

**The Plasticity of Participation:
Evidence from a Participatory Governance Experiment***

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September 2005

Revise and Resubmit for *American Journal of Sociology*

Abstract

In this paper we use data on attendance in 990 village-level popular assemblies in Kerala India to evaluate spatial and temporal variation in the magnitude and social composition of participation. We argue that key concepts in the participation literature – resources, norms and interests – when taken alone cannot explain the changes we document and provide little insight into processes of democratic deepening in the developing world. Instead, these “stock” variables gain explanatory power only when integrated into a relational model of analysis that treats the social profile of participation as the outcome of complex transactional dynamics between categorical groups and institutions. We begin by showing that inequalities in participation are indeed highly resilient. But in contrast to theories of participation that emphasize stock variables and path dependencies, we argue that “transactional fields” have to be actively reproduced and are as such subject to change. Our data reveals the “plasticity” of participation, and moreover suggests that transformations in the participation configuration are most likely to come from the organized agency of collective actors.

* Corresponding author: Patrick Heller. We are indebted to the Kerala State Planning Board and in particular to Board member T.V. Thomas Isaac for providing us access to the data we use in this paper. We thank James Mahoney, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Alfred Stepan, David Meyer, and two anonymous reviewers for their comments. The paper is based on research trips in 1996, 1999, 2001 and 2002 that were funded by the Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy at Columbia University.

The Plasticity of Participation: Evidence from a Participatory Governance Experiment

1. Introduction

In 1996, the government of the Indian state of Kerala initiated “The People’s Campaign for Decentralised Planning,” perhaps the boldest experiment in participatory decentralization ever undertaken in the subcontinent. Under this initiative, significant planning and budgetary functions, which had previously been controlled by state-level ministries, were devolved to the lowest tier of government—municipalities in urban areas, and gram panchayats (elected village councils) in rural areas. Moreover, a complex set of procedural and institutional reforms were introduced to maximize citizen input into the planning and budgeting process. Key among these was the requirement that every gram panchayat organize open village assemblies—called Gram Sabhas—twice a year through which citizens could express their “felt needs” and participate in formulating planning priorities, goals and projects.

In this paper, we use data on participation rates in the Gram Sabhas in all of Kerala’s 990 rural gram panchayats to examine the patterns of participation in the first and second year of the decentralization campaign and to assess the impact that a range of spatial, socioeconomic and political factors had on the level and social depth of participation in individual panchayats. We use our findings to argue that key concepts in the participation literature – resources, norms and interests – when taken alone cannot explain the changes we document and more broadly provide little analytic insight into processes of democratic deepening. Instead, these “stock” variables

gain explanatory power only when integrated into a relational model of analysis.¹ Our model builds on the idea of a transactional field in which the social profile of participation at any given time is governed by complex social-transactional dynamics between categorical groups and institutions (the participation configuration) and that the transformation of this configuration is most likely to come from the organized agency of collective actors.²

2. Democratic Deepening

The debate on democracy in the developing world has shifted from the study of transitions to formal democratic rule, to the study of democratic deepening (Linz and Stepan, 1996). Going beyond the traditional preoccupation with electoral participation, increased attention has been directed towards the importance of *direct participation* – that is direct forms of engagement with public decision-making entities and processes – in determining the quality and depth of democratic institutions. In large part, this new focus emerges from a common concern across disciplinary and paradigmatic perspectives with the shortcomings of representative democracy. In mature democracies, reinvigorating participation has come to be seen as a means to counter the dominance of narrow, sectoral and highly professionalized interest groups and to transforming a moribund political culture (Cohen and Rogers 1992; Skocpol 1999; Habermas 1996). In the developing world, participation is held up as critical to

¹ Relational (also referred to as transactional) analysis has a long tradition in sociology. For a comprehensive statement see Emirbayer (1997). Two applied approaches that have significantly influenced this paper are Tilly's work on durable inequality (1999), and Bourdieu's work on the practices through which class distinctions are reproduced (1984).

² Our approach can be clearly located in the tradition of what Skocpol and Fiorina (1999) have called the historical-institutional approach to explaining participation.

increasing the overall capabilities of citizens (Dreze and Sen 1995) and strengthening fragile democracies (Avritzer 2002), but also as a means of improving the quality of governance.

Detailed quantitative research on participation has a long history, and has produced a rich and diverse empirical literature.³ With respect to the debate on democratic deepening however this literature suffers from a critical conceptual shortcoming: developed as it has been in advanced democracies, it more or less takes for granted the basic *associational autonomy* of individuals (Mahajan, 1999). This literature in other words presumes that the existence of formal rights as enshrined in laws and enforced by public authority translates into actionable rights. The propensity to participate is then associated with individual attributes and dispositions, be they norms (neo-Durkheimian theories of social capital), interests (various rational choice models) or resources (the resource mobilization literature). The assumption of rights-bearing citizens and the reduction of participation to individual attributes decontextualizes participation in two respects. First, it abstracts from specific spatial and institutional contexts in which associational practices evolve. This is reflected in the fact that most quantitative studies of participation are based on national samples. Second, the focus on individual attributes tends to overlook social relations *between* individuals and groups, and fails to recognize that there are significant social and institutional barriers or costs to participation that arise from asymmetrical relations between groups.

If this is problematic in any less-than-perfect democracy (and there are no perfect democracies) it is especially problematic in developing democracies where the basic rights of association are circumscribed and distorted by pervasive vertical dependencies (clientelistic

³ Important recent contributions include Brady, Verba and Lehman Schlozman (1995), Oliver (2000), and Alesina and La Ferrara (1999).

relationships), routinized forms of social exclusion (e.g. the caste system, purdah), the unevenness and at times complete failure of public legality, and the persistence of pre-democratic forms of authority. As O'Donnell has argued, in developing democracies - or what he calls non-institutionalized democracies - the public authority of the modern state radiates out unevenly, and "the components of democratic legality and, hence, of publicness and citizenship, fade away at the frontiers of various regions and class, gender and ethnic relations (1993:1361)." Under conditions of "low-intensity citizenship" the right of all citizens to invoke legality is compromised by the exercise of pre-democratic sources of authority and social control.

Any theory of participation in less institutionalized democracies must as such explicitly take into account unequal social relations and uneven institutional environments as a determinant of participation. In other words specific context and relations matter as determinants of individual participation. Yet while this point has been broadly acknowledged in the literature on democratic deepening in the developing world (O'Donnell 1993; Vilas 1997; Fox 1994; Huber et al., 1999) empirical examinations of this argument are far and few between and we actually know very little about the variability of citizenship densities. There are a number of reasons for this. First, the institutional terrain in developing countries has not been particularly hospitable to democratic forms of participation. Most post-colonial democracies have comparatively centralized states, with few, if any local arenas in which citizens can meaningfully participate. India is a case in point. Though Indian citizens vote in much higher percentages than Americans and are much more likely to be involved in contentious actions, they have limited capacity to engage government between elections. The democratic quality of local government is very thin, compromised either by outright elite capture or governance institutions that are largely insulated

from popular accountability.⁴ Thus even as India boasts one of the most stable and vibrant democracies in the developing world, civic-based participation remains poorly developed, resulting in what Chhibber (1999) has described as “democracy without associations”. Under these conditions, democratic participation tends to be episodic (movements, protests etc ...) or highly idiosyncratic (a specific development project or community program) which makes empirical analysis of the determinants of direct participation very difficult. Second, even where various forms of participation have developed and have been carefully researched, there have been few attempts to systematically collect quantitative data across multiple cases.

The case of Kerala presents an important test case of the possibilities and determinants of democratic deepening. The campaign that was launched in 1996 was an explicit attempt to deepen democracy. The state devolved the resources and authority necessary for all 1214 local governments to plan, budget and implement their own development and mandated a range of policies and institutions designed to encourage direct citizen involvement. The state in other words created 1214 new and institutionally isomorphic spaces in which citizens could in principle participate in tangible decision-making processes. Over a two-year period at two different intervals, the State Planning Board (SPB) collected detailed data on who participated in local Gram Sabhas, the local ward-level general assemblies that were held at the beginning of every annual planning and budgeting cycle. Insofar as the Gram Sabhas established detailed development and budgeting priorities they represented genuine and substantial instances of democratic participation. Our analysis is based on the full sample of 990 (rural) panchayats,

⁴ It was not until the passage of the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution of India in 1993 that state governments were mandated to hold regular local government elections.

with participation data in the first Gram Sabha meetings of the first and second year (1996-96 and 1997-98).

We organize our empirical analysis into two parts. In the first stage, we document some basic patterns in the data. In particular, we note the significant heterogeneity across panchayats in levels of participation, as well as the significant fluctuations in the levels of participation from the first year to the second year. Because the triggering event—the creation of new opportunities for participation—is identical in all our cases, this variation can help profile the contextual determinants of participation. We also find that between the first and second year there was a dramatic shift in the social composition of participation in favor of subordinate groups. Given that the participation literature has generally found direct participation to be fairly sticky in its social composition, this finding also presents an important test of existing theories.

In the second stage of our analysis, we evaluate the impact of a range of factors in explaining the observed spatial and temporal variation. We find that social structure, and in particular, patterns of social exclusion, significantly shape the pattern of participation, but that these structures are not as rigid as often assumed, and are in fact subject to transformation through political and social agency. We review what these findings imply about the relative importance of the causal mechanisms emphasized in different theories of participation and argue that these findings support a dynamic and contingent view of participation, a perspective that recognizes the “plasticity of participation.”

3. Theorizing Participation

The literature on participation is vast and draws on a range of theoretical traditions, but most of the empirical literature has generally emphasized four variables – resources, interests, norms and mobilization. The literature on participation in developing democracies, which

consists almost exclusively of case-based qualitative studies, tends to lump these variables together and only rarely attempts to test the strength of these variables. The large-N studies that are more common in the participation literature for developed democracies tend towards more parsimonious explanations that emphasize the centrality of a single variable.

The emphasis on resources is at the heart of socio-economic status (SES) models which point to individual capacities for participation. These generally include income and education, but can also be extended to take in account less tangible capacities such as “political confidence” (or cultural capital). The US literature in particular has demonstrated that levels of participation are positively correlated with higher levels of income and education. A much more qualitative literature (absent reliable quantitative data) has come to similar conclusions for developing democracies.

Models that focus on interests, and especially those in the rational choice tradition, examine the costs and benefits of participation that a given individual faces. In its most parsimonious version, rational choice theory argues that individuals are likely to free-ride unless the probability of a direct return (ideally a selective incentive) warrants the effort associated with a particular form of participation (Olson, 1965). In this version rational choice theory is open to the criticism of being reductionist insofar as it abstracts from social and institutional settings and construes individual decision-making as an autonomous process (i.e. “preferences” are treated as exogenous).⁵ More recent versions of rational choice theory developed by economic historians

⁵ Because the more parsimonious versions of rational choice tend to be so deeply invested in equating human behavior with individual rationality, they are undersocialized in Granovetter’s (1985) sense of the term, and tend to underestimate or entirely ignore the degree to which social relations and social structure (whether in the negative form of domination, power etc or the

(North, 1989) and many political scientists (Bates, 1989) have however begun to treat institutions as endogenous, and a range of analysts have explored how institutions shape incentives and configure choice horizons.

By norms we mean to single out one of the most influential recent contributions to the literature, namely Robert Putnam's arguments about social capital. As is true of any social science concept that gains rapid popularity, the idea of social capital has been put to many uses, and has been extended to cover far greater analytic ground than the fairly parsimonious norm-centric view found in Putnam.⁶ We refer to social capital here in Putnam's (1993) sense, which as Skocpol and Fiorina observe, is "neo-Durkheimian" in that it "... stress[es] the socialization of individuals into shared norms and cooperative societal action" (1999:13). In his study of local government in Italy Putnam thus argues that higher levels of political participation reflect the quality and density of associational life. Iterated, interpersonal and horizontal interactions make a difference moreover because they nurture trust, the socialized disposition that gives social capital its positive spillover effects.

As different as they may be, these three core concepts – resources, interests and norms – have a critical, and limiting, commonality: they all point to the determinative significance of a positive form of networks) condition the range of choices that a given individual can make. For an interesting exception that combines anthropological insights with rational choice assumptions about interests, see Abraham and Platteau (2000).

