

THE VOTE, A RIGHT DRESSED AS DUTY

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Voting is a right, and giving it up deepens society's inequalities. Yann Basset, researcher, Universidad del Rosario, and Lina Guavita, a political scientist who graduated from the same institution, confirm this classic argument of electoral theory, revealing what has historically occurred in Colombia.

By Amira Abultaif Kadamani

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Let us play sums:

A. Colombia is one of the most inequitable countries on the planet.

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B. Colombia is the most abstentionist nation of Latin America.

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C. Territory that has inequalities, the roots of which extend deep.

Despite all its imperfections, “democracy is the most deeply rooted political doctrine in the world in that it allows a community—at least conceptually—to raise its voice and guarantees the practice of individual and collective rights without difference of conditions. However, for this to work, it requires will to turn this into action, and that seems to have a first and last name in the electoral arena: Mandatory voting.

The reasons underlie civility. One of the most powerful arguments in favor of mandatory electoral participation in academic literature starts not so much from civic considerations about how desirable the electoral participation is in abstracto as it does from the empirical findings of participation disparities between groups and the distorting effects on political representation and hence on the actions of governments,” points out Yann Basset, researcher, Faculty of International, Political, and Urban Studies, Universidad del Rosario, and Lina Guavita, a political scientist who graduated from the same institution, in his *Radiography of Disenchantment: Electoral participation in Colombia*, published in 2019.

One of the supporters of this position is Dutchman Arend Lijphart, who, in 1997, published an academic article that was very polemical at the time and ended up becoming a classic text in the literature on the topic. “He compares the scenario in various countries but mainly addresses the United States, which, within Western democracies, is the largest country with the greatest abstention, compared to Europe for example” says Basset, professor, and director of the Democracy Study Group of the Universidad del Rosario.

As explained by this researcher with a doctorate in political science from the University of Paris III – New Sorbonne, Lijphart postulated “a low electoral participation tends to reproduce and even amplify social inequalities in all areas,” which reduces the possibility of having progressive policies because politicians tend to be more in tune with their direct

voters, generally the people who are better off in society, the ones that use the ballot boxes more.

That encourages the idea of implementing the mandatory vote, a provision only taken by 10 percent of the countries in the world, including Belgium, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Australia, the Netherlands, Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Bolivia, Uruguay, and Peru. Colombia has considered this intention. The most recent proposal in this regard was in 2014, through a bill that went up to second debate in Congress.

With the aim of providing technical analysis based on the evidence to this discussion, Basset and his colleague Guavita evaluate the level of Colombian electoral participation on the basis of different variables (age, geographical area, socioeconomic stratum, rural or urban environment, and election type) and make a historical assessment in this regard, also comparing what occurs in our territory with the reality of other latitudes.

After their diagnosis, they manage to clarify some ideas that have become popular prejudices. Among them, two stand out. The first is that Colombia is a country abnormally abstentionist, but that deserves a note aside, particularly if the comparison is done with its regional neighbors —many with mandatory voting and various inscription methods— and without shuffling the national idiosyncrasies or differentiating between presidential, legislative, and local elections, the dynamics of which are vastly different.

In Colombia, the average electoral participation ranges from 40 to 50 percent (see national participation rate chart and synthetic analysis map), not very distant from a participation rate of around 50 percent in developed European countries with a voluntary vote. Furthermore, for Basset and Guavita, the population is over-registered in the official statistics considered to make electoral calculations. "It is a record that began to work in the 1980s and is supposed to automatically eliminate the deceased, but in all these years, there have been various debugging errors. When comparing it with the census, we suspect that the electoral roll is inflated," Basset says.

The second idea is that young people are very reluctant to go to ballot boxes, which is not only a Colombian but also a global reality. However, here, this general conception has its exceptions because in local elections, this group voted more than adults did (see the graph of participation by age in elections of 2011 and 2014). This and other nuances are broken down in the next interview.

