

# RACE, RESOURCES, AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN A BRAZILIAN CITY

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*Abstract: Does race influence political behavior in Brazil? Using data from Belo Horizonte, Brazil, we explore whether an individual's propensity to take part in a political association is affected by race, independent of socioeconomic position and of the availability of resources derived from this position. We found that white individuals participate more in political associations than do black individuals; however, after taking into account the differences in all types of resources, we found no difference in participation by racial groups. Nevertheless, by interacting race, skills, and income, it turns out that different racial groups use the same resources differently. A white individual's propensity to participate politically is significantly more affected by income than a similar black individual's propensity. Therefore, we argue that race mediates the effect of resources on political participation, which means that either different groups may use different resources or different groups can differ in how intensively they use resources.*

## INTRODUCTION

Does race influence political behavior in Brazil? Using data from Belo Horizonte, Brazil, we investigate whether an individual's propensity to take part in a political association is affected by race, independent of socioeconomic position and the availability of resources derived from this position.<sup>1</sup>

We are grateful to Neuma Aguiar, head of the Center for Quantitative Research in Social Sciences (Cepeqcs) at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, for allowing us to access the Belo Horizonte Area Survey data; to Jorge Neves and Juliana Candian, for their support with the data analysis; to Ana Carolina Ogando, for her help with revising the article; and to Stanley Bailey, Adrián Gurza Lavalle, Fábio Wanderley Reis, and James Vreeland for their careful read and thoughtful comments. We are also indebted to the three *LARR* anonymous reviewers, whose comments were of great help. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Twenty-seventh Annual ILASSA Annual Conference in Austin, Texas, in 2007. The order of authors' names is alphabetical and indicates equal authorship.

1. Belo Horizonte is the capital of the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais. According to the Brazilian Institute of National Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the metropolitan area of Belo Horizonte has an estimated population of approximately 4.9 million inhabitants (2007). It is the third most populous metropolitan area in Brazil.

*Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 44, No. 2. © 2009 by the Latin American Studies Association.

A long line of political participation studies show that the possession of resources such as income, education, or even skills is critical for an individual's ability to take part in any given type of political activity. It is also known that, in Brazil, there is a large discrepancy between blacks (*negros*) and whites (*brancos*) when it comes to almost all sociodemographic indices, such as educational achievement, formal employment rates, child mortality, and life expectancy (e.g., Hasenbalg, Valle Silva, and Lima 1999; Wood and Lovell 1992). Hence, there is unequal access to socioeconomic opportunities on the basis of (although not solely) race. Do these resource asymmetries express themselves in distinctive political behavior (Lamounier 1968; Souza 1971)? If so, do differences depend on access to resources or do racial groups present distinct political behavior even when they have the same resources?

Our findings indicate that white individuals participate more in political associations than do black individuals. After taking into account the differences in all types of resources, however, we found no difference in participation by racial groups. Nevertheless, by interacting race, skills, and income, it turns out that different racial groups use the same resources differently. A white individual's propensity to participate politically is significantly more affected by income than a similar black individual's propensity.

We argue that race mediates the effect of resources on political participation. This means that both resources and race, if taken into account in an interactive perspective, are important factors that help explain the propensity to participate politically. Belonging to a racial group mediates the conversion of a resource into political participation, implying that either different groups use different resources or that different groups vary in how intensively they use these resources.

This article is organized in six sections. First, we review the theoretical framework regarding political participation. Second, we offer a discussion on race and political behavior in Brazil. Third, we briefly summarize the questions that guide this study. Fourth, we present the data and the variables we used to test our hypotheses. Fifth, we present and briefly describe our empirical analysis. Last, we discuss and interpret our major findings in light of the literature discussed in the prior sections.

