

The gender-equalizing effects of labor unions: Union membership and gender gaps in political participation in Latin America

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Abstract

Labor unions play a key role in reducing women's labor market disadvantages. Despite this, critics argue that they continue to reproduce male-dominated cultures. This article contributes to this debate by examining whether unions reduce gender gaps in political participation, a domain where inequality remains persistent. We integrate the resource model of political participation with feminist scholarship and argue that unions can play an important role in reducing and even reversing political gender gaps. Using World Values Survey data from Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay (1994–2022), we show that, across the four countries, union membership not only narrows but reverses gender disparities in civic engagement. Furthermore, in Chile, union membership reverses gender gaps in participation in political activities. These findings extend research on the equalizing effects of unions beyond the labor market into the political realm and demonstrate that unions can foster women's political engagement even in contexts where union organization is weak. Overall, the study underscores the democratic significance of unions as gender-equalizing institutions.

Keywords

gender inequality, labor unions, political participation, Latin America

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Introduction

Labor unions play a key role in reducing women's labor market disadvantages, including wage gaps and job insecurity (Bryson et al., 2020; Haile, 2021; ILO, 2020; Milkman, 2007). Despite this, critics note that unions have historically been male-dominated institutions, often reluctant to incorporate women and hesitant to advance gendered concerns in their agendas. From this perspective, unions tend to reproduce masculine cultures and workplace hierarchies, limiting their potential to empower women. This article engages this debate by analyzing whether unions help reduce gender gaps in political participation.

Political participation is an area where gender inequalities remain persistent. Women participate less than men in a wide range of activities, from party membership to protests (Coffé and Dilli, 2015; Espinal and Zhao, 2015; Fakihi and Sleiman, 2024; Liu, 2022). Explanations for these gaps have traditionally relied on the resource model of participation, which highlights the role of individual-level resources—education, income, and civic skills—in fostering political engagement (Brady et al., 1995; Teorell, Sum et al., 2007; Verba et al., 1995). Feminist scholarship, by contrast, has emphasized that gender inequalities in participation cannot be explained solely by resource deficits. Structural barriers such as the unequal division of domestic labor, gendered patterns of employment, and exclusionary political and institutional cultures all shape women's opportunities and motivations to engage politically (Federici, 2021; Scott, 1988; Tronto, 2015).

In this article, we argue that unions are well positioned to address both sets of barriers. Unions provide training, organizational experience, and civic skills, while also integrating women into collective struggles and legitimizing their voices in politics. Thus, unions combine the mechanisms emphasized by resource and feminist models, potentially reducing gendered inequalities in participation.

Although unions are often described as “schools of democracy” (Verba et al., 1995), little is known about whether their effects are gendered. We propose that unions can narrow the gender gap in participation by producing a “gender-equalizing effect,” i.e., an effect observed when membership in unions reduces differences between men and women.

To investigate this question, we analyze survey data from four Latin American countries: Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay. These cases represent diverse union and labor regimes, ranging from centralized (Argentina, Uruguay) to fragmented industrial relations (IR) systems (Chile, Peru) (Collier and Collier, 2002; Cook, 2007; Etchemendy, 2019; Mejía Alvites, 2019; Pérez-Ahumada, 2023). Using data from the World Values Survey (WVS), waves 3 (1994–1998) to 7 (2017–2022), we demonstrate that union membership not only narrows but reverses gender disparities in *civic engagement* (e.g., membership in community-based organizations). Moreover, we find that in Chile, union membership also reverses gender gaps in *participation in political actions* (e.g., party membership and participation in demonstrations). These results suggest that unions' gender equalizing effect extends beyond economic outcomes to the political sphere. Importantly, they also show that unions can foster women's political engagement even in contexts such as Chile, where unions are institutionally weak and fragmented.

Our contributions are threefold. First, we conceptualize unions as sites where mechanisms identified by the resource model and feminist scholarship intersect, making unions particularly relevant for understanding gendered dynamics of political participation. Second, we extend research on the equalizing effects of unions beyond the labor market into the realm of political life. Third, we provide new comparative evidence from Latin America, a region where empirical studies on union's gendered political effects are practically non-existent. In sum, this article contributes to debates on gender, unions, and democracy by showing that labor unions can help close gender gaps in political participation. Unions matter not only for workers' material well-being but also for promoting more inclusive forms of democratic citizenship.

Literature review

Gender gaps in political participation

Political participation encompasses different types of activities through which citizens seek to influence political outcomes (Brady et al., 1995). These actions occur in diverse arenas such as elections, policymaking, and community affairs (Ekman and Amnå, 2012; Teorell, Torcal et al., 2007; Verba et al., 1995). They include institutional actions (e.g., voting, contacting policymakers, working for parties, donating), non-institutional and contentious actions (e.g., protests, marches), community actions (e.g., civic engagement in local organizations), and "expressive" actions like boycotts (Alvarez et al., 2017; Ekman and Amnå, 2012; Teorell, Torcal, et al., 2007).

According to the resource model, political participation depends on resources such as time, money, and "civic"—organizational and communication—skills (Brady et al., 1995; Teorell, Sum, et al., 2007). These resources are acquired in childhood and throughout life (e.g., in workplaces or non-political organizations) and shape individuals' political capacities. Consequently, participation is expected to be higher among groups with greater resources, such as men, the well-educated, middle-aged, and urban residents (Espinal and Zhao, 2015; Persson, 2015; Teorell, Sum, et al., 2007).

Consistent with this model, scholars show persistent gender gaps in participation. While voting is largely unaffected by gender (Liu, 2022; Teorell, Sum, et al., 2007), women are less likely than men to discuss politics or join protests, boycotts, marches, and party activities (Espinal and Zhao, 2015; Liu, 2022). Scholars explain this relationship by pointing to women's lower access to socioeconomic or political resources that foster engagement, such as income, education, or civic skills developed in voluntary associations (Coffé and Dilli, 2015; Fakihi and Sleiman, 2024; Teorell, Sum, et al., 2007).

Feminist scholars, on the other hand, offer explanations that emphasize the masculine character of politics rooted in the historical sexual division of labor. Sexual division of labor has limited women's participation in traditional spaces of representation such as parties and unions because it produces both structural barriers for women—e.g., lower labor force participation and the disproportionate burden of domestic and care work (Federici, 2021; Scott, 1988; Tronto, 2015)—and cultural norms and institutional practices that normalize male leadership and neglect women's structural constraints

(Blaschke, 2015). All social and political organizations, including unions, tend to reproduce these exclusions, especially in leadership (Godinho Delgado, 2022; Laight, 2020; Milkman, 2007).