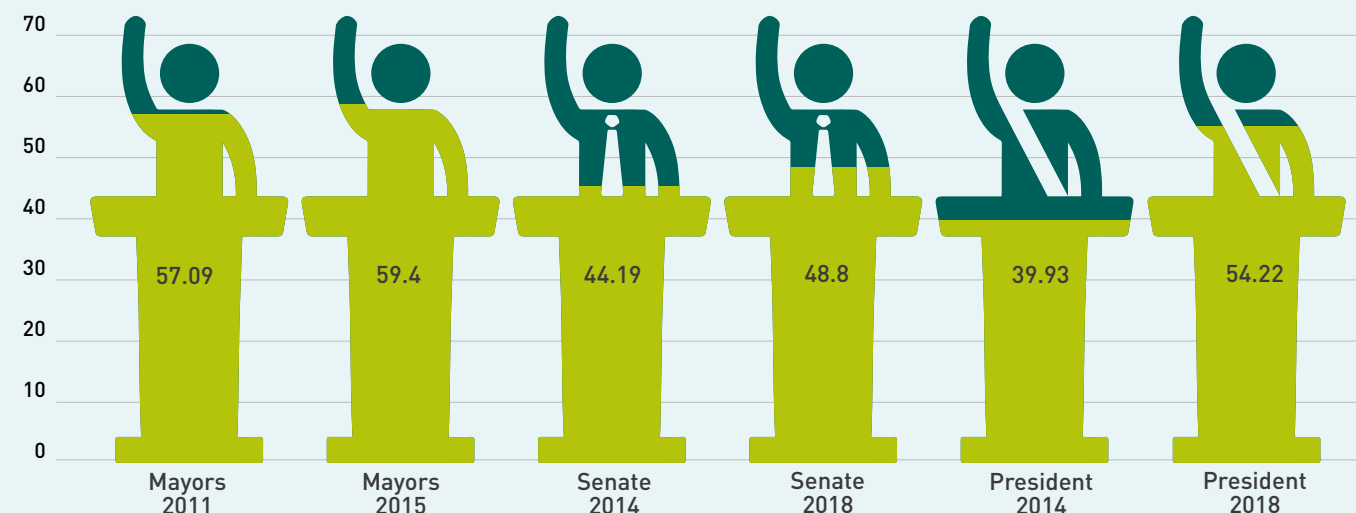
Advances in Science (AS): Is voting a duty or a right?

Yann Basset (YB): It is the two things with different levels of priority: It is above all a right because that is how it has been thought in modernity, but for democracy to mean something in practice, it requires strong participation, and therefore, it should also be considered a duty.

AS: Do you agree that duties are of a moral nature and rights are of a legal nature?

YB: I do not think that duties are just a moral issue; rather, they have to do with the interdependence in which we are immersed in modern society despite the appearances. If there is something that the COVID-19 pandemic reminds us by force is that we are absolutely interdependent, and, therefore, it is a duty, not only moral, that each person's wellbeing depends also on the wellbeing of society as a whole.

National participation rates in the last two electoral cycles



Source: Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil (National Civil Registry)



← For Yann Basset, researcher, Faculty of International, Political and Urban Studies, Universidad del Rosario, voting is not a question of knowledge, preparation, or previous skills; it is enough that people be aware of what they want, need, or think they need.

AS: And how does that translate to the Electoral scenario?

YB: In the fact that elections have to do with collective inequities that are founded on interdependence, many times, we participate not necessarily because we think that the candidate is wonderful or because we fully agree with their proposals but because we feel part of a collective project or want to collectively resist another with which we do not agree.

AS: Does voluntary voting maintain the quality of politics?

YB: No, because it makes politics focus on voters, and therefore, it leaves out many citizens.

AS: But some argue just the opposite: It makes political practice more creative and strategic at least to captivate more voters.

YB: That is confusing politics with something else. It is not the art of finding wonderful solutions at a scientific level but that of finding convenient solutions for everyone, and for that, there are no unique answers. Voting is not a question of knowledge, preparation, or previous skills. It is enough that people be aware of what they want, need, or think they need.

AS: Does a low electoral turnout diminish the legitimacy of the result?

YB: Yes, and that of not only the current ruler but also the institutions, thereby terribly affecting the legitimacy of the political system on the whole.

AS: Would mandatory voting encourage false legitimacy?

