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NGOs and Political Participation in Weak Democracies: Sub-national Evidence on Protest and Voter Turnout from Bolivia

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Abstract

How do NGOs affect political participation in weakly democratic settings? We know that NGOs can be an important part of moderate civil society by building trust, facilitating collective action, and encouraging voter turnout. This paper explores these relationships in weakly democratic settings. NGOs stimulate political participation by providing resources and opportunities for association. Where voting is seen as ineffective, new participation can take the form of political protests and demonstrations. This paper presents results from an original local level dataset from Bolivia on NGO activity, voter turnout, and political protest, showing a strong relationship between NGO activity and political protest in weakly democratic contexts.

Keywords: NGOs; Civil Society; Political Participation; Protest; Voter Turnout; Bolivia.

In October of 2003 the small Andean country of Bolivia was rocked with violent anti-government demonstrations that resulted in nearly 100 deaths and the hurried resignation of President Sanchez de Lozada, who fled the country amid the violence. These protests, later called the “October revolution,” were the culmination of a series of anti-government street demonstrations and riots that gained momentum over several years. The protesters, comprised of groups of labor unionists, indigenous groups and working class citizens, were called to action in part by a radio station called “Radio Pachamama,” a station run and staffed by a prominent women’s non-governmental organization (NGO) in the impoverished city of El Alto which adjoins the capital city of La Paz. Announcements made on the radio station helped coordinate large numbers of protesters marching down the steep winding road from El Alto to La Paz, where they converged on Plaza Murillo. This NGO is one of many in Bolivia that have received considerable amounts of foreign funding from the United States and Europe since the 1980s as part of an effort to promote civil society and strengthen democracy.ⁱ

This suggests an interesting puzzle about the role NGOs have played in recent political events in Bolivia. NGOs are frequently portrayed as a bulwark of the type of moderate civil society necessary for democratic stability, and they receive large amounts of funding from international donors as part of democracy promotion efforts. Yet, as the anecdote above suggests, NGOs can also play a more controversial role by mobilizing protest activities. This paper explores how NGO activity influences political participation, looking at both conventional democratic participation (such as voting) and less conventional contentious forms of participation (such as political protest). How do NGOs influence political participation in less than solidly democratic settings? Do NGOs stimulate voter turnout? More controversially, do they stimulate political protest?

NGO activity in any society can encourage political participation by providing resources to a community and opportunities for association. Both of these factors raise awareness of shared problems in the community, and encourage political participation as people discuss political issues and witness NGOs tackling problems with policies and programs at the local level. However, the larger political context in which NGOs are operating can greatly influence the type of participation they encourage. In democracies with well-functioning electoral mechanisms, NGOs may well strengthen moderate political participation. In weakly democratic settings – where elections are viewed as flawed or ineffective mechanisms for influencing the state – these same mechanisms can mobilize people to participate in more radical forms of participation such as political protest. When electoral mechanisms are seen as unreliable, NGOs still play a role in stimulating political participation, but frustrated citizens are likely to find new modes of participation, including demonstrations and political protest.

This paper examines the effects of NGOs on political participation in the context of poorly performing electoral institutions. Using original local level data on NGO activity and political participation from Bolivia, this paper tests the relationship between NGO activity and two different forms of political participation: voter turnout and political protest.ⁱⁱ Exploring these relationships with local level data from Bolivia offers several advantages. First, NGO activity is essentially a local activity, but it has previously been very difficult to find local level data on NGOs and political participation in developing countries. Second, this dataset includes two time periods, 1999 and 2004, allowing for better causal inference than a snapshot of variation between municipalities. The political context of events in Bolivia during these years provides an ideal setting in which to examine the effects of NGOs in a weak democracy. Between 1999 and 2004 there was widespread frustration with the effectiveness of local

elections, following disappointment with major constitutional reforms devolving authority and revenue to the municipalities in 1994. Most importantly, there is also wide variation in the performance of democratic institutions at the local level, allowing for a good sub-national test of the conditional impact of NGOs on participation.

The evidence shows that NGO activity in this weakly democratic setting is strongly associated with protest activity. Municipalities with high NGO activity witnessed increases in protest activity on average across the country. More crucially, even within a weakly democratic country, this relationship is strongest in the municipalities where democracy is performing the most poorly (as indicated by the absence of political competition). Only weak evidence is found for a relationship between NGOs and voter turnout. As we try to learn more about how democracy works in emerging settings, understanding how people become democratic citizens is vital. This paper shows that in weak democracies, the tools of civil society that we rely on to motivate people to vote can also lead to protest.

NGOs, Civil Society and Political Participation

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are a wide variety of non-governmental non-profit membership and support organizations.ⁱⁱⁱ In developing countries, they provide services ranging from local provision of health care, sanitation and housing services, to national level research and policy advice. They also frequently act as intermediaries for foreign aid projects. Some NGOs have explicitly political goals, such as empowerment for women or the poor, while others choose to remain as politically neutral as they can. Some are tied to churches or religious organizations and others are secular. These organizations make up one important part of the fabric of civil society in any country. In the developing world, NGOs play a particularly important role, as they are the targets of international funding aimed at strengthening civil

society and are often seen as a kind of intermediary or facilitator for larger civil society. Civil society includes more than just NGOs: organizations such as community groups, clubs, churches, labor unions, and professional associations are also a part of civil society.

