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Political participation

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POLITICA PARTICIPATION

Broadly defined, political participation refers to all voluntary activities by which ordinary citizens try to influence political outcomes. These activities cover such diverse forms as voting, taking part in campaigns and other organizational activities, contacting politicians, signing petitions, attending demonstrations or participating in more confrontational protest events (such as occupations or sit-ins). While early empirical research on political participation in the 1940 and 1950s mainly focused on voting and electoral turnout, the repertoire of activities covered by empirical studies has expanded ever since. The topic is important, as political participation is essential for democracy and, therefore, is also a key topic for research interested in the quality and functioning of democracies. As Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady write in their groundbreaking book on the topic, *Voice and Equality*: "Citizen participation is at the heart of democracy. Indeed, democracy is unthinkable without the ability of citizens to participate freely in the governing process" (p. 1). The following entry discusses (a) definitions and how the various forms of activities have been grouped into modes of participation, as well as (b) theories of political participation.

Expanding the Repertoire of Political Participation

Most definitions of political participation share five aspects:

1. Political participation refers to people's activities as citizens and not as elected representatives or public servants.

2. The focus is on actions and not solely on attitudes.

3. The activities are voluntary; that is, one is not forced to participate and does not receive pay for it.

4. The activities are triggered by the intention to influence the decisions of another actor or body.

5. The activities are political, as they are directed toward influencing a political outcome.

All five aspects are a matter of degree because it is not always easy to draw clear boundaries (for example, between voluntary and paid work or between intentional and non-intentional acts). However, the fifth aspect is the one that has changed the most over time if we compare various definitions. Early definitions focused very much on those activities aimed at selecting government personnel, whereas later studies have extended the scope to include all phases of political decision-making and toward influencing all kinds of decisions made by public representatives and officials. The term "political outcome" used above (and suggested by Henry Brady) is even broader, as it might potentially refer to any decision over the authoritative allocation of values—be it by elected representative and state officials or any other type of actor.

Reflecting the change in definitions, the concrete forms covered by empirical studies have expanded over time as well. As stated, classical studies focused on the act of

casting a vote in elections (and, sometimes, related campaign activities or the act of directly contacting elected representatives). In the late 1960s and 1970s, more and more forms have been covered—most importantly, all kinds of protest activities were added to the list of activities, such as signing a petition, taking part in demonstrations, unofficial industrial strikes, boycotts, occupations of buildings or in other more confrontational acts. In their landmark study on political action, Barnes and Kaase labeled these activities as "unconventional" to distinguish them from the "conventional" forms that had been at the center of scientific research so far. The label *unconventional* refers to activities that are either illegal and/or perceived as illegitimate by the wider public. This label seems no longer appropriate, as most of these forms correspond to social norms by now. Therefore, other authors have subsumed activities such as demonstrations, boycotts, and petitions under labels such as *protest behavior*, *non-institutionalized* or *elite-challenging activities*. Since the 1990s, yet another set of activities has been added to the list. This time, scholars put the emphasis on more individualized forms of political participation, such as political consumerism (i.e., the choice of goods and services due to ethical or political reasons) or civic and social engagement (i.e., membership and activity in various non-governmental organizations).

These are not just conceptual distinctions, but have also proved to be relevant in empirical terms as persons who get involved in politics in one specific way might also be more likely to get involved in very similar activities. Thus, it is possible to distinguish broader bundles or modes of political participation—although note that these might vary across contexts and over time. As highlighted by Russel J. Dalton, the activities discussed so far are a part of a hierarchy with several thresholds. The first threshold is the transition

from conventional to unconventional modes of political participation. The second threshold differentiates activities including lawful demonstration and signing petitions from forms of direct action, such as joining in boycotts. The third threshold refers to illegal but nonviolent acts (for example, unofficial strikes or peaceful occupations). Finally, the fourth threshold involves violent activities, including both violence against persons or properties. Apart from these thresholds, authors have also suggested distinguishing the various forms of participation by their capacity to convey information, the variation in volume and the requirements or resources needed from individual participants. For example, Verba and his colleagues emphasize that voting does not allow one to convey very specific pieces of information to the decision-makers, varies only little over time, and mainly requires an individual's time. By contrast, contacting an individual politician allows one to transmit more specific demands to the political system, varies more in volume over time, and requires time, but also the necessary skills to do it.

