Voter registration gap in
GUATEMALA

Introduction

One of the fundamental principles of democratic systems is how citizens elect their representatives, stay informed about public affairs, and collaborate with authorities to develop or choose solutions for the problems that affect them. Citizen participation is critical to improving the quality and legitimacy of decision-making in the political system. Although global support for democracy has increased recently, citizen participation in traditional democratic institutions such as elections and political parties has been fluctuating and declining for several decades.

Some experts consider institutional design crucial to ensuring the survival of democracy, especially when combined with free and periodic elections and a competitive political party system. However, others believe an active culture of citizen participation is essential for democracy to thrive.

During the 2023 general elections in Guatemala, 2 million eligible voters did not register to vote. Despite returning to democracy 36 years ago, Guatemala still faces obstacles to various population groups' political and electoral participation. (ONU Mujeres, 2023; Aguilar, L. M., & Xiloj, L., 2015). This is despite the country being known for its multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual characteristics, with over 52% of its population being female, over 40% identifying as Maya, and over half of its inhabitants being under 40 years old.

- What is the spatial distribution of registered voters across different regions in Guatemala?
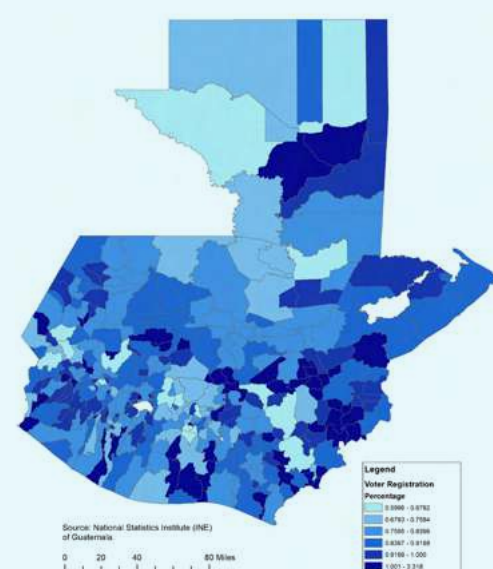- Are there significant disparities in voter registration rates between age groups and genders?

Methodology

The data for this spatial analysis was collected from the official report of the 2023 General Election by the National Electoral Body of Guatemala (TSE) and the National Statistics Institute of Guatemala (INE). The estimated age range of the population projections was adjusted to align with the age ranges used by the National Electoral Body for voter registration. The variables that were considered for the analysis are:

- The electoral roll for the 2023 General Election.
- Population projections for 2023.
- Percentage of the population that identifies as Maya.

Choropleth maps were created to analyze and compare different age groups among men and women. The original data was disaggregated based on the age groups the National Electoral Body defined to enable the comparison. Lastly, a hotspot analysis was conducted to identify the regions with significant Maya populations in the country. This was done to compare and see if there was any similarity with the voter registration rates.

Although this analysis could have been improved by incorporating other socioeconomic variables such as poverty levels, unfortunately, the most recent data available on this topic is from 2014 and is not disaggregated to the municipal level.

Figure 1
Voter registration %

Figure 2
Voter registration % by gender

Women's Voter Registration - 2023

Men's voter registration - 2023
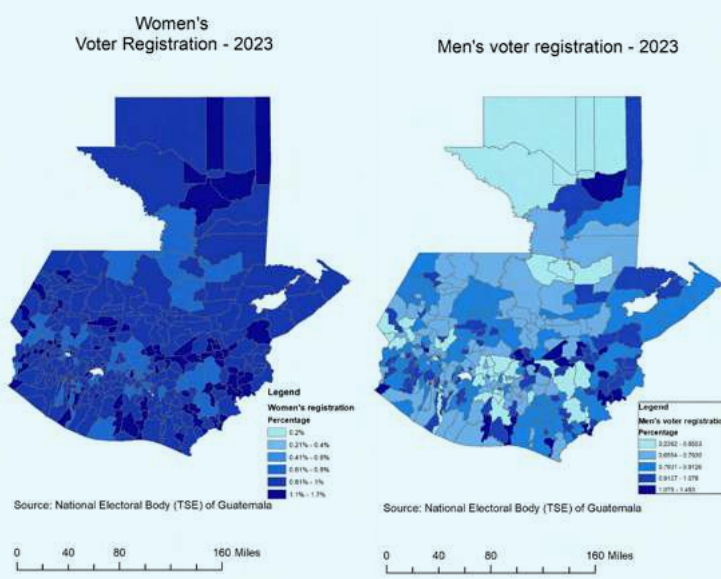
Figure 3
Voter registration % by gender for 18-25 age group