However, at various junctures women have organized collectively to demand rights and challenge marginalization (Arruzza et al., 2019; Martin and Shaw, 2021; Vogel, 2024). As a result, in recent years the gender gap in participation has narrowed, particularly in Western societies (Bode, 2017). In Latin America, feminist movements have been central to this trend, fueling protests against gender inequalities. Landmark examples include Argentina's *Ni Una Menos* mobilizations against femicide (Daby and Moseley, 2022), the 2017 transnational Feminist Strike denouncing the devaluation of women's labor (Arruzza et al., 2019), and Chile's 2018 Feminist May protests against misogyny in higher education (Palma Manríquez, 2018). These mobilizations have also foregrounded reproductive rights and the recognition of unpaid care work (Batthyány, 2021).

Within the labor movement, similar trends have been observed. Contrary to the patterns observed in the 1970s and 1980s, recent research in several countries across Europe, North America, and Latin America shows a notable increase in women's support for unions and in their participation in labor unions (Díaz Rojas and von Geldern Martel, 2023; Haile, 2021; Harris and Moffat, 2023; Torre, 2023). In many cases, this increase was driven by feminist mobilizations that succeeded in articulating their own agendas within trade unions and in bringing to the fore demands that had long been neglected by these organizations, e.g., the need to address workplace sexual harassment or work-family conciliation issues (ILO, 2020; Kirton, 2015; Laight, 2020; Lawrence, 1994; Velásquez and Retamal, 2023).

Despite these developments, women continue to participate less in politics than men, both globally and in Latin America (Coffé and Dilli, 2015; Espinal and Zhao, 2015; Fakihi and Sleiman, 2024; Liu, 2022), and remain underrepresented in union leadership positions (Blaschke, 2015; Godinho Delgado, 2022). This limits their influence over labor and political agendas and constrains unions' ability to address gender issues (Brochard and Letablier, 2017; Godinho Delgado, 2022; Milkman, 2007).

Labor unions, political participation, and gender inequality

There is abundant evidence that labor unions stimulate workers' participation in politics. Compared to non-union members, unionized workers are more likely to discuss politics, vote, work for parties, and engage in disruptive, non-institutional actions such as protests and boycotts (Hadziabdic and Baccaro, 2020; Kerrissey and Schofer, 2018; Turner et al., 2020). In Latin America, quantitative research on unions' "political effects" remains scarce, but the few available studies suggest that, like their counterparts in affluent nations, Latin American unions encourage political participation and civic engagement among their members, even though they are comparatively weaker (Chambers-Ju and Hecock, 2021; Pérez-Ahumada and Astorga-Pinto, 2025).

Scholars have offered different explanations for this relationship. One perspective emphasizes that unions heighten workers' political awareness and reinforce left-leaning orientations, thereby increasing their disposition to act collectively (Kerrissey and

Schofer, 2013; Pérez-Ahumada and Astorga-Pinto, 2025; Wright, 1997). Another perspective, consistent with the resource model of political participation, highlights the role of unions as “schools of democracy” that provide political resources and civic skills facilitating engagement (Hadziabdic and Baccaro, 2020; Terriquez, 2011; Verba et al., 1995). For instance, scholars show that unionized workers are more likely to engage in collective action because union membership increases political interest, reinforces left-leaning identities, and enhances leadership and organizational skills that transfer from the workplace to broader political arenas (Kerrissey and Schofer, 2013; Pérez-Ahumada and Astorga-Pinto, 2025; Terriquez, 2011).

Most of these studies cannot demonstrate that unions *cause* political participation. These studies are usually based on cross-sectional data, which do not disentangle “selection effects” (individual factors motivating workers to join a union) from “treatment effects” (the attitudinal changes that follow union membership) (Hadziabdic and Baccaro, 2020; Kim and Margalit, 2017). Nevertheless, research using strategies to address endogeneity concerns—such as controlling for firm-level determinants of union membership—suggests that, unlike other associations, union membership is shaped more by exogenous workplace characteristics (e.g., firm size, presence of a union) than by workers’ political orientations (Kerrissey and Schofer, 2013; Ryan and Turner, 2021). As a result, only a small portion of the association between union membership and political outcomes can be attributed to self-selection (Kim and Margalit, 2017). The implication is that, while recognizing the limitations of cross-sectional data, it is still worth analyzing the association between union membership and political participation and whether such association varies by gender. This is fundamental for addressing the goal of this article, which is not whether union membership causes political participation, but rather whether it reinforces the propensity to participate in politics in a gender-equalizing way.

To the best of our knowledge, no investigation has analyzed to what extent unions’ “political effects” can help reduce the gender gap in political participation. However, empirical research suggests that unions can have positive effects for gender equality. For instance, research shows that unions contribute significantly to reducing wage gaps between female and male workers by mitigating gender biases in salary systems and bonus schemes (Bryson et al., 2020; ILO, 2020; Kostøl and Svarstad, 2025). Furthermore, the growing presence of women within trade unions enhances their effectiveness in reducing gender disparities (Haile, 2021; ILO, 2020; Kostøl and Svarstad, 2025).

Based on all the arguments developed thus far, we hypothesize that:

H1: There is a positive association between union membership and political participation: union members’ levels of political participation are significantly higher than that of nonunion members.

H2: Women’s levels of political participation are significantly lower than men’s.

H3: Union membership has a gender equalizing effect on political participation: the positive association between union membership and political participation is *stronger* for women than men.

Labor unions in Latin America: The cases of Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay

Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay provide valuable cases for analysis because they represent diverse union and labor regimes. During the era of Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI), unions were central political actors across all four countries (Collier and Collier, 2002). However, shaped by the distinct political and institutional contexts in which they operated, unions' influence and strategies varied considerably across these countries.

Throughout the 20th century, Argentina (like Mexico and Brazil until the 1980s) developed state-corporatist arrangements that granted unions significant institutional power. These included legislation that restricted inter-union competition and promoted centralized, industry-level bargaining (Cook, 2007). However, in these contexts, these arrangements also subordinated unions to the state and to the populist parties that controlled it (De la Garza, 2001).