The numbers of NGOs working in the developing world, along with foreign aid dollars available to them increased sharply in the 1980s, termed the “NGO decade.” Donors and development workers lauded NGOs as the new hope for stalled development programs throughout the developing world. In Latin America, this new attention to NGOs was pinned on both political and economic optimism. In the realm of politics, NGOs were seen as an essential building block towards more democratic politics. First, many organizations had already gained international attention for their opposition to authoritarian regimes across the region. Second, the growing presence of these organizations was taken as a sign that a vibrant civil society was taking root, something that theorists have long claimed necessary for democracy to flourish. For economic development programs, NGOs gained the reputation as a promising “clean” alternative to corrupt governments and an important step toward humanizing plans for economic growth.

Despite considerable debate over the role that NGOs play in the developing world, and a bias in the literature in favor of descriptions of what NGOs *should* be doing over what they actually are doing, there is now general agreement that NGOs have political effects, including helping and/or hurting incumbents in different contexts (Boulding and Gibson 2008; Brown, D.S. et al. 2002, 2007, 2008; Brown J.C. et al. 2005). They are no longer seen as neutral service providers, but as part of the political landscape, affecting change through both intentional and unintentional mechanisms.

Foreign aid organizations, seeking both to strengthen civil society and to make their programs more effective, began financing NGOs across the developing world beginning in the

1980s and continuing today. Considerable portions of both multilateral and bilateral aid are channeled through NGOs and many organizations have whole units devoted to strengthening ties with NGOs and building civil society. The World Bank, for example, involves civil society organizations through policy consultations, information sharing and training, grant making and involving civil society in setting poverty reduction strategy goals. The World Bank estimates that five percent of its total annual portfolio (or about one billion dollars) is channeled to civil society organizations through grassroots development programs (World Bank 2006, xv).

This effort to support civil society by collaborating with and funding NGOs and other civil society organizations is found across the major donors, including the U.S. and European aid agencies. And there is broad consensus that supporting civil society through NGOs is better for development outcomes and better for democracy – largely based on the idea that NGOs make up a part of a moderate and democratic civil society.^{iv} And, more importantly, that encouraging people to participate in these types of organizations will have a moderating and positive effect on political participation, encouraging people to become politically engaged to tackle difficult problems in their community. For example, the USAID website states that the agency “is working to strengthen commitment to an independent and politically active civil society in developing countries” so that individuals can “associate with like-minded individuals, express their views publicly, openly debate public policy, and petition their government” (USAID 2009). Similarly, the Swedish development agency (SIDA) describes civil society as important for promoting democracy because it “includes aspects such as tolerance, pluralism, social capital and trust, as well as respect for the opinions and desires of others” (SIDA 2007, 6).

NGOs and Political Participation in Weakly Democratic Settings

The notion that civil society is a pluralistic moderating force in political life is drawn largely from the experience of stable developed democracies. How does the political context of weak or unstable democracies change the role that civil society plays? If civil society helps people organize and articulate their demands to the state, what happens if the state is unresponsive? Under these conditions, civil society might not always be a moderate force in political life. Instead, civil society might also help mobilize people in more radical ways. If NGOs mobilize people to participate in politics, but traditional mechanisms like voting are blocked or seen as ineffective, it follows that people might seek new outlets for voicing their demands, including protests and demonstrations.

NGOs can stimulate participation through at least two distinct mechanisms: 1) providing resources that can be used for political organizing, and 2) associational effects as NGOs facilitate interaction between members of the community. Both of these things can facilitate political participation, but tell us little about how participation will be channeled or directed.

First, NGOs bring some level of resources to a community. Resources, whether they are financial, educational, or infrastructural, can make participation easier. Reducing financial strain for individual community members means they may have more time for political activities. Likewise, better infrastructure can translate into better access to political events, as it is easier for people to travel and participate if roads are passable. Other resources common to NGOs, such as telephones, computers, fax machines, and vehicles can also be used to facilitate political organization and participation. These are intentionally wide-ranging examples, but the point is that any influx of resources into a community can facilitate political participation, especially in resource-poor contexts.

Second, NGOs provide space for people to associate and interact with one another.^v

Whether the organization is providing health care, educational services, or community organizing, they engage community members in interactions. As people gather together – regardless of their purpose – some degree of social capital is gained simply through organized, repeated interaction. This idea has deep roots in the literature on social capital and civic culture (Clarke 1998; Putnam 1994; Almond and Verba 1963). NGOs, whether they are providing small business training, lobbying for women's or indigenous rights, providing health care, or building houses, all involve local interaction between NGO workers, neighbors, and others in the community. By spending time together, talking, and working toward a common project, people build trust in each other. Communicating shared grievances in this kind of setting paves the way for political action as increased trust helps address the collective action problems inherent in mobilization.

