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Why Political Interest Matters and How to Understand Its Origins

You are interested in politics. Chances are you regularly vote and follow the news and know something about the major legislative proposals debated in Congress or Parliament. You may well have contributed some of your time and energy to making self-governance work, perhaps volunteering with a community group, serving on the school board, or helping raise money for a political cause. You are not alone. Many other people are politically interested. They might not all pick up this book, but they read political history and *Politico* and inside accounts of election campaigns; they'll read *The Atlantic* and *The Economist*, and biographies of presidents and prime ministers. Largely owing to their political interest, devoting hours and hours to reading and hearing and talking about politics is a treat for them, not a burden.

Yet here's what people who read books like this one often forget: Not everyone lives this way. Our interest in politics makes us different from many other people. There are people who have no interest whatsoever in politics, and there are many more with varying degrees of moderate interest. On a five-point scale used by the American National Election Study in 2008, about 10 percent of Americans reported being "extremely interested . . . in politics," and another 25 percent "very interested." But close to 10 percent are "not interested at all" and about 20 percent are only "slightly interested." And they don't read, watch, or hear much about politics.

At first glance, this variation in political interest seems no more remarkable than variation in taste for wine, country music, or modern art. In all of these domains – and many others – interest ranges from low to high, with plenty of shades of gray in between. Yet even if interest in politics resembles the psychological experience of interest in art or music, the consequences for our societal well-being are profoundly different: Only political interest comes with a membership in the self-governing class.

The self-governing class[1] is the segment of the population that contributes to collective decisions about how we run our country. Membership is not formal, and contributions vary. Some people only cast a vote now and then, without much information about their choice. Others may not even vote, but collect and share information that influences those who do. Some people study politics exhaustively just to make their own best decision. Still others give much time and effort to building coalitions and organizing collective action. Together, through their political decisions and actions, they decide how a country addresses challenges and moves forward.

Political interest is not required to join the self-governing class. Some learn about politics or get involved out of a civic duty. Others just say yes when asked. Some receive a salary for their contributions to governance or feel that political involvement is necessary to preserve their fortune. Likewise, political interest does not guarantee membership. Structural features of the political system and the constraints of individual lives can make it difficult, sometimes even impossible, for politically interested people to become politically involved. But for the most part, the obstacles in modern democratic systems are not powerful enough to deny membership in the self-governing class. As research reviewed later in this chapter demonstrates, people who join in self-governance, in ways big or small, alone or with others, not only turn out to be more interested in politics but are often involved precisely because they are more interested.

This book's central puzzle arises directly from the established link between political interest and political involvement. If the boundaries of the self-governing class are defined not by property requirements, professional qualifications, or reasoning skills, but by the extent of people's interest in politics, then where does this political interest come from?

It's tricky, yet the reason for trying to solve this puzzle could not be clearer: Imagine that we understood how to raise political interest among the third of Americans who are "slightly interested" or "not interested at all." According to existing research, many would join the self-governing class because their raised interest would lead them to see what's at stake in the next election, learn something about the candidates and parties on the ballot, and cast a vote. The third of Americans with middling levels of interest may already dabble in self-governance once in a while, perhaps voting in the loudest presidential elections or occasionally peeking at a headline. Yet make them "extremely interested in politics," or at least "very interested," and they might read beyond the first paragraph, consider their political decisions more thoroughly, and vote even in state and local

[1] I owe this phrase to Ted Brader, who used it at a manuscript workshop for this book and does not remember if he heard it somewhere or came up with it himself.

elections with less of a roar. Some might even go from supporting a representative to representing others. To be sure, greater political interest would not make everyone a model citizen. Some people's opinions may become stronger but not wiser. And higher political interest alone is not enough to break down remaining structural barriers to political participation or afford everyone the time to get involved. But on balance, greater political interest promises greater civic engagement and more effective self-governance.

So, how does political interest develop? We don't know. We do not even know if political interest has the stability of a personal trait or the volatility of a regularly updated assessment of the political environment. Psychologists and educators have found ways to motivate individuals to tackle a specified task – but politics is more than a task, and political interest is different from persistence in the face of adversity. In this book, I build on ideas from psychology to derive and test a theory of political interest.

The very nature of how interest forms and blossoms presents a formidable challenge for research, however. Analytically speaking, the trouble with you, me, and the other politically interested folks is this: Our interest in politics rarely dips from its high levels. It was not the bill considered by the legislature last month or yesterday's cover story about rivalries between cabinet members that got us interested. We've been at this for a long time. Reports and analyses and historical accounts of politics don't create our political interest; they feed it.

