Extended abstract

Size Matters. Comparative Study of the Effect of Habitat on the Vote (Galicia and Andalusia, Spain, 2000-2020)

Juan Jesús González Rodríguez
Luis Barreiro Castro

Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Madrid, España

DOI: 10.4422/ager.2023.02

ager
Revista de Estudios sobre Despoblación y Desarrollo Rural
Journal of Depopulation and Rural Development Studies
Highlights:

1. There is a gap in the electoral behavior between rural and urban areas.
2. The municipalities with the smallest population have a higher electoral participation than their urban counterparts.
3. Electoral support for the reference parties is greater in rural municipalities.
4. Electoral differences between habitats can be attributed, in part, to a composition effect.
5. The data presented is also compatible with the possible presence of patronage networks.

Abstract: The study of all the electoral processes held in Andalusia and Galicia, so far this century, presents the following main conclusions. Regarding participation, the rates are systematically higher in smaller habitats than in urban and intermediate ones. Regarding the direction of the vote, two CCAAs characterized by having had a predominant party system, during the reference period, of different political sign (PSOE in Andalusia and PP in Galicia) have been chosen. In both cases, the same pattern is observed, consisting of greater support for the predominant party in rural areas. Given the sociodemographic differences, between the different habitats, it would be possible that these different patterns of electoral behavior could be explained by a composition effect. To rule out this possibility, the results of a multinomial regression model are presented, which indicates that, once the effect of variables such as ideology, age or gender is controlled, the habitat continues to have a net effect that we will try to explain with help of specialized literature. Finally, we will present the main observable trends between the two general elections held in 2019.

Keywords: Electoral behavior, Andalusia, Galicia, population, patronage.

Juan Jesús González Rodríguez.
E-mail: jgonzalez@poli.uned.es
Luis Barreiro Castro. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5659-5715.
E-mail: lbarreiro5@alumno.uned.es
1. Introduction and justification

The habitat problem has become topical again in recent years. First it was literature and the media that circulated the myth of "empty Spain", then came the response from Spain that was not as empty as thought and that mobilized to claim the rights long postponed by a political class that he only went to her when she was on the electoral campaign. Subsequently, the Spain that felt abandoned reached Parliament and managed to get its demands on the political agenda on an equal footing with other demands. Finally, the 2020 pandemic reminded us all of the debt that society as a whole owes to the rural environment, to which it turns every time the economies of agglomeration lead us to a critical situation like the one we had to live in that year. As a consequence of all this, the gap between the rural and the urban is once again the subject of study and reflection.

2. Objectives, methodology and sources, areas of study

This article is dedicated to investigating the political and electoral dimension of the gap. We will begin, after exposing the theoretical-conceptual bases, by explaining the research strategy that we have developed to highlight the influence of habitat on voting. Next, we will present the results related to a double aspect of electoral behavior: the level of participation and voting preferences. Since these results are aggregated data from official sources, we will contrast them with micro data from the CIS electoral studies, to verify that the patterns observed in rural areas do not obey only a composition effect and, therefore, they cannot be reduced to differences in sociodemographic profile between habitats. We will finish by presenting the net effects of rural habitat with the help of a multinomial regression model that takes as reference the two 2019 general elections, as well as the trends observed between them.
3. Results

The results obtained allow us to affirm the existence of differences in electoral behavior depending on the habitat, both in electoral participation and in the direction of voting, in the elections held in Andalusia and Galicia, in the first two decades of this century. Regarding electoral participation, it has been verified that, in Andalusia and Galicia, rural environments are more participatory than urban ones. When electoral preferences are observed, the data show that the preponderance of the hegemonic party (PSOE of Andalusia and PP of Galicia) in the reference rural environment is indisputable.

The models subjected to regression show that the habitat appears as an explanatory factor of electoral behavior independently of the contribution of other variables.

4. Discussion

The greater participation observed in municipalities with smaller populations in municipal elections would be fully justified by both the psychological and the economic approach, since, on the one hand, it is much more likely that greater identification and contact between the candidate and the voters and, on the other hand, electoral participation will be favored by two factors: the possibility of a single decisive vote and the existence of selective incentives that increase the particular benefit of going to vote.