By contrast, countries such as Chile, Bolivia, Uruguay, and, more briefly, Peru developed traditions of class-based unionism. Here, ISI policies were less favorable to labor, as labor laws promoted union fragmentation and decentralized bargaining at the company level (Cook, 2007; Mejía Alvites, 2019). With fewer institutional resources, unions turned to alliances with left-wing parties—often Marxist—that, although frequently in opposition, played a crucial role in labor mobilization (De la Garza, 2001). Differences remained, however, as in Uruguay and Peru, unlike Chile, populist parties also incorporated labor “from above” (Collier and Collier, 2002).

Both models were later transformed by authoritarian regimes and by the wave of neo-liberal reforms that began in the mid-1980s (and a decade earlier in Chile, under Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship). In countries with class-based traditions, unions resisted these reforms, whether implemented under authoritarian regimes (Chile, Peru) or democracy (Uruguay). Yet their capacity to block neoliberal restructuring was limited (Carneiro et al., 2020; De la Garza, 2001). In Uruguay, for instance, President Luis A. Lacalle (1990–1995) deregulated labor markets and suspended the Wage Councils, *de facto* decentralizing collective bargaining. Similarly, the neoliberal regimes of Pinochet in Chile (1973–1990) and Alberto Fujimori in Peru (1990–2000) restricted the right to strike, fragmented collective bargaining, and promoted union pluralism (Cook, 2007; Pérez-Ahumada, 2023).

In corporatist contexts such as Argentina, the picture was different. Here, neoliberal reforms were introduced by parties historically allied with labor. This “unexpected betrayal” weakened unions, who oscillated between resistance and accommodation before ultimately subordinating to market reforms (De la Garza, 2001). Additionally, the credibility of corporatist unions declined as new labor organizations emerged to challenge both their monopolistic position and their limited interest in representing precarious workers (Marticorena and D'Urso, 2022).

The consequences of these transformations became evident in the 2000s amid the “left turn” and the partial political reincorporation of the working classes (Rossi and Silva, 2018). In Argentina and Uruguay, the left turn revitalized ties between unions and governing parties, which in turn implemented policies that recentralized bargaining and

strengthened the right to strike. These reforms laid the foundation for what Etchemendy (2019) terms “segmented neo-corporatism”: a coalition between centralized labor movements and center-left governments, combining wage coordination and union inclusion in policymaking, but limited in scope because of high levels of informality.

This trajectory contrasts with Chile and Peru. In Chile, ties between unions and left-wing parties (notably the Communist Party) persisted but became significantly weakened. As a result, electoral victories of the left did not lead to a broader revitalization of union-party alliances or to major pro-labor reforms comparable to those in Argentina and Uruguay (Pérez-Ahumada, 2023). Although union activism has resurged, and unions enjoy comparatively high levels of public support, their capacity to influence policy remains limited (Pérez-Ahumada et al., 2025).

Peru represents an even more unfavorable case. Historically weaker ties between unions and political parties such as APRA or the Communist Party were further eroded by Fujimori’s repression and the continuity of neoliberal labor reforms. This produced a lasting crisis of unionism (Manky, 2019; Mejía Alvites, 2019). As Manky (2019) notes, the weakness of the Peruvian left deprived unions of crucial allies, undermining their mobilization capacity. This stands in contrast to Chile, where continued support from parties like the Communist Party has helped unions maintain some organizational strength despite restrictive labor laws (Manky, 2019; Pérez-Ahumada, 2023).

All in all, based on this comparative evidence, we hypothesize that:

H4. The gender-equalizing effect of union membership on political participation is larger in Argentina and Uruguay, and lower in Chile and especially in Peru.

Data and methods

We relied on data from the WVS, a cross-national research program that collects nationally representative survey data on individuals’ values, beliefs, and attitudes toward topics such as politics, religion, and social norms. Conducted by an international network of social scientists, the WVS uses standardized questionnaires to enable cross-country and over-time comparisons.

Due to data availability, we focused on four waves of the WVS: wave 3 (1994–1998), wave 5 (2005–2009), wave 6 (2010–2014), and wave 7 (2017–2022). After correcting some inconsistencies in data availability (particularly, we excluded wave 6 in the Argentina sample because some relevant variables were not available) and after applying listwise deletion, we obtained the following country samples: Argentina ($N=2888$), Chile ($N=3747$), Peru ($N=4902$), and Uruguay ($N=3765$).

Dependent variables

Building upon prior studies (Ekman and Amnå, 2012; Espinal and Zhao, 2015; Klesner, 2007; van Deth, 2014), in this article we measure political participation through two separate variables:

1. *Participation in political activities*: this variable was measured through an index that indicates whether the respondents have participated in political actions such as boycotts, demonstrations, or petition signing, and whether the respondents are members of political parties. All variables were coded 1 if the respondents have participated/are party members, and 0 if they have/are not. The correlations between these variables were positive and relatively high—the average tetrachoric correlations ranged between $r_{tet}=0.38$ (Peru) and $r_{tet}=0.50$ (Uruguay). Consistent with prior research (Alvarez et al., 2017), the positive correlations suggest that, while encompassing conventional and unconventional forms of participation, the activities included in this index are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. To obtain the index, the four variables were summed up. To facilitate interpretation, the original index was transformed into a 1–10 scale (higher values indicate higher participation in political activities).
2. *Civic engagement*: This variable was measured through an index that indicates whether the respondents are members of (a) sport/recreational, (b) artistic/educational, (c) environmental, and (d) charitable/humanitarian organizations (1 = yes, 0 = No). These variables were highly correlated; the average tetrachoric correlations ranged between $r_{tet}=0.59$ (Peru) and $r_{tet}=0.80$ (Argentina). These variables were summed up to obtain the index, which was then transformed into a 1–10 scale (higher values denote higher civic engagement). Although these activities may not appear “political” in a narrow sense, we include them for both theoretical and empirical reasons. Theoretically, they capture forms of participation aimed at influencing collective and community life (Ekman and Amnå, 2012; van Deth, 2014). Empirically, research in Latin America shows that such forms of engagement are especially important among lower-income groups and can serve as a stepping stone to more overtly political actions, such as those captured in our index of political participation (Alvarez et al., 2017; Boulding and Holzner, 2021). Including civic engagement therefore allows us to capture a broader range of participatory practices among Latin American workers.

Independent variables

The main independent variables are two:

1. Sex (female = 1, male = 0)
2. Union membership, measured through a dichotomous variable coded 1 if the respondents are union members and 0 if they are not.

