

Democratic Participation without Democrats: Evidence from 109 Countries*

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Abstract

In canonical research on civic and political culture, there is an implicit assumption that citizens participate in civic life more when they are committed to democratic rule. We provide descriptive evidence to the contrary using survey data from 551,763 respondents across 109 countries drawn from four major cross-national surveys. We examine whether individuals who express greater or lower tolerance for non-democratic governance and authority vary in their participation rates. Across geographic regions, participation modes, and measures of regime attitudes, we find no consistent association between democratic commitment and participation. Instead, individuals who tolerate military rule, coups, or strongman leadership are often more likely to participate than those who reject such views. The weak-to-null relationship between democratic commitments and participation does not systematically vary with country-level democratic consolidation; participation is not systematically undertaken more by democrats in consolidated democracies. Findings emphasize that while democracy requires participation, participation does not require democrats.

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In the literature on civic and political culture, participation in protests, community meetings, and civic associations reflects citizens' attachments to democratic rules and constraints on authority (Almond and Verba 1963; Putnam 1993; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). The theoretical claim within this tradition is that participation facilitates democracy by expressing political orientations congruent with democratic structures (Almond and Verba 1963), generating social capital that sustains democratic institutions (Putnam 1993), or enabling democratic accountability (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995).

Indeed, participation is a constitutive feature of democratic governance; there is no democracy without participation. The civic culture tradition, however, moved beyond this structural claim and conceptualized participation as behavior that expresses democratic orientations, generates social capital, and signals democratic health. This interpretive framework continues to inform contemporary research, which treats the strength of civil society as a predictor of democratic consolidation (Foa and Ekiert 2017), assumes that social trust and democratic satisfaction move together (Zmerli and Newton 2008), and examines whether participatory practices can rebuild democratic trust (Boulianne 2019). The same logic shapes major measurement projects: V-Dem's participatory democracy index uses civil society organization entry as indicative of democratic quality (Coppedge et al. 2020).

We subject this interpretive move to empirical scrutiny by testing a core behavioral implication of the framework: whether individuals committed to democratic rules participate more than those who tolerate non-democratic authority. If participation expresses democratic orientations, as the civic culture tradition contends, this heterogeneity should sort into participatory behavior; citizens committed to democratic rules should engage more, and those tolerant of non-democratic authority should engage less.

Existing work has highlighted important heterogeneity in how citizens evaluate and prioritize democratic norms vis-à-vis other goals. Recent experimental work, for instance, shows that, even in established democracies, citizens tolerate violations of democratic procedures

when partisan or policy interests are at stake and that not all who claim to value democracy reject non-democratic alternatives (Grossman et al. 2022; Graham and Svobik 2020; Carvajal, Cox and Garbiras-Díaz 2025). In parallel, updated accounts of civic engagement document shifts in the style and targets of participation (Dalton and Welzel 2014). However, to our knowledge, no research has examined whether these evaluations predict who participates.

Drawing on survey data from 551,763 respondents across 109 countries, we examine whether individuals who express tolerance for military rule, coups, or strongman leadership participate at rates different from those who reject such views. We find no consistent positive association between democratic commitment and participation.

In fact, citizens expressing tolerance for non-democratic authority often participate at equal or higher rates across most countries and participation modes. In pooled estimates, tolerance of non-democracy is associated with significantly higher protest participation in Africa, Asia, and Europe. At the country level, positive associations outnumber negative ones by roughly 2:1 in Latin America, 3:1 in Africa and Asia, and 7:1 in Europe. This relationship does not vary with country-level democracy: citizens who tolerate non-democratic uses of power are not distinctively mobilized in autocracies or demobilized in democracies. The association is flat across regime types.

These findings contribute to a growing literature questioning whether civic engagement carries the normative content that the civic culture tradition attributed to it. Existing work has shown that the effects of civic engagement on democratic stability are contingent on institutional capacity, organizational density, and elite strategies (Huntington 1968; Berman 1997; Satyanath, Voigtländer and Voth 2017). We document a different source of contingency: heterogeneity in participants' attitudes toward non-democratic governance.

Data and Methods

To study the relationship between stated support for democratic governance and political participation, we draw on four major cross-national survey programs: the LAPOP AmericasBarometer, Afrobarometer, Asian Barometer, and the World Values Survey. Our pooled sample includes 551,763 respondents from 109 countries surveyed between 2001 and 2023. We focus on non-electoral political participation as a measure of civic engagement, including activities such as attending community meetings, participating in protests, signing petitions, and contacting government officials. The availability of specific participation measures varies by survey (see Appendix A1).

We measure support for non-democratic governance using a set of survey items capturing attitudes toward democratic rules and constraints on authority, including approval of military rule, justification of coups, rejection of democracy as the best system, and preference for strongman leadership. All measures are coded as binary indicators, where 1 denotes expression of tolerance for a non-democratic act or principle. Full operationalization is reported in Appendix A1.