Based on two other main criteria, Jan Teorell and his colleagues suggest a typology that combines all of the different forms (see Figure 1). They suggest distinguishing forms of participation with respect to (i) the main channel of expression (representational vs. non-representational) and (ii) the mechanism of influence (exit vs. voice). First, while representational forms (e.g., taking part in elections, party membership, or contacting an elected official) are directly targeted toward the formal channels of representation in liberal democracies, extra-representational activities are less driven by the logic of representation and do not primarily target representative officials. Second, some forms are more exit-based, while others are more voice-based in the sense that the main mechanism of influence is not exchanging one "product" for the other (exit)

but, rather, trying to influence an outcome by directly raising specific demands (voice). In addition, Teorell and colleagues distinguish between those extra-representational forms that are highly targeted toward specific actors or institutions (for example, contacting a specific politician), and those that are non-targeted (for example, protesting in the streets).

[Figure 1 about here]

Most often, empirical studies rely on survey data to assess the frequency and determinants of participation in the various forms. More precisely, respondents are asked whether they have taken part in the various forms during a specified time period (for example, the last twelve months, five years or ever in their life). Of course, this raises the problem that what is usually studied is self-reported behavior and we do not know how often someone got involved in a certain type of activity during the period indicated in the survey question. The last point is especially problematic for forms that vary more over time as, for example, large-scale protest mobilization. For this case, scholars have also used alternative methods to collect data (for example, the systematic coding of newspapers and other written documents).

Theories of Political Participation: Who Participates?

Having clarified what is captured by political participation and the tendencies related to

changes in repertoires and forms of participation, we turn to the central analytical question related to political participation: who participates and how can we explain participation or the lack thereof? This question is of utmost importance since it contributes to an understanding of political inequalities—that is, unequal political voice and capacity to influence policy decisions that affect the life of citizens, but also shape society and its transformation.

The dominant approach to the study of political participation relates to the civic voluntarism model proposed by Verba, Schlozman and Brady. In this essential reading, the authors propose that people participate because: a) they can; b) they want to; and c) they have been asked to do so. In other words, Verba et al. contend that people participate. thanks to a combination of political resources (they can), political attitudes (they want to), and recruitment networks (they have been asked to do so). These three sets of explanations are used individually or in combination to explain citizens' participation in politics. In the following paragraphs, we will zoom in on each explanation to discuss in more detail what are important readings in the field and their key findings.

Political resources

Political resources are derived from education, occupational status, and income, which contribute to political participation directly or indirectly through political attitudes. Indeed, education, occupational status, and income can be directly translated into political resources. In particular, income can be used to spend money to support political causes, donate money to political parties, or to finance political candidates. However, education

and occupational status support the acquisition of other political resources. They offer political knowledge, access to information, and the capacity to easily understand and process information facilitating participation. Hence, education and occupational status are central in the acquisition of other political resources that take the form of political attitudes—interest in politics, feelings of efficacy, or political knowledge.

Political attitudes

The most important theory in relation to political attitudes and participation is that of post-materialism proposed by Ronald F. Inglehart. Inglehart suggested that post-industrial transformation values shifted from materialistic to post-materialistic; this process is what he refers to as the silent revolution of the late 1960s. As citizens gain material well-being, thanks to employment and social security, they turn to demands for post-materialistic goods, such as civic rights related to self-expression or related to issues of belonging and quality of life. These new sets of demands are related to the satisfaction of primary needs and appear first among the middle class, who benefit from the post-industrial turn. This shift in dominant values among the younger cohorts, which then spread to the overall society in Western democracies, results in transformed political participation. Indeed, Inglehart claims that post-materialistic individuals are more prone to engage in elite-challenging forms of participation that allow them to more directly express their views about society.