⁶ Going beyond Putnam's emphasis on interpersonal forms of association that produce certain civic virtues, the concept of social capital has been extended to include national level organizations (Minkoff 1997), the dynamic between trust and institutions (Paxton 1999), the role of elections (Brehm 1997) and state-society synergies (Evans 1996).

stock variable, that is a variable that is relatively unchanging over time. All three concepts as such tend towards path dependent explanations of participation. Resource models would anticipate changes in the profile of participation only insofar as socio-economic structures change. Many key studies in this tradition have found the social profile of participation to be quite invariant over time (Brady et al. [1995] point to patterns of “participation stratification”). Models that emphasize interests would anticipate changes with new incentive structures or with the introduction of selective incentives, both of which are exogenous to the explanatory logic of the model. Mancur Olson (1965) even argues for the logical improbability of large scale social movements. In the norm-driven view, processes of socialization necessarily take time. Putnam attributes the civic mindedness of citizens in Northern Italy to cultural developments that have their roots in the "mist of the dark ages" (1993:180).⁷ In sum, none of these concepts are very promising for explaining significant changes in the social profile of participation in a relatively short time span.

The fourth variable that has figured prominently in the participation literature – mobilization - does however allow for greater contingency. There is a long tradition of research on participation in formal political life as well in more contentious forms of collective action that emphasizes the agency of political elites or activists. Political scientists have thus pointed to the

⁷ In theoretical terms, the stickiness of norms is clear: “It [norm-driven perspective] depicts individuals as self-propelling, self-subsistent entities that pursue internalized norms given in advance and fixed for the duration of the action sequence under investigation. Such individuals aspire not to wealth status, or power, but rather, to action in conformity with the social ideal they have accepted as their own” (Emirbayer, 1997: 285).

importance of political parties and “recruiters” in mobilizing participation and social movement theorists have highlighted the importance of movement entrepreneurs in mobilizing resources, building networks, framing issues and creating the structures for collective action.

In explaining variation in participatory patterns in our case we borrow freely from the political mobilization literature in arguing for the importance of the agency of collective actors (Verba, Nie and Kim, 1978; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). In doing so however, we introduce a critical modification informed by the relational perspective in sociology (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Emirbayer, 1997). Following Emirbayer, we draw a distinction between “substantialist” and “relational” models of social action. Substantialist perspectives take the presumed essences of individuals as the point of departure for explaining action. “[R]ational-actor or norm-based models, diverse holisms and structuralism, and statistical “variable” analyses [are all] beholden to the idea that it is entities that come first and relations among them only subsequently ...” (1997:281). By contrast, in the relational perspective, “Individual persons, whether strategic or norm-following, are inseparable from the transactional contexts within which they are embedded” (Emirbayer, 1997:287). The choice, as Emirbayer notes, is between “whether to conceive of the social world as consisting primarily in substances or in processes, in static “things” or in dynamic, unfolding relations (1997:281).”

Upon closer examination it becomes clear that even as mobilization theories bring agency back in, much of the political mobilization literature betrays a substantialist emphasis on fixed individual properties. Thus, in a recent contribution to their extensive research into political mobilization Lehman Schlozman, Verba and Brady argue that the effect of mobilization flows from the fact that “[political] recruiters act as rational prospectors, [who] seek out people who would be likely not only to participate but to participate effectively “(Lehman Schlozman et al,

1999:450).⁸ In this treatment participation becomes a simple aggregation of the mobilizational effort of recruiters and the disposition/resources of targeted individuals.

The relational model we propose views the determinants of participation as a function of what we call the *transactional field*, that is the full complex of institutional and social relations that govern the costs and returns of participation. A field, following Bourdieu, consists of “a set of objective, historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power (or capital)” (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992: 16). A field is in effect the result of past struggles – “the balance-sheet, at a given moment, of what has been won in previous battles and can be invested in subsequent battles” (Bourdieu, 1984: 245). In this sense, the concept dovetails neatly with Skocpol’s historical-institutionalist view of participation which begins with the observation that the playing field – i.e. formal democracy – “grew up historically out of century-long struggles among social groups and between state authorities and their subjects” (Skocpol 1999:14).

In this paper we are specifically interested in the transactional field of local government in India. The institutional dimension of a transactional field refers to all the routinized and

⁸ We do not question Lehman Schlozman et als’ empirical findings, but rather the static manner in which mobilization is conceptualized. The agency of mobilization is seen to have an effect only inasmuch as it acts on existing distributions of individual attributes. This is problematic on two accounts. First, no mechanism for how the distribution of attributes is reproduced is provided. Second, there is no consideration of the possibility that agency could in fact change how individual actors calculate their interests, develop normative orientations and combine resources.

organizationally backed practices that govern the interaction of individuals with state apparatuses. The social dimension refers to asymmetries of information, capacities and resources (or the various form of capital in Bourdieu [1984]) that differentiate social groups and that determine the success which they can engage in the practices recognized and rewarded in that field. In our case the field in question is local government, and our concern is with identifying the local *participation configuration*, that is the magnitude and social composition of participation. We argue, following Tilly, that the primary and most durable relations that constitute a transactional field are those of bounded categories. Tilly provides an explicitly relational rationale for the explanatory leverage of bounded categories:

Bounded categories deserve special attention because they provide clearer evidence for the operation of durable inequality, because their boundaries do crucial organizational work, and because categorical differences actually account for much of what ordinary observers take to be results of variation in individual talent or effort (Tilly, 1998:6).

In making the case for a relational perspective on participation we do not deny that resources, interests and norms of actors matter. They do, but only insofar as they are produced and activated in and through a transactional field. A particular participation configuration exists and is durable in Tilly's sense not because there is an uneven distribution of norms, resources and interests across individuals, but because these exist and are *put to work* through the continuous, dynamic and relational processes through which the boundaries between categories are reproduced. To take the example of gender: women in India participate less than men in local government not because they have fewer resources or are less disposed towards civic

engagement,⁹ but because the ongoing production of gendered power relations in rural India produces a transactional field in which the costs of participation are much higher for women.

Finally, the relational model recognizes that forms of inequality are highly resilient. But in contrast to substantialist perspectives, the relational emphasis on bonds rather than essences (Tilly, 1998) underscores the importance of actual practices in patrolling and reproducing categorical inequalities. The participation configuration as such has a certain artifactuality to it (Cohen and Rogers 1992), reflecting as it does a balance of relations that is by its very nature subject to change. We believe that any such change can only follow from the interventions of collective actors, but that the impact of mobilizational efforts can only be understood with reference to the transactional field.

4. The setting and the data

4.1. Kerala and the People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning

Located in the south-western corner of the Indian subcontinent, Kerala is a state of 32 million inhabitants best known for having achieved some of the highest indicators of social development in the developing world. The state was formed in 1956 by combining the region of Malabar, which was under direct British rule as part of the Madras Presidency, with the two princely states of Travancore and Cochin. Since then, successive governments have aggressively implemented wide-ranging land reforms, provided universal education and health care, and extended social protection to a range of socio-economically disadvantaged groups. Diverse

⁹ Rejecting the substantialist position that women participate less because they have internalized patriarchal norms of subjugation, Chhibber points to survey findings from Haryana in which “the voice for equality, self-sufficiency, and education was almost unanimous” (Chhibber, forthcoming).

commentators have attributed the efficacy of government intervention to the demand-side dynamics of highly organized opposition parties, mass-based organizations of workers and landless laborers and a vibrant civil society (Ramachandran 1996; Dreze and Sen 1995; Kannan 1988; Herring 1983). If, by Indian standards, the state in Kerala has been highly responsive and has effectively provided a range of public goods, it is nonetheless a highly centralized state, plagued by many of the problems associated with top-down, insulated, command-and-control bureaucracies. Local governments in Kerala, as is true throughout India, have very limited powers, and have historically done little more than act as conduits for schemes designed and funded by state-level ministries. In 1993, the Indian government passed two constitutional amendments that mandated greater powers and responsibilities for local governments. The task of decentralization however fell to state governments, most of which implemented reforms that had little substantive impact. The most notable exception was Kerala.

In 1996, the Left Democratic Front (LDF) coalition returned to power in Kerala and the Communist Party of India–Marxist (CPM)—led government immediately fulfilled one of its most important campaign pledges by launching the “People’s Campaign for Decentralized Planning”.¹⁰ All 1,214 local governments in Kerala—municipalities and the three rural tiers of district, block and gram panchayats (the all-India term for village councils)—were given new functions and powers of decision-making, and were granted discretionary budgeting authority over 40% of the state’s developmental expenditures. As structured by the implementing agency

¹⁰ The two dominant parties in Kerala are the Indian National Congress (the Congress) and the Communist Party of India–Marxist (CPM) which respectively head up the United Democratic Front and the Left Democratic Front. Since Kerala’s first election in 1957, the two have (with a minor exception) rotated in power.

- the Kerala State Planning Board (SPB) - the campaign was designed to create an active role for local citizens in shaping local development policy-making and budgeting. Local governments were not only charged with designing and implementing their own development plans (which included designing and financing projects across the full range of development sectors), but were also mandated to do so through an elaborate series of participatory exercises. The building block of this process was the holding of 2 annual Grama Sabhas (ward-level assemblies), one at the beginning of the planning cycle and one at the end of the budgeting process.

The first Grama Sabha (from which our data are derived) serves as an open forum in which residents identify local development problems, generate priorities and form sub-sector development seminars in which specific proposals first take shape. The Gram Sabhas are open meetings, presided by local elected officials, and facilitated by “key resource persons” trained by the State Planning Board. They are always held on weekdays, and in public buildings (usually schools). Preparations for the assemblies include extensive publicity, and the distribution of various planning documents. Minutes are kept, and each sub-sector group presents a report of its deliberations and produces a list of “felt needs”. These are in turn translated into specific projects by Task Forces and submitted to the elected Panchayat council for final budgetary approval.¹¹

¹¹ The design and politics of the campaign created a wide range of mechanisms that make elected panchayat councilors de facto—if not de jure—accountable to the Gram Sabha mandates. Survey data collected in 2002 shows that the degree of accountability varied widely across Panchayats, but that overall local governments became much more responsive and that popular mandates significantly impacted budgetary outcomes (Harilal et al. 2004).

Beyond its institutional design, there are two critical features of the campaign that need to be highlighted. The first is that in addition to providing the fiscal resources, the procedural templates, the enabling regulations and laws, key oversight functions and administrative capacity, the Kerala state government—and specifically the SPB—also orchestrated a massive education campaign in which over 100,000 local officials and ordinary citizens were trained in local development planning and 600 Key Resource Persons were trained to facilitate the participatory process. The second is that at every stage of this process, a range of civil society organizations have played an active role. Most notable has been the role of the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP)—the People’s Science Movement. With its 50,000 strong membership recruited predominantly from the white-collar professions of civil servants and school teachers, the KSSP has an organized presence in many villages in Kerala, and is by far the most active and influential non-party affiliated, secular organization in the state. In addition to playing an active role in the campaign itself (supplying for example many of the local Key Resource Persons) it is important to emphasize that in designing the campaign the SPB relied heavily on a stock of practical knowledge, ideas and experiences drawn from twenty-five years of local-level experiments in sustainable development conducted by the KSSP.

4.2. The data

Our data on participation come from attendance registers that were maintained at all of the ward-level Gram Sabhas. From these registers, which were collected, coded, and summarized by the Kerala State Planning Board (KSPB), we obtained data, not only on the total number of participants in the Gram Sabhas in each panchayat, but also on the number of female participants

as well as the number of participants from Schedule Castes and Tribes.¹² Moreover, because the SPB merged in data from the 1991 Census of India and from other official surveys, we also have data on a limited number of characteristics of each gram panchayat.