For individual i in country c interviewed in survey wave w , we estimate

$$\text{Participation}_{icw} = \beta \cdot \text{Attitude}_{icw} + \alpha_c + \gamma_w + \varepsilon_{icw}, \quad (1)$$

where $\text{Participation}_{icw}$ is a participation outcome for individual i in country c in wave w , Attitude_{icw} is an indicator that a respondent stated attitudes consistent with non-democratic governance, α_c and γ_w are country and wave fixed effects, and ε_{icw} is the error term. Standard errors are clustered at the country-wave level. The coefficient of interest is β represents the difference in participation between citizens who do and do not express stated preferences for non-democratic rule, conditional on country and time period. Country fixed effects also

capture any idiosyncrasies in how political participation is contextualized within a particular polity.

We report pooled region-level and country-level results that aggregate across attitudes and outcomes. To aggregate across participation measures, we construct an inverse covariance weighted (ICW) index following Anderson (2008). The ICW index weights measures by the inverse of their covariance matrix, giving more weight to participation items that contribute independent information. This approach is preferable to simple averages or standard indices because it reduces the influence of highly correlated items, mitigates issues of redundancy, and helps address concerns about multiple comparisons. As a result, the ICW index provides a single, interpretable summary measure of non-electoral participation.

Results

Figure 1 presents pooled coefficients across all regions, participation outcomes, and attitudinal measures. Each panel represents a different form of participation, while the vertical axis indexes expressions of non-democratic attitudes. Contrary to the characterization of civic engagement as inherently pro-democratic, individuals who sympathize with non-democratic rule or tolerate violations of democratic procedures are not less likely to engage in non-electoral participation than those who hold pro-democratic attitudes.

Indeed, across all regions and participation measures, the association is consistently non-negative and often positive. The two exceptions are the United States and Canada, where this association is negative or null, and Latin America, where it is negative when operationalized as disagreement with the view that democracy is best. However, democratic rhetoric is nearly universal (Przeworski 2019), regardless of ideological orientation. Consequently, we believe direct questions about support for democracy are less informative about regime preferences whereas concrete scenarios—such as whether a coup would be justified—provide a less direct but more discriminating measure of attitudes, an intuition validated in extant

research (Carvajal, Cox and Garbiras-Díaz 2025). This finding comports with other work showing that individuals in Latin American express support for democracy yet tend to mistrust democratic institutions (Booth and Seligson 2009).

Looking at regional effects, on average, individuals in Africa who support military rule are estimated to be 3.2 percentage points more likely to protest (about a 9% increase over the regional average). In Asia, those who accept military rule are estimated to be 4.4 percentage points more likely to protest (approximately a 45% increase), and those who prefer a strong leader are estimated to be 5.6 percentage points more likely to protest (a 57% increase). In Europe, those who accept army rule are, on average, 2.2 percentage points more likely to have joined a boycott (around a 24% increase). Section A2 in the Appendix shows results controlling for individual-level characteristics and shows the substantive findings unchanged.

Such patterns are not artifacts of particular countries but systematic within regions. Figure 2 shows country-specific coefficients using the ICW participation index, which aggregates across participation types. There is substantial heterogeneity both within and across regions: no region shows a uniform pattern, and every region contains countries with both positive and negative coefficients. But on balance, the distribution skews positive. In Africa, 26 of 46 countries show positive coefficients; in Asia, 14 of 21; in Europe, 14 of 20. The exceptions concentrate in the Americas: in Latin America, 17 of 20 countries show negative coefficients, and both the United States and Canada do as well. Even among the negative cases, few are substantively large. Uruguay, one of Latin America's most consolidated democracies, shows a coefficient of -6.4 percentage points, but so does Haiti (-5.2 percentage points), a country with a very different democratic trajectory.

Figure 3 examines whether the association between stated tolerance for non-democratic principles and political participation varies systematically with democratic consolidation. Specifically, we plot country-level coefficients against V-Dem polyarchy scores to assess whether a more negative relationship emerges in more consolidated democracies, as some