This kind of interaction closely follows the classic understanding of civil society. As people become more connected with one another, and empowered through positive interactions with their neighbors, they are more likely to tackle difficult problems facing their community. In other words, as more organizations bring more people together, participation in politics is likely to increase. These effects can be intentional – in fact, many NGOs in developing countries see this type of work as central to their mission of education, empowerment and outreach. NGOs can serve as training grounds for democratic behavior, encouraging people to participate in decision-making, compromise and democratic practices such as voting. However, it can also be an unintentional side effect. Even NGOs that actively seek to remain apolitical still promote interactions among the people they serve.

The first testable hypothesis to emerge from the argument that NGOs stimulate participation is the conventional wisdom that increases in NGO activity should raise voter turnout. If NGOs are contributing to civil society in the expected way (by mobilizing underrepresented citizens to participate in politics), increases in voter turnout should occur where more NGOs are active.

Hypothesis 1 (Conventional Wisdom): High levels of NGO activity will be associated with high levels of voter turnout.

However, the conventional wisdom does not take political context into account. The mechanisms linking increased NGO activity with increased political participation tell us very little about how that new urge to participate will be acted upon. What happens when confidence in the fairness of the democratic system is low? Under conditions of weakly performing democratic institutions when voting is not an appealing option, the same mechanisms that facilitate conventional political participation can also make less conventional strategies more viable, including political protest and demonstrations. Voting and political protest are both forms of political engagement, and both can be vital to the health of a democracy. But, for the individuals involved, voting is almost always less costly than protesting. Although both voters and protesters can be targets of intimidation, protests are inherently less controlled than voting, and more risky. The larger political context is important for how that mobilization is translated into action. Specifically, if voting is seen as ineffectual, other modes of participation become more attractive.^{vi}

Hypothesis 2: In weakly democratic settings, increases in NGO activity will be positively associated with increases in protest.

Protest, like the more conventional forms of participation just discussed, can be facilitated through intentional or unintended consequences of NGO activity. First, increases in

protest might reflect a conscious strategy choice on the part of NGO leaders who decide that more institutional routes of pressuring the government are ineffective. Alternatively, increases in protest might be an unintended consequence of increased associative activity. As NGOs bring new people into participation in politics, and their demands are not easily or swiftly met by the state, the people themselves might seek other forms of action. We know from the literature on social movements and protest that people are more likely to protest when they have strong motivation, effective leadership, and a political context that seems ripe for change (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). We also know that electoral incentives can pressure politicians to enact policies that reduce protest (Wilkinson 2006). In the Bolivian context, there is some evidence that political competition reduces protest (Arce and Rice 2009) and that individuals who have experienced corruption are more likely to participate in protest (Gingerich 2009). Protest, like voting, is easier in an environment of dense NGO activity because coordination is easier among people with shared membership in associations.

Although the direct and indirect mechanisms are difficult to parse out with the data available, it is likely that both possibilities occur simultaneously in Bolivia – some organizations do turn to actively organizing protest (as seen in the anecdote about Radio Pachamama that opens this article), but evidence exists suggesting protest is an unintended consequence of NGO activity for other organizations. Regardless of their specific activities or political inclinations, NGOs provide both resources and opportunities for association.

To illustrate the ways in which even ostensibly non-political NGOs can promote protest activity, consider this scenario: several large NGOs working on health and development issues start projects in a municipality a few hours from a major city. The NGOs choose the town through some combination of need, accessibility, population density and personal connections.

One NGO sets up a health clinic and vaccine program, one starts a project working with local farmers to get their goods to the higher priced markets in the city, one sets up evening literacy classes. These projects, although not directly political, facilitate interactions between neighbors in the community as people wait for vaccines for their children, attend literacy classes, or meet with neighboring farmers to discuss problems of marketing their goods. In this town, there is widespread discontent with the political system that most view as corrupt and inefficient. A few leaders in the community use the literacy class and farmers' group to start a discussion about joining in an upcoming protest march to the capital to protest an increase in taxes. Because of the NGO activity in this municipality, organizing protesters is easier, and a large contingent marches to the provincial capital.^{vii}

In settings where the institutional mechanisms for democratic participation are seen as flawed two things may happen. First, political NGOs are more likely to turn to unconventional tactics to gain attention and press for political change. Second, at the level of individual citizens, if contact with an NGO encourages them to participate, they are more likely to engage in protest and demonstrations if voting is seen as ineffective. In this view, the relationship between NGO activity and political participation is a conditional one: the effect of NGO activity on participation is conditioned by the quality of the electoral mechanisms in place.

