

Political Participation among Informal Sector Workers in Mexico and Costa Rica

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Introduction¹

This paper examines, in a comparative perspective, the relationship between organization and participation of informal sector workers in Mexico and Costa Rica. Specifically, we examine whether or not membership in an occupational organization increases or decreases the likelihood of engaging the political process. By engagement of the political process, we mean specifically the following political behaviors: volunteering for a political campaign, contacting a public official, and engaging in political protest. As we shall see, participation in an occupational organizations does increase the likelihood of engaging in political behaviors, even in different political settings such as Mexico and Costa Rica.

Among the more recent works dealing with the politics of the informal sector in Latin America are Aguilar (1995) and Thornton (1998). Aguilar (1995) uses survey data from Costa Rica to address the political attitudes and participation of workers across a broad range of informal sector occupations. Thornton (1998) compares the political attitudes and participation of informal sector workers with those of formal sector workers in Mexico and Costa Rica. In this work, we return to the central questions of Aguilar (1995) – what shapes the political participation of workers in the informal sector – with the extended data provided by Thornton (1998). We also address political participation in a more general sense, using a summative scale for participation of these rather than focusing on individual forms of participation. Throughout this work we will focus on the central finding of Aguilar (1995) that organization plays an important role in shaping the politics of the informal sector workers in both Costa Rica and Mexico.

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Background on the Informal Sector

Research into the informal sector of the economy, primarily undertaken in the setting of developing countries, has its origin in a study by Keith Hart (1973) of the Kenyan economy. In his study, Hart described the informal economy as that which was characterized by the following seven characteristics: 1) ease of entry due to low capital requirements, 2) reliance on locally available resources, 3) family ownership, 4) small-scale activity, 5) labor intensive and adapted technology, 6) skills acquired outside of the formal schooling system, and 7) unregulated and competitive markets.

Authors devoting attention to the informal sector have since proposed an additional and complementary definition of the informal sector : “It is unregulated by the institutions of the state in a legal and social environment in which similar activities are regulated (Castells and Portes, 1989:12).” Most authors devoting scholarly attention to the informal sector of the economy tend to employ an amalgam of the two definitions, enabling them to cast a wide theoretical and empirical net when analyzing the phenomenon.

In fact, substantial attention has been devoted to the informal sector, by a wide range of social scientists. Among these are studies of the economic characteristics of informal workers (Briones, 1989:59), the occupations in which informal labor is concentrated (Trejos, 1989), the evaluations made by informal workers of “revolutionary governments” (Coleman, Speer, and Davis, 1989), and the extent to which informal workers vote (Aguilar, 1991).² Given that significant attention has been devoted to the informal sector, however, presents a puzzling question: Why do we know so little about the politics of the informal sector? It is that gap in our understanding of the informal sector that this proposal will seek to fill.³

² For other examples of studies on the informal sector of the economy see Portes, Blitzer and Curtis (1986) on informality in Uruguay; Rossini and Thomas (1990) on Peru; Sassen-Koob (1989) on informality in New York City; and Grossman (1989) on informal labor in the former Soviet Union.

³ Very recent published work on the informal sector in Latin America has devoted some attention to the politics of the informal sector. This research, however, analyzes state policies toward the informal sector

This gap in our knowledge has been identified elsewhere. Specifically, Sanyal (1991:39) cogently noted that:

“The voluminous research on the urban informal sector (UIS) has centered on analyzing the UIS as an economic entity: Of its politics we still know little...Neither do we know about the politics of its external relationships with the government, with established political parties or with organized labour in the formal sector.”

Since the time that Sanyal penned the above lines, little has changed in terms of our understanding of the political world of informal sector workers. In the vast literature on the informal sector, only a handful of studies have as yet addressed the political realities and consequences of the informal economy in Latin America. Among the studies which stand out in this regard are those by Cameron (1991, 1992) on the political importance of the informal sector in the electoral victory of Peru’s Alberto Fujimori. Another study on the political reality of the informal work experience found that the political beliefs, as well as the evaluations that informal sector workers held of their political environs, were theoretically complicated, and could not simply be understood using pocketbook issues as the main predictive variable (Speer, 1992).

