if most people can be trusted.
Dummy differentiating those that believe that democracies main characteristic is freedom of speech and respect of minorities.
Economic Stability:
Dummy indicating if interviewee is concerned about loosing his/her job in the next year.
Four-range scale of satisfaction with present economic conditions, ranging from low to high satisfaction.

Diffuse and Specific Support of Institutions:
Index composed of 7 four-range scales indicating level of trust in Congress, Judiciary, Bureaucracy, Police, Army, Political Parties, and Government. Cronbach’s Alpha of .87.
Index composed of 6 Four-range scale indicating level of trust in actors that represent democratic institutions, including judges, police officers, public servants, politicians, military officers, and congressmen. Cronbach’s Alpha of .84.

Impact of the Law:
A four-range scale indicating how demanding citizens are of their rights. This is an indicator of rights conscious.
Dummy variable indicating if interviewee believes that all citizens are treated equally by the law in his country.

Socio-economic Controls:
Dichotomy for gender where 1 represents men.
Age indicated by the number of years of the interviewee.
Educational level represented by years of formal schooling of the interviewee.
Ideology represented by a 10-point continuum ranging from radical left (1) to radical right (10).
Economic situation indicated by an index composed of items referring to declared possession of specific goods.
Dummy variables for all countries included in the analysis with the exception of Argentina, to avoid perfect collinearity. The constant in the equations assumes the value of Argentina.