These data on participation are unique in a number of respects. First, the data set encompasses the entire universe of gram panchayats in Kerala and measures a much more substantial form of participation than voting. Information on forms of political participation other than voting has generally come from surveys of randomly selected individuals spread across a number of different communities. Even with clustered sampling, in most such surveys, the number of individuals residing in the same community tends to be small, both in absolute terms and more importantly, as a fraction of the overall population of the community. Because of this, inferences about levels of participation at the community level from individual-level survey data are likely to be quite noisy. Second, unlike with most other data on forms of participation other than voting, there is no ambiguity in our data about the nature of the forum in which the individual is participating. Nor is there any concern about multiple memberships in different groups understating or overstating the actual level of participation. Third, because our data are

¹² “Schedule Castes” are those caste groups (more specifically “Jatis”) that have been officially recognized as having been historically disadvantaged through their socially ascribed status as “untouchables”. “Schedule Tribes” are those groups that are officially recognized as belonging to traditional tribal communities. As of the 1991 Census, individuals from SCs and STs represented 11.9% of Kerala’s rural population. Self-recognition movements of these two communities have substituted the terms “dalit” for SC and “adivasi” for ST. To avoid confusion and because our data and the campaign largely used the official terminology, we use SC and ST throughout the paper.

based on records of actual attendance rather than retrospective self-reported indicators of participation, there is less reason to be concerned about possible upward biases in the estimated extent of participation. And fourth, unlike most aggregate data on voting and voter-turnouts at the community (e.g., precinct or county) level, our data provide direct information on two crucial (in this context) characteristics of the participants, namely, gender and caste affiliation. This additional information is exactly what is needed to get around the ecological inference problem (King, 1997) that would otherwise have arisen in trying to answer questions about the participation of subordinate groups such as women or Schedule Castes and Tribes.

We should note that we are very confident about the reliability of the registers. Registration was mandated by the SPB, and required, among other reasons, for the logistical purposes of organizing the sectoral discussion groups that were conducted after each general assembly. Given Kerala's high rates of literacy individual participants would have no problem providing the requested information. The possibility of political or bureaucratic interference was minimized by three sets of circumstances. First, because there were no explicit incentives linked to attendance levels in the Gram Sabhas, it seems unlikely that panchayat officials deliberately manipulated these records. Secondly, the highly pluralistic profile of representation at the Gram Sabhas mitigated against manipulation. The typical Gram Sabha was attended by the local ward representative, non-elected party officials, government officials (usually the panchayat secretary and an extra-local representative from the district planning board) and a wide range of civil society representatives, most notably the various Resource Persons trained by the campaign to facilitate the process. Third, the Gram Sabhas received extensive coverage in Kerala's vernacular press which, with over 20 vernacular dailies, has the highest readership in India and is dominated by papers aligned with the Congress opposition parties.

In our analysis of the participation data we focus on the levels and changes (over time) in five separate measures of participation. The first is the overall participation rate, which we define simply as the percentage of the population that participated (i.e., attended the Gram Sabha). This measure ranges from 0 to 100. The remaining four measures capture the absolute and relative levels of participation by two traditionally subordinate groups, namely members of Scheduled Castes and Tribes (SC/STs) and women. We measure absolute levels of participation in these two groups in the same way that we do for the population at large, i.e., we calculate participation rates for SC/STs and (separately) for women, defined respectively as the fraction of the SC/ST population that participated and the fraction of women who participated. To assess the relative intensity of participation by each of the two groups, we calculate the relative participation propensity for each group as the ratio of the participation rate of the group to the overall participation rate. So, for instance, if the participation rate of SC/STs was 10% and the overall participation rate was 5%, the relative participation propensity of SC/STs would be 2. In general, a value below 1 would indicate that SC/STs are under-represented among the participants in the Gram Sabhas relative to their share in the overall population (that is they are less likely to participate) and a value above 1 would indicate that they are over-represented (more likely to participate).

5. Basic Findings

Four broad patterns emerge from our analysis of the data on participation in the planning Gram Sabhas held in all 990 panchayats in the first two years of the campaign (there have been 3 subsequent rounds). First, in the aggregate, rates of participation were high, and persisted from the first year of the campaign to the second. Second, the aggregate statistics on participation mask significant variation across the panchayats in participation levels. Though some of this

variation can be attributed to historically important regional differences, intra-regional heterogeneity—i.e., localized variation—in participation rates was far more pronounced. Third, in contrast to the relative stability of participation rates in the aggregate, there was substantial variation across panchayats in the extent and direction of changes in participation over time. And fourth, and most strikingly, there was a dramatic increase, from the first to the second year, in the social depth of participation. Not only did the participation rates of two traditionally subordinate groups, women and members of SC/STs, increase substantially, in the case of SC/STs, participation rates in the second year were higher than those of the general population in 80% of the panchayats. These patterns are documented in Tables 1 and 2 and in Figures 1 through 3. We refer to these figures and tables as we discuss the findings in more detail below.

5.1. Overall Participation

In the first year of the campaign, nearly 7% of Kerala's rural population participated in the planning Gram Sabhas held in each ward of each panchayat. With those eligible to vote representing about 67% of the population (from the 1991 census), this suggests that over 10% of the rural electorate participated. Furthermore, with about 3.5 voters on average per household in rural Kerala, it is possible that close to a third of the households had an adult member who attended the Gram Sabha.¹³ The aggregate participation rate in 1997, the second year of the campaign was, at over 7%, actually higher than in the first year, though the increase was small. Given the level and intensity of effort involved—Gram Sabhas last between 3 and 4 hours, and in addition to formal presentations, involve elaborate small groups discussions of the full range

¹³ According to the 1991 Census there were 5,513,200 households in Kerala and 19,659,444 individuals eligible to vote. Note that the latter number does not exactly match that reported in Table 1 because the number in Table 1 is an estimate of the size of the *rural* electorate.

of developmental issues— participation rates were substantively very high. Identifying an appropriate benchmark is difficult given the lack of reliable comparable data, but there is little doubt that this represents the highest level of participation in any Indian state (World Bank, 2000) and compares favorably with the city of Porto Alegre and the province of Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil, the most celebrated and carefully documented case of direct participation in budgeting (Baiocchi, 2001; Schneider and Goldfrank, 2001).

5.2 Intra-regional heterogeneity

The aggregate statistics mask significant variation in participation rates across the panchayats in both years. The extent of variation is apparent in Figure 1, which plots the overall participation rate in the first year (on the horizontal axis) against that in the second year (on the vertical axis) for each of the 990 gram panchayats. Participation rates in both years ranged from a low close to zero to a high near 25%.

The statistics we report in Table 2 suggest that this cross-sectional variation is primarily due to intra-regional heterogeneity in participation rates. While there are significant differences in average participation rates across the three historically important regions of Kerala (see Table 2), with the highest average rate of participation in the first year being in Malabar (7.88%), and the lowest in Cochin (6.01%), a simple analysis of variance indicates that less than 5% of the inter-panchayat variation in participation rates is explained by the historical-region effects.

To the extent that a common “blueprint” was applied statewide in structuring the institutional aspects of the participatory planning process, the observed intra-regional heterogeneity highlights the need to take into account local contextual influences on participation. We cannot, given these data, determine whether the localized variation we observe stems from differences in the degree to which the “blueprint” was faithfully implemented on the

ground, or whether it reflects differences in the ways in which a common “blueprint” interacted with locally varying circumstances. But whichever the case, the point remains that local context clearly matters, and any explanatory model must be able to account for this localized variation.

5.3 Inter-temporal variation

Participation rates, both in the aggregate and on average across the 990 panchayats were remarkably stable over the two years for which we have data, hovering in each year around 7% (see the first row of the second and third panels of Table 1). In contrast, as is apparent from Figure 1, at the level of individual panchayats, there were large swings in participation in both directions, with the magnitude and direction of the changes varying substantially from panchayat to panchayat. Had overall participation rates remained unchanged between the first and the second year in most panchayats, the scatter-plot in Figure 1 would have been clustered around the diagonal (45-degree line). That is clearly not the case.

Of course, some fluctuation in participation rates from year to year is to be expected. For instance, the Gram Sabha in one of the years may have fallen on a particularly rainy day, discouraging attendance. What is striking about Figure 1 is the proportion of panchayats in which the change in the overall participation rate was, in absolute terms, larger than what one might plausibly attribute to such natural (unsystematic) variation. In particular, in 502 (or 51%) of the 990 panchayats, there was a *2 percentage point* (or larger) change in the participation rate; on the other hand, in only 276 (or 28%) of the panchayats was the change less than 1 percentage point.¹⁴ Moreover, as we document below, these shifts had a very pronounced social character.

5.4. Increase in participation by subordinate groups

¹⁴ Given an average participation rate of about 7%, a 2 percentage point change (to 5% or 9%) represents a 30% increase or decrease in the number of participants.

The most striking feature of the data is the dramatic increase in the social depth of participation between the first and the second year. Kerala has a long and well-documented history of subordinate group movements, and ranks first in India on all indicators of social development. Blatant practices of caste exclusion and “untouchability” such as segregated public spaces and resources that are still common in many parts of rural India are now quite rare in Kerala.¹⁵ Nonetheless, patterns of caste-based inequality and gender inequality persist. Lower caste groups make up the bulk of landless households, provide most of the low-skilled and low-status labor and find themselves at a significant social and political disadvantage in public life. Similarly, for all the gains women have made in Kerala, the practice of “social purdah” - various forms of patriarchal control over women’s access to public spaces - remains pronounced (Mukherjee, 2002). In sum, the associational autonomy and the social capacity to exert basic rights that is often taken for granted in developed democracies, remains unevenly distributed in Kerala. As such, one might readily predict that socially subordinate groups would have lower levels of participation, especially in a civic-intensive function such as Gram Sabhas.

And indeed this is borne out by the figures for 1996, the first year of the campaign. For the state as whole, individuals from SC/STs were, with a relative participation propensity of 0.53, only half as likely to participate as the population at large. The degree of exclusion is apparent in Figure 2. In over a third of the panchayats (those clustered along the vertical axis), there were no SC/ST participants at all in the first year, and in only 27% of the panchayats was the relative participation propensity of SC/ST individuals greater than one. Women, too, were

¹⁵ Kerala’s successes on the social development front are well documented and have received extensive commentary. For one of the most succinct and comprehensive accounts, see Ramachandran (1996).

only half as likely to participate as the population at large. While there were female participants in all the panchayats, only in 1% of the panchayats was the female participation rate greater than that of men. In sum, a pronounced pattern of “participation stratification” (Brady et al. 1995) is evident in the first year of the campaign.

By 1997, however, participation rates for both these groups had risen dramatically. For the state as a whole, SC/ST participation rates were nearly one and a half times that of the general population, whereas the relative participation propensity of women had risen to 0.82. Moreover, the gains were widespread. The relative participation propensity of women rose in 83% of the panchayats. And in the case of SC/STs, not only did relative participation propensities increase in 78% of the panchayats, the magnitude of the increase was such that participation rates of SC/ST individuals were, in 1997, actually higher than that of the general population in 80% of the panchayats. Given that overall levels of participation remained stable, it is important to note the increase in women and SC/ST participation was accompanied by a proportional decrease in male and non-SC/ST participation.

6. Explaining Plasticity

In addition to the importance of contextual factors that are highlighted by our finding (4.1) of inter-Panchayat heterogeneity (and which we discuss further in the next section), our data also point to two manifestations of plasticity, namely inter-temporal variation across panchayats and a dramatic increase in participation by subordinate groups. Neither of these variations sits well with the stock nature of social determinants of participation posited in resource and norm-based models of participation. It is simply implausible that the social or economic resources that facilitate participation or the dense horizontal ties that produce civic engagement could have changed enough in a year to account for inter-temporal variation or for

the observed changes in the social composition of participation. More specifically, it is important to underscore that the significant increase in women and SC participation is – in light of the existing literature – surprising. The political mobilization literature on the United States has generally emphasized both the highly stratified and durable nature of participation, with wealthier and more educated groups participating more often and more intensively than poorer and less educated groups. The extensive case-study literature on participation in developing democracies also documents clear and unambiguous patterns of subordinate group under-participation.