Additionally, to explore the mechanisms that may connect (mediate) union membership and political participation among females, in a second stage of this study we analyzed three more variables: (1) *Strike participation* (1 = yes, 0 = no); (2) *Political interest*, measured through a 0–3 interval scale obtained from the survey question “How interested would you say you are in politics?” (0 = not interested at all to 3 = very interested); and (3) *Political position*, measured through four categories indicating

the respondents' self-identification: "Left" (scores 0–3 on the original interval scale), "Center" (scores 4–6), "Right" (scores 7–10), and "No political position" (DK/NA).

Building on traditional mediation analysis (Baron and Kenny, 1986), we explored to what extent the hypothesized positive effect of union membership on women's political participation can be explained by the fact that unions increase workers' political skills/resources, as suggested in empirical studies (Kerrissey and Schofer, 2013; Pérez-Ahumada and Astorga-Pinto, 2025; Terriquez, 2011). More specifically, we wanted to explore whether unions foster female workers' political participation by increasing their participation in workplace actions (particularly strikes) as well as their interest in politics and their left-leaning orientations. Data for strike participation were not available in wave 5. Therefore, the sample size in this exploratory mediation analysis was slightly smaller.

Controls

In addition, our analyses included the following sociodemographic controls:

- Employment status: 1. Not working, 2. Salaried worker, 3. Self-employed.
- Education level: 1. Lower (primary or no education), 2. Middle (secondary level of education), 3. Upper level (incomplete or complete tertiary education).
- Age: 15–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, 55–64, and 65 years or more.
- Marital status: 1 = married or live-in-partner, 0 = other.
- Children: dummy variable indicating whether the respondent has children (1 = yes)

Finally, we included wave dummies to control for unobserved time trends (reference category = wave 3).

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analysis. Data and codes are available in the OSF repository¹:

Table 2 presents the distribution of union and non-union members by sex across the country samples. The sample shares of union membership do not fully match national-level union density—suggesting, for example, an overrepresentation of union members in Chile and an underrepresentation in Argentina and Uruguay (Pérez-Ahumada, 2023: 161). In the case of Argentina, this underrepresentation is likely reinforced by the exclusion of wave 6, conducted in 2012–2013 during the union revitalization period (Etchemendy, 2019; Marticorena and D'Urso, 2022). While this may affect descriptive estimates, the analysis is not intended to measure country-level unionization rates but to examine the relationship between union membership and political participation. Importantly, in all four countries, men are consistently more likely than women to be union members, a pattern that aligns with national trends during the period studied. This consistency supports the validity of the data for our purposes. Hence, despite limitations in representativeness, the dataset is suitable for assessing whether union membership is associated with gender-equalizing effects in political participation.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

	Argentina (N=2888)					Chile (N=3747)					Peru (N=4902)					Uruguay (N=3765)				
	%	M	SD	Min.	Max.	%	M	SD	Min.	Max.	%	M	SD	Min.	Max.	%	M	SD	Min.	Max.
Participation in political activities		1.4	2.14	0	10		1.3	2.07	1	10		1.1	1.89	0	10		1.62	2.26	0	10
Civic engagement		1.33	2.5	0	10		2.13	3.22	1	10		1.45	2.42	0	10		1.47	2.54	0	10
Female (1 = yes)		0.53	0.5	0	1		0.53	0.5	0	1		0.5	0.5	0	1		0.59	0.49	0	1
Union membership (1 = yes)		0.08	0.27	0	1		0.17	0.37	0	1		0.08	0.27	0	1		0.12	0.32	0	1
Strike participation (1 = yes) *		0.1	0.3	0	1		0.12	0.32	0	1		0.08	0.27	0	1		0.14	0.35	0	1
Political interest		0.98	0.94	0	3		0.86	0.9	0	3		0.97	0.91	0	3		1.13	1.07	0	3
Political position																				
Left	14.02						22.66					14.95					32.96			
Center	40.75						35.44					42.9					31.74			
Right	22.4						15.88					24.61					25.02			
No political position	22.82						26.02					17.5					10.28			
Employment status																				
Not working	44.7						42.62					40.47					48.71			
Salaried worker	38.92						49.21					29.4					42.28			
Self-employed	16.38						8.17					29.87					9			
Education level																				
Lower (primary or no education)	35.46						16.25					20.89					38.35			
Middle (secondary level of education)	49.83						61.38					55.2					43.43			
Upper level (incomplete or complete tertiary education)	14.72						22.36					23.91					18.22			
Age																				
15-24	18.56						15.21					22.54					12.93			
25-34	21.78						20.15					24.93					18.62			
35-44	18.42						20.79					21.42					16.76			
45-54	14.27						17.77					15.44					14.79			
55 - 64	12.95						13.85					9.38					16.55			

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

	Argentina (N = 2888)					Chile (N = 3747)					Peru (N = 4902)					Uruguay (N = 3765)				
	%	M	SD	Min.	Max.	%	M	SD	Min.	Max.	%	M	SD	Min.	Max.	%	M	SD	Min.	Max.
65 or more	14.02					12.22					6.28					20.35				
Marital status (1 = married/		0.55	0.5	0	1		0.61	0.49	0	1		0.6	0.49	0	1		0.56	0.5	0	1
live-in-partner)																				
Children (1 = yes)		0.69	0.46	0	1		0.77	0.42	0	1		0.7	0.46	0	1		0.77	0.42	0	1

Table 2. Union membership by sex (sample percentages).

	Argentina		Chile		Peru		Uruguay	
	Nonunion members	Union members	Nonunion members	Union members	Nonunion members	Union members	Nonunion members	Union members
Males	90.5	9.5	79.2	20.8	90.5	9.5	85.6	14.4
Females	93.2	6.8	86.8	13.2	94.0	6.0	90.0	10.0
Total	92.0	8.0	83.2	16.8	92.2	7.8	88.2	11.8
	$\chi^2 = 6.736; P < .001$		$\chi^2 = 38.310; P < .001$		$\chi^2 = 20.435; P < .001$		$\chi^2 = 16.535; P < .001$	

Analytical strategy

To address the hypotheses, we used Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions. As stated above, our main objective is to analyze whether labor unions foster political participation among female workers, relative to male workers. Therefore, our analysis focuses mostly on the interaction effects between union membership and gender.

To analyze the mechanisms that may explain union membership's effects on female workers' participation, in the second stage of our analysis we fit regression models for a subsample of women only. In this exploratory analysis, we focus on whether the size of the coefficient for union membership changes (i.e., is reduced) after including the variables theorized as mediators (strike participation, interest in politics, and political orientation).