In recent research on the informal sector, Aguilar (1995) focused on the role that occupational organization plays in terms of the political beliefs and behaviors of informal sector workers. Using Costa Rica as a case study, Aguilar (1995) found that occupational organization of informal sector workers, particularly in the guise of unions and cooperatives, seemed to prompt higher rates of a variety of political behaviors (such as voting and contacting political officials). Additionally, membership in an occupational

and not the way in which informal sector workers relate to their political world. See Rakowski (1994), and Bromley (1994).

organization was associated with statistically significant higher levels of diffuse support and political efficacy, as compared to non-members. The interpretation given to these findings, among others, is that the occupational organization of informal sector workers could bode well for sustaining democratic forms of governance. Organized workers were more supportive of the state in general, and engaged in more system supporting political behaviors as opposed to their unorganized counterparts.

Theoretical Guidance Linking Organization and Behavior

In the broadest terms, this paper analyzes the relationship between engaging in a variety of political behaviors and one's participation in an occupational organization. In short, we suggest that participation in a workplace organization by informal sector workers creates in them a greater psychological willingness to engage in a variety of forms of political behavior.

Our reasoning for believing this is suggested by theoretical guidance provided by Putnam (1993). Putnam suggests that membership in organizations influences individuals in a way that makes them more likely to become involved in their political world. As Putnam has so cogently noted, "Internally, associations instill in their members habits of cooperation, solidarity, and Public-spiritedness. (p.90)" Simply put, participation in an organization "teaches" individuals something about engaging the political world, whether the organization is overtly political or not (p. 90).

While Putnam's work is the most recent, and likely most authoritative treatment of this phenomenon, the link between organization and political involvement is by no means a new or novel theoretical development. For example, Marks (1989), writing about unions suggested that "Since the Industrial Revolution trade unions have been the chief organizational means for those toward the bottom of society to express their economic

and political demands (p. xii).”⁴ Moreover, those who were unorganized and lacked “occupational community and organization tended to be politically apathetic about their working lives... they saw their conditions as being beyond purposeful control and accepted them accordingly, as part of the natural order of things (p. 11)”

Of course, the analysis of how organizations affect one’s likelihood of engaging in a variety of political behaviors has even further antecedents. Almond and Verba (1963) noted in their study that those who were members of organizations tended to have higher levels of political participation than their non-member counterparts.

Our analysis will follow this basic line of theorizing. Our basic position is that membership in organizations inculcates individuals with feelings of belonging to a community whose concerns encompass their own. The process of sharing common experiences and common concerns within the organization teaches individuals that their concerns are indeed shared by others. As discussed above, works from Almond and Verba (1963) to Putnam (1993) have examined the relationship between organization and individuals’ views of the state and participation in the political system. In this work, we look more specifically at one subset of the population, the informal sector, and show the role that the organizations play within it.

The Organization of Informal Sector Workers

How do informal sector workers organize, and is the kind of organization partially contingent on the political regime type under which they live? Previous research (Torrazza, 1985) has analyzed why and how urban workers in the Latin American context organize into unions. There is essentially no theoretical discussion, however, as to why

⁴ In this paper, we do not limit the analysis solely to unions in the workplace. Aside from unions, we consider cooperatives and other voluntary organizations related to the workplace as relevant associations. This conceptualization of what is and is not an organization follows Putnam’s discussion of organizations.

informal sector workers would organize along occupational lines. This issue is one to which additional scholarly attention should be devoted, for reasons I discuss below.