How then do we explain that while the participation propensities of women and SCs conformed to expected patterns in the first year of the campaign, they increased suddenly in the course of a year to produce a participation configuration that clearly points to a deepening of local democracy?¹⁶ We do not have quantitative data that speak directly to this question. Drawing on a range of more qualitative studies and our own field work we can provide some suggestive analysis. If the campaign has indeed altered the participation configuration, we argue that the change has to be explained in terms of both institutional and social factors. We begin

¹⁶ The SPB only collected data for the first two years of the campaign. Activists and officials widely believe that the level of subordinate group participation has remained high. A number of case studies confirm this. Most notable however are the participation data gathered from a random sample of 72 Panchayats in 1999. Data collected from the same registers as ours found that women accounted for 41% of participants, and SCs accounted for 14% of participants, well above their proportion of the general population and their 11.5% representation in the sample (Chaudhuri et al, 2004).

with an examination of institutional factors that are most likely to have impacted the social profile of participation.

The institutional design of the campaign was explicitly biased in favor of the poor. First, funds were earmarked for women and SC/STs, and many of the developmental responsibilities that local government was charged with – such as maintaining public services and providing basic developmental inputs (e.g. housing) - were more likely to be of value to the poor. Second, because the campaign was time-intensive, the opportunity costs of participation for better-off groups were relatively higher. Third, the range of procedures developed to ensure greater accountability and transparency in the decision-making process all had the de facto effect – at least to the extent they were implemented – of increasing the costs of elite influence and reducing the costs of subordinate influence. In sum, because of the way in which the campaign was designed, subordinate groups had more to gain from participation. Of course, in the first year subordinate group participation was relatively low, but this can be explained as simply an information and demonstration problem. By the second year, as the workings of the campaign became better known, and as the first cohort of subordinate participants secured real benefits from their participation, the calculation of returns for a second cohort became clearer. Many first hand accounts of the campaign support such an interpretation, including the SPBs own analysis.

The role of institutions and learning advanced in this explanation conforms to an interest-based model of participation, but with two critical limitations. First, interest-based explanations often assume that all institutional change is endogenous, namely that institutions evolve, in functional manner, to fit new emerging interests. As such, they provide little understanding of the historical and political conditions under which such institutions either do or don't emerge. Second, an exclusive focus on interests, especially in the rational-choice tradition, tends towards

tautological explanation: a higher rate of effort must mean a higher rate of return. As sociologists have long argued, interests are not just given, they have to be formed, interpreted and made actionable. Thus, even though the campaign introduced a uniform set of rules and procedures (or more accurately preferences for participation) that were biased towards the poor, the impact was highly uneven across panchayats, suggesting the presence of local mediating factors.

On both these points we need to give greater attention to mobilizational dynamics viewed from a relational perspective. First, to interpret the campaign's institutions in functional terms would entirely obscure the critical role of the CPM in initiating the campaign, the agency of the state in leveraging subordinate participation and the role of social movements, especially the KSSP, in developing over the course of many years the templates that served as the architecture of the campaign (Thomas Isaac 2001; Tonrquist 1997) . The campaign's institutional design had a clear mobilizational logic, which was both pragmatic and political. The CPM and the SPB encouraged mobilization as a means of improving the quality of local governance as well as to increase the political engagement of subordinate groups, which have historically provided the CPM its strongest electoral base.¹⁷ When subordinate participation in the first year was disappointingly low, the SPB and movement organizations revamped their strategy. The procedures for earmarking funds for SC/STs and women were strengthened, and more precise

¹⁷ Historically, the CPM has mobilized support along class lines and specifically around redistributive issues. The new focus manifest in the campaign on mobilizing women and SC, and focusing on deepening democracy, represents a critical shift in the CPM's politics and social base (Heller 2004; Tornquist 1997).

criteria for identifying beneficiaries were introduced. Institutional adjustments in other words increased the probability of returns to participation for the poor.

It is difficult to exaggerate the effect of these interventions. In the context of poorly institutionalized democracies, public legality – including basic governance structures – is routinely compromised by local power structures. In the Indian context in particular, the capacity of landlords, dominant castes and other local powerbrokers to capture state resources and to frustrate institutional reforms is well documented (Herring 1985; Kohli 1987). In light of this, it becomes clear that the determined intervention of the state and allied organizations to facilitate subordinate participation, not simply through exhortations, but through careful institutional fine-tuning, changed the balance of the local transactional field.

This institutional effect was further enhanced by the mobilization efforts of various civil society groups, including the KSSP and a large number of women's groups. Existing training programs were re-designed to target women and SC/STs more effectively and to help campaign participants develop projects more suited to the needs of the poor. Most notably, in the second year the KSSP and its local partners helped establish women's neighborhood groups in hundreds of Panchayats. These were designed to mobilize and capacitate women in preparation for Gram Sabhas. Movement activists helped form either neighborhood groups or self-help groups, emphasizing in particular the importance of women's collective agency in identifying their needs. Self-help groups were encouraged to develop rotating credit schemes (for housing loans, small economic projects etc...) and to link these schemes to demands made at Gram Sabhas. In sum, mobilizational efforts helped shape interests and resolve collective action problems. By definition these efforts were organizationally intensive, and presumably had an impact only where existing networks of activists were strong. Though we have no aggregate data for these

mobilizational efforts, field-based research has linked the formation of Neighborhood Groups with increased participation in the 1997 (Manjula 2000; Thomas Isaac 2000) as well as in subsequent years (John and Chathukulam 2002).

To sum up, the very design of the campaign and institutional changes between 1996 and 1997 clearly shifted the distribution of costs and opportunities between groups, and in particular, produced higher relative returns to participation for subordinate groups. This is consistent with interest-based accounts of participation. But to argue that the new patterns of direct participation mechanically reflect new utilities, would be to miss two key points. First, the distribution of incentives across groups changed only because of the agency of the CPM and the state. Second, the variation from 1996 to 1997 and the variation across Panchayats suggests that these institutional incentives had a highly uneven effect. Though the data reported so far can not demonstrate this, field research and accounts from key actors suggest that local mobilizational efforts were critical in explaining levels of participation. We would argue that where movements were active, greater access to information and increased self-organizing capacity increased the probability that subordinate groups could effectively interpret and act on the new incentives created by the campaign.

7. Understanding the variation in participation across panchayats

Having explored the general implications of the observed plasticity of participation for key concepts in the participation literature, we turn in this section to a more detailed investigation of the local contextual determinants of participation. Our aim is to better understand some of the sources of the striking variation in participation that we document across Kerala's 990 panchayats. We use multivariate regression techniques to explore the panchayat-level correlates of the initial levels and subsequent change in each of our five measures of

participation. Recall that the five measures are: (1) the overall participation rate in the panchayat; (2) the participation rate of individuals from Scheduled Castes and Tribes; (3) the participation rate of women; (4) the relative participation propensity of SC/STs; and (5) the relative participation propensity of women.

We report the results from two sets of regressions. In the first set (Table 4) we try to explain the variation across panchayats in the levels of participation in the initial year of the campaign. The dependent variable in the second set of regressions (Table 5) is the change in the relevant measure of participation between the first and the second year. In both tables, the reported estimates are from ordinary least squares regressions, in which we allow for district-level cluster effects in the disturbance terms and adjust the standard errors of the coefficients accordingly.¹⁸

Two important caveats are in order. The first is that because the mapping from the analytic constructs emphasized by various theories to the specific observable variables available in the data is necessarily an imperfect one, the extent to which the empirical results help us distinguish the causal mechanisms highlighted by the different concepts is quite uneven. The

¹⁸ We also calculated maximum-likelihood Tobit estimates that explicitly take account of the fact that in some cases, the dependent variables are, in principle, censored, both below (at zero) and above (at one). These estimates did not differ significantly from the least-squares estimates, either qualitatively or in magnitude. Because the Tobit model is highly non-linear, the interpretation of the estimated coefficients is somewhat more complicated than in the case of a linear least-squares model. For ease of interpretation, we therefore report and discuss only the least-squares estimates. McDonald and Moffitt (1980) provide a very useful discussion of the uses and interpretation of Tobit estimates.

second is that even though the panchayat characteristics that we include are all inherited or pre-determined—in the sense that they pre-date the start of the campaign—and hence there are no concerns about endogeneity stemming from the influence of the campaign itself, there still remains the possibility that these variables are simply serving as proxies for unobserved (to us) features of the local context, features that are the real “causal” drivers of the observed variation in participation.

7.1 The explanatory variables

We describe below each of the explanatory variables we include in the regressions, and provide the rationale for its inclusion. Table 3 displays summary statistics for all the variables.

Population and area

The overall population of the panchayat and the physical area covered by the panchayat should influence participation rates because both directly capture two important potential sources of community-level variation in the benefits and costs of participation. Since the marginal impact (and hence, the marginal potential benefits) of participation by any single individual is likely to decrease with the number of individuals in a jurisdiction, interest-based models of participation would predict a decline with the population of the community. Similarly, because the pecuniary costs of participation—e.g., travel costs, opportunity costs of travel time, etc.—increase with the geographical size of a political unit, we would expect participation rates to be lower in more geographically dispersed communities.

Insofar as differences in population size and area also lead to differences in population density, the impact of this latter difference represents a third possible effect captured by the two variables. Higher population density might be associated with denser networks and shorter social

ties which should lead to lower overall social transaction costs. This should facilitate efforts to mobilize participants.

Fraction of Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes and Women

We include the fraction of the population in the panchayat that belongs to Scheduled Castes or Tribes (SC/ST) primarily to gauge the impact that the size of a minority community has both on its own participation rate as well as that of the larger community. In terms of the former, to the extent that SC/ST individuals share a common identity and interests that are distinct from those of the majority, participation rates among SC/ST individuals may be more influenced by the size of the SC/ST community in the panchayat than the overall population of the panchayat. Rational choice theories of collective action argue that the problem of free-riding increases with the size of the community (Olson, 1965), and that would suggest that the SC/ST participation rate should decline with the fraction of SC/STs in the panchayat. Since SCs are disproportionately concentrated in low-skill and low status occupations, represent the bulk of landless laborers, and have lower educational attainment, the size of this community is a good proxy for individuals from lower socio-economic groups. In a resource-based model of participation one would anticipate an inverse correlation between the size of the SC community and levels of participation. In contrast, the size of the SC community would on balance favorably impact participation in the relational model. First, a larger SC community would imply greater political clout in local elections and as such greater incentives for self-organization. Second, a larger community would mitigate against the impact of categorical inequalities, and specifically with reference to the workings of the caste system, the ability of dominant groups to enforce exclusionary practices.

Literacy rate

We include the literacy rate because, as emphasized in resource-based models, literacy has a direct bearing on the capabilities of individuals and social groups to effectively enter the public arena. We should note however that the average literacy rate across Kerala's panchayats is 89% and that in contrast to the modal India picture, literacy is well distributed across caste and gender lines (Franke and Chasin, 1989, Kannan, 2000). Given that the average participation rate is around 7%, it seems unlikely that deviations from the average literacy rate would have much impact on the participation rate. There are already many literate individuals who are not participating. On the other hand, if we recognize that literacy has historically been a key source of differentiation in the caste system, and that literacy may have broader social ramifications, the possibility arises that even modest differences in literacy rates may translate into large differences in participation rates. In other words, we would anticipate that any impact that literacy may have is less a function of individual attributes as posited in the resource model, and more a function of relational dynamics.

Characteristics of the labor force

To capture the potential influence of the composition of the labor force in a panchayat, we include as separate regressors the fraction of workers engaged in non-agricultural activities, and the fraction of workers whose primary source of income is agricultural labor (on farms other than their own). The excluded categories are the fraction who are agricultural cultivators and the fraction of workers who derive their livelihood from animal husbandry and fisheries activities.

In Kerala's fairly unique continuous settlement pattern, many rural areas are in fact in close proximity of urban centers. A high percentage of non-agricultural workers would thus capture the degree of urbanization, and with it the degree of commercialization. Norm-based

models build directly on the *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* tradition in sociology arguing that urbanization and the increasing division of labor atomize social actors and erode community-based ties.¹⁹ To the extent that dense community ties are correlated with civic engagement in norm-based models, we would expect panchayats with a higher fraction of non-agricultural workers to have lower participation rates. Reinforcing this effect is the fact that the fraction of non-agricultural workers also captures the size of the “middle class” in the panchayat. Members of the middle class are likely to perceive both higher opportunity costs and lower benefits to participation, since middle-class jobs in Kerala are largely in the public sector, which is associated with higher incomes and more stable employment.