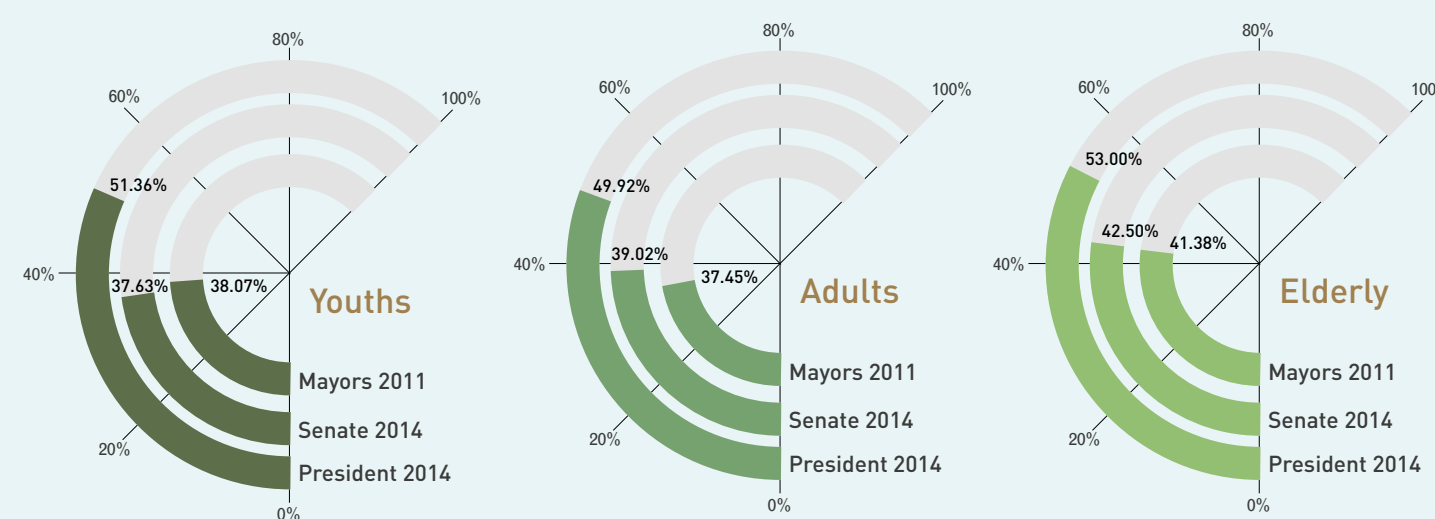
YB: That is a danger. It happened in Chile, which was presented as a model of electoral participation. There, the vote was mandatory and had an optional enrollment system; that is, only those who were actually going to vote were registered.

But in 2012, voting became voluntary, and the previous model was useless in a very surprising way because the indexes of participation dropped a lot and hardly anyone saw it coming. Everyone thought that Chile was very good and that there was no problem regarding legitimacy, but we realized that there were many hidden problems.

AS: Could abstention represent a voice of protest?

YB: No way. It can be many things, such as apathy and practical and technical problems. That has traditionally been the

Participation rates by age in the elections of 2011 and 2014



Source: Author's data and data from the Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil

interpretation of the most critical voices of the system, for example, in the days of the National Front, when there was low involvement. But they did not vote even when they could vote for alternatives other than the two big parties; therefore, it is not a very reliable argument and even more so when there are much more visible ways of protesting, such as the blank vote.

AS: But this figure does not exist in all countries.

YB: That is right. There are few countries where the blank vote has a political effect as it does here.

AS: Could it be argued that mandatory voting implies freedom with responsibility?

YB: Yes, it is a quest to balance duty and right. It is not true that it results in a terrible coercion of freedom; it only forces people to go to the ballot boxes once every few years, but once they are there, they are free.

AS: Why would mandatory voting discourage vote buying?

YB: Because vote buying is much more profitable if there are few voters, otherwise it would cost a great deal of money. That is the reason why it is done many times in local elections and sometimes in legislative elections but not so much in presidential elections as it would be very expensive. Vote buying is done before the elections; that is to say, politicians must give something before the elections because, if not, the people will not care about the issue. But that does not guarantee the result for the politician because people also trick them; it is not otherwise explained that, in many places of the Caribbean Coast, for example, a politician ends up surprisingly winning against the machinery. In other words, people accepted the money and voted for another.

AS: Would this not qualify that statement according to which it would discourage vote buying per se?