Data and Research Design

These hypotheses are tested using an original dataset on NGOs, election results, and political protest at the municipal level from Bolivia. First, two different sets of regressions are estimated to test the effect of changes in numbers of NGOs on changes in voter turnout and political protest over a five year period from 1999-2004. The first uses change in voter turnout as the dependent variable and the second uses change in incidences of protest as the dependent

variable. Given the context of Bolivia during these years, I expect a strong relationship between NGOs and protest.

Second, for further evidence of the conditional nature of the relationship between NGO activity and political participation, municipalities with high levels of political competition between political parties (close elections) are compared with municipalities with little or no political competition. Using political competition as a measure of local quality of democracy allows for a compelling test of the conditional hypothesis that NGOs stimulate political protest in weak democratic settings by measuring variation in the contextual variable at the local level.

The Context: Bolivia and Democracy in Crisis

Bolivia is a good place to test these relationships because it has high levels of NGO activity and wide variation on political participation. Bolivia is an established democracy since its transition from authoritarian rule in 1982, but one with significant flaws, including high levels of corruption and popular dissatisfaction with democracy. In 1994, major constitutional reforms under the Law of Popular Participation decentralized authority to the municipalities, transferred funds to the municipal level, and mandated participatory budgeting and oversight by local organizations (Kohl 2003).^{viii} NGOs played an important role during the implementation of these reforms, often acting as advisers to the local governments during the planning phase, assisting with organizing oversight organizations, and educating citizens about their rights to participate in the new processes (Kohl 2003a).

The 1999 municipal elections were the first regularly scheduled local elections following the initial implementation of the reforms. Despite widespread optimism that decentralization would bring dramatic improvements in terms of poverty reduction and political accountability,

instead reforms achieved mixed results. Problems with financial management and corruption continued, and the demand for real change was largely unmet (Kohl 2003).

During the years between 1999 and 2004, Bolivia experienced a growing crisis of governance as political protests frequently shut down the capital and other major cities. Several major incidences of protest, including the “Water War” over privatizing the city of Cochabamba’s water supply in 2000 and the “Gas War” of 2003 brought political protest to the forefront as an important strategy for participation. Both of these events were large-scale protests around specific issues (although the multiple groups that joined the protests were not always united in their goals or their tactics). Neither of these events are included in the data analyzed here (the data on incidences of protest for this project cover the years 1999 and 2004, intentionally omitting these flashpoint events), but they are important to mention as part of the changing climate of Bolivian politics as ordinary citizens increasingly felt alienated from the political process and contentious politics became normalized as a frequent part of daily life across the country.

Bolivia during these years is an exemplary case of democracy under strain, or weak democracy struggling to live up to the promises of its institutions. Unfortunately, for many Bolivians, this was also a time of crisis of confidence in the democratic institutions that had promised great reforms and had failed to deliver. Thus these years lend themselves very well to an evaluation of the effect of NGOs on political participation in the context of poorly performing electoral mechanisms: Bolivians felt little confidence that even if voting were to lead to reforms that those reforms would lead to real and lasting change.

NGO data

Data on NGO activities were coded from a Bolivian government registry of NGOs published by the Vice-Ministry of Public Investment and Foreign Financing (VIPFE in Spanish acronyms). The registry has been published and updated five times since 1996. Most of the data for this project were coded out of the 2003-2004 registry. The data in the registry are entered by NGO and include the official acronym, the full name of the organization, the country of origin, the department where the organization registered (Bolivia is divided into 9 administrative departments), the date the NGO began activities, the date the registration was renewed, contact information, the sectors the organization is involved in, and the location of their work. All information is self-reported by the NGOs, as required by law. This registry is available as a published book or as a PDF file on VIPFE's website (VIPFE 2004; VIPFE 2006).^{ix}

To make these data useful for comparing across municipalities, the numbers of NGOs in each municipality are summed to get a total number for 2004. In order to get a total number of NGOs for 1999, the date the NGO began activities is referenced and only those organizations that were in existence before 1999 are used.^x These data were cross-referenced with the 1996 version of the NGO registry to identify NGOs that closed during these years.

To capture the effect of changes in numbers of NGOs, NGO counts from 1999 and 2004 are used to create a variable indicating the change in numbers of NGOs over the five-year period. In most municipalities, the number of registered NGOs increased between 1999 and 2004, despite considerable differences in size and population between municipalities. The maximum increase occurred in the capital city of La Paz, with an increase of 139 organizations, bringing the total from 55 in 1999 to 194 in 2004. The minimum is a loss of 8 NGOs. 130 of the municipalities have no recorded NGOs in either year.

Voter Turnout Data

Municipal level data on voter turnout, is available from the Bolivian national election court (Corte Nacional Electoral de Bolivia), which publishes election results down to the individual table where the votes were cast (CNE 2009). Bolivia held nationwide municipal elections in 1999 and 2004. Voter turnout is calculated as the percentage of registered voters that submitted ballots. The total number of ballots submitted was used instead of the number of valid ballots because casting blank or invalid ballots is often an intentional way of expressing discontent with the choices presented under mandatory voting rules. For the best causal inference, the dependent variable used is change in voter turnout between 1999 and 2004.