The fraction of the labor force engaged in agricultural labor can be taken as both a measure of poverty and the level of pre-existing organization. It captures poverty obviously enough because the landless are the poorest rural class. But it also captures organization and collective resources in that agricultural laborers in Kerala also have a long history of militant mobilization and high levels of unionization (Kannan 1988). A mobilization model that emphasizes the positive multiplier effects of collective organizational skills would anticipate a positive relationship between agricultural labor and participation. Such a relationship would also support arguments made in the comparative sociological literature on democracy, which, in its most relational vein, points to relations of class forces and specifically links democratic deepening to the formation and self-organization of wage workers (Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens, 1992).

¹⁹ For a careful examination of the “decline-of-community thesis” and its ties to the social capital literature see Paxton (1999).

Gender-relevant characteristics

We have included female labor force participation rates because women's entry into the labor market is often a source of significant social change. It is important to note the complex ways in which gender and work can interact in shaping women's participation in civic life. On the one hand, in a culture that exercises "social purdah" (that is patriarchal control over women's public life) work can represent a singularly transformative experience, empowering women with greater civic skills and a "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai, 2004). On the other hand, labor force participation can disproportionately increase the opportunity costs of participation in local governance activities since in Kerala's deeply patriarchal culture all domestic tasks are reserved for women, and political participation for working women represents a "triple burden" (Mukherjee, 2002).

Political configuration

The final set of variables we include are all binary indicators of the party in power (meaning the party with a majority of seats on the panchayat council) in the panchayat. There are over 20 separate parties that controlled at least one panchayat. We grouped the parties into six mutually exclusive categories: a separate category for each of the three parties with the highest number of panchayats under their control, i.e., the CPM, the Congress(I) and the Muslim League, a fourth for other parties in the CPM-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) coalition, a fifth for other parties in the Congress(I)-led United Democratic Front (UDF) coalition, and a sixth and final category for parties outside both these coalitions. The breakdown of the number of panchayats that fall into each of these six categories is presented in the middle panel of Table 3. In our regressions, we leave out the dummy variable for Congress(I) control, which implies that the coefficients on the remaining dummy variables capture effects relative to the Congress(I). The

inclusion of these party variables permits us to assess whether the differences across localities in the identity of the party in power are systematically associated with differences in observed participation rates. Given that different parties have very different mobilizational capacities, we would anticipate a significant effect. The CPM in particular is the quintessential cadre-based party with a long history of mobilization, and was moreover the key player in introducing the campaign.

7.2 Results and interpretations: estimated elasticities of participation

Table 4 presents the results regarding the panchayat-level correlates of the initial levels of participation. The dependent variables corresponding to the five columns are the initial (i.e., 1996) levels of our five measures of participation.

Except for the binary indicator variables for the gender of the panchayat council president and the political party in control of the panchayat council, all the variables in Table 4 are in logs. The reported coefficients may therefore be interpreted as “elasticities”—i.e., the percentage change in the relevant measure of participation associated with a 1 percent change in the relevant explanatory variable, everything else being held constant.

Literacy effects

Perhaps our most striking finding is the dramatic impact that the literacy rate in the panchayat appears to have on the participation rates and relative participation propensities of women and individuals from Scheduled Castes or Tribes (SC/ST). The point estimates (fourth row, second and third columns of Table 4) indicate that a 10% increase in the literacy rate in a panchayat translates into nearly a 30% increase in the SC/ST participation rate, and over a 5% increase in the female participation rate. Moreover, higher levels of literacy appear to also

increase the relative participation propensity of members of subordinate groups, suggesting that the channels through which literacy rates affect participation are highly differentiated socially.

If, in keeping with resource models of participation, we treat literacy as an individual attribute, it is not clear why it would have had such a dramatic effect on participation. Lower caste groups in Kerala enjoy comparatively high levels of literacy and access to health care and are less economically disadvantaged than in the rest of India. Similarly, women in Kerala have the lowest fertility rates, the highest literacy rates and the longest life expectancy in India (Kannan 2000). Yet despite this leveling of individual capabilities, social capabilities tied to categorical inequalities remain highly unequal.

Levels of education for subordinate groups in Kerala are high, as reflected both in literacy rates (80% for SCs and 84% for women) and a range of other measures of educational achievement.²⁰ The SC community boasts a number of very effective independent associations, has high rates of unionization and is well represented in a number of political parties. By all accounts, SCs have developed far greater political experience and capacity than is the norm in India. In sum, it is clear that within any panchayat the availability of individuals from subordinate groups with the basic civic skills to participate is many times greater than the actual level of participation. Moreover, if members of subordinate groups are more likely to participate as representatives of their social category, rather than as individuals, it is not at all clear why the presence of small percentages of illiterates would impact the rate of participation for these groups.

²⁰ In 1991, 85.2% of untouchable men and 74.3 untouchable women were literate, compared to 49.9% and 23.8% in India (Kannan, 2000:54). Kerala has a 95% retention rate in primary education, and female enrollment in tertiary education actually surpasses male enrollment.

To explain the marked and differential impact of the panchayat literacy rate on participation rates, we must go beyond viewing literacy as a purely individual asset. Changes in literacy in a society marked by categorical inequalities can make a difference to the extent that they transform the transactional field. There are two complimentary lines of reasoning that support this view. On the one hand, literacy in rural India is a critical mechanism for maintaining boundaries between unequal groups. The entire, elaborate hierarchy of the caste system is tied to gradations of cultural/symbolic capital, manifest for instance in the traditional monopoly Brahmins exercised over the interpretation of holy scriptures and prohibitions against educating “unclean” castes. The literacy rate can as such be treated as a proxy measure of the degree of social inclusion/exclusion in the panchayat. Literacy rates in Kerala are high because of a long history of mobilization by subordinate groups, beginning with communist party organizing in the 1930s (that focused among other things on building village libraries) and more recently a mass-based literacy campaign in the 1990s that specifically targeted excluded groups. In some communities, adult literacy is close to 100%. Where literacy is comparatively low, say 80%, this would indicate either that local movements have been weak, or that a segment of the population has remained socially excluded for one reason or another. For example, this would clearly be the case in Tribal areas, since Tribals have been the least mobilized of all groups in Kerala, and as is true in much of India, Tribals often remain outside the dominant culture.²¹ In other words, comparatively lower rates of literacy reflect more stubborn forms of social exclusion and more rigid categorical boundaries and might as such be associated with lower rates of participation within that community.

²¹ Across the 990 gram panchayats, the simple correlation coefficient between the literacy rate in the panchayat and the percentage of SC/STs in the population, is -0.42 with a p-value of 0.000.

On the other hand marginal increases in literacy, by expanding even slightly the pool of literate individuals from subordinate groups, might spawn significant spillover or multiplier effects in terms of participation if these individuals play a prominent mobilizing role and challenge elite monopolies of representation. Despite a competitive party system, rural India is notorious for the efficiency with which local notables (almost always high-caste landowners) deliver “votebanks”. Yet the hold of clientelism has begun to erode, especially to the extent that increases in literacy have been associated with the rise of new educated, lower and middle-caste activists. As Krishna (2002) has shown for the Indian states of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan this new class of political intermediaries has significantly increased the voice of the poor by displacing traditional powerbrokers. Similarly, the rise of the Dalit-based Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh has been attributed the relatively large proportion of SCs employed in government jobs in that state.

Both of these interpretations underscore a relational explanation. On the one hand, a slightly lower degree of literacy marks the presence of a more durable form of inequality and hence of more significant barriers to participation. On the other, higher than average rates of literacy can make a difference for subordinate group participation by transforming the transactional field.

Population and area effects

The estimated elasticity of the overall participation rate with respect to the population of the panchayat—see the first row of the first column of Table 4—is -0.354 , indicating that a 10% increase in the panchayat population is associated with a 3.54% decrease in the overall participation rate, all else equal. The effect, moreover, is highly significant. This is consistent

with a interest-based argument that the larger the group, the lower the level of participation given declining returns to individuals (Olson, 1965).

A parsimonious rational choice argument is however complicated by the finding that though the participation rate of women is also negatively affected by population size with an estimated elasticity of -0.268 it is lower (in absolute value) than that for the population as a whole. Similarly, whereas the geographical area covered by the panchayat appears to have little impact on the overall participation rate, an increase in area does significantly dampen female participation rates. A 10% increase in the area of the panchayat is estimated to lower female participation rates by nearly 1%, and the estimated impact is significant. The first two rows of the last column of Table 4 moreover indicate that these differences in the sensitivity of the overall participation rate and the female participation rate to the population and area of a panchayat are statistically significant. Thus, the *relative* participation propensity of women goes up as the population of the panchayat increases (holding area constant), while it declines with the area of the panchayat (holding constant population size), and both these effects are statistically significant. Why do area and population – both factors that would impact the cost and returns of participation – have a differential impact on women? We would argue that two sets of factors are at work.

The fact that an increase in population matters less to women than men suggests that purely instrumental calculations of the declining returns to participation with population size are less important to women than men. Women might be motivated to participate to affirm their identities or because of the political significance attached to engaging local government. Both motivations would be consistent with the emphasis that the campaign placed on achieving greater gender inclusion and the fact that women's participation is much more likely to have

been mediated by movement actors. In other words, declining individual incentives to participate are partially compensated for by the role that shared identities, especially under the highly publicized conditions of the campaign, can have in reducing collective action problems. The fact that an increase in area has a much more negative effect on women's participation suggests that the costs associated with distance (either in monetary or social terms) are higher for women than men.

If social-relational determinants are at work, the case can also be made that the differential impact of population and area can be attributed to the differential impact of population density, which in turn stems from the differing mobilizational dynamics at work in the case of women. Assuming that the direct disincentive effects of an increase in population are the same for men and women, the increase in the relative participation propensity of women associated with an increase in population suggests that the density of population within a community matters more for women, with greater population density having more of a positive impact on the participation rates of women than it does for men. The decline in the relative participation propensity of women with the geographical area of the panchayat is consistent with this differential effect of population density. If we assume that women's participation is more socially mediated than men's in that women face greater social barriers to participation, the differential impact of population density might reflect the fact that these barriers are more likely to be overcome in more densely populated communities where the "social transaction costs" (Tarrow, 1994) of efforts to mobilize women (either through their own initiative or interventions by activists) are lower.

Whichever set of factors is at work, the point that needs to be highlighted is that the channels through which population size and area influence participation rates are in fact socially

mediated. The determinants of female participation, even with respect to these very basic factors—which are commonly treated in the literature as simply having neutral effects (in terms of shifting costs and opportunities to individuals)—are quite different from those of men. And, as Agarwal (2001) has eloquently argued, this has often been overlooked by proponents of participatory institutions.

The insignificance of the coefficient reported in the first row of the second column of Table 4 suggests that the overall population of the panchayat does not influence the participation rate among individuals from Scheduled Castes or Tribes (SC/ST), though SC/ST participation rates do decline appreciably with the geographical area covered by the panchayat. This would appear to contradict the findings above that an increase in population drives down participation. However, given the importance of caste identities in the Indian context, the appropriate reference group for SC/ST individuals should be the SC/ST population. And indeed, as the third row of the second column of Table 4 indicates, the SC/ST participation rate in a panchayat declines with the fraction of the panchayat population that belongs to a Scheduled Caste or Tribe. Thus, a 10% increase in this variable—which, with the overall population of the panchayat held constant, is equivalent to a 10% increase in the SC/ST population—lowers the SC/ST participation rate by almost 4%. This finding is then consistent with the earlier observation that there are increasing disincentives to participation with increased population, though the reasons may be slightly different than for women and the overall population. If for the latter the explanation has to do with the diminishing return to effort associated with larger populations, the SC/ST finding probably has more to do with a free-rider problem. In those communities where the SC/ST population is relatively larger, the SC/ST community's political clout is no doubt much greater given the intense local party competition in Kerala. In such political contexts, that is where

SC/STs already have a voice, individuals might be more inclined to delegate participation to community leaders.