The issue of organization along occupational lines is a particularly tricky issue when one considers that one of the main reasons why workers organize occupational is to defend their interests vis-à-vis the interests of employers. However, in the case of informal sector workers, the vast majority of these individuals are *self-employed*. Why would one then seek to organize along occupational lines? Clearly, workers do not seek to protect their interests as workers as they relate to their interests as employers. Part of the answer is provided in Aguilar (1995: 238-245). In the case of informal sector workers, organization is spurred by a desire to promote the interests of similar workers in relation to the interests of the state. However, there are most likely a myriad of other important reasons which spur the organization of the informally employed.⁵ That we know next to nothing about this issue demands additional attention from scholars interested in informal labor. This is particularly true when we consider that it is through effective organization that workers are likely to be able to impact the political process.

In Costa Rica, there has been a relatively long history of organization along occupational lines for workers which have similar characteristics to those found in the urban informal sector (Monge Alvarez, 1986). This is not to say, however, that overall levels of organization of workers within society has been particularly high. Former president Oscar Arias himself has bemoaned the relatively resistance to organization within the working class of Costa Rica (Arias, 1987). In the analysis presented later in this paper, we will see that organization can foster higher levels of political behavior. This being the case, in order to build a strong democracy, states in Latin America might considering fostering social organization at many levels, be it work related or not.

⁵ One important reason for examining the political organization of informal sector workers is that there are unexpected consequences to such organization. As Hirschman (1989) has noted, organization of groups has long term consequences even when the groups are not initially successful in pursuing the goals that led them to organize in the first place.

While it is difficult at this point for us to directly address the exact nature of informal sector organizations in Mexico, it is useful to look at the overall role of organizations in the Mexican political system. Many authors, including Camp (1996: 12), have discussed the corporatist nature of the Mexican political system. Through corporatist structures the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) has established special relationships with various segments of society including labor. Camp (1996: 126-127) notes that this feature of the Mexican political system has allowed for two types of representation. On the one hand, there are organizations set up by the state in order to incorporate certain interests. The other type of representation is based on informal channels being used to express interests outside of the established formal channels. Camp (1996: 127) asserts that, while it is difficult to say that informal channels are more important than institutionalized formal ones in Mexico, most observers believe that these informal channels are more important. This might mean, in the context of examining the informal sector, that while these workers may not be organized as parts of larger umbrella organizations with close institutional ties to the state such as CTM they may form their own organizations that would have some way of voicing their concerns. This being said, how might we go about examining the role of organization in these two countries?

One possible answer is that in order to learn about the role that occupational organization plays in shaping the politics of the informal sector is to engage in case studies of successful organizations in the two countries. It is likely that such research will generate findings which are not necessarily consistent between the two countries. Given the different political contexts, it is likely that occupational organizations of informal sector workers will engage different political strategies in order to effectively pursue their own political ends. At this point it is unlikely useful to speculate on the kind of different strategies that organizations will use, but it seems reasonable to suggest that the political context, with the Costa Rican one being presumably more responsive to citizen input, will help shape the ways in which organizations engage the political process. Such a direct

approach to examining the role of organizations representing informal sector workers would certainly be of use. However, in this paper we take a different approach to examining the role of organizations in shaping the political attitudes and participation of informal sector workers.

In this work, we address the role of organization by looking at the political reality of individual workers within the informal sector. More explicitly, are those workers in the informal sector who are organized more likely to participate in the political system? While this approach does not allow us to fully examine the *ways* in which organizations link informal sector workers to the political system, it does allow us to see the extent to which these organization both foster positive attitudes of the political system and encourage their members to participate.

Our interest here is centered on the relationship between informal sector workers being organized and political participation. Rather than focus on specific forms of participation separately, we have combined three forms of participation in two scales. In this way, we can address political attitudes and political participation in a general sense.

We include three forms of political participation in our scale of participation. These three are contacting a government official to have a need addressed or a concern voiced, participation in a campaign for political office, and engaging in political protests. While certainly not covering the full range of possible forms of participation, these three ways of participating are important ones. They all require a significant amount of initiative and energy, particularly as compared to other forms of participation such as voting. Thus, we have selected forms of political participation that may best address the question of whether workers are truly politically active.