Hence, one reason why you and I are not particularly helpful here is that we cannot easily point to a particular root cause of our political interest. Because, as this study will show, most of us have been interested for a very long time and there are not too many adults whose political interest changes markedly, even over long periods. We thus have limited material to work with in figuring out what triggered these changes. It's a challenge worth accepting, though, because its promise is a greater understanding of how political interest develops and how we might increase it among those who lack it. Doing that might help make our democratic system work better. Before we spend more time chasing the vision of greater political interest, however, I owe you two explanations: What exactly does it mean to be interested in politics? And, how sure can we be that raising political interest would expand the self-governing class and increase its capacity?

WHAT IS "POLITICAL INTEREST"?

There are two basic types of interest, both of which you have surely experienced (although perhaps not with respect to politics). When something around you catches your attention, intrigues you right then and there, and makes you feel (possibly without thinking it), "Hmm, this is interesting" – that's one type of interest. The other type is the sense that leads you to say "I am interested in X,"

even when X is not around at the moment. Instead, you expect that engaging with X in the future will be a gratifying experience.

The first type is a feeling of curiosity and discovery. It is an emotional reaction triggered by something around us and involves a momentary sense of wanting or liking the object that prompted it. Psychologists call this type of interest *situational* interest. It can be over very quickly, either because the emotion wears off or because the object that triggered it disappears from our environment.

The second type, *dispositional* interest, is a more lasting sentiment that can sustain itself even when the initial environmental stimulus has disappeared. In the absence of the triggering object, there must be something inside us that makes us go back, either to the same object or an object like it, because we expect that doing so will be rewarding. Dispositional interest arises from situational interest, but most experiences of situational interest never develop into a predisposition that endures in the absence of the environmental trigger.

Applied to the political domain, political interest starts with situational interest when something in the environment related to politics triggers an affective reaction. Dispositional political interest entails an expectation that engaging with political content again in the future will turn out to be gratifying. Chapter 2 will flesh out this definition of political interest and describe the general psychological model of interest on which it is based.

For a proper understanding of representative democracy, the distinction between situational or dispositional interest is significant, so determining empirically to what extent political interest is dispositional will take up a good portion of Part I of this book. If few people ever develop dispositional interest, attention to politics would be driven mostly by a long series of environmental triggers that might get people to see this or support that. The key to self-governance would be to ensure constant political stimulation in the hopes of continuously generating situational political interest. The hoopla of political campaigns and the breathless pace of the media's horserace coverage look like they operate on the assumption of mostly situational interest. If, on the other hand, interest in politics is to a considerable extent dispositional, self-governance does not require constant stimulation because people develop a demand for politics that is sustained even when the hoopla dies down. People become involved in politics because they want politics, not because politics wants them.

A fundamental property of interest is already obvious: It is an internal disposition, clearly distinct from a behavior. Participation, in contrast, is a behavior. Just as participation can occur in the absence of political interest, it is possible to be interested in politics without participating in it. Barriers to participation may not be barriers to becoming politically interested. Resource constraints, for example, impose limits on political participation, but in principle should not affect interest. People may be too busy to follow politics

or volunteer (Brady et al. 1995; Verba et al. 1995), but even someone without a minute to spare for these activities can still be highly interested.[2]

Political interest is also different from political sophistication, a cognitive concept that encompasses knowledge and understanding of politics. Political sophistication is at least in part the result of political learning, another behavior. It is possible to be knowledgeable about politics without finding it interesting. Likewise, a politically interested person does not necessarily have a clear and well-informed grasp of politics.[3]

Political interest, political participation, and political sophistication are sometimes conflated and treated as one. They are typically considered as facets of "good citizenship." And, as the next section will show, they are strongly related empirically. But in order to understand this amalgam of motivational, behavioral, and cognitive political engagement, it is important to distinguish the three concepts and examine their causal connections because their close interrelations are neither inevitable nor immune to contextual variation. What makes political interest important as a separate concept is the claim that it drives the other two.