YB: Yes, it is always a dubious argument because vote buying is a super uncertain business and quite archaic. And politicians are barely beginning to realize this.

AS: What is more representative in participation: Congressional or presidential elections?

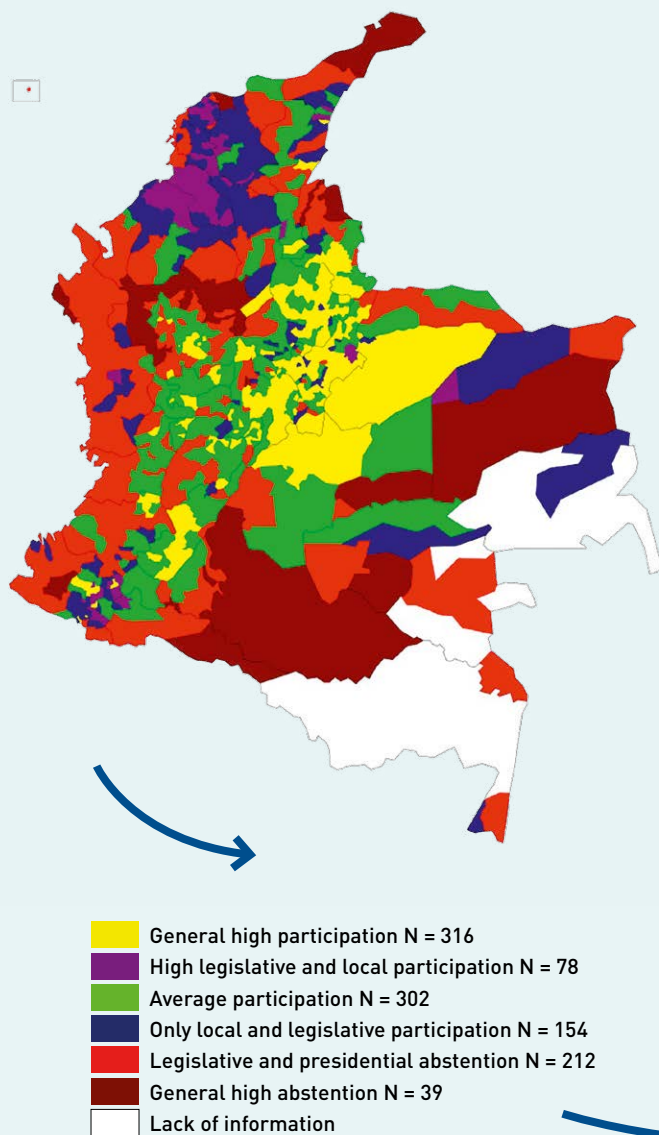
YB: It depends on the area of the country. What we show in our research is that what summons more in the center is the presidential and that what summons more in the regions are the legislative ones because all regional interests are processed via congressional representatives. The other explanation is

the weight of vote buying but not to the extreme of thinking that there is no vote buying in big cities.

AS: But other elections are even closer to people: Locals, whose participation, according to the study, exceeds 50 percent. Since this is not a federalist country, why is there more interest in local than there is in national voting?