Data

The analysis here is based on survey research conducted in both Costa Rica and Mexico. The data come from three surveys conducted of informal sector workers. The

first survey was conducted in San José and Limón, Costa Rica, in June and July of 1993.⁶ A total of 504 respondents were interviewed, with approximately 84-86 respondents in six different occupations.

The other two surveys, one in Mexico and one in Costa Rica, were based on sampling of both informal and formal sector workers. The surveys in Mexico were conducted during the summer of 1997; the surveys in Costa Rica were conducted in the spring of 1998.⁷ The survey in Mexico was conducted of 602 workers in the Federal District. The sample of 719 workers in Costa Rica was drawn from the metropolitan area of San José.

As noted above, the data used in our analysis comes from three different surveys in two countries: Costa Rica, 1993 and 1998, and Mexico in 1997. For the analysis presented below, we modify the data sets for purposes of limiting analysis strictly to informal sector workers.

For this paper, we are using only the four informal sector occupations selected as parts of the Mexico 1997 and Costa Rica 1998 data sets. The following are the four informal sector occupational categories of workers included from these surveys for this essay: street vendors, small-scale craftsmen, day laborers in construction, and market vendors. This restriction of the data leaves 345 of the 602 workers surveyed in Mexico and 396 of the 719 workers surveyed in Costa Rica for analysis in this paper.

In addition to eliminating the formal sector workers from the Mexico 1997 and Costa Rica 1998 data sets as discussed above, we are eliminating one occupation from the Costa Rica 1993 data set – taxi cab drivers. The extent to which taxi cab drivers are clearly informal workers varies somewhat by area. In some contexts, the characteristics of informal labor as discussed by Hart are met very well by taxi cab drivers. In other cases,

⁶ The surveys were conducted by UNIMER, under the direction of Aguilar. UNIMER is a professional survey research firm that conducts surveys for newspapers in Costa Rica, market research for companies, as well as academic research.

⁷ The surveys in Mexico were conducted by MORI de México, under the direction of Thornton. The surveys in 1998 in Costa Rica were conducted by Borge y Asociados, under the direction of Thornton.

they do not meet the characteristics very well. We eliminate this potential problem by removing them from the analysis. We note, however, that in Costa Rica 1993 data set, unlicensed taxi cab drivers, known as *piratas*, are retained for the analysis. These individuals clearly meet the characteristics of informal sector work, regardless of which definition one prefers.

The Analysis

As presented in the theoretical discussion above, the central interest of this work is whether organization is positively related to political participation. The independent variable for organization for the Costa Rica 1998 and Mexico 1997 data sets here is measured by whether a respondent belongs to any organization. Organization is not limited to unions. Respondents were coded as members of an organization based on a series of questions that asked if they belonged to any of the following types of organizations: cooperatives, unions, solidarity associations, professional associations, neighborhood organizations, or “other” types of organizations. This addresses the fact that many informal sector workers not directly organized through some workplace based organization may find organizational membership through a variety of sources. The question, then, is whether informal sector workers who do find some organization to which to belong are more likely to participate in the political system than those workers who are not a member of any form of organization.

There are four basic socioeconomic variables included in the analysis: income, age, gender, and education. These are important characteristics of individuals who one would expect to shape both their views of their state and their patterns of political behavior, as has been demonstrated elsewhere.⁸ In some cases, these variables may not prove to be statistically significant but are still necessary to include. Inclusion of these variables allows

⁸ It is standard to control for such socioeconomic factors when addressing political attitudes and participation. For one example of a work in which the relationship between socioeconomic status and political participation is addressed, see Verba, Nie and Kim (1978). The relationship between politics and both socioeconomic status and gender is also discussed in Almond and Verba (1963) and ([1980] 1989).

a view of whether the relationship between organization and political participation is due to underlying socioeconomic differences or more singularly associated with organization itself.

