Democratic Phoenix

Reinventing Political Activism

Conventional wisdom suggests that citizens in many countries have become disengaged from the traditional channels of political participation. Commentators highlight warning signs that include sagging electoral turnout, rising antiparty sentiment, and the decay of civic organizations. But are these concerns justified?

This book compares systematic evidence for electoral turnout, party membership, and civic activism in countries around the world and suggests good reasons to question assumptions of decline. Not only is the obituary for older forms of political activism premature, but new forms of civic engagement may have emerged in modern societies to supplement traditional modes. Political participation appears to have evolved over the years, in terms of the agencies, the actions used for political expression, and the political actors that participants seek to influence. The process of societal modernization and rising levels of human capital are primarily responsible, although participation is also explained by the structure of the state, the role of agencies, and social inequalities.

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Preface

It is widely assumed that citizens in many countries have become disengaged from the conventional channels of political participation. This book compares systematic evidence for electoral turnout, party membership, and civic activism in countries around the world and suggests good reasons to question popular assumptions of pervasive decline.

Before proceeding to articulate this argument, so that the wary might be warned before proceeding further, we should note that interpretations of the contemporary state of political participation can and often do fall into multiple potential traps.

One is the danger of mythologizing a romantic Golden Age when all the town hall meetings were packed, all the voting booths were overflowing, and all the citizens were above average. It is all too easy to equate change with decline. Familiar patterns of our parents’ and grandparents’ generations are regarded nostalgically as the norm, in a misty-eyed Jimmy Stewart small-town-America sort of way. But change can simply mean adaptation to circumstances.

Ethnocentrism is another common danger. The bulk of research on political participation originates in America, and it is sometimes assumed that political fashions are like the export of McDonald’s, Nikes, or Levis, so that patterns that first emerge in the United States (or even in California) will probably become evident later among other Western publics. Yet in this regard, as in many others, as Lipset suggests, there may well be American exceptionalism. The individualistic values and particular constitutional structures created at the founding of the United States set a specific cultural milieu, so that civic ills do not necessarily creep north over the Canadian border, let alone spread widely like a virus throughout Western political systems. Particular circumstances, particular historical legacies, and particular institutional structures may block generalized contagions.

Another potential obstacle concerns partial perspectives. Political science has experienced growing fragmentation and intellectual specialization; as
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Almond pointed out, like Rattigan’s actors, we are increasingly “sitting at separate tables.” As a result, research on older mainstream channels of participation, such as elections and political parties, often fails to be integrated into work on new social movements and transnational policy networks. Students of political behavior decry eroding party membership, while elsewhere international relations scholars celebrate the flowering of a cosmopolitan civic society. Psephologists mourn half-empty ballot boxes, while communications scholars herald the rise of internet activism. A wide-ranging voyage drawing upon multiple subareas and many countries is needed to develop a more comprehensive and balanced perspective, even if breadth comes at the inevitable expense of some loss of depth.

Outdated theoretical frameworks are another barrier. We are often imprisoned by the uncritical inheritance of concepts for studying political participation arising from the early classics of the 1960s, but as curiously old-fashioned today as the stump speech, the railway whistle-stop tour, and the “I Like Ike” campaign button. We need to build on the past and honor the intellectual foundations that we inherit. Yet overreliance on traditional frameworks can blind us to modern forms of civic engagement that are symbolized today by events on the streets of Seattle, Gothenburg, and Genoa, and the wide repertoire of activities engaged in by environmentalists, peace protestors, human rights advocates, and women’s groups. These dimensions of participation need to be captured, as well as the way that the more conventional activities of parties and elections function, evolve, and adapt in transitional and consolidating democracies such as Russia, Mexico, and South Africa.

Accounts can also exaggerate the value of participation. Viewed through a Schumpeterian lens, democracy involves three core components: the existence of widespread political rights and civil liberties such as freedom of expression and association, party competition in the pursuit of office, and opportunities for citizens to vote at regular intervals to elect their leaders. As such, opportunities for participation by all citizens are a necessary but far from sufficient condition for democracy. Multiple institutions need to be working effectively to channel citizen’s voices into representative government, and to ensure that the participation is meaningful rather than merely symbolic. Nor is greater participation by itself necessarily a sign of democratization in the absence of other important safeguards; mass demonstrations on the streets of Iraq, high electoral turnout in Belarus, and plebiscitary rallies in Pakistan have been utilized to legitimize the rule of authoritarian regimes and radical antidemocratic factions.