Labor force effects

The percentage of the labor force in non-agricultural activities has a mild negative effect on overall participation. In Kerala's fairly unique continuous settlement pattern, many rural areas are in fact in close proximity of urban centers. A high percentage of non-agricultural workers roughly captures the degree of urbanization, and with it the degree of commercialization. In keeping with a Durkheimian interpretation it might be argued that individualization in the absence of new integrative norms weakens the social ties of reciprocity and trust that social capital theorists have argued enhances civic participation.²² An alternative explanation is that the fraction of non-agricultural workers captures the size of the "middle class" in the panchayat, which from a rational choice perspective would imply both higher opportunity costs and lower benefits to participation, since middle-class jobs in Kerala are largely in the public sector, which is associated with higher incomes and more stable employment. It is not possible to adjudicate between these explanations, but in any event the effect is fairly weak.

A much stronger relationship is indicated by the estimated effects of the labor force characteristics on SC/ST participation rates. The effects of both the labor force characteristics we include are pronounced and are mutually consistent in suggesting that the greater the role of agriculture in the community, the higher the SC/ST rate of participation (Table 4, second column, 5th & 6th rows). Specifically, a 10% increase in the share of workers engaged in non-

²² It is notable that most of the local commentary on the campaign – including key officials in the SPB - assumed that more rural areas, where associational patterns are widely thought to be more stable than in peri-urban areas, would have much higher participation rates.

agricultural activities is associated with over a 4.37% decrease in SC/ST participation rates, while a 10% increase in the fraction who are agricultural laborers is associated with over a 3.48% increase.

In interpreting this very robust result we first note that given that SC/STs are almost by definition landless and represent the overwhelming majority of landless laborers, the association is clearly one between the proportion of SC/STs that work as agricultural laborers and participation. And this association in turn has a very clear logic. Agricultural laborers in Kerala have a long history of militant mobilization and high levels of unionization. The KSKTU—the CPM affiliated agricultural laborers union—claims a membership of over 1 million, out of a total of roughly 2 million. Moreover, district level union membership data clearly points to higher levels of organization in the areas with the highest proportion of laborers, most notably the rice-growing regions of Kuttanad and the district of Palghat (Herring 1983; Kannan, 1988). Because union activity involves among other things maintaining a complex and sophisticated system of wage negotiations and labor market controls, areas with high concentrations of agricultural laborers and hence union activity, are likely to be those where a sizable segment of the SC/ST community is well-organized. In sum, the existing level of SC/ST organization facilitated participation in Gram Sabhas. This finding is in keeping with participation models that emphasize the importance of political mobilization. Among others, Verba, Nie and Kim (1978) and Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) have shown that pre-existing levels of organization are tied to political participation. We would however go beyond the aggregative, and ultimately substantialist argument that involvement in organizations equips participants with new civic skills to argue in a more relational vein that mobilization – especially of an explicitly contentious character - erodes barriers to participation by changing the local balance of power. In the Kerala

context, the role that class-based organizations such as the KSKTU played in transforming agrarian social relations, and in particular of eroding the social basis of upper-caste landlordism is well documented (Herring 1983; Kannan 1988) and supports the class-relational emphasis of the comparative sociological literature on democratization (Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens, 1992; Moore, 1966).

This finding is powerfully reinforced by the observed effects of female labor force participation. Though there appears to be no association between the female labor force participation rate in a panchayat and the overall participation rate (which can be attributed to the low levels of female participation in the initial year in most panchayats), the female labor force participation rate is positively and significantly associated with the SC/ST participation rate. On the other hand, female labor force participation rates do not appear to influence the participation of women in Gram Sabhas. This paradoxical finding can be unraveled if we again consider how caste, gender and class intersect in Kerala to create distinct transactional fields.

Three facts are relevant here. First, women from SC/STs have higher labor force participation rates than do women from majority castes, though, as a fraction of female workers, SC/STs still constitute a minority. It is possible therefore that high rates of participation by working SC/ST women are reflected in the SC/ST participation rate but not in the overall female participation rate. Second, the entry of SC/ST women into the labor force is qualitatively different than for women in general because the former are concentrated in low-skill, low status manual labor (agricultural labor, and various agro-processing industries) where the rate of unionization is high, and where the CPM in particular has been very active (Kannan, 1988). SC/ST women may have therefore disproportionately benefited from the enhancement of civic skills and increased solidarity associated with workplace political activism, which in turn might

have increased their capacity and willingness to participate in Gram Sabhas. Third, in contrast to non-agricultural labor (where high caste women are clustered), agricultural labor is concentrated in peak seasons, and most laborers are underemployed during the rest of the year.²³ And this might plausibly reduce the opportunity costs of participation in Gram Sabhas, which are never scheduled during periods of peak agricultural activity.

Political party effects

Overall participation rates in the initial year of the campaign were significantly higher in panchayats controlled by the CPM, the ruling party at the state level and the one that had initiated the campaign. CPM-ruled panchayats recorded participation rates that were, on average, 15% higher than those in panchayats controlled by the Congress (I)—the main opposition party in the state—and were higher than those in panchayats controlled by other parties, including parties within the CPM-led Left Democratic Front coalition. The gap between CPM-ruled panchayats and other panchayats was even more pronounced in terms of female participation rates.

These results are consistent with what we know of the campaign as a whole, and what one might expect in light of Kerala's political history. The campaign was designed, promoted and launched with much fanfare by a CPM-led LDF government. The campaign was enthusiastically championed by E.M.S. Namboodiripad, the CPM's most popular and venerated elder statesman. CPM elected officials were encouraged by the party leadership to promote participation, and as a disciplined, centralized, cadre-based party, the CPM is far more likely to effectively translate programmatic positions into grass-roots mobilization than other more

²³ In the mid-1980s, women agricultural laborers worked an average of 112 days in a year. (Government of Kerala, 1985).

loosely organized parties. Moreover, as was widely reported in the local press at the time, opposition parties in Kerala's highly polarized political environment were reluctant, initially, to lend their support to an LDF government initiative. Finally, given a long history of party-based patronage in Kerala, citizens in opposition-controlled panchayats may have expected to receive lower budgetary allocations, and may have had, as a consequence, less incentive to participate.²⁴

7.3. Results and interpretations: correlates of changes in participation

Table 5 displays our results on the panchayat-level correlates of the changes in the levels of participation between the first and second year of the campaign. Again, except for the binary indicator variables, the explanatory variables are all in log form. However, unlike in the case of Table 4, the dependent variables are simply the changes in our participation measures between the first and second year of the campaign. The coefficients may therefore be interpreted as semi-elasticities, indicating the increase or decrease in the dependent variable—which, itself, is the change in the relevant measure of participation between the first year and the second year—associated with a 1% change in the relevant explanatory variable.²⁵

The most notable aspect of the results in Table 5 is the fact that the estimated coefficients are, uniformly, quite small, and for the most part, insignificant. And yet, the descriptive statistics

²⁴ In retrospect this expectation turns out to have been incorrect as funds were, by all accounts, distributed on a strict population and poverty-based formula.

²⁵ For instance, the estimate of 0.0177 in the first row of the first column implies that a 10% increase in population is associated, everything else equal, with a 0.1 *percentage point* increase in *the change in* the overall participation rate. So, if the overall participation rate had increased by 2 percentage points, say from 6% to 8%, a 10% increase in population would have implied a change of 2.1 percentage points from 6% to 8.1%.

we documented earlier indicate that there were indeed dramatic and pronounced changes in the level and social composition of participation. The fact that the variables we observe and include in our regressions appear to have such limited explanatory power then suggests that the variation must stem from phenomena that we do not capture in our data. We know from previous research and general accounts of the campaign that both the State Planning Board and grass roots movements targeted their efforts towards mobilizing women and SC/STs in 1997. And thus, political and movement agency seem to us to be plausible candidates for the unobserved variable. This hypothesis is supported by the patterns of significance that did emerge from the regressions in table 5.

Everything else constant, panchayats with larger populations appeared to have experienced larger increases in female participation rates and relative participation propensities. Independent accounts have emphasized the role of the KSSP and women's groups in creating neighborhood groups that helped women overcome social obstacles to participation (Manjula 2000; Seema and Mukherjee, 2000; Mukherjee 2002). Though we do not have data about where these efforts were focused, it is quite possible that organizations targeted mobilization efforts in areas of greater population density, where the returns to the efforts of social movement activists would plausibly be higher because network ties are shorter, and mobilizing efforts are likely to have a higher diffusion effect. Stated somewhat differently, because social movement entrepreneurs must overcome "social transaction costs" (Tarrow, 1994) in successfully organizing participants, they are far more likely to be successful in communities characterized by dense ties.

Second, and perhaps not surprisingly given the across-the-board increase in the participation rates of individuals from Scheduled Castes and Tribes that we documented earlier,

panchayats with a higher fraction of SC/ST individuals had larger increases in overall participation rates. However, the size of the coefficient—the point estimate (third row, first column of Table 5) indicates that a 10% increase in the fraction of SC/ST is associated with only a 0.1 percentage point increase in the change in the overall participation rate—suggests that the increase in the participation rates of SC/STs was largely, though not completely, offset by a decrease in the participation rates of individuals from the majority castes.

On the political front, there does not appear to have been larger increases in participation rates in CPM-ruled panchayats relative to Congress(I)-ruled panchayats. In other words, the gap in participation rates between the two that was evident in the initial year of the campaign neither increased nor decreased between the first and the second year. That the CPM was unable to build on its initial advantage is probably related to the significant dissent within the party about the political payoffs of the campaign. The initial year of the campaign came on the coattails of the Party's return to power and party unity was at its height. By 1997, however, factionalism had re-emerged, and important elements within the Party were criticizing the campaign. Much of the resulting mobilizational slack was taken up by non-partisan organizations, especially the KSSP. The effects of CPM rule were thus not magnified relative to the initial year, though they did not diminish either.

The impact of the Muslim League is also calls for comment. The change in the female participation rate in Muslim League controlled panchayats was, on average, 1.5 percentage points lower than in Congress(I)-ruled panchayats and was lower as well than that in panchayats controlled by the other parties. Note that this does not imply that female participation rates fell in Muslim League panchayats, only that they increased less than they did in other panchayats. Whereas for the sample as a whole the average female participation rate rose from 4.2% in 1996

to 6.0% in 1997 (see Table 1), in Muslim League panchayats the corresponding change was from 3.3% to 3.6%. The difference stems no doubt from the greater restrictions placed on women's activity outside the home in Muslim communities.

7.4. Evaluating the Key Concepts in the Participation Literature

Given that our data is drawn from a natural experiment it was not possible to operationalize and systematically test the concepts of resources, norms, interests and mobilization systematically. However, the base-line trends we observed (the spatial and temporal variability of participation) and some of the associations we identified through the regression analysis are sufficiently robust to allow us to evaluate some of the causal stories associated with these key concepts.

First, it is important to reiterate that insofar as interest, norm and resource-based models are substantialist – that is emphasize attributes that inhere in individuals – and as such point to the causal significance of stock variables, none sit comfortably with the degree of inter-temporal variation we have documented in both the rate and social composition of participation. While such stock variables are important to understanding the social profile of participation at any given time, when taken alone they provide limited traction for understanding the variations we have documented.

Our data does not provide for any direct measures of how the quality of associational life might have impacted participation. We did however find strong evidence - as in the case of the impact of population density, or SC/ST womens' labor force participation - that social ties matter, but not in the way or for the reason that norm-based models would anticipate. Thus, environmental and socio-economic phenomena that should have some relationship (either as determinants or effects) on the quality of associational life such as population density or the

composition of the labor force were found to have effects only as mediated through specifically bounded social groups and only as activated through relational or mobilizational dynamics (e.g. the relative size of the SC community, the association of agricultural workers with unionization).²⁶ The fact that ties matter with reference to groups and transactional dynamics suggests that the significance of social interactions stems more from political factors and histories of mobilization, than long-term acculturation factors. This interpretation is consistent with critics of Putnam's treatment of social capital. Tarrow (1996) has argued that the higher levels of social capital Putnam documents in Northern Italy are the product of distinct and polarizing patterns of class based politics and Edwards and Foley's critique could well apply to Kerala: "Putnam's assessment of the state of "civil community" in the United States and his account of regional government in Northern Italy underestimate the ability of newer organizations, and of specifically political associations such as social movements and political parties, to foster aspects of civil community and to advance democracy" (1996: 40).