Protest Data

Data on protest were coded from Spanish language newspapers and English language wire stories, using the search engines Lexis-Nexis (for English language sources) and Factiva (for Spanish language).^{xi} For the years 1999 and 2004, all articles containing the search word “Bolivia” were skimmed for any mention of political violence, protests, demonstrations, riots, labor unrest, roadblocks, marches, or other forms of political protest. The English language and Spanish language coding were cross-referenced against each other to minimize overlap and maximize the number of observations. Although the original coding includes information on the numbers of protesters involved, the dates of the protests, the numbers injured or killed, the state response, and various other information, for the purposes of this project, the data were aggregated into simple event counts by municipality, by year. Protests that lasted multiple days are counted once for each day.

Protests, even in the volatile political climate of Bolivia during these years, are still relatively rare events. In 1999, the average municipality did not experience a protest incident (the

mean number of protests in 1999 is .55) In 2004, the mean is higher at 1.01. In 1999 the town with the most protests experienced 30, which rose to 95 in 2004. Again, this project is interested in change over this period; the variable used in the regressions is the change in number of protests between 1999 and 2004.

Control Variables

The full model of political participation estimated here includes controls for election specific variables, socio-economic variables, and indicators of past participation.^{xii} The election specific variables include the *Number of Political Parties* and *Political Competition* (measured as the difference in vote share between the two largest political parties in the 2004 election). *Evo Morales' Vote Share* in the 2005 election is also included as an indicator of support for this popular and charismatic national candidate. 2004 was the first election in which the party of Evo Morales, the MAS, captured significant vote shares in many municipalities, appealing to indigenous and excluded voters. The socio-economic variables are *Population (logged)*, *Level of Development* (measured as percentage of household with electricity), *Rural, Indigenous Population*, and *Adult Literacy*.

Voter Turnout Results

To test for a relationship between NGO activity and voter turnout, change in voter turnout between the 1999 and 2004 municipal elections is estimated as a function of changes in the numbers of NGOs working in the municipality. Given the context of poorly performing electoral institutions and popular dissatisfaction with democracy in Bolivia during these years, it is unsurprising that the relationship between increases in NGO activity and voter turnout is not a strong one. It does not appear that increases in NGO activity had any significant impact on levels of turnout in 2004 (see Table 1). Change in the number of NGOs is not a statistically significant

predictor of voter turnout in either model. Model 1 shows the model of voter turnout including change in NGOs and a baseline number of NGOs from 1999. Model 2 shows results from the same model but includes a measure of political protest in 2004 since both voter turnout and political protest can be thought of as different measures of political participation. Including protest does not change the results.

Although *change* in NGOs does not affect turnout, there is some evidence that high *levels* of NGO activity in a community are associated with higher levels of voter turnout. The number of NGOs in 1999 is positively associated with increases in voter turnout in both Models 1 and 2. This result suggests that municipalities with more NGOs to begin with were more likely to witness higher levels of voter turnout than municipalities where few NGOs were working. However, the arrival of new NGOs during the last five years has little impact on levels of turnout. The average turnout in the 1999 municipal elections was 59 percent. In 2004, that number went up to 62. Change in turnout between the two elections spanned a large range, from a loss of 51 percent, to a gain of 57 percent. The distribution of the variable is close to normal.

The other independent variables in the model give an interesting picture of electoral politics in Bolivia. First, the *Number of Political Parties* is positive and significant. Bolivian elections are multiparty elections with proportional representation on the city council. Voter turnout is higher where a larger number of political parties ran. Second, the variable that captures support for Evo Morales' MAS party is a very strong predictor of change in turnout when all observations are included. It appears that where the MAS gained new support, turnout increases. This fits nicely with the description of the MAS landslide in 2004 and 2005 as a victory of mobilization; the MAS did a tremendous job at getting new voters to the polls. *Population* and

Adult Literacy are also significant; turnout is higher in smaller municipalities and in more educated ones.

The main finding that change in NGOs has little effect on turnout, but high levels of NGO activity is associated with higher turnout are robust to several different specifications of the model, included in the web appendix^{xiii}. In different variations, NGO activity is measured as NGOs per capita instead of counts (Model 1A); the effect of NGOs are estimated on *levels* of turnout in 2004 including the lagged dependent variable, rather than *change* in turnout (Model 1B), and cases that might be considered outliers are excluded, in particular the largest four cities in Bolivia (Model 1C). Additionally, the inclusion or exclusion of the first period variable in the change models (NGOs in 1999) does not change the results. Overall, there is little evidence to suggest a strong connection between NGOs and voter turnout, but given the weak performance of democratic institutions in Bolivia, this is expected.

Protest Results

The relationship between the changes in numbers of NGOs and changes in protest is more evident. Change in NGO activity is a positive and significant predictor of increases in protests, using robust standard errors. On average, an increase of one NGO in a municipality is associated with an increase in .5 protests. Or, more intuitively, an increase of 10 NGOs would predict an average increase of around 5 protests in a year.