We began our analysis by creating a scale that would capture the overall level of political activity that individuals were engaged in. Our three forms of political behavior, as noted earlier, were engaging in political protest, volunteering for a campaign, and contacting public officials. The scale is a summative scale that weights each of the three political behaviors by factor scores generated by a factor analysis. Table One below summarizes the overall factor analysis results for the three behaviors for the three data sets we employ.

All three of the factor analyses were conducted using principal component extraction, with varimax rotation specified. We note that in none of the cases was a rotation performed, as only one factor was extracted.⁹ What table one shows quite clearly is that the three variables do load quite nicely on only one factor each. It is this factor that we label our political behavior scale. Normally, loadings of .4 or higher are considered adequate indicators of an individual item loading on a factor. In this case, the lowest value is .605, for protest in the 1998 Costa Rica data set. Of course, we might suggest a higher standard given that we only have three variables. In any event, we suggest that our results do show that the items “go together.”

Our next task was to create the scale, using the factor scores as our weights. Simply put, a scale was created for each data set using the following formula: $\text{Scale} = (((\text{item} - \text{item mean}) / \text{s.d. item}) * \text{factor score for item}) + \text{other items}$. The factor scales that results are essentially normalized scales weighted by the factor score of each item. The final scale is distributed $N \sim (0, 1)$. It is this scale that we use as our dependent variable.

⁹ That only one factor was extracted is no real surprise. We would not necessarily expect that more than one factor would be extracted given only three variables.

Table One
Factor Analysis Results: Three Data Sets

Variable	Costa Rica, 93 Factor Loadings	Costa Rica, 98 Factor Loadings	Mexico 97 Factor Loadings
Contact	.630	.778	.626
Campaign	.695	.702	.695
Protest	.726	.605	.748
% Var. Explained	46.9	48.8	47.8

In the following section, we discuss the results of our analysis linking political behaviors to organization. Specifically, we test the hypothesis, as suggested by Putnam and others, that those individuals who are organized tend toward more political participation. In simplest terms, we find that the answer is yes. For all our cases, we find that organization is positively related to greater political behavior. Table Two shows the results of the analysis.

Table Two
Regression of Political Behavior Scale, Three Data Sets

Variable	Costa Rica, 93	Costa Rica, 98	Mexico 97
Constant	.002	-.246	-1.1
Organized ? (yes=1)	.309 p=.054	.381 p=.007	.36 p=.023
Age	.003 p=.397	.004 p=.239	.007 p=.211
Education	.004 p=.065	.107 p=.017	.12 p=.002
Gender (male=1)	.07 p=.612	.04 p=.239	-.30 p=.014
Avg Weekly income	.5e-08 p=.966	-.04 p=.504	.09 p=.052
R squared	.026	.043	.107
F test	2.068 p=.069	3.1 p=.010	7.9 p=.000
n=	387	345	335

The coefficients for the organization variable show the essential evidence for our hypothesis. In all the cases, the coefficient is in the expected direction. In two of the three cases (Costa Rica 98 and Mexico 97), the coefficient is not only in the expected direction, but also statistically significant. In the case of Costa Rica 93, the coefficient does not attain the .05 level, but comes very close (.054). While technically not meeting the .05 level, we feel quite confident that the evidence is sufficiently strong to support the notion that membership in organizations, be they work related, or other, tends to make individuals more likely to engage in political behavior.

As noted above, the socioeconomic variables are primarily included here as control variables. The analysis presented in Table Two shows that most of these control variables fail to meet the standard of statistical significance. While some of the variables are significant for the data sets, the one of most note here is education. In both the Costa Rica 1998 and Mexico 1997 data sets, education is shown to be both positively and significantly related to political participation. Even for the case of Costa Rica 1993, where the education does not meet the .05 level of statistical significance, education does approach statistical analysis with a p-value of .065 and is also positive. Thus, out of the mix of socioeconomic control variables include, it is worth note the strong role education would seem to play in supporting political participation. This finding is also in line with general expectations that one might have about political participation. Studies have shown, as early as the Civic Culture (Almond and Verba, 1963), that higher levels of education are correlated with higher levels of political participation. This finding is generally repeated in our analysis.