Considering the goals of our research, the statistical analyses were performed separately for each country.

It is important to emphasize that our cross-sectional data do not distinguish between selection and treatment effects, so they do not allow us to demonstrate that union membership causes political participation. Despite this, we believe that our methods are helpful for analyzing whether union membership contributes to reducing gender gaps in political participation. As pointed out above, previous research suggests not only that union membership is explained mostly by exogenous factors (i.e., non-voluntary factors such as finding a job in a unionized workplace), but also that self-selection accounts for a small portion of the observed political effects of unions (Kerrissey and Schofer, 2013; Kim and Margalit, 2017; Ryan and Turner, 2021). Therefore, while using cross-sectional data, in the following sections we will refer to unions' "gender-equalizing effects" in the statistical sense of the term, not in a causal sense. In other words, we will talk about gender-equalizing effects when the interactive regression coefficients suggest that union membership reduces the gender gap in political participation.

Results

Table 3 presents several OLS regression models predicting participation in political actions and civic engagement in the four countries under study. For each country and dependent variable, two models are presented: one without interaction effects (models a) and another including interaction effects (models b).

Strongly consistent with H1, the regression models show that, in all four countries, the levels of participation in political activities (models 1a, 2a, 3a, and 4a) and of civic engagement (models 5a, 6a, 7a, and 8a) are significantly higher among unionized workers than among nonunionized workers. The coefficients for gender show, on the other hand, that in the four countries women's participation in political activities is lower than men's. Gender gaps are also visible in civic engagement, but only in Peru. In the other countries, the levels of civic engagement are statistically the same for women and men (although the sign of the female coefficients is positive, in none of these countries are they statistically significant). This means that H2 should be only partially accepted.

As stated above, the focus of our analysis is the interaction effects. These effects are presented in models 1b, 2b, 3b, and 4b (participation in political activities) and in models

Table 3. Regression models predicting political participation in Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay.

1. Political activities	Argentina (N = 2888)		Chile (N = 3747)		Peru (N = 4902)		Uruguay (N = 3765)	
	M1a	M1b	M2a	M2b	M3a	M3b	M4a	M4b
Unionized	2.110*** (0.137)	1.912*** (0.184)	1.761*** (0.085)	1.449*** (0.113)	1.770*** (0.096)	1.879*** (0.122)	2.075*** (0.105)	1.988*** (0.146)
Female	-0.137† (0.078)	-0.171* (0.081)	-0.086 (0.068)	-0.207** (0.074)	-0.145** (0.054)	-0.124* (0.056)	-0.115† (0.069)	-0.137† (0.074)
Female*Unionized		0.441 (0.273)		0.715*** (0.170)		-0.277 (0.191)		0.173 (0.202)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	0.407** (0.132)	0.432** (0.132)	0.582*** (0.140)	0.646*** (0.140)	0.411*** (0.103)	0.405*** (0.103)	0.087 (0.133)	0.101 (0.134)
Adjusted R ²	0.146	0.146	0.145	0.149	0.152	0.152	0.226	0.226
2. Civic engagement								
Unionized	4.669*** (0.146)	3.929*** (0.194)	5.836*** (0.104)	4.941*** (0.136)	3.574*** (0.119)	3.280*** (0.151)	3.173*** (0.116)	2.511*** (0.161)
Female	0.089 (0.083)	-0.039 (0.085)	0.034 (0.083)	-0.312*** (0.089)	-0.177** (0.067)	-0.233*** (0.070)	0.060 (0.076)	-0.106 (0.081)
Female*Unionized		1.648*** (0.289)		2.054*** (0.205)		0.750** (0.238)		1.324*** (0.223)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	0.903*** (0.140)	0.994*** (0.140)	2.036*** (0.171)	2.222*** (0.169)	1.834*** (0.128)	1.852*** (0.128)	1.283*** (0.148)	1.385*** (0.148)
Adjusted R ²	0.292	0.300	0.472	0.486	0.201	0.202	0.250	0.256

***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05; †p < .1.

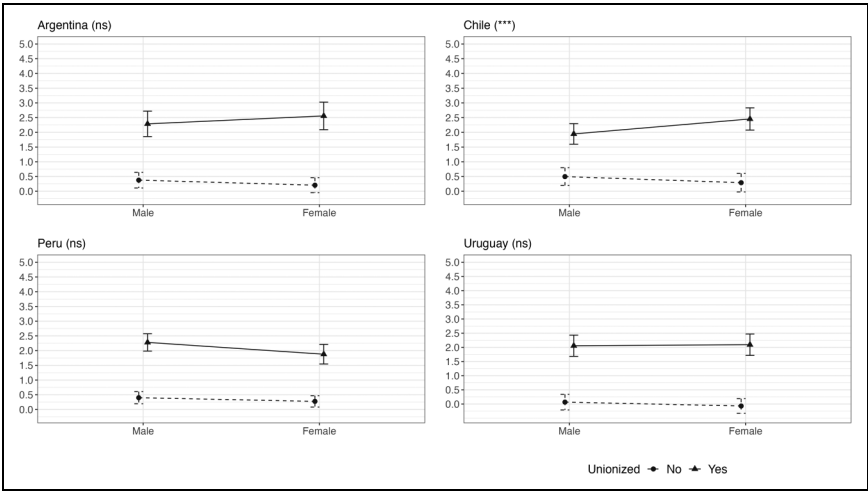


Figure 1. Participation in political activities in Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay (interaction effects). *** $P < .001$; ** $P < .01$; * $P < .05$; † $P < .1$.

5b, 6b, 7b, and 8b (civic engagement). To facilitate interpretation, the interaction effects are presented in Figures 1 and 2. To plot these effects, we used the interaction coefficients and calculated the scores for either dependent variable, holding the other variables constant at their mean (quantitative variables) or reference categories (categorical variables). Thus, these figures show the union membership–gender interaction effect on the average marginal scores in the index of participation in political activities (Figure 1) and in the index of civic engagement (Figure 2).

Figure 1 shows that only in Chile is there a statistically significant interaction effect between gender and union membership. This means that only in Chile does the association between union membership and participation in political activities vary by gender. More specifically, the predicted scores for this country show that when nonunionized workers are considered, women score slightly lower than men in the index of participation in political activities (0,5 for males versus 0,25 for females). However, when union members are considered, women’s average score becomes *higher* than men’s. In this latter group, the average score is around 2,0, whereas women’s score is around 2,5. This interaction effect is not substantially large (therefore the confidence intervals overlap). However, it is statistically significant ($P < .001$). This suggests the existence of a gender-equalizing effect of labor unions in Chile, as union membership not only reduces but *reverses* the gender gap in participation in political activities.