Model 3 estimates the effect of change in NGOs on changes in incidences of protest, controlling for factors related to political participation. Model 4 includes a measure of voter turnout to capture both modes of participation. Both models show very similar results (see Table 2). The models of voter turnout and protest are intentionally identical for ease of comparison and

to reflect the conceptualization of turnout and protest as different types of the same phenomenon: participation.

Of the control variables, the number of NGOs in 1999 is positive and significant, which lends further support to the idea that NGOs are related to protest activities. *Evo Morales' Vote Share* is negatively associated with protest, which somewhat counters the popular notion that his supporters made up the bulk of the protests during these years. More interestingly, it lends further support to the idea that participation will be channeled into electoral routes if those routes are promising; where Evo Morales had high electoral support, there was a decrease in protests, even though protests eventually helped bring Evo to power.

These results are very stable. Several variations on the models are available in the web appendix, including measuring NGO activity as NGOs per capita (Model 3A), estimating the effects of NGO activity on *levels* of protest (with the lagged dependent variable) as opposed to *change* in protest (Model 3B), excluding the largest four cities as possible outliers (Model 3C), and excluding the cases with the greatest increase in NGOs as possible outliers (Model 3D). Since incidences of protest are event counts, it is possible that a poisson estimation is more appropriate for testing these relationships. Model 3E shows the results of a poisson estimation, and the results are very similar to the OLS estimations.

One concern with these findings is that it is very hard to rule out the possibility that increases in NGOs and increases in protest and voting are both indicative of a third factor, such as rising political dissatisfaction. Both the actions of forming a new NGO and marching in the streets in protest can be seen as political actions. To address this concern, I estimate a simple regression model to determine if protests in 1999 are associated with an increase in NGO activity, which would be true if both were the result of rising dissatisfaction alone. Protests in

1999 have no statistically significant effect on changes in NGO activity, controlling for levels of NGOs in 1999. However, to the extent that increases in NGO activity and increases in protest are both responding to latent demand for political change, some feedback between the two is entirely consistent with the theory that NGOs facilitate different types of participation in different settings, and that in weakly democratic contexts, political protest is one likely outcome of NGO activity. The next section provides additional evidence in support of this conditional relationship.

Local Quality of Democracy: Political Competition

Bolivia during the late 1990s and early 2000s makes for a good test of how national level political context influences the relationship between NGO activity and political participation. The crisis of Bolivia's political institutions allows for a test of the relationship near the extreme of weakly functioning democratic institutions, and the results demonstrate that NGO activity can stimulate political protest under these conditions. However, measuring local variation in quality of democracy allows a more direct test of the conditional nature of the relationship between NGOs and participation.

To this end, political competition (as indicated by the margin between the two largest political parties) is used as an indicator of local quality of democracy in order to compare how NGOs influence voting and protest in municipalities with competition between parties and municipalities with little or no competition between parties. Political competition captures something very important about the functioning of democratic institutions. If the margin between parties is so large that there is no effective competition, even if other aspects of the institutions are functioning well (low corruption, highly responsive politicians, etc.), democracy is in trouble. However, it is more likely that extremely uncompetitive elections in developing countries are also accompanied by strong clientelist systems and corruption to ensure a certain party's hold on

power. In the absence of direct measures of quality of democracy, political competition is a very good proxy.

It is reasonable to assume that where the difference is less than 3 percent, there was real uncertainty over the outcome of the election, and thus some level of real competition (Nardulli (2005)). Where the difference in vote share is greater than 3 percent, it is likely that the largest party had a fairly strong certainty of winning a plurality in the election. Although this is an admittedly arbitrary threshold, there is an important difference between competitive and non-competitive elections. In one, voters go to the polls thinking their vote might make a difference. In the other, the winner is known before the election. In Bolivia, the average municipality had a 15 percent gap between the two largest political parties. Of 311 municipalities with data, 77 of them were competitive at the 3 percent threshold. 105 were competitive at a 5 percent threshold.

In order to compare how NGOs affect participation in these different contexts, a dummy variable for political competition at a 3 percent threshold is used (based on the 2004 municipal elections), and fully interactive models of change in turnout and change in protest are estimated (see Table 3). These interactive models give strong support to the idea that NGOs stimulate participation, and that participation is channeled differently depending on the political context. In non-competitive municipalities (where there is little or no real competition between political parties), an increase in NGO activity is associated with an *increase* in protest, as are levels of NGO activity in 1999. On the other hand, in NGO activity has little effect on voter turnout in non-competitive municipalities. These results are robust to using a 5 percent threshold as a cut-off for competitiveness, and a similar pattern is observed when the relationship is modeled using an interaction between the margin of victory in percentage points and change in NGO activity, rather than a dichotomous variable for competitive vs. non-competitive: As elections become

less competitive, NGOs have a stronger stimulating effect on protest. This is further evidence that the effect of NGO activity on participation is conditional on how well the democratic institutions are functioning. When voting is seen as ineffective or unlikely to result in any real change, newly mobilized people are more likely to protest.