Discussion

The above analysis has focused solely on the relationship between membership in an organization and increased political activity. In it, we have found that membership in an organization, be it political, work related, or other, leads to higher levels of political

activity, as measured by contacting public officials, engaging in political protest, and volunteering for political campaigns. This finding holds comparatively across two countries (Mexico and Costa Rica), and over time within one country (Costa Rica) at different political periods.¹⁰ We suggest this is an important finding for at least a couple of reasons.

First, that this finding is consistent across two different countries with quite dissimilar political systems, we think, is important. Both Mexico and Costa Rica, to be sure, at at some level democracies. That Costa Rica is a democracy may be disputed, but one would be hard pressed to win that argument. However, one might make a stronger case for Mexico being only marginally democratic, if at all. This being the case, the message that participation in civic organizations make for a politically active populace, even one that is quite politically marginalized as are informal workers, is important.¹¹ What seems clear here is that organization leads to increased political participation, and by implication, to a democratic system that functions better than if participation were lower. In effect, we suggest that increased political participation, aside from allowing individuals to make their voices heard, also makes people more willing to “buy into” the overall democratic process.¹² Even in the case of Mexico, which is not by any stretch of the definition of democracy a highly democratic system, we see that organization increases

¹⁰ At the time that the first Costa Rica data set was collected, the primary season for the 1994 presidential election was in full swing, with José María Figueres emerging as the main contender. At the time the second Costa Rica data set was collected, Figueres was preparing to step down as president and a challenger (Miguel Angel Rodríguez) from an opposing party had just recently won the election for presidency.

¹¹ It is the case, however, that the informally employed are more politically marginalized in Costa Rica than they are in Mexico. Street vendors in particular, in Mexico City, have found themselves as unwitting and sometimes willing pawns in the political battles between the PRI and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. As such, their political capital has risen substantially in the last few months. However, overall informal sector workers remains a mostly marginalized political group even in Mexico.

¹² Preliminary evidence to support this can be found in Aguilar (1995) and Thornton (1998). A more detailed analysis, due to time constraints, could not be presented here. However, readers may contact the authors for a fuller description as well as results of the preliminary analysis.

participation. If states are interested in strengthening their democracies, fomenting the growth of civic organizations might be a useful tool to wield.¹³

The second reason that we suggest our finding is an important one is that not only does it hold across countries with different political systems, but also holds within the same country at different political points. For the case of Costa Rica, we compare 1993 and 1998 data. These were two very different political periods. In 1993, José María Figueres was poised to win the presidency of his country in 1994. Significant discontent had built around the then PUSC government, and the “writing was on the wall” that Figueres would win the election. By 1998, the tables had turned. Figueres’ administration had floundered in the latter part of his tenure, and his party, the PLN, had been defeated by a PUSC candidate. Regardless of which party was in office, however, we see that the effect of organization remains largely constant.¹⁴ Here we see the evidence that suggests that organization remains an enduring motivator for political participation, even when the political context has changed within a given country. We suggest that for countries such as Costa Rica, where democracy has had significant time to inculcate itself into the popular culture, civic organization is an important tool for sustaining democracy, if we are willing to accept that democracy contains as part of its definition participation by the citizenry.

In sum, we suggest that these findings, though somewhat preliminary, are important as they relate to the role of civic organizations prompting political participation.¹⁵ However, what we have shown here should serve as a kernel for future

¹³ In Costa Rica, such an effort has been underway since the late 1970s, with the creation of INFOCOOP, a state institution that helps with the creation of cooperatives.

¹⁴ Note that the coefficients are very similar to each other in terms of relative strength, aside from being in the same direction.

¹⁵ We do acknowledge that these findings are preliminary. Future work will have to consider additional control factors, such as the actual occupations of the workers, as well as other attitudinal variables, such as diffuse support and political efficacy, to further refine the effect of organization on participation.

research into the link between civic organization and political participation within the informal sector.

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