

URBANIZATION AND POLITICAL DEMAND MEASUREMENT IN LATIN AMERICA: The Problem of Lag Effect

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A general assumption of the modernization literature is that urbanized nations constitute more socially mobilized and therefore potentially demanding political environments (Thompson, p. 477; Deutsch, p. 498). The expansion of urban centers indicates the breakdown of traditional peasant society and the natural static political order that it represents. Consequently, Huntington (pp. 53–55) and others argue that nations undergoing the process of urbanization will tend to become more violent and politically unstable unless the new demands ultimately created by rural to urban migration are satisfied in the socioeconomic sphere or managed by capable political institutions.

This common association of urbanization with potential political demands has resulted in the pervasive use of the statistical measure percent urban or, more specifically, percent of population living in cities of over 20,000 inhabitants as a quantitative indicator of social mobilization level, political participation, political demands, and similar concepts in studies of Latin American politics (Morrison and Stevenson, p. 254; Smith, p. 33). Differences in percent urban have been used to indicate contrasts in expected political pressures in cross-national comparisons (Ruhl, p. 19). Longitudinal studies have examined changes in percent urban to demonstrate that a given Latin American political system is becoming more socially mobilized and perhaps unmanageable (Dix, pp. 39–41).

The employment of this statistical indicator is intuitively reasonable but unless special care is exercised by the researcher, the measure's usage may result in serious interpretive errors. Misunderstandings are created because scholars usually ignore the fact that urbanization's impact on the mobilization of demands has been clearly demonstrated to involve a generational lag. A large number of studies of the Latin American urban environment suggest that the first generation of rural-urban migrants tend to remain almost as politically passive as though they had never left the traditional countryside (Peattie, pp. 91–104; Mangin, p. 66).

Many explanations have been advanced for this pattern of apolitical behavior. Peasant migrants usually retain rural, socially deferential attitudes and as yet may be unable to envision the possibility that unfavorable socioeconomic or political conditions might be altered by their own actions. In addition, migrants often find their slum living situation more satisfactory than one might expect given the fact that their new surroundings are both more exciting and

more hopeful. In the city, public services may be available to migrants for the first time; there even may be modest educational opportunities for their children. On the negative side, the peasant migrants are unlikely to trust their unfamiliar neighbors enough to join them in political action. Moreover, the precarious, service-sector employment that most migrants depend on leaves little energy for anything other than the most basic, immediate concerns. The city's newest arrivals seldom have the time to gain the most rudimentary understanding of urban political structures.

Thus, despite massive, rapid urbanization, a nation's urban areas may not become truly mobilized or politically demanding for many years. Perhaps this fact helps explain why, for instance, Schoultz in his study of Colombia, discovered that although "an almost incredible one-third of the entire rural Colombian population under the age of 40 in 1951 had left for an urban area by 1964" (p. 28), there was no net increase in demanding behavior such as anti-system voting in the urban areas. Conditions in rural Colombia had simply created a large generation of urban migrants whose traditional political characteristics had not been replaced by more modern orientations.

Periods of vast urbanization, as in the Colombian experience, do, however, portend an eventual increase in political demands. Theorists argue that longer-term migrants and certainly their children become genuine urban political actors with all of the participatory characteristics commonly attributed to them (Peattie, p. 139; Huntington, pp. 281–82). Rural patterns of thought and action fade. The urban environment becomes more familiar and less satisfying or hopeful. Education and, perhaps, more stable, though poorly paid, employment become stimuli to political activity. The long-term, second-generation urban poor thus pose a much more serious potential problem for political elites than had their migrant fathers and mothers. A number of scholars have recently shown that political systems may still be able to manage the second and third generation urban poor through co-optation and political repression (see Handelman, Cornelius, Fagen and Tuohy). The important point, however, is that political elites are often required to act effectively in these later situations to prevent disorder, whereas they could safely ignore the urban slums in the past when heavily populated by new migrants.

The impact of urbanization therefore involves a lag effect. Until future research discovers the exact amount of delay involved, let us make the reasonable assumption that at least a twenty-year period is necessary for first generation migrants to (1) become more integrated into the urban environment and (2) create and raise an adult second generation. If this or an analogous assumption of lag effect is correct, then it follows that there are obvious problems in most attempts to use the percent urban indicator to measure concepts such as social mobilization or political demands. The percent urban figure aggregates the old and new residents of cities despite the fact that empirical research has shown that the latter are neither mobilized nor demanding.