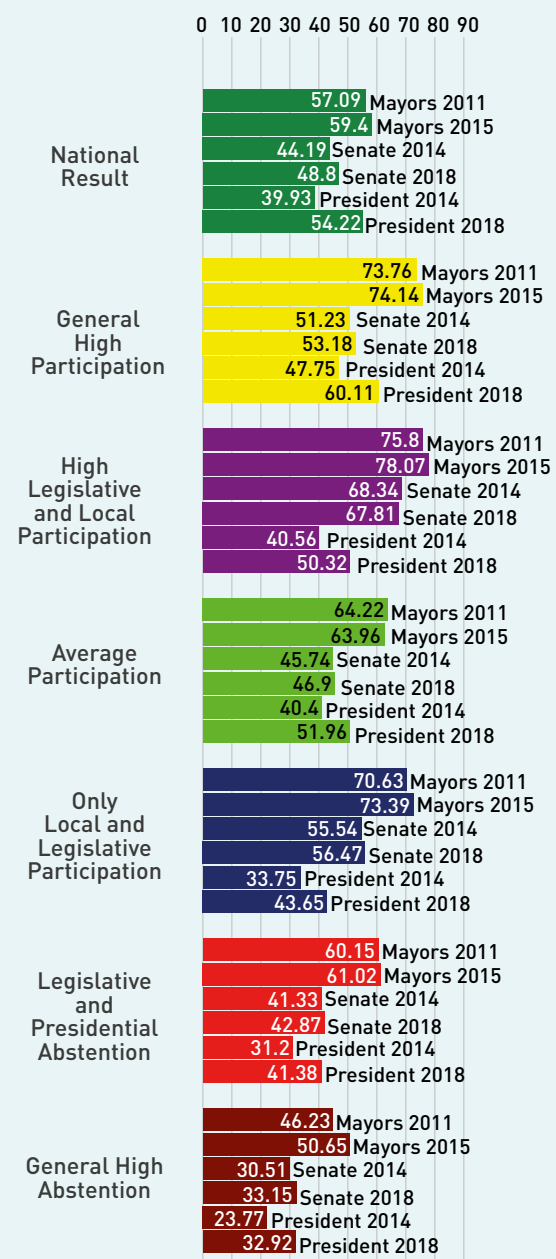
YB: Because in Colombia there is a much more local culture than there is in other countries, and that has to do with regional diversity, which is so strong that it makes people often identify more with local politics than they are with what happens in Bogotá. There is also the technical effect: Here there are 1,122 municipalities (Argentina, for example, has 169), with

Synthetic Analysis Map of electoral participation in the past two election cycles at the municipal level



Average participation rates in each category of the synthetic map

This graph first shows the rates, in green, of national participation in each of the six elections that served for analysis (taking up the graph of national participation rates in past electoral cycles). This "national profile," illustrated by the gray bars, can be compared with the profile of each category on the map. Indeed, the yellow bars represent the average participation rates of the municipalities belonging to the category "general high participation" of the map and successively for each of the six categories with the colors corresponding to the map.



many of them being very small, and that plays a relevant role in making a municipal choice in a neighborhood election; that is to say, a voter ends up personally knowing a candidate for something even though it is for the Council.

AS: Does geography have a great weight in this?

YB: Yes. This geography of small towns in the mountain ranges affects a great deal here when compared with other countries in the region, where there is no such rugged geography nor as many little municipalities.

AS: Some say that democracies with mandatory voting are paternalistic and buy votes. What do you think?

YB: They buy votes because it is profitable. They are sometimes paternalistic, but that criticism would apply to the entire republican tradition, and it seems to me a narrow way of looking at the matter.

AS: Why is Latin America the world region where mandatory voting has been mostly adopted?

YB: That is a heritage from the national-popular era, between the 1930s and 1960s, in which some movements with a strong anti-elitist and anti-oligarchy discourse wanted to mobilize those excluded from society. The typical example is the Peronism of Argentina. When those movements became governments, they wanted so much to vindicate the political and civic rights through mandatory voting, as well as social rights through access to social security, collective agreement, and unionism, among other things.

AS: Although it is not stated in the book, the way elections are executed— remote, electronic, manual, or in-person voting among other options— influences the debate on voluntary or mandatory voting?

YB: Yes, this debate can be raised, particularly for some categories, such as nationals abroad. Valid efforts have been made to integrate their vote. But I am not so sure it is a good idea because that raises other types of considerations on the vulnerability of systems to external attacks and things like that. Those are technologies that need to be checked first for very specific audiences before considering an entirely electronic vote.

AS: Today the financial system works electronically. Why is it so difficult to think about it for the electoral system?

YB: That is because the elections have to guarantee the secrecy of the vote and it is very difficult to verify that people actually voted for which they said they would vote. While, for the financial sector, it is easy to verify the ownership of the transactions, in the electoral system, it would not be like that. The system not only has to be transparent but also seem transparent, and that is a challenge. More than thinking about electronic voting, we should think about doing the public counts, as is done in many countries, where anyone can go to a ballot table at the end of the day and attend the live vote count. However, adding more technology on the matter could generate more suspicion.

DC: So you privilege secrecy over the possibility of exercising the right?

YB: Yes, the secret of the vote is necessary, fundamental. ■