Conclusions

We have good reason to expect that NGOs facilitate collective action and political participation. How that political participation is exercised, however, is contingent on the larger political context in which NGOs are operating. This paper makes the case that NGOs do stimulate political participation, but not only in terms of moderate methods such as voting. In weakly democratic settings where institutions are viewed with deep distrust and skepticism, new political participation can also take more contentious forms, such as political protest and demonstrations.

These results are important for several reasons. First, together with the finding that NGOs are only weakly associated with institutional participation in the form of voter turnout, the finding that NGOs and protest are linked challenges some of the fundamental assumptions about how NGOs affect participation in weak or developing democracies. Instead of acting as training grounds for the type of citizenship we associate with developed democracies, NGOs may also be invoking much less stable and less predictable forms of participation. Protest may well be a necessary and vital part of democratic participation, but it is rarely what advocates of civil society have in mind when they advocate for NGOs.

More importantly, this finding contributes to our understanding of how civil society works in less democratic settings and draws attention to the importance of political context. Political science tends to privilege voting as the pinnacle of political participation, when in

reality voting can be a very flawed process in developing democracies. Protest, on the other hand, carries the connotation of violence and political instability, but in some circumstances may be a vital mechanism for making voices heard that would be obscured through more traditional procedures of participation.

There is ongoing debate over whether the recent protests in Bolivia represent a crisis for democracy or an advance for democracy, and it seems too early to tell for certain. Clearly, traditional mechanisms of participation were not satisfying the demands of the mostly poor protesters. The protests have succeeded in reshaping the political agenda in Bolivia to address issues of exclusion and poverty. But they have also raised questions about the stability and governability of the country. Bolivia in many ways is on the brink, and it remains to be seen if workable political compromise can be reached. Regardless of the outcome, it is important to understand civil society, and the role that NGOs play in facilitating participation, in their larger political context.

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TABLE 1: Change in Municipal Voter Turnout, 1999-2004

	Model 1	Model 2
<i>NGO Activity</i>		
Change in NGOs	0.000 (0.00)	0.000 (0.00)
NGOs, 1999	0.002* (0.00)	0.002* (0.00)
<i>Election Specific Variables</i>		
Number of Political Parties	0.003* (0.00)	0.003* (0.00)
Political Competition	0.005 (0.03)	0.005 (0.03)
Evo Morales Vote Share	0.074* (0.03)	0.072* (0.03)
<i>Socio-Economic Variables</i>		
Population (logged)	-0.020* (0.01)	-0.020* (0.01)
Level of Development (Electricity)	-0.047 (0.03)	-0.048 (0.03)
Rural	-0.040 (0.02)	-0.038 (0.02)
Indigenous Population	0.032 (0.02)	0.033 (0.02)
Adult Literacy	0.117* (0.04)	0.119* (0.04)
<i>Participation Variables</i>		
Turnout, 1999	-0.693* (0.07)	-0.695* (0.07)
Change in Incidences of Protest		-0.001* (0.00)
Constant	0.487* (0.10)	0.488* (0.10)
R ²	0.628	0.629
N	307	307

Note: OLS Estimation with robust standard errors in parentheses; *p<0.05.

TABLE 2: Change in Incidences of Protest, 1999-2004

	Model 3	Model 4
<i>NGO Activity</i>		
Change in NGOs	0.506* (0.09)	0.505* (0.10)
NGOs, 1999	0.225* (0.05)	0.226* (0.05)
<i>Election Specific Variables</i>		
Number of Political Parties	0.088 (0.07)	0.089 (0.07)
Political Competition	0.226 (0.98)	0.229 (0.99)
Evo Morales Vote Share	-2.126* (0.66)	-2.085* (0.67)
<i>Socio-Economic Variables</i>		
Population (logged)	-0.597* (0.18)	-0.599* (0.18)
Level of Development (Electricity)	-0.180 (0.64)	-0.211 (0.65)
Rural	-0.629 (0.77)	-0.671 (0.77)
Indigenous Population	0.191 (0.55)	0.228 (0.56)
Adult Literacy	0.285 (1.08)	0.296 (1.09)
<i>Participation Variables</i>		
Incidences of Protest, 1999	-0.934* (0.12)	-0.935* (0.12)
Change in Turnout		-0.361 (0.92)
Constant	5.080* (2.43)	5.085* (2.45)
R ²	0.761	0.761
N	310	307

Note: OLS Estimation with robust standard errors in parentheses; *p<0.05.