WHY POLITICAL INTEREST MATTERS

A half-century of research on public opinion, political psychology, and political behavior has made it an article of faith that politically interested individuals are, in a variety of ways, more politically involved than people who lack interest. Political interest stands out in past research as a strong, often the strongest, predictor of political engagement. For Bennett (1998, 539), "[w]ithout question, the most important reason for young Americans' lack of exposure to political reporting in the media is indifference to public affairs." Analyzing the impact of political interest on political sophistication, Luskin

[2] Past studies of political involvement have often used summary scales of involvement in which political interest is one component along with self-reported behaviors (e.g., Verba and Nie 1972; van Deth 1990; Nie et al. 1996; Zukin et al. 2006). This practice makes it impossible to distinguish the roles of motivation and behavior. Lupia and Philpot (2005, 1122) equate high political interest with "spend[ing] considerable time focusing on politically oriented tasks and materials." Operationally, Lupia and Philpot (2005, 1132) treat political interest not as a behavior, but as an intention to engage in political behaviors (learning about politics, talking with others about it, and voting). This is closer to the definition of political interest as a predisposition. It still infers interest from its correlates, however.

[3] Political interest also differs from Zaller's (1992) concept of "political awareness … [which] refers to the extent to which an individual pays attention to politics *and* understands what he or she has encountered … Political awareness denotes intellectual or cognitive engagement with public affairs as against emotional or affective engagement or no engagement at all" (21, emphasis in original). Zaller contrasts political awareness and political interest, mentioning "people who describe themselves as highly interested in politics, which I take as a form of affective involvement" (43). The characterization of political interest as purely affective is not consistent with psychological work on interest.

(1990, 344, 348) concludes "that interest has a huge effect" and that "[b]y far the most influential variable, unsurprisingly, is interest." In Shani's (2009a, 152) reading of the literature, "The importance of citizens' political interest for explaining democratic politics can hardly be overrated. Virtually every scholar who has studied people's political knowledge, political participation, and many other political phenomena has noted the central role of the motivation to engage in politics." Politics looks very different to politically interested people.

Politically interested people are more likely to seek out information about politics (Prior 2007; Geer et al. 2014). All that reading, watching, and listening makes a difference for the quality of political decision-making. Many studies have shown politically interested people to be more knowledgeable about politics (e.g., Berelson et al. 1954, 31; Atkin et al. 1976; Bennett 1986, 130, 137; Luskin 1990; Verba et al. 1995, 348 fn.29; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Jennings 1996; Westle 2006; Prior and Lupia 2008; Prior 2014).[4] They are also more likely to hold political opinions, identify with a political party, and prefer one candidate over another for president (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948 [1944], 41; Zuckerman et al. 2007; Sides and Vavreck 2013, 106). Yet having opinions and candidate preferences is not necessarily indicative of good decision-making. It could, after all, follow a rush to judgment or a failure to consider counter-arguments. But politically interested people are also more internally consistent in their political thinking (Berelson et al. 1954, 26–7; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008), and more likely to make political decisions in accordance with their preferences. Kohler (2005), for example, finds that the impact of changes in occupational status on party preference in Germany is conditioned by political interest. Former workers who become self-employed or start to employ other people change their party affiliation to the conservative, pro-business side (CDU/CSU) only if they are politically interested. Likewise, it takes high political interest for individuals who experience the opposite transition to change their affiliation to the labor-friendly Social Democratic Party.

The association between political interest and political participation, too, is empirically strong. Politically interested people are much more likely to report having voted (e.g., Lazarsfeld et al. 1948 [1944], 45–6; Berelson et al. 1954, 31; Bennett 1986, 130, 142; Powell 1986; Verba et al. 1995). They also report many more other forms of participation, such as attending political meetings, donating money to campaigns, and engaging in socially-motivated boycotts of consumer products (Bennett 1986, 130, 146–50; Verba et al. 1995; Gaiser and Rijke 2000; Campbell 2006, ch.6; Quintelier and van Deth 2014). The main reason for these associations is probably that interest motivates behavior, but the political environment is also more inviting of politically interested people. They are more likely to be the target of mobilization (Enos et al. 2014; Hersh

[4] This is consistent with research in educational psychology, which has repeatedly shown interest to help comprehension, learning, and depth of information processing (for reviews, see Schraw and Lehman 2001; Hidi and Renninger 2006).

2015), and attempts to encourage political participation often have significantly greater effects on individuals who are politically interested to begin with (Brady et al. 1999; Finkel 2002).