Networks: interpersonal and organizational

Regarding network and political participation, the dominant (although controversial)

theory is that of social capital proposed by Robert D. Putnam. The United States has been praised for the richness of its civic networks and the importance given to individual involvement in various types of civil society organizations, from the more political ones, such as parties or associations, to bowling or other sports clubs. However, in his book Putnam argues that citizens' involvement in civil society organizations is declining and this, in turn, negatively affects political participation. The idea is that as citizens no longer engage in civil society organizations, they have reduced social and political trust which, in turn, hinders political participation.

Research by Putnam and others on social capital is mainly focused on the beneficial influence of organizational networks. However, interpersonal networks also play a role in explaining political participation. First, thanks to discussion about politics, citizens gain political knowledge and acquire new information about politics. This contributes both to political socialization and to recruitment into politics. However, as—for example—Diana C. Mutz shows, networks can also have a negative influence on participation when the information and the cues they provide are contradictory.

The state and policy feedback

Furthermore, the forms and the repertoires of political participation vary by country, depending on citizens' right to participate politically through various means, but also because of the specific political opportunity structures offered to participation. First, regarding citizens' rights, we have in mind democratic regimes in which all forms of expression of political voice are recognized and valued. However, even in such a context, some forms of participation may be violent or even illegal and, therefore, differently accepted

or tolerated by the authorities in place and the wider citizenry. Second, the openness of the political system affects citizens' choice of preferred mode of action. This relates to horizontal and vertical power-sharing. Moreover, it refers to elites' positions on specific issues, the fact that they offer a united or a divided front and that they are more or less accessible and responsive to external demands. In addition, the specific socio-economic configuration affects political participation. On the one hand, the historical legacy affects collective memories and choices of action repertoires. On the other hand, the dominant issues debated in the public sphere may lead to different types of political action.

Another approach on the influence of the state on political participation refers to the policy feedback effect. In this line of research, for example by Joe Soss, the focus of attention lies on the effect of policies on citizens' political socialization—that is, how citizens learn from their interaction with the state to trust or distrust the state capacity and the motivation to respond to their demands. This line of research is interesting, as it contributes to the study of adult political socialization which is much less developed than that of children and youth in the family, at school, or through interactions with peers. Furthermore, this area of study highlights the importance of citizens' equal voice; that is, citizens' equal capacity to have their voices heard and contribute to shaping public policies that will affect their lives.

Trends in Research on Political Participation

Current research on political participation focuses, among others, on the relationship between genes, personality traits and participation or on the rise of new forms of participa-

tion related to the digital revolution. The idea of new forms is often put forward, but is also criticized. Yet, the term is used here to convey the idea of a renewal of political participation, which often draws from existing action repertoires that are rejuvenated, such as online petitioning, boycotting campaigns, and other culture-jamming events. As new forms of participation—whether on- or offline—develop, they raise questions related to their political dimension. As stated in the definition, "influencing a political outcome" is a critical and controversial aspect of the definition of what counts as political participation. However, influencing a political outcome can be understood in a broader or narrower sense. Recent theoretical work on political participation, more specifically on creative political participation, highlights the importance of the meaning that citizens attach to their action. Thus, any type of action can be an act of political participation if those who perform it aim at conveying a political message. This understanding of political participation poses challenges to its study over time and space, as well as to our ability to capture individual participation in politics through survey questions. However, it offers promising avenues for the study of citizens' involvement in democratic practices.

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See also Activism; Bowling Alone; Election Turnout; Civic Engagement; Collective Action; Disengagement; Mass Political Behavior; Personality Traits; Political Socialization; Resource Mobilization; Social Capital.

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