But, as mentioned, the least populated municipalities not only show to be more participatory in municipal elections, but also in the rest of the electoral processes, except for the general elections in Galicia and by a narrow margin. From a psychological point of view, identification with the candidate due to his greater contact with voters in regional, general and European elections does not have to be higher in less populated municipalities than in those with the largest population; quite the contrary, normally these candidates come from the municipalities with the largest populations, since they are the ones that contribute the most affiliates to the respective parties, so that the knowledge and contact of the inhabitants of the small municipalities with them is, in the majority of the cases, non-existent. In this way, the psychological approach does not respond to the fact that, in this type of electoral calls, participation in less populated municipalities is also higher than average. On the other hand, from
the point of view of the economic approach, given that in the regional and general elections the constituency is provincial and in the European ones it is national, the probability that a vote will be decisive in these habitats is minimal and, in any case, is the same for a voter from a small municipality as from a larger one, so the fact that participation is higher in small municipalities would not be justified either. However, the economic approach can still provide us with an explanation for the greater participation in small municipalities, if we consider it as a consequence of patronage networks that mobilize the electorate in all kinds of processes. To do this, we can assume that the benefit in the form of favours continues to be greater than the cost of going to vote, which would justify the excess mobilization that occurs in the least populated municipalities in the European elections, which is more than sixteen percentage points in the case of Andalusia and more than eight in Galicia.

It would remain to address the question of whether the differences observed in electoral participation can be attributed, according to the sociological approach, to the social characteristics of individuals, such as sex, age or ideology. Although it is evident that these characteristics can explain part of the variation observed between habitats, they do not account for those variations in their entirety. In the first place, two autonomous communities have been studied where the reference party in rural areas is of a different ideological sign and, however, they maintain a similar pattern in terms of electoral participation, so that ideology does not seem to be a fundamental element when explaining the differences in participation between habitats. Secondly, in this work two categories have been used that could be included within what we would call rural habitat, which correspond to those that include the least populated municipalities, so it is difficult to think that there are many differences between the municipalities of both groups, in aspects such as age, gender or ideology, which justify the appreciable difference in participation between both categories of municipalities. Thirdly, as has been stated in relation to the direction of the vote, the habitat also appears as an explanatory factor, regardless of sex, age and ideology. Hence, if the habitat is an explanatory variable of the vote, it must also be an explanatory variable of the electoral participation.

All the above indicates that a fundamental element to explain electoral participation is the size of the population of the municipalities. This fact would be justified by the presence of patronage networks whose privileged sphere of action is confined spaces.

Regarding the direction of the vote, in the two communities studied, a clear hegemony of the traditional parties in the rural habitat is observed, which gradually fades as the population of the municipalities increases. In line with what was stated
in the section on electoral participation, it is to be assumed that one of the causes of this pattern of voting in smaller municipalities is the presence of clientelist networks.

5. Conclusions

The results show, on the one hand, the existence of differences in electoral behavior depending on the habitat. On the other hand, the models subjected to regression suggest that the population of the municipalities is an explanatory factor of electoral behavior. This fact could be due to the presence of patronage networks that, in rural areas, would retain part of the electorate. These results are in line with the work of Barreiro (2022b) in which, based on game theory, it is shown how the strategic situation faced by a totally rational voter varies depending on the habitat. Consequently, it points out that the roots of clientelism could be found not in a certain perversion of certain political actors, but in a series of structural conditions that favor certain behaviors on the part of those voters who seek to maximize their personal benefit. In this line, the data presented is compatible with the presence, in rural areas, of a significant part of voters who would exchange their support in exchange for favors of all kinds.

6 Next steps

The work carried out opens the way to extend it to other territories, which will make it possible to verify whether rural clientelism is a phenomenon that transcends the different geographical areas. Additionally, carrying out field studies will make it possible to verify whether the demands of voters for preferential treatment are at the root of rural clientelism today.