Much of the research on interest and participation is based on respondents' reports of their participation. If all evidence came from self-reports, we should be concerned that greater political interest might only make people good at pretending to be politically involved. Part of the relationship between political interest and reported political involvement is indeed spurious because it reflects correlated measurement error. Politically interested respondents are more likely to report that they voted when in fact they abstained (Ansolabehere and Hersh 2012). Overreporting of news exposure may also be more pronounced among the politically interested (Prior 2009b). But this does not mean that strong correlations between interest and involvement are measurement artifacts. For one, political interest is still the strongest correlate of turnout when data on turnout come from official records (Bennett 1986, 130, 144; Clarke et al. 2004, 252–61; Ansolabehere and Hersh 2012). Moreover, some elements of political involvement can be measured well in surveys. The ability to accurately answer knowledge questions is higher among more politically interested respondents, and this is not a quantity that can be overreported. In fact, Prior and Lupia (2008, 175) find that a monetary incentive for answering knowledge questions correctly has a particularly strong effect on more interested respondents, suggesting that "traditional survey procedures fail to motivate moderately and (to a lesser extent) strongly interested citizens to try as hard as they can when answering political knowledge questions. Hence, past survey-based studies have likely underestimated the effect of political interest on political knowledge."[5]

Another reason for skepticism is more serious. Research linking political interest and citizenship outcomes often rests on the association between these

[5] Prior and Lupia (2008) also show that lack of ability is *not* the main obstacle to a more informed electorate. When survey respondents are given a full day to answer political knowledge questions, the politically uninterested among them reveal considerable learning skills. Politically very interested people still answer significantly more questions correctly, but the difference is only half as big as the equivalent difference when respondents must answer immediately:

> Many people who are intrinsically motivated to follow politics acquire political information regularly and regardless of whether a decision is impending. They are knowledgeable when we ask them fact-based questions on surveys. Others who do not enjoy politics as much are less likely to carry such information in their declarative memories. When survey interviewers contact them without warning and the survey rushes along apace, these people do not perform well. But it would be a mistake to assume that such observations are sufficient to infer a general lack of capability. (Prior and Lupia 2008, 179)

Judging by the behavior of less interested respondents, the de facto impediment to learning for them is not that they are incapable of finding political information, but that they are not usually motivated to do so. Political interest brings that natural inclination to learn about politics even if you could look up information later.

variables measured in the same survey. That makes it difficult to establish that political interest is indeed the cause. Both political interest and the citizenship outcome are in place at the time of measurement, and there is no straightforward way to determine which came first. Elements of citizenship may have influenced political interest. Or an unmeasured third variable influenced both political interest and citizenship outcomes.

Studies that aim to break up this simultaneity are not as frequent. Butler and De La O (2011) note that residents of different linguistic regions in Switzerland tend to follow media coverage from neighboring countries that share their language. Because an election in a neighboring country raises political interest only among those Swiss who speak the language of the country, they can plausibly break the chicken-and-egg challenge by assuming that elections in neighboring countries cannot be influenced by political interest of Swiss people (and, in technical terms, can thus serve as valid instruments for political interest). Butler and De La O's results show substantial effects of interest on participation.

Verba et al. (1995, 352–3) also use an instrumental variables technique to reduce simultaneity concerns. When they instrument political interest in the same interview that also gauged political participation with political interest measured in a screener interview about a year earlier, the coefficient for political interest predicting political participation doubles, while the associations with partisan attachment and political information, equally instrumented, remain unchanged. (It should be noted that the estimates remain biased if participation, measured but not necessarily performed at a later time, already caused political interest in the screener.) In estimating reciprocal causation between political interest and political sophistication (a multi-faceted measure of what people know about politics), Luskin (1990) makes the assumption that age and parental political interest cause interest, but not sophistication. His analysis supports a large effect of interest on sophistication.[6]

Measuring political interest some time before measuring the purported effects of interest also adds plausibility to the case for interest as a causal factor (although it cannot rule out alternatives completely). Blais and St-Vincent (2011) use data from a two-wave panel and find that the association between political interest and turnout is somewhat weaker but still statistically significant when political interest measured in the pre-election wave replaces political interest measured in the same post-election interview as turnout. Political interest is also related to future political learning (Dimitrova et al. 2011) and change in the self-reported frequency of political discussion (Eveland et al. 2005).[7] I add a similar demonstration in Chapter 4, showing that turnout

[6] Luskin's analysis requires some strong assumptions (that parental interest does not affect sophistication directly, for example, and that news exposure cannot raise interest).

[7] All of these findings involve intervals between measurements of under half a year. Measuring the supposed cause and effect at different points removes distortions from some types of measurement

and political knowledge at election time are predicted by both political interest early in the campaign and gains in interest over the course of the campaign.

Collectively, these findings justify a large bet that an increase in political interest would be followed by an increase in the kinds of civic behaviors and ways of political reasoning that are commonly associated with good citizenship. Political interest is typically the most powerful predictor of political behaviors that make democracy work. More politically interested citizens know more about politics, think more systematically about their political decisions, vote at higher rates, and participate more in the political process in other ways. The evidence for a strong association between political interest and these outcomes is overwhelming, and evidence demonstrating causal impact, while sparser, exists as well.