Data limitations are yet another major barrier. Studies of trends in political participation are restricted by the availability of longitudinal time-series aggregate and cross-national survey data. Until recently, this has produced a systematic bias toward studying postindustrial societies in Western Europe and the United States. Most series of survey data date back no further than
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the 1970s or 1960s. The number of confounding factors that can complicate the analysis once we start to compare many different regions and types of states around the world can lead to the familiar difficulty of too many variables and too few cases (nations). The “most similar” research design, which focuses on a few countries sharing similar democratic political systems, cultural histories, and historical legacies, has many well-established advantages. Qualitative case studies provide richness and depth. Yet this approach is also limited, particularly in how far those who know only democracies can ever hope to understand democracies. This is akin to feminist strategies claiming that we can understand gender best by focusing on women, rather than comparing similarities and differences between the sexes. In formal terms, the danger is to bias the inferences that can be drawn. We need to understand the process of democratization, not just for its own sake, but also because understanding the path traveled by transitional and consolidating democracies generates important insights into established democracies. The flowering of the third wave of electoral democracies since the early 1970s, and the wider availability of new sources of cross-national survey data since the 1980s, help to illuminate how far we can generalize from the comparative laboratory of older democracies to patterns evident elsewhere around the world. Recent decades have generated a flourishing range of regional studies on the transition and consolidation of democracies in Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe, Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, which can be integrated and synthesized to help clarify the broad trajectory of world trends. We can start to “turn proper names into variables.”4 Globalization has gradually transformed world politics, but comparative politics has been relatively slow to adapt to the new reality by becoming more global in its research designs.

Given these multiple difficulties, many wiser heads might have been deterred from proceeding. Nevertheless, the topic appeared too important, and the current systematic evidence too flimsy, to allow the conventional wisdom to occupy center stage unchallenged. My previous books had circled around issues of political participation, but the time seemed ripe for a more direct approach.

This book owes many debts, as ever, to friends and colleagues. The idea for the study originated over lunch with Lew Bateman, whose constant support at Cambridge University Press has proved invaluable. It received early encouragement that I should proceed, despite the difficulties, in conversations with Russ Dalton, Jan Van Deth, Ronald Inglehart, Jane Mansbridge, David Marsh, Ian McAllister, Joseph Nye, Robert Putnam, Ben Reilly, Marian Sawer, Sidney Verba, and Paul Whiteley. The book got under way during a visit to the Research School of the Social Sciences at the Australian National University, and I would like to thank colleagues there, especially Ian McAllister and Marian Sawer, for their generous and congenial hospitality. I am also most grateful to all those who went out of
their way to provide feedback on initial ideas, or to read through draft chapters and provide chapter-and-verse comments, including Andre Blais, Ivor Crewe, Mark Franklin, Michael Lewis-Beck, Peter Mair, and Susan Scarrow. The first section, on turnout, would not have been possible without the data kindly provided by International IDEA in Stockholm, especially the help of Bengt Sond-Saverland and Maria Gratschew. Subsequent analysis was heavily dependent on the World Values Study, and I owe a large debt of gratitude to the principal investigator, Ron Inglehart, for collecting and sharing this invaluable data set. Data and literature for specific chapters were collected by research assistants at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, including Josh Good, Rob Hanna, Sarah Herrup, and Andrea Stephanous. I would like to thank the panel discussants and colleagues who commented as draft papers were presented at professional meetings, including the Midwest Political Science Association in Chicago, the Political Studies Association of the UK, the European Consortium of Political Research, and the ESF Conference on Social Capital at Exeter University, as well as at the University of Oslo, the University of Orebro, and the Universidad Internacional Mendez Pelayo in Santander. Lastly, this book would not have been possible without the encouragement and stimulation provided by many colleagues and students at the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy and the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

Cambridge, Mass.
November 2001