#### A RESOURCE-BASED APPROACH TO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

A well-established tradition in political science argues that political participation and socioeconomic status variables are highly associated (e.g., Dahl 2006; Milbrath 1965; Nie and Verba 1975; Reis 2000a; Verba and Nie 1987; Verba, Nie, and Kim 1987; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Furthermore, this tradition points out that participation is not randomly distributed in most societies and that,

usually, higher-status individuals are more likely to participate politically. One of the first and most influential works to summarize the literature regarding political participation and social inequality was that of Milbrath (1965). One of his major theoretical propositions is that the more central the individual is, the more likely that individual is to be politically active.<sup>2</sup> The notion of centrality is composed of objective and subjective dimensions. The objective dimension includes aspects such as urban and rural scenarios, occupational status, socioeconomic status, and education. The subjective dimension refers to attitudes and beliefs such as community identification, the perception of political efficacy, involvement and interest in politics, and self-alienation. Being central in a central-periphery scale broadly means having higher scores in the objective dimension and/or having more socially and politically proactive self-perception, attitudes and beliefs, and psychological involvement in the subjective dimension.<sup>3</sup>

More recently, Verba and colleagues (1995) suggested the civic voluntarism model (CVM) to explain the propensity to participate politically. In this model, the participatory process has three main factors: (1) networks of recruitment, (2) engagement, and (3) resources. Recruitment is characterized by the presence of the individual in networks that make him or her likely to be invited, pressured, and/or instigated to take part in political activities. Engagement is defined as interest in politics, political information, partisanship, and perception of efficacy. Resources, the most significant factor of the CVM according to these authors, are necessary for perceptions and networks to turn into political actions. These resources include income, time, and civic skills. The former two resources derive from the individual's social position, and the latter one is derived from the individual's participation in secondary civil associations.

Civic skills are defined as "the communicational and organizational abilities that allow citizens to use time and money effectively in political life" (Verba et al. 1995, 320). The authors emphasize that these skills are developed and acquired through interpersonal contact and socialization in churches, at work, and in associations (although different kinds of jobs, religious affiliations, and associations have differential effects). Civic skills require active engagement in organizations rather than mere formal or informal ties to an organization.

The concept of civic skills is somewhat unclear because it lacks an analytical framework for formulating more precise causal mechanisms. It

2. Milbrath (1965, 1) defines political participation very broadly as any and every action that influences, or aims to influence, the outcome of government.

3. Some studies (e.g., Milbrath 1965; Reis 2000a; Verba and Nie 1987; Verba et al. 1995) have pointed out that more central positions in the subjective dimension depend on higher positions in the objective dimension. In spite of the importance of this debate for studies on political participation, a more detailed discussion falls outside of the scope of this article.

can be argued that it is impossible to determine the precise direction of causality: if individuals who participate in nonpolitical associations acquire resources to participate politically or if politically active individuals are more likely to take part in nonpolitical associations. Therefore, using such a term as *skills* may lead to the possibility of spuriousness. The term *civic skills* can be difficult to deal with because it entails normative aspects about the relationship between participation and democracy.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, we do believe that the ideas and suggestions that the notion of civic skills brings to this discussion are valid. In other words, the development of skills, competence, and abilities in nonpolitical socialization settings are important to the probability of becoming politically active, even if we understand that these variables are mutually constitutive, meaning that there is mutual influence between taking part in nonpolitical associations and participating politically. Moreover, participating in nonpolitical associations may provide individuals with means to overcome the obstacles of becoming politically active by the lack of (or low amount of) socioeconomic (and often asymmetrical) resources, such as income and education. These problems should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results.

Because we cannot properly explore the mechanisms that connect participation in nonpolitical associations and political activity with the data we will analyze, from now on we will use the term *associational attachment*. This term illustrates more clearly how we have (tentatively) tried to deal with a broader notion of useful skills for political participation.

### *The Political and the Nonpolitical: Distinctions*

Arguing that participating in nonpolitical organizations enhances the chances of acquiring some useful skills for political activity requires that we establish criteria capable of distinguishing political from nonpolitical participation.

The notion of political participation, when defined as behavior designed to affect political processes and outcomes by any means possible, encompasses activities that range from voting to acts of political violence (it is important to keep in mind that in some countries, like Brazil, voting can be compulsory). Voting is probably the most commonly studied political behavior. Yet to describe and to understand patterns of political behavior in a particular political system, it is necessary to investigate a wide range

4. It is important to be clear that we do not assume any inherently civic value in participation. We believe that the civic dimension of a political activity is an analytical and empirical matter; therefore, it depends on how one defines civic (or virtuous) political participation and whether one is able to find such civic or virtuous features after empirical scrutiny.

of activities that, potentially, have different logics (i.e., causes and effects) (Claggett and Pollock 2006; Verba, Nie, and Kim 1987).