For some outcomes, such as learning of factually correct information and the quality of decision-making, normative desirability is unambiguous. Other outcomes linked to political interest, such as opinionation, turnout, or protest, are not unequivocally desirable, but are normally seen as indicators of a healthy democracy. The prospect of higher turnout rates among uninformed individuals may spark concerns about unintended side effects of raising interest. But past research suggests that greater interest would not selectively increase one outcome alone, but instead raise a whole bundle of them, such as turnout rates and political knowledge and the quality of decision-making. Based on the existing research, it is thus reasonable to assume that a person gaining political interest would, as a consequence, become more politically involved in a variety of ways. If a substantial number of people became more interested, collective political decision-making and the public's capacity for self-governance would likely improve.[8]

error. For example, in the same interview, a respondent who reported high political interest may inflate subsequent reports of participation because it would look inconsistent or feel awkward to concede not having voted or volunteered. If the two questions appear in different interviews, these consistency pressures are likely much lower. Political interest is also related to future self-reports of news exposure (e.g., Atkin et al. 1976; Strömbäck and Shehata 2010; Boulianne 2011).

[8] The exclusive focus in this review on political interest as a cause of political involvement and participation does not imply that political interest is the only cause, or even the only internal disposition that leads to engagement. Some individuals do not find politics particularly interesting, but turn out to vote due to a sense of civic duty (Campbell 2006; Blais and Achen 2011). Cognitive mechanisms (such as political efficacy or civic duty) and identity (such as identification with a political party) could have effects through political interest or directly on political participation. A sense of efficacy could raise political interest by strengthening the expectation that reengaging with the domain of politics will be rewarding (see Chapter 2), but it could also lead to political participation independently of political interest. Similarly, civic duty can strengthen political interest by linking the domain of politics to role definition and self-concept, but it could also lead people to participate who are not interested in politics. Party identification could make politics seem important and interesting but could also invite people to mechanically turn out for their side.

THE ORIGINS OF POLITICAL INTEREST

Despite the widely accepted role of political interest as a pivotal precursor to normatively desirable behavior, social scientists have devoted little attention to studying its roots. Early survey research suggested that political interest was an important factor in encouraging electoral participation. Causes of political interest were less obvious, however. In their pioneering study of the 1940 presidential election, Lazarsfeld et al. (1948 [1944], 46–7) concluded that

> three-quarters of the non-voters stayed away from the polls deliberately because they were thoroughly unconcerned with the election... Only a small number of people were kept from the polls by a last minute emergency. The possibility that the deliberate non-voters could have been made more interested during the campaign is slight; their decision not to vote was too persistent. A long range program of civic education would be needed to draw such people into the orbit of political life, and further studies are needed to unearth the specific nature of their lack of interest.

Much existing research has examined the external factors that encourage or thwart political participation, the "last minute emergency" that keeps people from voting or the structural features that do so more systematically by imposing costs on casting a vote or learning about one's options. A corollary to this line of research are studies of voter mobilization and other external forces that reduce the cost of participating. The impact of these external factors is smaller than the large differences in participation between politically interested and politically uninterested citizens. In fact, Get-out-the-vote efforts are finely targeted toward moderately interested individuals right at the cusp of turning out, precisely because these are the individuals for whom external encouragement has a chance of affecting behavior (e.g., Hersh 2015). Likewise, high costs of voting – imposed by advance registration, new identification requirements, or extended distance to the polling place – are bound to lower turnout among citizens who, without those additional hurdles, would have just enough internal motivation to make their way to the polls and complete a form or two.

The purpose of this book is not to question the relevance of external encouragements and deterrents to political participation, only to give the underlying internal motivation its due. It may turn out that the difficulty of raising participation by raising political interest justifies the large amount of resources devoted to marginal changes in behavior through external mobilization. Or, the former just takes longer, and patience and effort could be rewarded with stronger impact.

More than half a century after Lazarsfeld and colleagues conducted their pioneering work, we are, mostly, still waiting for those "further studies"

Mobilization by campaigns and encouragement through interpersonal networks can get less interested people to vote, volunteer, or donate money (although GOTV efforts tend to target individuals with a high ex-ante probability of turning out; see Enos et al. 2014; Hersh 2015). Political interest alone is not enough to become involved; people must also have some time and resources (Verba et al. 1995).