An interest-based model of participation does provide important explanatory leverage for a number of our observed associations. Most notably, the negative impact of population on participation is consistent with a declining marginal-return argument. Similarly, the positive effect that density has on participation might point to the significance of the transaction costs associated with participation. What is most interesting about these findings however, is that the explanations work best when we move beyond substantialist assumptions about individuals and

²⁶ The one possible exception was our finding that the degree of urbanization/commercialization (as measured by the percentage of the non-agricultural labor force) does adversely impact participation, possibly indicating the negative effect of weakening social ties. The association however was weak.

interpret instrumental behavior through a social-relational lens. We found for example that declining marginal returns matter less for women than for men and that the free-riding impulse among SC/STs is conditioned by their identity (and possibly political capacity) as SC/STs.

Finally, the a relational model provides some very compelling interpretive schemes for explaining both observed and unobserved associations. These can be moreover grouped into two interrelated sets of explanatory variables. The first set emphasizes the significance of relational social structures. The observation about population, as already noted, works best when the social characteristics of specific populations are taken into account. We also attributed the significance of various labor force characteristics to the dynamic effect that results from the overlay of occupational position and caste. We thus found that SC/STs and women who are agricultural laborers are much more likely to participate, and tied this to the particular mobilizational history of agricultural laborers in the Kerala. A third finding was that the rigidity of social exclusion, as measured through illiteracy rates, has a very adverse effect on participation.

The second set of variables captures the effects of political and social agency. The most direct evidence was the observation that rates of participation in 1996 were strongly associated with CPM-controlled panchayats. Indirectly, the fact that the presence of the CPM cannot explain increases in participation between years points to the agency of other actors, especially grass roots organizations. We also argued that given that only one of our stock variables (population) had an appreciable impact on the variation between 1996 and 1997, the observed increase in women's and SC/ST participation has to be attributed to unobserved causes. Based on existing qualitative research, including our own field observations, we claim that state

intervention and grass roots activism played the critical role by effectively transforming the local transactional field.

8. The plasticity of participation

The possibility of more participatory forms of democracy has often been met with skepticism by democratic theorists.²⁷ Even those inclined to support the idea of participation on normative grounds alone have argued that gains are difficult to come by. In any democracy, the power of entrenched interests represents a significant obstacle to expanding the scope and depth of participation. In the context of developing democracies the problem is compounded by poorly developed and unevenly distributed basic capabilities (Sen 1999) and social barriers to association that are pervasive. Not surprisingly, most theories of participation, including social capital and rational choice, more or less assume that favorable conditions for participation can only develop through long-term processes.

The empirical findings documented in this paper suggest otherwise and point to the need for a more dynamic and contingent view of participation, one that recognizes the “plasticity of participation.” The very strong evidence of spatial and temporal variation we have documented suggests that pre-determined local factors do shape the nature of participation, but that the influence of these factors can be shaped—magnified or mitigated—through political or social agency.

The variability of participation we documented is manifested along two dimensions. From a cross-sectional perspective, our findings highlight the extent to which certain local stock variables mould the magnitude and the social composition of participation. Thus within the same

²⁷ See for example Cohen and Arato’s (1995) review of the debate between representative and participatory theories of democracy.

statewide institutional context of decentralization of resources and decision-making, levels of participation varied significantly across panchayats. Moreover, the fact that subordinate group participation in the first year of the campaign fell well below the average confirms the view that categorical social inequalities (Tilly, 1998) severely constrain the quality and depth of associational life.

Yet the temporal dimension of our analysis, which explored variation in participation between 1996 and 1997, yields findings that appear to be paradoxical. The very durable social structures—specifically those of social exclusion—that had such a strong effect on participation in 1996 turn out to be extremely malleable in 1997, as evidenced by the dramatic rise in the participation of subordinate groups. While our data do not allow us to statistically identify the causal factors at work, analytical inference does point in the direction of the mobilizational efforts of grass roots organizations and interventions by the state. Thus in contrast to many studies that treat the determinants of participation as stock variables—that is, as variables that change only very slowly over time—our empirical findings suggest that the level (absolute numbers) and social depth (participation of historically excluded social categories) of participation are highly variable, and are not likely to be explained by adherence to a single paradigm, especially paradigms that make parsimonious assumptions about human behavior. Certainly, stock variables matter. But our findings indicate that the actual determinants of participation are multiplex, and require a configurational analysis that takes into account stock variables, institutional factors and political contingencies (including the agency of parties and social movements).

These findings broadly support an emerging body of theory that has made the case for the “constructability” of collective capacities for participation (Evans 1996, 2002; Fung and Wright,

2002). What distinguishes these approaches is a central concern with understanding how specific institutional arrangements interact with social and political factors in determining the role that historically marginalized groups might play in effectively shaping public policies. These configurational models (for lack of a better label) however present only a very general elaboration of the problem. More research is clearly needed, on the one hand, to flesh out the empirical details of the causal mechanisms at work, and on the other, to develop a positive explanatory framework—within which to organize and interpret empirical work—of why and how a favorable configuration would result in higher levels of democratic participation.

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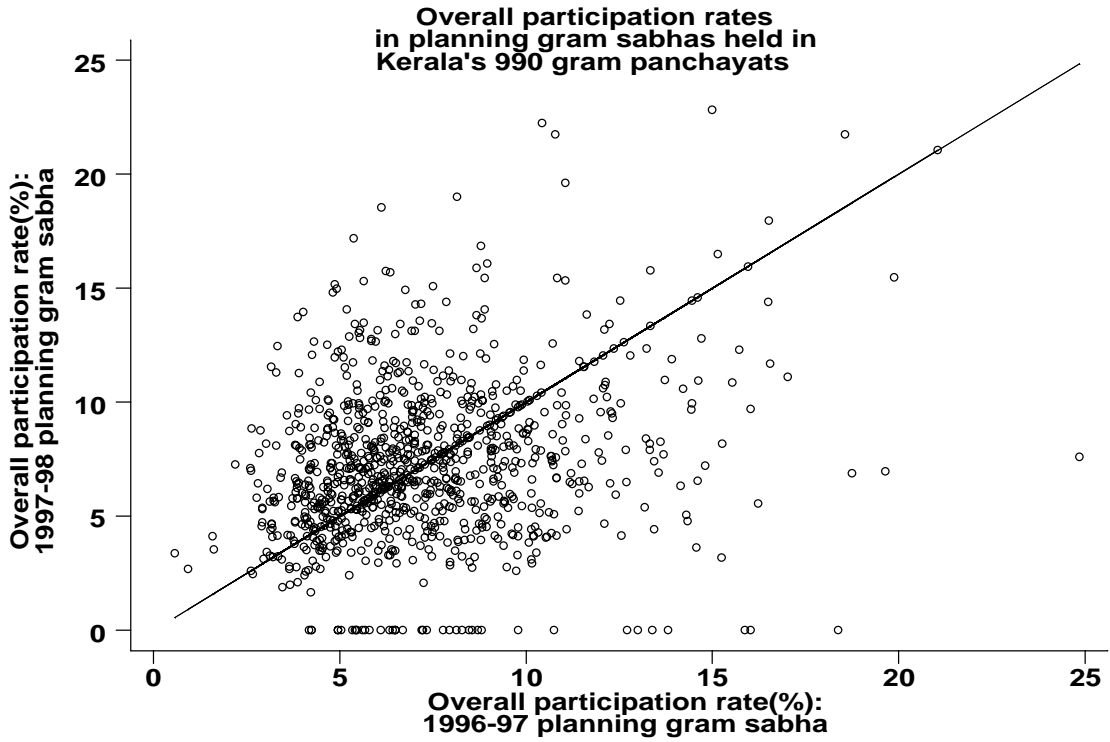


Figure 1

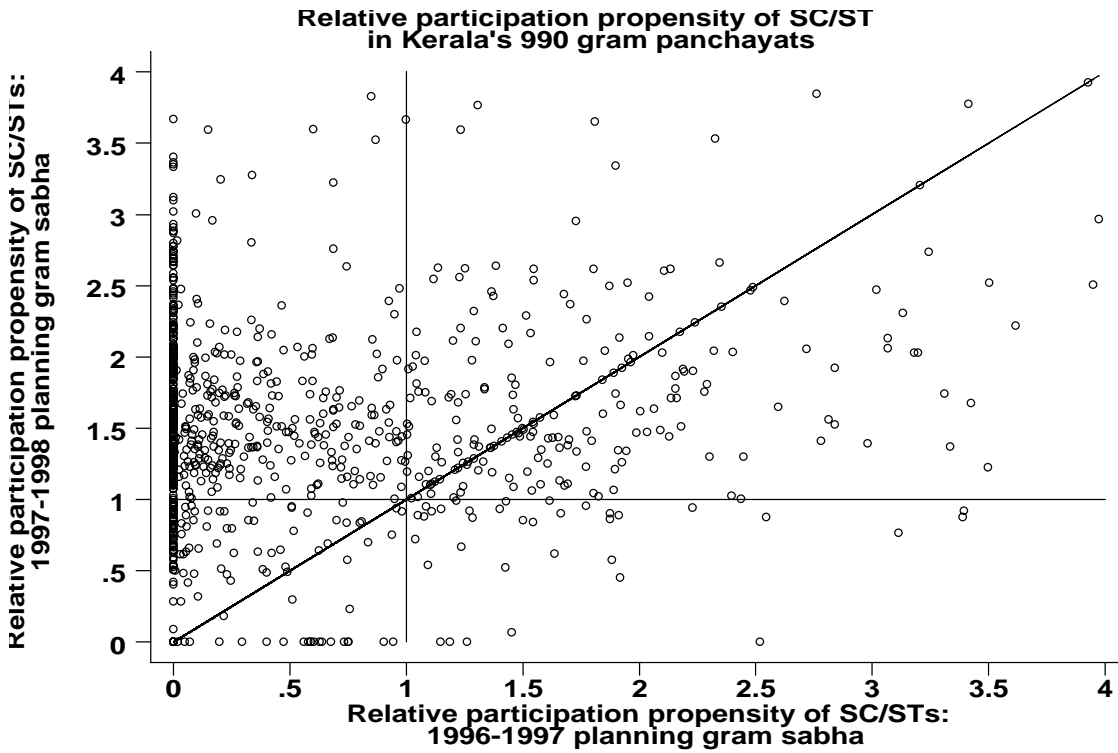


Figure 2

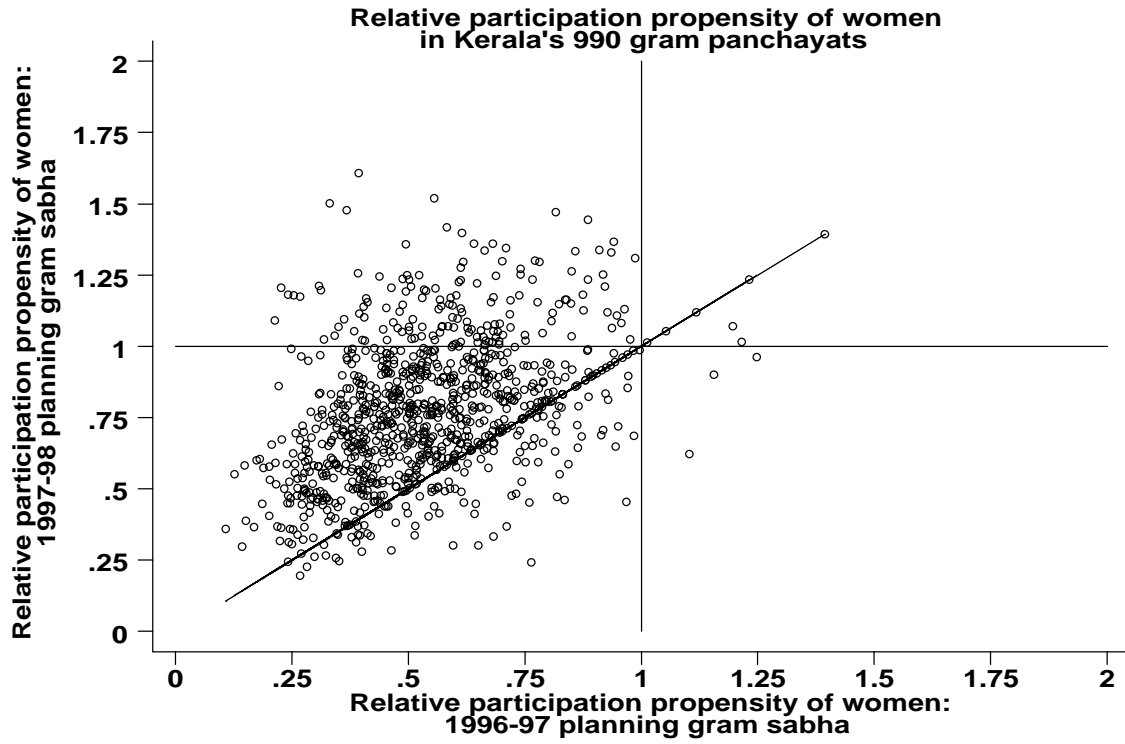


Figure 3

Table 1
Participation in Kerala's gram sabhas: the aggregate picture

(a) Basic facts

Variable	
Total population of Kerala's 990 gram panchayats	24,898,930
Percentage of population members of Scheduled Castes (SC) or Scheduled Tribes (ST)	11.9
Total electorate (no. of voters) in Kerala's 990 gram panchayats (estimate)	16,822,130
Number of gram panchayats	990
Fraction of panchayats where SC & ST constitute less than 25% of the population	0.96
Average population per gram panchayat	25150
Average number of wards per gram panchayat	11
Average area per gram panchayat (sq.km)	37.5