However, two problems arise when one includes a wide variety of activities in the concept of political participation. First, the concept can be inflated in such a manner that it risks becoming indeterminate. Second, it loses all of its analytical strength. Therefore, it is necessary to find a definition broad enough to encompass different patterns of behavior in a variety of cultural settings and simultaneously limited in scope, which requires exclusion of some behavior to enhance explanatory power (Conge 1988). We do not intend to provide a final definition of political participation, but we do wish to distinguish political participation from nonpolitical participation on the basis of two analytical criteria that are compared in our empirical data.

The first criterion is based on Fábio Wanderley Reis's (2000a, 2000b) work, in which he criticizes the definition of what is political as a mere reference to the state. According to this author, "the political" refers to the occurrence of strategic interaction or some form of conflicting interaction. The second criterion, based on Warren's (2001) and Rosenstone and Hansen's (1993) propositions, defines political participation as the attempt to influence the distribution of social goods and values. Similar to Reis's discussions, the previously cited works also define or understand political activities as those that are designed to influence the state but are not limited to it. Therefore, political participation comprises political parties and unions as well as community organizations that attempt to influence the resource distribution of health and educational services in a given county. Political activities exclude self-help organizations or recreational associations, the primary mission of which is to provide aid or leisure to members, with no involvement in interest conflict or influencing conflict regulation.

In short, we rely on the CVM. However, it should be noted that we do not include all of its dimensions, nor do we restrict our variables to the CVM's variables. We include the variables we consider the most relevant and those that can be properly measured with our data. We also include an additional variable (education), given its relevance in studies of political participation in Brazil.<sup>5</sup> It is important to keep in mind that we maintain the CVM's perspective because we are interested in evaluating the impact of resources on participation in a resource-demanding type of political activity (participation in political organizations) by racial groups with unequal access to those resources.

5. Even though Verba and colleagues (1995) do not include education in their models, they make extensive use of this variable as an indicator of social position and as a control for other variables.

## RACE AND INEQUALITY IN BRAZIL

*Inequality and Prejudice*

Brazil is famous for many reasons, but inequality is one of its most infamous features. When one thinks of the various dimensions of inequality in Brazil, racial inequality particularly stands out. Relative to whites, nonwhite individuals have historically found themselves in the worst position of almost all (if not all) sociodemographic indicators (e.g., Hasenbalg 2005; Hasenbalg, Valle Silva, and Lima 1999; Santos 2005).<sup>6</sup> Oracy Nogueira (1998) suggests that the skin-color continuum (from darker to whiter) is accompanied by the social stratification continuum, known as the “chromatic social scale.”<sup>7</sup>

Racial inequalities not only are startling but also have perpetuated for quite some time (Telles 2003), especially when considered in a comparative perspective. Studies show that racial inequality decreased in the United States between 1940 and 1980, whereas in Brazil it has either remained stable or increased, depending on the chosen demographic indicator (Andrews 1992; Skidmore 1992). Some mid-twentieth century authors argued that racial inequality exists as a result of the legacy of Brazilian slavery, but it would eventually disappear as Brazil underwent structural changes and became a fully capitalist class society (e.g., Fernandes 1968a 1968b; slavery was abolished in 1888). Interestingly enough, starting in the 1970s, studies showed that racial groups were asymmetrically benefited by economic growth (Hasenbalg 2005). The nonnegligible gap between blacks and whites and the resilience of this gap in Brazil have led some authors to interpret that racial groups constitute types of “racial castes” (Azevedo 1966; Guimarães 2005; Telles 1996).

This kind of racial configuration also leads to the symbolic dimension of inequality. Despite the fact that the idea of different human races is biologically incorrect (Templeton 1999), the notion of race—and, for Brazilians, the notion of color—is “socially effective to build, sustain, [and] reproduce privileges, hierarchies, and differences” (Guimarães 1999, 153). Guimarães (2004, 68) argues that racial discrimination constitutes practices that, in Brazil and other societies, lead to “a hierarchy (of class and social status) between blacks and whites acknowledged as natural and given.”

6. It is important to emphasize that whites and blacks are not the only racial groups in Brazil. However, according to the 2000 Census, these two groups encompass about 98 percent of the population (see <http://www.ibge.gov.br/home/estatistica/populacao/censo2000>).