Figure 2 shows that, across the four countries, there is a positive and statistically significant interaction effect between union membership and gender. In other words, the positive association between union membership and civic engagement is *larger* for women than men. This indicates that unions have gender-equalizing effects on civic engagement—more specifically, that union membership may even reverse the gender

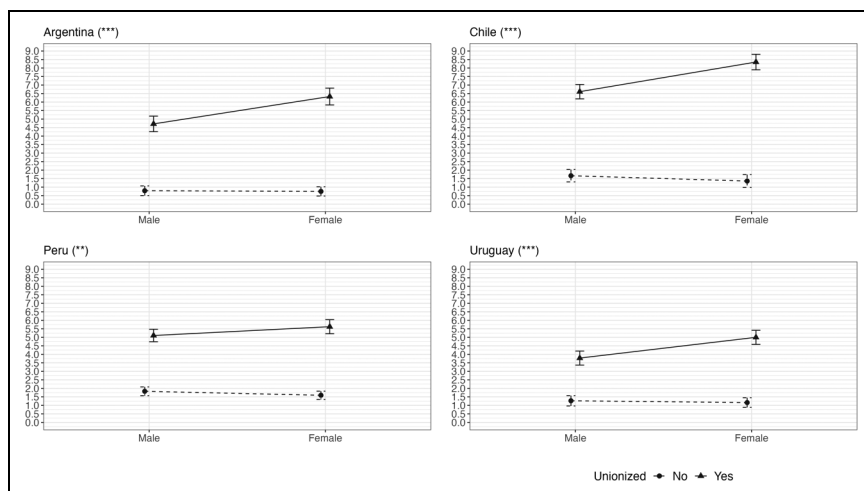


Figure 2. Civic engagement in Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay (interaction effects). *** $P < .001$; ** $P < .01$; * $P < .05$; † $P < .1$.

gap. In all four countries, non-unionized women exhibit slightly lower levels of civic engagement than non-unionized men. However, among union members, women display significantly higher levels of civic engagement than men.

All in all, the evidence presented in Table 2 and in Figures 1 and 2 is partially consistent with H3. Although the results for civic engagement (Figure 2) strongly support the existence of the gender-equalizing effects hypothesized in H3, the results for participation in political activities (Figure 1) indicate that only in Chile should this hypothesis be accepted.

Finally, looking at the cross-national differences in the union membership–gender interaction effects, our results are partially consistent with H4. On the one hand, contrary to our hypothesis, the results suggest that, except for Chile, there are no statistically significant interaction effects of union membership and gender on participation in political activities (Figure 1). On the other hand, the results for civic engagement (Figure 2) suggest that the size of the union membership–gender interaction effects does vary by country. Nevertheless, this variation does not totally follow the hypothesized trend. As hypothesized, the smallest interaction effect size is observed in Peru. However, the largest interaction effect sizes in Figure 2 are observed in Argentina and, contrary to our expectation, in Chile. In Peru, the average scores in the index of civic engagement are 5.1 for unionized male workers and 5.6 for their female counterparts. In other words, unionized women's level of civic engagement is 0.5 points larger than that of unionized men. In Chile and Argentina, such score difference is much larger: in Chile it is 1.8 points (6.6 points for unionized men and 8.4 for unionized women), and in Argentina it is 1.6 points (4.7 points for unionized male workers; 6.3 points for unionized female workers). Finally, and again contrary to H4, the interaction effect size in Uruguay is between the extremes of Peru and Chile; it is 1.2 points higher for unionized women (5.0 for this group vs 3.8 for unionized men).

Exploring mechanisms

Building upon these results, in a second stage of the research we analyzed whether the positive effect of union membership on women's participation in political activities (found in Chile) and on women's civic engagement (found in the four countries) was mediated by strike participation, interest in politics, and political identification. Our goal was to analyze whether unions' gender-equalizing effects are explained by the fact that unions increase female workers' political skills/resources—more specifically, foster their participation in workplace actions (strikes), and cultivate women's interest in politics and their left-leaning orientations. To do so, we focused on a subsample of female workers only and estimated a “baseline model” that included the same variables analyzed in Table 3. Then, we compared the baseline model's union membership coefficients with the coefficients from three other models, each of which included the hypothesized mediators separately. Following the standard practice in mediation analysis (Baron and Kenny, 1986), before estimating these models, we made sure that our independent variable of interest (union membership) was significantly correlated with the three hypothesized mediators.

Table 4 shows the results of our analysis for women's participation in political activities in Chile. The table shows that, compared to the coefficient from model 0 (baseline model), the coefficients for union membership in models 1 through 3 are smaller in size. This indicates that, among women, the association between union membership and participation in political activities may be mediated by the variables hypothesized as mechanisms underlying such association. This evidence can be interpreted as supporting the claim that, in Chile, unions facilitate women's participation in political activities by increasing female workers' political skills and resources—particularly, by fostering their participation in workplace actions, their interest in politics, and their left-leaning orientations.

However, this conclusion should be cautiously interpreted. On the one hand, the reduction in the size of the coefficients from models 1 through 3 is not large. The largest reduction in size is observed in model 1, which includes strike participation as a mediator. In this model, the union membership coefficient is $b = 2.004$, i.e., only 7% smaller than the coefficient from the baseline model ($b = 2.158$). On the other hand, although all the mediating variables are significantly correlated with the dependent variable, in none of the models with mediators does union membership stop being statistically significant. Following traditional mediation theory (Baron and Kenny, 1986: 1176), this means that strike participation, interest in politics, and political orientations account for, *at best*, a minor portion of the relationship between women's membership in union and their participation in political activities.

The results are even less clear in the case of civic engagement (Table 5). Our analysis shows that, except for two models in Peru, in most of the models the mediating variables are not significantly correlated with the dependent variable. As a result, in no model with mediators (models 1 through 3) does the size of the union membership coefficient decline substantially, when compared to their respective baseline model. This means that in none of the four countries is the relationship between women's membership in unions and their levels of civic engagement mediated by strike participation, political interest, and political orientations.

Table 4. OLS regression models predicting women's participation in political actions in Chile.