This measurement distortion may not be very serious with respect to cross-national studies of developed nations. Most Western European countries, for example, substantially urbanized some time ago, hence, few contain sizable

migrant communities.¹ However, significant problems are involved in the use of percent urban as an indicator in comparisons of the Latin American nations since the region includes less developed nations where urbanization may be a more recent phenomenon. For example, in the table, 1970 figures show that Argentina, Chile, and Venezuela have urban populations of approximately the same percentage size. Nevertheless, the fact that these three nations achieved comparable urbanization levels at very different rates suggests that large, albeit temporary, contrasts exist in the actual mobilization or political demand potential of their urban populations.

Comparisons made with 1950 data demonstrate that Argentina's urban population increased from 52 percent to 66 percent in the twenty-year period, a change that indicates only modest rural-urban migration. In Venezuela, the urban population expanded rapidly from 32 percent to 61 percent in the same period. Thus, Venezuela's cities are presumably far less socially mobilized than Argentina's cities because of a much higher proportion of recent urban migrants. Political demands in urban Chile would seem to fall between the Argentine and Venezuelan levels given Chile's 1950–70 urban expansion from 41 percent to 60 percent. Although simple comparisons might imply a comparable level of political demands in each of the three nations because of their present percent urban characteristics, in reality, the Argentine urban population should exhibit more socially mobilized demanding political behavior than either of the others. The percent urban statistic, hence, tends to inflate or overestimate the level of potential political demands, to the extent that an urban population is composed of relatively new rural-urban migrants and their children. Following this reasoning, the sizable urban populations of Mexico, Brazil, and Peru also would not be as politically demanding as current measures would claim given the large 1950–70 rural-urban migration suggested in the table.

This analysis does not suggest that percent urban should not be employed as a measure of either social mobilization or political demands in studies of Latin American politics. On the contrary, the indicator is a valuable one as long as scholars examine the relative migrant/nonmigrant composition of the urban populations they analyze. Quantitative studies should explicitly allow for an appropriate lag effect when using percent urban as an indicator. For example, in constructing an index of social mobilization for 1970 from a number of standard indicators, we would have a sound theoretical reason for using older data for the percent urban component. A social mobilization index might then be composed of the following indicators: percent literate 1970, radios per capita 1970, percent of nonagricultural employment 1970, and *percent urban* 1950.² The use of twenty-year old urban data implies that the rural-urban migrants and their children who were included in the 1950 percentages had, by 1970, taken on more truly urban political characteristics. This procedure also assumes that changes in percent urban are entirely caused by migration not by variations in rural and urban birth rates, foreign immigration patterns, or changes in a nation's statistical classification procedures.³

This paper has suggested that it is necessary to take into account the migrant/nonmigrant composition of urban populations in order to make accu-

rate assessments of potential political demands in Latin American nations. Percent urban is still a useful measure of social mobilization and potential political demands if it is used carefully in light of recent empirical findings and theoretical revisions. There are many unresolved issues with respect to the linkages between urbanization, political demands, and political instability. Future research should begin with a proper understanding of the pitfalls that lie in the use of urbanization's most common and most obvious indicator.

Change in Percent Urban Population, 1950–1970^a

	1950 ^b	1960 ^c	1970 ^c
Argentina	52	60	66
Brazil	21	31	40
Chile	41	50	60
Mexico	23	52	57
Peru	18	31	43
Venezuela	32	53	61

^a% urban = % population living in cities of 20,000 or over.

^bData for 1950 are from Sanchez-Albornoz, pp. 184, 245.

^cData for 1960 and 1970 are from Fox, p. 5

NOTES

1. Most migrant communities that do exist in Western Europe are usually composed of foreign immigrants, e.g., rural Italians in West Germany, rural West Indians in Great Britain.
2. It is, of course, conceivable that lag effects may be involved with some of these other aspects of social mobilization as well, but there is as yet little empirical research into such possibilities.
3. Rural birth rates tend to exceed urban birth rates, for example. See the discussions on the determination of net rural-urban migration in McGreevey, (pp. 392–93) and Sanchez-Albornoz (pp. 242–43).

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