7. This hypothesis was defined by Reis (2000a, 411) as “chromatic and social scales parallelism.”

*Race and Politics*

Although there is a consensus on how racial groups have unequal access to resources, there is still deep controversy on the actual causes (prejudice, discrimination versus class-based mechanisms) that explain such differences (Souza 2006). Such controversy appears in the debates on race and politics in Brazil.

In a resource-based approach to political participation, the deprivation of resources such as income, education, and politically relevant skills should negatively affect the propensity of black individuals to take part politically, as they usually find themselves in worse social positions compared to white individuals. Verba, Schlozman, Brady, and Nie (1993, 457–458) argue that “differences in political involvement among racial or ethnic groups [should be placed] in the context of their distinctive socioeconomic positions: groups that are disadvantaged with respect to education or income are correspondingly less active politically.” According to this approach, race is relevant as long as it is associated with socioeconomic positions and with other factors, such as religion and language, which racial groups can mobilize as resources.

Hence, the expected differences in political activity are due to differences in the amount of individually possessed resources (which includes socioeconomic resources or developed skills in nonpolitical contexts). Therefore, after taking into account the differences in all types of resources, there should be no difference in participation by racial groups. However, the literature on race and politics in Brazil presents a slightly different picture.

There is consensus in the literature on race in Brazil that race has not been an effective means for forging a sense of group identity. Telles (1996) points out that factors usually connected with Afro-descendant identity, like religion and skin color, and structural factors, such as residential segregation, were not exclusive enough for Afro-descendant individuals. Therefore, unlike in the United States, these factors did not produce a clear and thick line between blacks and whites that could help establish a racial identity. Nevertheless, it is important to stress the symbolic dimension of racial inequality because symbolic capital manifests itself in prejudice, discrimination, and other mechanisms that reduce a group’s self-esteem and potential collective action. Self-perception of both political competence and ability to influence political decisions also affect political actions. Therefore, symbolic capital is also a factor that could negatively affect the probability of blacks becoming politically active. According to Hasenbalg (2005), the social acquiescence of blacks in Brazil was caused by the confluence of three factors: (1) social cooptation (which converts collective aspirations for social and economic improvement into individual



desires for mobility), (2) ideological manipulation, and (3) the use or threat of repression. These factors explain why “racial affiliation was not able to provide collective ties to stimulate blacks to mobilize towards group social mobility or to reduce racial inequality” (Hasenbalg 2005, 233).

Another approach to the relations between race and politics in Brazil are studies of black movements. Political movements that incorporate racial issues have existed, with greater or lesser impact, since the imperial period. Although the movements have never achieved large-scale adherence, they cannot be ignored. During the twentieth century, black activism played a relevant political role at various moments, such as the Brazilian Black Front (Frente Negra Brasileira, FNB), during the first decades of the century. The Unified Black Movement (Movimento Negro Unificado, MNU), which began in the 1970s, has been the most successful black movement, in terms of achievement, since the abolition of slavery (Andrews 1991). Still, even though the black movement has acted politically many times, its major focus has been cultural. In other words, its main concern was the integration of blacks into Brazilian society (especially during the first decades of the twentieth century) and the defense of a particular black culture and identity, such as black soul during the 1970s (Hanchard 1993).

However, since 1985, important changes have taken place in the black movement. For instance, the MNU was the first to assume radical racialism, with *quilombismo's* Afrocentrism, proposed by Abdias Nascimento. During the 1980s and 1990s, other organizations were created to address a racial agenda that ranged from the politics of recognition to the fight against racism and discrimination and to redistributive politics (affirmative action). The demands for antidiscrimination policies and the attempt to reduce racial inequalities are clearly different from the cultural demands, which the state adopted more easily as part of the Brazilian foundational myth based on syncretism among indigenous peoples, blacks, and whites (Guimarães 2003).<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, as Mala Htun (2004) shows, there were relevant changes in the government's position regarding race; Fernando Henrique Cardoso was the first president to promote race-based redistributive policies and to personally take initiative on racial issues. Moreover, international conferences such as the 2001 World Conference on Racism, in Durban, South Africa, were very important in legitimating black movements and denouncing racism (Paschel and Sawyer 2008; Sawyer 2005).