	M0 (Baseline)	M1	M2	M3
Unionized	2.158*** (0.137)	2.004*** (0.118)	2.019*** (0.134)	2.140*** (0.137)
Strike participation		3.059*** (0.135)		
Political interest			0.517*** (0.054)	
Political position (ref.: left)				
Center				−0.547*** (0.124)
Right				−0.413** (0.154)
No position				−0.716*** (0.130)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	0.264 (0.195)	0.331* (0.167)	0.039 (0.190)	0.783*** (0.216)
Adjusted R ²	0.196	0.409	0.244	0.213
N	1444	1444	1444	1444

*** $P < .001$; ** $P < .01$; * $P < .05$; † $P < .1$.

Discussion

Although the gender gap in political participation has narrowed in some countries, women in many regions remain less politically active than men (Coffé and Dilli, 2015; Espinal and Zhao, 2015; Fakihi and Sleiman, 2024; Liu, 2022). This disparity reflects not only unequal access to resources, as emphasized by the “resource model” (Brady et al., 1995; Teorell, Sum, et al., 2007), but also the masculine character of politics itself. Feminist scholars highlight how women's engagement is constrained by structural barriers such as lower labor force participation, unequal divisions of care work, and organizational practices that normalize male leadership and marginalize women's voices (Federici, 2021; Milkman, 2007; Scott, 1988; Tronto, 2015).

Building upon these insights from the resource model and feminist theory, we have examined whether labor unions can reduce gender gaps in political participation. Prior research shows unions encourage both conventional and contentious forms of activism (Hadziabdic and Baccaro, 2020; Kerrissey and Schofer, 2013; Pérez-Ahumada and Astorga-Pinto, 2025; Turner et al., 2020). Our analysis of four Latin American countries demonstrates that unions exert important gender-equalizing effects, reversing gaps in civic engagement and, in Chile, in broader political activity as well.

This finding has important implications for the study of labor unions and political participation. Contrary to the belief that unions are organizations that care little to integrate and empower female workers, our evidence suggests that unions' political effects on workers can be stronger for women, especially with respect to their level of civic

Table 5. OLS regression models predicting women's civic engagement in Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay.

	Argentina				Chile				Peru				Uruguay			
	M0 (B)	M1	M2	M3	M0 (B)	M1	M2	M3	M0 (B)	M1	M2	M3	M0 (B)	M1	M2	M3
Unionized	4.076*** (0.284)	4.100*** (0.290)	4.048*** (0.285)	4.053*** (0.283)	6.903*** (0.168)	6.902*** (0.168)	6.882*** (0.169)	6.924*** (0.169)	4.787*** (0.206)	4.851*** (0.208)	4.765*** (0.206)	4.768*** (0.206)	3.996*** (0.183)	3.997*** (0.185)	3.976*** (0.185)	4.028*** (0.183)
Strike participation		0.096 (0.242)				0.007 (0.193)								-0.008 (0.184)		
Political interest			0.098 (0.072)				0.078 (0.069)				0.129* (0.059)				0.055 (0.058)	
Political position (ref.: left)																
Center				-0.107 (0.204)				0.086 (0.154)				-0.111 (0.166)				0.270† (0.143)
Right				0.089 (0.219)				0.278 (0.191)				-0.126 (0.179)				0.516*** (0.149)
No position				-0.470* (0.227)				0.143 (0.161)				-0.385* (0.184)				-0.304 (0.205)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	1.079*** (0.213)	1.091*** (0.215)	1.032*** (0.216)	1.286*** (0.279)	1.547*** (0.239)	1.547*** (0.239)	1.513*** (0.241)	1.431*** (0.268)	1.606*** (0.188)	1.594*** (0.188)	1.498*** (0.194)	1.810*** (0.233)	1.297*** (0.219)	1.291*** (0.220)	1.266*** (0.222)	1.114*** (0.242)
Adjusted R²	0.207	0.206	0.207	0.211	0.552	0.552	0.552	0.552	0.277	0.278	0.278	0.278	0.298	0.297	0.298	0.305
N	1008	1008	1008	1008	1444	1444	1444	1444	1759	1759	1759	1759	1691	1691	1691	1691
(B) = Baseline model																

***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05; †p < .1.

engagement. This complements and extends prior research on unions' equalizing effects in the economic sphere, particularly research showing that unions' positive impact on workers (e.g., on their income) is stronger for women who usually occupy an underprivileged, underpaid, and less secure position in the labor market (Bryson et al., 2020; Haile, 2021; ILO, 2020).

Additionally, our findings align with the argument that unions act as a "school of democracy" insofar as they provide workers with resources that facilitate political involvement (Hadziabdic and Baccaro, 2020; Terriquez, 2011; Verba et al., 1995).

In fact, our results show that female union members often report higher levels of civic engagement than their male counterparts, even though nonunionized women participate less than nonunionized men. Importantly, we do not believe that this pattern is explained solely by selection effects, since prior research has shown that union membership is largely shaped by workplace structures rather than individual political orientations (Kim and Margalit, 2017; Ryan and Turner, 2021).

Taken together, this evidence supports the argument that unions have important gender-equalizing effects on political participation. It suggests that unions not only mobilize women to levels comparable to men but, under certain conditions, enable them to surpass men. In this sense, unions may not only equalize but also, at times, *reverse* gender disparities.

Our exploratory mediation analysis does not fully explain why union membership produces these effects among women. While further research is needed, feminist scholarship provides useful insights. This scholarship shows that women's mobilization—both within and beyond the workplace—reshapes unions by pressuring them to address gender-specific issues such as sexual harassment and work–family reconciliation (Brochard and Letablier, 2017; ILO, 2020; Kirton, 2015; Velásquez and Retamal, 2023). These processes increase women's presence within unions and expand their agendas to incorporate gendered concerns, thereby fostering organizational environments more conducive to women's active participation (Harris and Moffat, 2023; Milkman, 2007). In Latin America, recent waves of feminist protest may have amplified these dynamics, particularly in contexts such as Chile's 2019 social upheaval, where feminist and labor movements acted in coordination within broader coalitions (Arruzza et al., 2019; Batthyány, 2021; Daby and Moseley, 2022; Joignant et al., 2024). Unions' involvement in these coalitions may have increased labor leaders' receptiveness to feminist demands and, in turn, expanded opportunities for women's active participation.