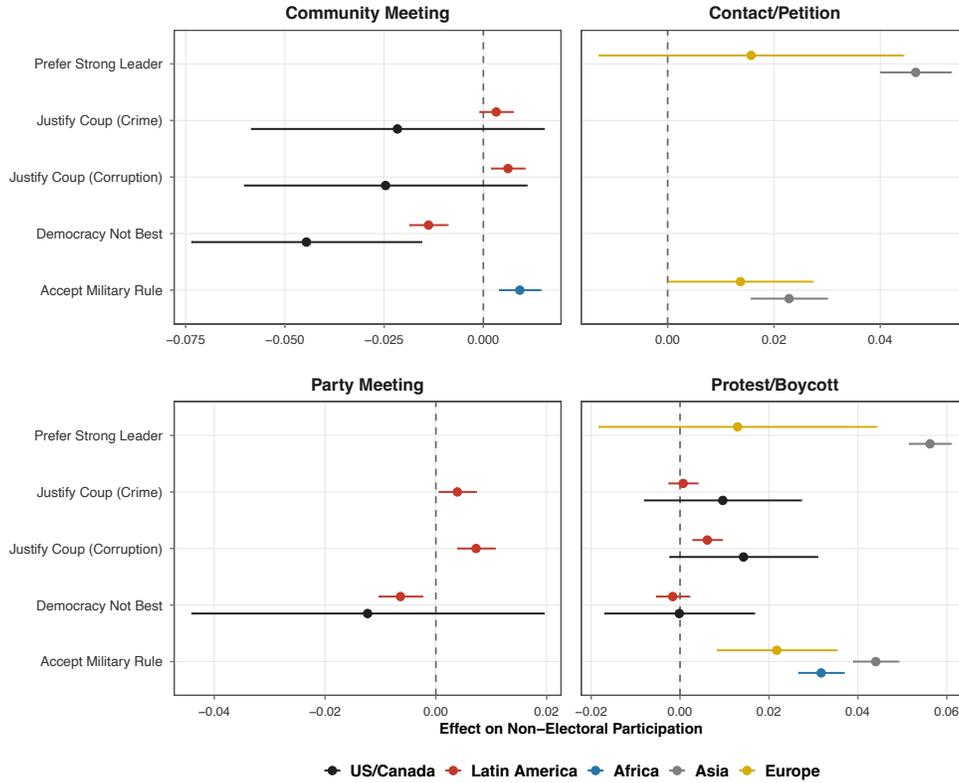


Figure 1: Pooled coefficients for the effect of non-democratic attitudes on participation. Points right of zero indicate that citizens with non-democratic attitudes participate more. Error bars show 95% CIs.

canonical accounts would suggest (Almond and Verba 1963). We find no such pattern. The association between non-democratic attitudes and participation does not vary systematically with levels of democracy, and the relationship between country-level coefficients and polyarchy scores is weak and inconsistent. In the data, more democratic countries do not display a distinctive correlation profile compared to less democratic ones.

Discussion

Because participation is structurally necessary for democracy, it is tempting to treat it as an indicator of democratic health. The civic culture tradition leaned into this interpretative conflation. Participation was read not merely as a feature of democratic governance but