8. A survey of civil society organizations in São Paulo (Gurza Lavalle, Castello, and Bichir 2007) showed that most, though not all, black social movements are nongovernmental organizations, meaning that their beneficiaries are a population segment (blacks) and their main activities are typically advocacy practices to intermedate the beneficiaries' assumed interests.



In a different perspective, Lamounier (1968), Souza (1971), Soares and Valle Silva (1985, 1987), Berquó and Alencastro (1992), and Castro (1993) claim that race is a variable that causes differential voting behavior. These authors argue that the experience of discrimination and prejudice influence the voting behavior of blacks, even though they do not argue that race is an attribute that produces amplified collective action.

Souza (1971), for instance, argues that blacks would more intensively express a preference for parties and candidates regarded as populist when compared to whites, even when blacks are in a higher social position (the term *populist* is defined as a politician who claims to represent the wishes and opinions of poor, ordinary people). Soares and Valle Silva (1985) also found a tendency among mixed-race individuals (*pardos*) to vote for populist candidates, especially those considered Getúlio Vargas's political heirs. Castro (1993) discovered divergence in black voting behavior, varying from a higher degree of apathy to greater radicalism, depending on the individual's social position. Lower-strata black individuals were more apathetic (or alienated, according to the author), annulling their votes or voting in blank. On the other hand, higher-strata black individuals, especially those with more education, not only were more active by not annulling their votes but also chose candidates identified as radicals more frequently. Prandi (1996) points out that, in spite of the fact that race affects voting behavior, it is not the main determinant: age and education superseded race as the main determinants in the 1994 presidential election. Nevertheless, Prandi argues that there was a clear tendency for blacks to vote for the populist candidate Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, while most whites voted for the right-wing candidate Fernando Henrique Cardoso.

In studies on race and voting behavior in Brazil, there is an assumption that experiences of discrimination and racial inequalities affect the political behavior of blacks. However, none of these studies refutes the traditional view that broad political collective action is not based on the attribute of race, especially when compared to other countries.

We are interested in assessing the extent to which a resource-based approach for political participation explains the relationship between race and political behavior in Brazil. Given the literature on race and voting behavior, race has an effect independent of socioeconomic position, even though the direction and the intensity of this effect and, most important, the mechanisms that explain it are not entirely clear. The literature on race and collective action highlights the difficulties that racially oriented social movements face to politically mobilize a broader array of individuals.

Unlike what Verba and colleagues (1993) have found in the United States, the resources derived from racial and ethnic identity that can enhance the probability of participation of socioeconomically disadvantaged racial groups are not present in Brazil (e.g., racially exclusive language,

religion). Yet there are significant race-based disparities in socioeconomic resources.

This brings us back to one of the first questions that motivated this article: how do race and resources relate to the propensity to become politically active? We are aware that a resource-based approach is not the only available model to explain the political behavior of individuals in racial groups (Leighley and Vedlitz 1999). However, given the reasons outlined previously and the influence of the resource-based approach on studies of political behavior in Brazil, we choose to discuss and test hypotheses derived from this model.

### *Racial Classification*

As mentioned earlier, race is a social construction, and there is no difference between racial groups as far as genetics is concerned. Belonging to a racial group, however, has an impact on the real conditions, achievements, and various individual psychological aspects of one's life. Nevertheless, the literature on race and political behavior in Brazil carelessly neglects the debate on racial classification. In addition, authors usually take for granted how individuals are racially classified by themselves or others. By considering how and why there are different forms of classification, one is compelled to think of race as more than just information constructed and collected in the interaction between interviewers and interviewees in a research survey.

It is not an easy task to comprehend the forms of racial classification in Brazil. Since the abolition of slavery, Brazil has not had a legal system of racial classification. This facilitated the development and use of various standards for racial classification that vary contextually. In general, there are at least three major standards for racial classification.<sup>9</sup> The system adopted by IBGE, which is usually used in research, surveys, and censuses, employs the categories *branco*, *preto*, and the intermediate category of *pardo*. The black movement argues that the most salient racial cleavage in Brazil is between brancos and individuals of African descent, negros (blacks). Last, there is a more popular racial classification system, in which a diversity of forms and categories are used, depending on the geographical setting, the social interaction context, and the classifier and the classified. In addition to these elements, the popular racial classification system includes the widely used category *moreno*, despite that this category presents various ambiguities (Bailey and Telles 2006; Telles 2003) (moreover, the category of "moreno" can be used as a socially accepted

9. It should be noted that in discussing the classifications of brancos, pretos, and pardos, we do not take into consideration Asians and indigenous individuals.

way to refer to “colored” individuals; see, e.g., Hasenbalg, Valle Silva, and Lima 1999).