(b) Aggregate figures on participation

Variable	Planning Gram Sabha	
	1996-1997	1997-1998
Overall number of participants	1,736,865	1,784,847
Aggregate overall participation rate (%)	7.0	7.2
Percentage of electorate that participated (estimate)	10.3	10.6
Number of SC/ST participants		
	110,105	306,014
Percentage of participants SC/ST	6.3	17.2
Aggregate participation rate of SC & ST (%)	3.7	10.3
Aggregate relative participation propensity of SC & ST	0.53	1.44
Number of female participants		
	493,442	727,986
Percentage of participants women	28.4	40.8
Aggregate participation rate of women (%)	4.0	5.9
Aggregate relative participation propensity of women	0.57	0.82

(c) Summary statistics on overall participation at the panchayat level

Variable	Planning Gram Sabha	
	96-97	97-98
Average overall participation rate (%)	7.3	7.4
Fraction of panchayats in which overall participation rate went up	0.49	
Fraction of panchayats in which overall participation rate changed by more than 2 % pts.	0.51	
Fraction of panchayats in which overall participation rate changed by less than 1 % pt.	0.28	

(d) Summary statistics on participation by SC/STs and women at the panchayat level

Variable	Planning Gram Sabha	
	96-97	97-98
Average participation rate of SC & ST (%)	4.6	11.1
Fraction of panchayats in which SC & ST participation rate went up	0.76	
Fraction of panchayats in which SC/ST participation rate changed by more than 2% pts.	0.80	
Average relative participation propensity of SC & ST	0.66	1.57
Fraction of panchayats in which relative participation propensity of SC & ST went up	0.78	
Fraction of panchayats in which relative participation propensity of SC & ST more than 1	0.27	0.80
Average participation rate of women	4.2	6.0
Fraction of panchayats in which female participation rate went up	0.67	
Fraction of panchayats in which female participation rate changed by more than 2 % pts.	0.54	
Average relative participation propensity of women	0.54	0.77
Fraction of panchayats in which relative participation propensity of women went up	0.83	
Fraction of panchayats in which relative participation propensity of women more than 1	0.01	0.16

Table 2

Regional variation in participation in gram sabhas

Historical regions	Participation rate in 1st gram sabha (%)		
Travancore	7.33		
Cochin	6.01		
Malabar	7.88		
P-value from F-test of significance of historical region dummies:			(0.000)
Percentage of inter-panchayat variation in participation rates explained by historical region dummies:			4.7
	Number of panchayats	Fraction of panchayats	
Travancore	402	0.41	
Cochin	184	0.18	
Malabar	404	0.41	

Table 3

Summary statistics on dependent and independent variables

	Mean	Min	Max	Percentile	
				25th	75th
Dependent variables					
Overall participation rate in 1st gram sabha	7.3	0.6	24.9	5.2	8.9
Participation rate of SC & ST in 1st gram sabha	4.6	0.0	44.8	0.0	7.3
Participation rate of women in 1st gram sabha	4.2	0.2	21.3	2.2	5.4
Relative participation propensity of SC & ST	0.66	0.00	6.33	0.00	1.09
Relative participation propensity of women	0.54	0.02	1.39	0.40	0.66
Change in overall participation rate (% points)	0.1	-18.4	12.4	-1.9	2.2
Change in participation rate of SC & ST (% points)	6.6	-31.0	39.4	0.1	11.3
Change in participation rate of women (% points)	1.9	-12.6	15.5	-0.2	3.9
Change in relative participation propensity of SC & ST	0.90	-4.13	6.45	0.15	1.54
Change in relative participation propensity of women	0.23	-0.52	1.21	0.06	0.38

Independent variables					
Population of panchayat	25150	4588	78343	18541	30019
Area of panchayat (sq.km)	38	2	817	17	34
Percentage of population belonging to SC or ST	12.0	0.0	63.0	6.0	14.3
Literacy rate	89.0	28.0	98.0	87.3	93.1
Percentage of labor force in non-agricultural activities	10.0	0.0	55.0	4.2	12.8
Percentage of labor force in agricultural labor	26.0	0.0	82.0	16.4	35.0
Female labor force participation rate	17.0	3.0	51.0	11.2	21.0
		No. of panchayats		Fraction	
Female president of panchayat council		362		0.37	
Political party in control	Congress-I	242		0.24	
	Muslim League	89		0.09	
	Other UDF party	73		0.07	
	CPI-M	434		0.44	
	Other LDF party	110		0.11	
	Others	42		0.04	

Table 4

Estimated elasticities of participation in Kerala's 990 gram panchayats

Independent variables	Dependent variable				
	Participation rate in 1996 Planning Gram Sabha (%)			Relative participation propensity in 1996 Planning Gram Sabha	
	Overall	SC & ST	Women	SC & ST	Women
Population	-0.354 (0.000)	0.099 (0.809)	-0.268 (0.000)	0.448 (0.405)	0.086 (0.025)
Area	0.021 (0.332)	-0.725 (0.003)	-0.099 (0.008)	-0.999 (0.002)	-0.120 (0.000)
Percentage of population SC & ST	-0.014 (0.449)	-0.398 (0.082)	0.020 (0.513)	-0.417 (0.164)	0.034 (0.070)
Literacy rate	0.178 (0.088)	2.988 (0.010)	0.572 (0.001)	3.441 (0.022)	0.395 (0.000)
Percentage of labor force in non-agricultural activities	-0.062 (0.002)	-0.437 (0.048)	-0.121 (0.000)	-0.510 (0.077)	-0.059 (0.004)
Percentage of labor force in agricultural labor	0.018 (0.309)	0.348 (0.079)	0.018 (0.540)	0.447 (0.083)	0.000 (0.986)
Female labor force participation rate	-0.001 (0.961)	1.210 (0.000)	-0.029 (0.574)	1.689 (0.000)	-0.028 (0.380)
Female panchayat council president	-0.014 (0.573)	-0.249 (0.363)	0.006 (0.877)	-0.316 (0.376)	0.020 (0.422)
Political party in control: Muslim League	-0.038 (0.439)	-0.411 (0.454)	-0.119 (0.157)	-0.512 (0.475)	-0.080 (0.116)
Political party in control: other UDF party	0.005 (0.922)	-0.662 (0.238)	-0.009 (0.917)	-0.905 (0.217)	-0.014 (0.789)
Political party in control: CPI-M	0.145 (0.000)	-0.013 (0.969)	0.186 (0.000)	-0.100 (0.818)	0.041 (0.182)
Political party in control: other LDF party	0.070 (0.101)	0.095 (0.842)	0.076 (0.295)	0.089 (0.886)	0.005 (0.904)
Political party in control: others	-0.041 (0.515)	0.024 (0.972)	-0.043 (0.680)	-0.036 (0.968)	-0.003 (0.965)

Constant	-0.226 (0.722)	-22.939 (0.001)	-3.173 (0.003)	-27.171 (0.003)	-2.948 (0.000)
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Notes: p-values indicating the (two-sided) significance level of the t-statistic associated with each explanatory variable appear in parentheses. The standard errors used to calculate the t-statistics were adjusted to allow for district-level cluster effects. Variables that are significant at a level of 10% or less are indicated in bold. Except for the binary indicator variables for the gender of the panchayat council president and the political party in control, all variables are in logs. The reported coefficients may therefore be interpreted as “elasticities”—e.g., the estimate of –0.354 for population in the first column implies that a 10% increase in the population of a panchayat is associated with a 3.54% decline in the overall participation rate, everything else being held constant.

Table 5

Determinants of changes in participation in Kerala's 990 gram panchayats

Independent variables	Dependent variable				
	Change in participation rate between 1996 & 1997 Planning Gram Sabha			Change in relative participation propensity between 1996 & 1997 Planning Gram Sabha	
	Overall	SC & ST	Women	SC & ST	Women
Population	0.0177 (0.000)	0.0039 (0.657)	0.0115 (0.008)	-0.0071 (0.951)	0.0757 (0.006)
Area	-0.0041 (0.135)	-0.0116 (0.032)	-0.0059 (0.026)	-0.0131 (0.858)	-0.0395 (0.023)
Percentage of population SC & ST	0.0112 (0.000)	0.0141 (0.003)	0.0113 (0.000)	-0.0811 (0.189)	0.0391 (0.003)
Literacy rate	-0.0020 (0.874)	-0.0130 (0.586)	0.0113 (0.339)	-0.4987 (0.119)	0.1186 (0.119)
Percentage of labor force in non-agricultural activities	0.0015 (0.520)	0.0076 (0.104)	-0.0014 (0.553)	0.1881 (0.003)	-0.0135 (0.361)
Percentage of labor force in agricultural labor	0.0000 (0.998)	0.0093 (0.072)	-0.0011 (0.660)	0.1005 (0.141)	-0.0205 (0.205)
Female labor force participation rate	-0.0006 (0.855)	-0.0072 (0.313)	0.0013 (0.708)	-0.1492 (0.111)	-0.0052 (0.814)
Female panchayat council president	0.0071 (0.012)	0.0125 (0.025)	0.0038 (0.169)	0.0636 (0.387)	-0.0292 (0.094)
Political party in control: Muslim League	-0.0095 (0.096)	-0.0071 (0.525)	-0.0148 (0.008)	0.3404 (0.023)	-0.1100 (0.002)
Political party in control: other UDF party	-0.0046 (0.429)	0.0210 (0.070)	-0.0048 (0.403)	0.3548 (0.021)	-0.0290 (0.427)
Political party in control: CPI-M	-0.0042 (0.218)	0.0048 (0.484)	0.0017 (0.612)	0.1369 (0.127)	0.0499 (0.019)
Political party in control: other LDF party	-0.0037 (0.450)	-0.0017 (0.865)	-0.0022 (0.644)	0.0226 (0.860)	0.0166 (0.584)

Political party in control: others	-0.0016 (0.826)	0.0051 (0.715)	-0.0069 (0.324)	0.1910 (0.296)	-0.0470 (0.280)
Constant	-1.268 (0.083)	0.0039 (0.657)	-0.1187 (0.097)	4.1666 (0.031)	-0.9809 (0.032)

Notes: p-values indicating the (two-sided) significance level of the t-statistic associated with each explanatory variable appear in parentheses. The standard errors used to calculate the t-statistics were adjusted to allow for district-level cluster effects. Variables that are significant at a level of 10% or less are indicated in bold. Except for the binary indicator variables for the gender of the panchayat council president and the political party in control, all the independent variables are in logs.