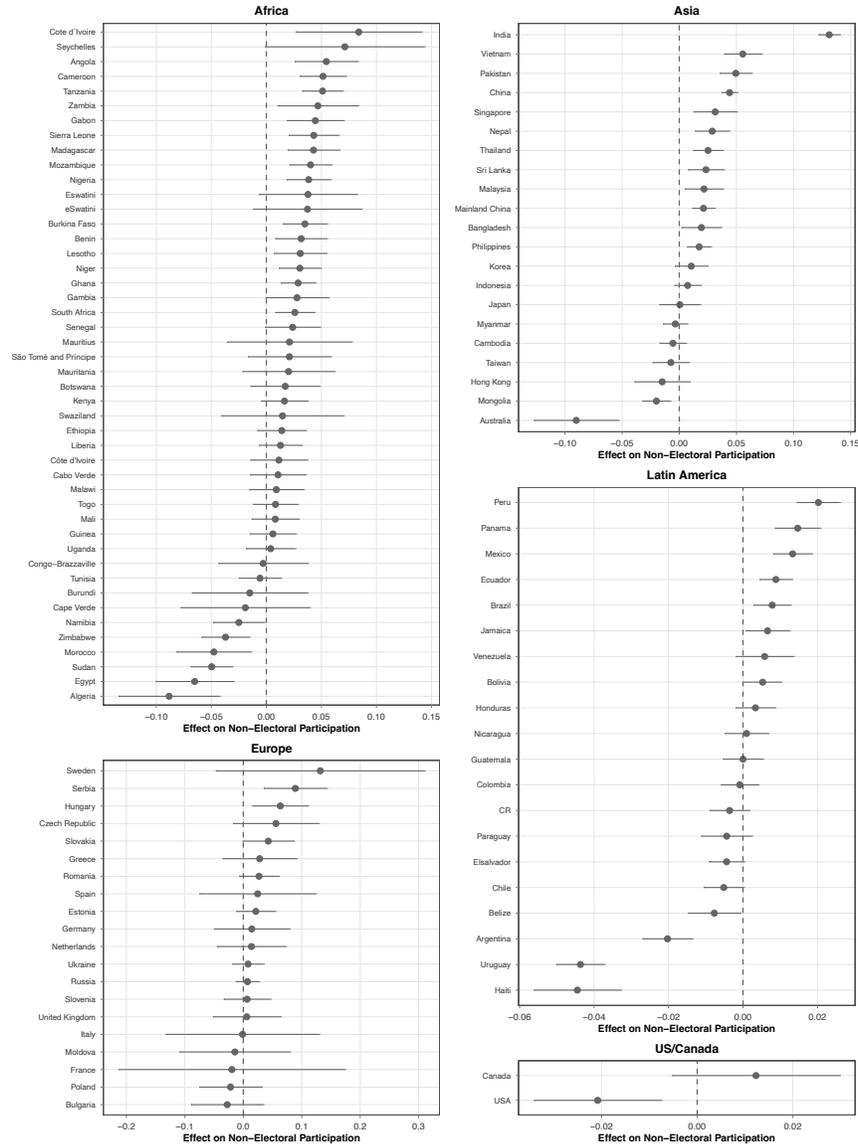


Figure 2: Country-level coefficients using the ICW non-electoral participation index. Points to the right of zero indicate countries where citizens with non-democratic attitudes participate more.

as an expression of democratic orientations, a generator of democratic social capital, and a signal of democratic vitality. This conflation still informs some contemporary research. Our findings join extant scholarship in challenging this interpretation. We find that citizens who tolerate military rule, justify coups, or prefer strongman leadership participate at rates

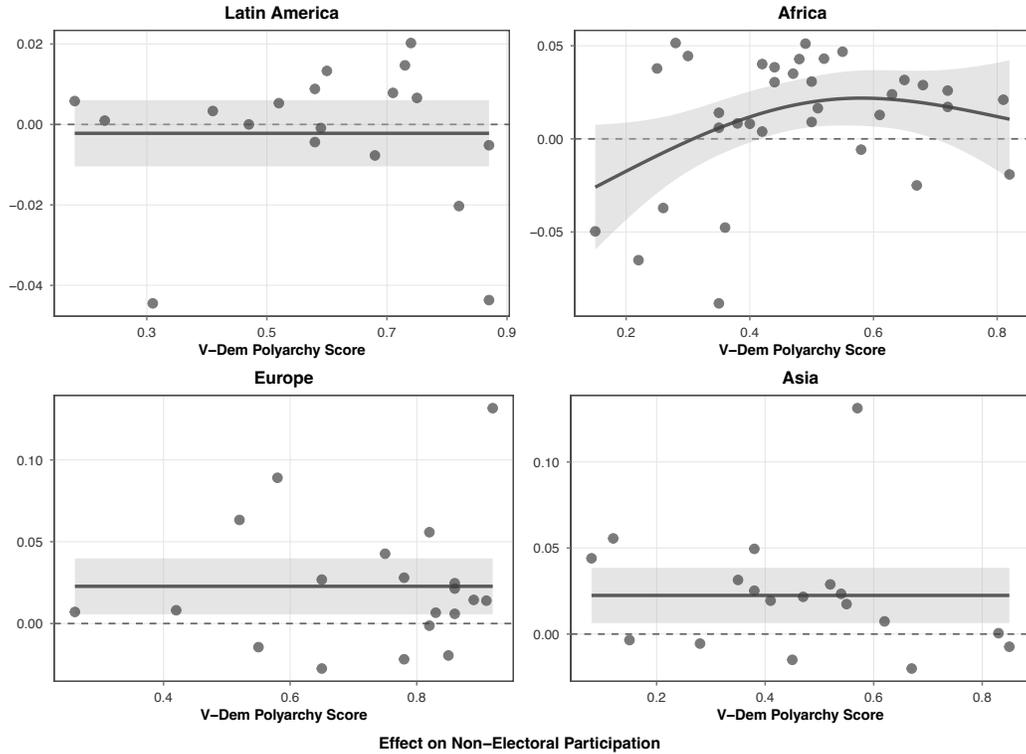


Figure 3: Country-level coefficients vs. V-Dem polyarchy scores. Cubic spline fits (GAM) show flexible relationships. No consistent pattern emerges: democracy level does not moderate the attitudes-participation relationship.

comparable to, and often exceeding, those who reject such views. Participation does not sort democrats from non-democrats.

Documenting that participation varies across individuals with heterogeneous attitudes toward non-democratic governance is not the same as showing that their participation serves illiberal ends or undermines democratic institutions. Our results are correlational and do not tell us about individuals' motivations for participation. Indeed, participatory practices may retain democratic value even when they fail to produce democratic outcomes (Isiksel and Pepinsky 2026). Instead, we establish a descriptive fact: participation does not sort democrats from non-democrats. Our findings suggest that accounts linking participation to democratic outcomes must attend to who participates and what they believe. Whether participation by citizens with autocratic attitudes accelerates democratic erosion, stabilizes

authoritarian governance, or has no discernible effect on regime outcomes remains an open empirical question.

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