Despite the ambiguities clearly presented by the use of racial classifications, this study relies on a simple classification system that draws the color line between whites and nonwhites. In our opinion, this is the most consistent way to deal with such problems. Brancos tend to be more consistently classified than pardos and pretos in self-classification and (alter) interviewer classifications. Pardos, an intermediate category, has a medium level of consistency, even though a third of self-classified pardos are classified by alter-classification as brancos or pretos. Pretos have the least consistent classification, given that half of the self-classified pretos are considered by alter-classification to be pardos. Such findings show that there is more probability of consistency for those considered branco than for those considered pardo or preto. In essence, this also indicates that the distinction branco (white) and *não-branco* (nonwhite) is more consistent (Telles 1996, 2003). Beyond the similarity of socioeconomic indicators among pardos and pretos in contrast to brancos, there are good reasons to aggregate pretos and pardos as nonwhites or negros (blacks). Therefore, we argue that, for our purposes, using the categories blacks (negros) and whites (brancos) is a sound strategy, given the current state of development of the study of race and politics. (In the section “Empirical Findings,” we show that, for our purposes, using pretos and pardos is not more empirically accurate than aggregating the categories into blacks.)

#### GUIDING QUESTIONS

We have chosen to analyze the propensity to take part in political associations. The main reason for this choice is that political participation in associations is typically more resource demanding than some other modes of participation, such as voting and signing petitions. Taking part in associations demands time availability, attendance, and frequently, deliberative and organizational skills. This type of participation is contrasted with voting, which occurs regularly within relatively longer time spans and is clearly institutionalized by political systems, which designate the times and places for voting, and provide the means for doing so. One can conclude thus far that taking part in political associations is more costly. The more resource demanding the political activity is we have chosen, the more appropriate the test is for a resource-centered approach.

Moreover, because we will deal with racial groups with very asymmetric resource levels, a resource-centered approach may serve as a useful model to test and interpret the existence of conditioning to political participation of blacks and whites. The literature on race and voting behavior leads us to expect that race plays a secondary, though relevant, role in

political participation. However, it is not clear how race affects political behavior or how race relates to resources when it comes to political participation. We will pursue three main questions: Do blacks and whites present different levels of participation in political associations? If yes, do race or resources influence the different propensities for political participation? Do the same resources equally affect the political participation of blacks and whites?

#### DATA AND METHODOLOGY

##### *Data*

We analyzed data from the Belo Horizonte Area Survey (BHAS), collected in 2005, a random representative sample of the Belo Horizonte metropolitan area population. The survey was conducted by the Center for Quantitative Research in Social Sciences at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil (Aguar 2005). The total of successfully completed interviews was 1,122. The sample was based on a three-level selection. Census areas and households were randomly selected, and the respondent was randomly chosen from the members of the household. The initial sample design was composed of 1,440 cases. The final database was weighted to reduce bias (see Suyama and Fernandes 2007).

Because our major objective is to present data and to analyze the propensity of white and black racial groups to take part in political organizations, we excluded any individual who self-identified as indigenous (*indígena*), Asian (*amarelo*), or another racial category. We ended up with a sample of 1,010 cases, after a weighting bias correction of individuals who self-identified as whites (*brancos*) and blacks (*pretos* and *pardos*) in a sample of 1,010 cases, after a weighting bias correction (without the weight for bias correction, the sample has 999 cases; all multivariate analyses are computed with the 999 cases without any weight for bias correction). We had two main reasons for doing this. The primary reason is that the debate on race and political behavior in Brazil is almost entirely focused on the behavior of blacks and whites, and our goal is to establish a dialogue with that particular literature. Second, the number of individuals in our sample who self-classified as indigenous, Asian, or another racial category was insufficient for any meaningful analysis in our sample.

##### *Variables*

*Political participation* / As mentioned earlier, our dependent variable is participation in political associations. We consider that an individual participates politically when he or she participates in associations that have politically oriented activities. On the basis of the criteria presented in





