TABLE 3: OLS Change in Protest and Turnout

<i>Dependent Variable</i>	<i>Change in Protest</i>	<i>Change in Turnout</i>
Non-Competitive Municipalities (Polcomp=0)		
Change in NGOs	0.557* (0.06)	-0.000 (0.00)
NGOs, 1999	0.231* (0.04)	0.003* (0.00)
Number of Political Parties	0.010 (0.05)	0.003 (0.00)
Evo Morales Vote Share	-2.224* (0.70)	0.072* (0.03)
Population (logged)	-0.583* (0.15)	-0.025* (0.01)
Level of Development	0.084 (0.80)	-0.050 (0.03)
Rural	-0.782 (0.78)	-0.065* (0.03)
Indigenous Population	0.295 (0.58)	0.031 (0.03)
Adult Literacy	-0.646 (1.11)	0.099* (0.04)
Incidences of Protest, 1999	-0.960* (0.11)	
Turnout, 1999		-0.718* (0.07)
Competitive Municipalities (Polcomp=1)		
Polcomp *Change in NGOs	-0.542* (0.09)	0.003* (0.00)
Polcomp*NGOs, 1999	-0.359* (0.13)	-0.008* (0.00)
Polcomp*Number of Political Parties	0.142 (0.12)	-0.000 (0.00)
Polcomp* Evo Morales Vote Share	1.521 (1.46)	0.047 (0.07)
Polcomp* Population (logged)	1.020* (0.51)	0.023 (0.02)
Polcomp* Level of Development	-0.083 (1.56)	-0.023 (0.07)
Polcomp*Rural	-0.278 (2.03)	0.072 (0.05)
Polcomp*Indigenous Population	0.070 (1.27)	-0.022 (0.06)
Polcomp*Adult Literacy	3.132 (2.48)	-0.017 (0.09)
Polcomp*Incidences of Protest, 1999	1.563* (0.33)	
Polcomp*Turnout, 1999		0.116 (0.18)
Polcomp (Competitive Municipality Dummy)	-11.735* (4.58)	-0.305 (0.25)
Constant	6.246* (2.33)	0.584* (0.11)
R ²	0.814	0.644
N	310	307

Note: OLS Estimation with robust standard errors in parentheses; *p<0.05.

ⁱ Author interview (2004).

ⁱⁱ This paper follows scholars such as Pippa Norris in conceptualizing voting and protest as different “repertoires” of political participation (Norris 2002, 190).

ⁱⁱⁱ Hulme and Edwards (1997) use the term NGO only to refer to intermediary organizations that offer support to development and grassroots organizations (termed GROs). Carroll (1992) makes a similar distinction, but uses the term “community based organizations” (CBOs). This project looks at the aggregate effect of all types of NGOs.

^{iv} This notion is supported by the large body of literature inspired by Almond and Verba’s (1963) work on civic culture and Putnam’s work on social capital (1994).

^v Fisher (1998) describes this as the “spillover effect” of NGO activity. As associational activity increases, people trust each other more, understand each other more, and see their common problems, all of which helps solve the complicated collective action dilemmas that can hinder mobilization.

^{vi} Although the conventional wisdom is clearly that NGOs make up a part of moderate civil society, there is a limited body of work that directly addresses the connection between NGOs, social movements, and protest. Some of the early work on NGOs pointed to a possible connection between NGOs as activists and NGOs as social movement organizations, focusing on the way that international NGOs influenced local NGOs to become more outspoken and radical (Clark 1991). More directly, some work implies that NGOs organize protests on behalf of the poor (Covey 1995; Korten 1990) and can use mass advocacy as one of many strategies to influence the state (Fisher 1998, 114-117). A few case studies link NGOs and protest in developing countries, for example: Thailand (Dechalert 1999), the Philippines (Clarke 1998) and Kazakhstan (Luong and Weinthal 1999). However, there are no studies to my knowledge

that test the relationship between NGOs and protest events using sub-national statistical analyses. And, despite these few studies that connect protest and NGOs, the dominant view of NGOs as pillars of moderate civil society remains strong.

^{vii} This stylized anecdote is very similar to many stories of NGO involvement in municipal life that I have heard during fieldwork in Bolivia in 2004 and 2007.

^{viii} The LPP allowed for greater access to resources for NGOs in the municipalities in Bolivia, and promoted the formation of new NGOs to take advantage of the newly mandated role for NGOs in municipal budget and governance procedures. The national mandate for providing resources to NGOs across municipalities makes for a better test of how NGOs affect participation by reducing the potentially confounding selection problems of NGOs locating in areas with higher levels of discontent.

^{ix} For more detail on the types of NGOs and the activities they are involved in, see web appendix.

^x One challenge in sorting the data was matching the locations listed by the NGO in their registration with known municipalities. To get a complete list of all the municipalities in Bolivia, I referenced Salvador Romero Ballivian's authoritative *Geographia Electoral de Bolivia* (2003) and the list of municipalities from the 2001 census (INE 2001). Several municipalities have more than one commonly used name. A complete list is available upon request.

^{xi} Data were coded according to the conventions of the Latin American Political Protest Project (LAPP) by Steve Garrison. The data will be made available as part of that larger project. For more details on the coding conventions, see (Garrison 2001).

^{xii} The number of observations changes slightly between models due to missing data in the original data sources.

^{xiii} Web appendix available at <http://sobek.colorado.edu/~boulding/index.html>