Other dynamics linked to labor market transformations may also be relevant. As in other regions, female labor force participation in Latin America increased substantially between the early 1990s and the late 2000s. Data from the ILO (2025) show that in Argentina and Uruguay female participation increased from around 45% in 1991 to 55% in 2019, whereas in Chile and Peru it rose from around 35% (Chile) and 40% (Peru) in 1991 to 50% and 70% in 2019, respectively. Throughout this period, most women were employed in service activities, with percentages ranging from 65% in Peru to 85% in Argentina. Although women are more likely to work in informal occupations (OIT, 2019), women's higher labor participation has been associated with stronger support for unions (Torre, 2023). This may have facilitated women's membership in

unions, especially due to women's predominant insertion in the public and private sector services. While public sector unions have shown notable resilience, private service unions have experienced substantial membership growth (Krein and Galvão, 2023; Pérez Ahumada, 2024; Pérez and Cifuentes, 2020; Schnabel, 2013).

All in all, this evidence suggests that both labor market transformations and unions' efforts to integrate women—likely driven by women's own mobilization—may have expanded female workers' access to political skills relevant for participation. These skills were not captured in our mediation analysis and thus warrant further investigation. We propose that one such skill is leadership capacity. Terriquez (2011) demonstrates that union membership is associated with more critical forms of civic engagement (i.e., forms of engagement involving decision-making roles) because participation in labor unions reinforces leadership capacities—e.g., problem-solving and organizing skills—that are activated in the civic/community arena. If Terriquez's argument is true, then unionized female workers should be more likely to participate in civic associations and political activities because of the leadership capacities they cultivate through their membership in labor unions. In statistical terms, this means that leadership capacities should mediate the relationship between union membership and political participation, and that such mediating effect should be substantially higher for women than men. Further research should clarify this issue.

In this article, we have examined four Latin American countries with different trajectories of class politics, working-class power, and IR systems. Contrary to our expectation, our analysis of civic engagement showed that union membership has similar gender-equalizing effects in the four countries studied. This means that unions may contribute to the reduction of gender gaps in civic engagement in countries as different as Peru, where unions are weak and left parties are fragile and lack connections with the working class, and Uruguay, where unions are powerful and have strong ties to an electorally successful left party (Etchemendy, 2019; Manky, 2019). This finding is based on a small sample of four countries, so we cannot draw strong conclusions regarding the existence of cross-national similarities in unions' gender-equalizing effects on civic engagement. However, this finding is consistent with recent comparative evidence for Latin America, which suggests that the association between union membership and political participation is similar regardless of the institutional and political context in which unions operate (Pérez-Ahumada and Astorga-Pinto, 2025).

That said, and again contrary to our expectation, we found that unions' gender-equalizing effect on political participation was overall more noticeable in Chile than in Peru and, surprisingly, Argentina and Uruguay. As pointed out above, only in Chile did we find statistically significant interaction effects on civic engagement *and* on participation in political activities. This finding is puzzling and warrants closer attention. By suggesting that Chilean labor unions have been comparatively more successful in reversing gender gaps in political participation than their Argentine or Uruguayan counterparts, it challenges conventional assumptions linking institutional and political strength to union efficacy. More specifically, this finding indicates that unions' gender-equalizing effects may be stronger in contexts like Chile—that is, in a country where IR are highly decentralized, unions are more fragmented, and where labor parties are generally less

responsive to union demands than in Argentina and Uruguay (Etchemendy, 2019; Pérez-Ahumada, 2023).

We propose that two factors are relevant to explain this surprising result. The first one relates to the company-level nature of Chilean unions. Although company-level bargaining severely undermines the power of unions, organizing at the workplace level may create more opportunities to politicize workers “from below” (see, e.g., Paolucci and Roche, 2024)—in this case, to politicize female workers who might otherwise have limited exposure to political activities. This politicizing role may be particularly important in Chile, where union activists tend to hold comparatively strong left-wing identities (Manky, 2019; Pérez-Ahumada and Astorga-Pinto, 2025). These stronger political identities may also help explain why similar effects are not observed in Peru, where unions likewise operate at the company level but are characterized by less politicized identities (Manky, 2019).

The second factor relates to the rise in popular mobilization, labor strikes, and feminist protests observed in the country during the last decade and a half (Araujo et al., 2023; Joignant et al., 2024; Palma Manríquez, 2018). During key protest cycles (e.g., 2011–2014 and 2016–2019), these mobilizations were often organized through coalitions in which labor unions and feminist movements played a central role (Martin and Shaw, 2021; Osorio and Velásquez, 2022). As noted above, such dynamics may have increased unions’ responsiveness to feminist demands while also facilitating women’s political engagement within and beyond unions. Further investigations should investigate whether this explanation has some merit. These investigations should also explain why we did not find similar effects in Uruguay, where union activist’ left-wing identities are strong as well.

Conclusion

Drawing on evidence from four Latin American countries, we have highlighted the enduring relevance of unions as agents of political participation and as potential vehicles for reducing gender inequalities in political life. Consistent with the resource model, we found that union membership boosts political involvement across cases. Yet our evidence also supports feminist perspectives in that, although women continue to face barriers to political participation, unions can exert gender-equalizing effects that help mitigate—and in some cases even *reverse*—these disparities.

A key implication is that unions’ political impact cannot be explained solely by institutional strength or corporatist arrangements. Even in contexts where unions are weak or fragmented (as in Chile), they remain important platforms for women’s political action. Moreover, the cross-national consistency of unions’ equalizing effect on civic engagement suggests that this dimension of union influence is especially robust, transcending national institutional settings.

We recognize that our cross-sectional analysis does not establish causality, so the gender equalizing “effect” of unions should be understood in statistical rather than causal terms. Still, self-selection is unlikely to drive our findings, since union membership is shaped more by institutional and structural factors, such as workplace unionization, than by individuals’ political predispositions.

Our analysis of mechanisms also indicates the need for further research. As noted above, our mediation analysis does not identify the specific pathways through which unions generate gender-equalizing effects. While prior studies point to potential mechanisms not examined here (such as leadership skills acquired through union membership), future research should empirically assess whether these mechanisms help explain the empowering effects of union membership on women.

Overall, this article shows that Latin American unions, despite varied histories and institutional environments, retain the ability not only to mobilize workers politically but also to reverse persistent gender gaps in participation. The implication is that unions continue to matter for the quality of democracy in the region, both as political actors and as organizations that shape the participatory trajectories of their members.

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Note

1. See <https://osf.io/nzy4f/overview>

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