Women's 18-25 Voter Registration - 2023

Men's 18-25 Voter Registration - 2023
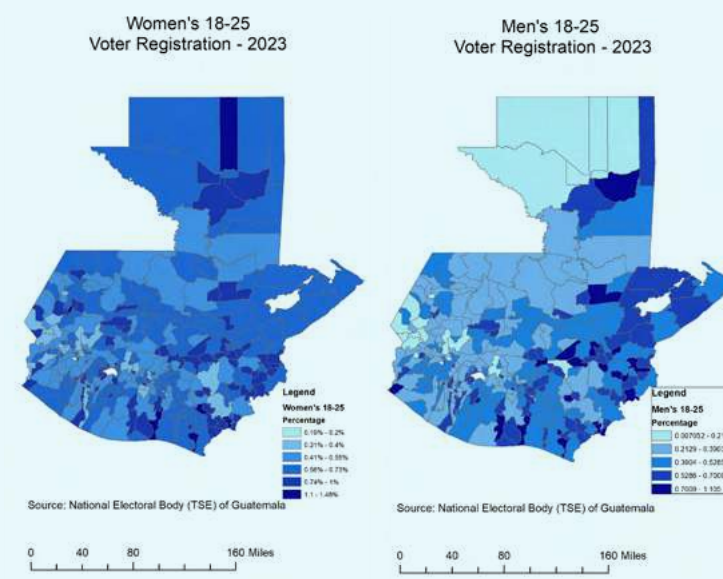
Figure 4
Voter registration % by gender for 26-35 age group

Women's 26-35 Voter Registration - 2023

Men's 26-35 Voter Registration - 2023
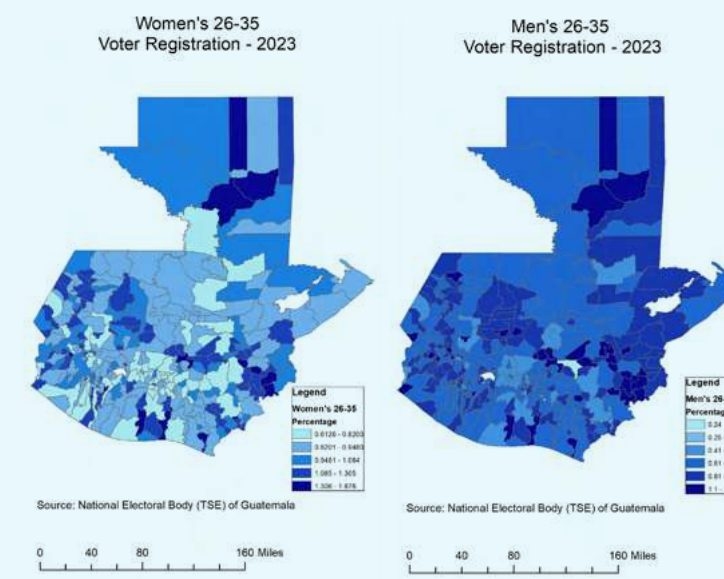
Figure 5
Maya population hotspot analysis

>>> Findings

- All maps depict some territories with excessive registration that surpass the population projections, leading to rates over 1. This can be attributed to two possible explanations: 1) migration and 2) individuals who do not update their electoral district. Many migrants have left their communities after being registered, yet they are still recorded on the records. Moreover, studies have also shown that there has been a significant amount of internal migration within the country, particularly from rural to urban areas. However, people often fail to update their residency and continue voting where their family or community is.

- As figures 2, 3 and 4 show, in general, women's have a better voter registration rate compared to men. Moreover, areas with bigger registration gaps are territories with high levels of migration to the U.S.

- Figure 3 shows that voter registration gap for men between the ages 18-25 is bigger in Western Highlands. Context: Displaced populations – Suffered the most during the armed conflict.

- Comparing Figure 3 and 4 shows that Women between the ages 18-25 have low rates of voter registration and gaps are present across the territory. The difference with the age group of 26-35 might relate with their levels of participation in governmental programs, like conditional cash transfers.

- Figure 5 illustrates that most of the Maya population is concentrated in the northern-western highlands of the country. When comparing all the figures with the hotspot analysis, it becomes evident that municipalities with a high concentration of the Maya population have lower voter registration rates. This low registration rate could be related to the oppression the Maya people endured during the Guatemalan armed conflict between 1960 and 1996.

Policy recommendations

- The TSE must take action to ensure the political participation of marginalized groups, including women, indigenous peoples, youth, and LGBTQ+ groups.

- The TSE should create linguistically and culturally relevant communication and training campaigns to better engage with indigenous peoples in territories with a more significant presence. It is also suggested that the TSE ensures its delegations and temporary bodies have staff and citizens who speak the local languages.

- The TSE should generate strategic communication campaigns targeting different cultural and age groups to promote voter registration and voting participation.

References

- **Aguilar, L. M., & Xiloj, L. (2015).** Strengthening Democratic Participation of Maya Communities in Rural Guatemala. United Nations Democracy Fund.

- **ONU Mujeres. (2018).** Si somos más de la mitad ¿Por qué no tenemos paridad? Avances y desafíos en la participación política de las mujeres en Guatemala (Atenea: mecanismo de aceleración de la participación política de las mujeres en América Latina y el Caribe).

- **Rodríguez, M. (Ed.). (2021).** Cultura política de la democracia en Guatemala y en las Américas 2021: Tomándole el pulso a la democracia. LAPOP.