Political Participation and Voter Turnout

“A low voter turnout is an indication of fewer people going to the polls.” (George W. Bush)

“Don’t vote. It only encourages them.” (Unknown)
Hierarchy of Political Participation: The Traditional View

Dimensions of Participation:

The Revisionist View

1. Voting
2. Campaigning
3. Communal Activity
4. Personalized Contacting

- Most people who engage in one type of activity also engage in others (a few are even "complete activists"), but some specialize in only one type of participation.
- Most people who do other things also vote; many who vote do nothing else.
- Campaigners and communalists differ in that the latter prefer to engage in cooperative group-based activity, while the former are more comfortable with conflict.
- The fourth type of activity refers to contacting government officials concerning a personal problem; contacting regarding a social problem is part of the communal dimension.
Craig’s take on this (based on data from a nationwide non-probability sample of college students, asked in the early 1980s whether they had participated or would be willing to participate in a range of activities:

- Voting (national or state election, local election);
- Campaigning (work for a party, contribute money, persuade friends/family how to vote, work for candidate, attend campaign rally);
- Group Activity (work with local group to solve community problem, be active on behalf of an issue, work for organized interest group, contact official about social problem, nonviolent protest activity);
- Dissent (disobey unjust law, engage in or advocate violence in order to produce/prevent fundamental changes in political system or its policies); and
- Military Service (during wartime or national emergency, during peacetime).

Did Not Load (run for office, contact official about personal problem).

Note: (a) there is no cooperative vs. conflict dimension; and (b) the fact that non-violent protest loads on Group Activity probably reflects the age of respondents.
Based on a much larger and more representative (national) sample in the early 1990s:
Correlates of Participation

- Socioeconomic status, esp. education (generally regarded as the single most important personal background factor in shaping the likelihood of someone’s becoming active in politics).

Better-educated citizens

- usually know more about the political system and how it affects their lives (thereby increasing the motivation to be active);
- tend to live in a social environment where there is pressure to be politically active, and to come from families where participatory norms were instilled early in life;
- are more likely to have skills that facilitate participation (including reading and analytical skills that enable them to understand complex events and issues, and the connections among them);
- tend to follow politics more closely in the mass media, and to engage in discussions with their friends/family; and
- have stronger feelings of internal and external efficacy, both of which make participation more likely.
Age, with those who are either very young and very old participating less than those in between.

For young people, we think this reflects the fact that they tend to be less settled in their lives – e.g., less likely to be married and have children (lower perceived stakes in political outcomes, though getting married may actually depress participation in the short term); more mobile (haven't had time to establish roots in their community → fewer social and organizational ties and, again, lower perceived stakes in political outcomes, the need for re-registering after a move, harder for campaigns to track and mobilize); and, in general, lots of other things going on in their lives that cause them to be less interested in politics than many of them will be later on.

While participation rates drop among the very old (largely reflecting physical and mental infirmities), this is less true for voting than for other, more demanding forms of political involvement.
Race/ethnicity. Black turnout is only slightly below that of whites, due mainly (or even exclusively) to SES differences; in recent years they have actually been more active in campaigns than whites (partly due to mobilization that occurs in many black churches), but less likely to give money (SES again).

Latinos and Asians have low participation relative to whites, but this varies from place to place and, in the case of voting, election to election (incl. whether a minority candidate is on the ballot).

Racial differences as a whole are probably declining, and those that remain have more to do with SES and language problems than with race/ethnicity per se.

Gender is not nearly as strong a predictor of political participation as it once was – but it still matters. Although women actually vote at a slightly higher rate than men (especially among the unmarried), men are more likely to give money to a campaign, contact an official, and join a political organization.
Contextual factors such as neighborhoods and churches. City size also appears to have an impact, with people who live in smaller communities (urban vs. others, but also within rural/suburban/urban areas) being more politically active, on average, than others.

Electoral rules and procedures (voluntary registration, no mandatory voting, weak party-group linkages, single-member districts, voter fatigue).

Attitudinal/psychological factors such as sense of civic duty, internal and external efficacy, partisanship, and maybe ideology.

Emotions, personality traits (anger, anxiety, extraversion, altruism, group identity).

Political/campaign factors such as personal contact, level of campaign spending (perhaps including for campaign ads), and competitiveness of the race/constituency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dyzygotic twins</th>
<th>Monozygotic twins</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(&quot;fraternal&quot;)</td>
<td>(&quot;identical&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share 50% of genetic material</td>
<td>Share 100% of genetic material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared environment</td>
<td>Shared environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unshared environment</td>
<td>Unshared environment</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Assumption: If MZ twins are more alike in their political participation than DZ twins are, it must be due to the differences in shared genetic material.
Conclusion: Participation and turnout are affected by both genetic and environmental factors.

Is there a “voting” gene? Maybe (probably) not, but voting may nevertheless be one of several political behaviors that are manifestations of a set of genetic and environmental predispositions.
Changing Conceptions of the Citizenship Role

The theory:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Always vote in elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Be active in social or political organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Choose products for political, ethical, or environmental reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Try to understand reasoning of people with other opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Keep watch on actions of government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Order</td>
<td>Always obey laws and regulations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Never try to evade taxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being willing to serve in the military in a time of need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solidarity</td>
<td>Support people in America who are worse off than oneself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Help people in rest of the world who are worse off than oneself</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“There are different opinions as to what it takes to be a good citizen. As far as you are concerned personally, on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is not at all important and 7 is very important, how important is it to . . .

Results here show that all of these norms are regarded as important by the American public – but some of them are more important than others to different individuals; see Dalton, *The Good Citizen*, p. 30.
The Distribution of Citizenship Norms

FIGURE 3.1  Generations and Citizenship

- Citizen duty decreases among younger generations, and engaged citizenship increases among the young.

Source: 2004 General Social Survey.

Democrats emphasize engaged citizenship over citizen duty, and Republicans are the opposite.

Source: 2004 General Social Survey.

The position of each group in this space represents its score on citizen duty and engaged citizenship.

Source: 2004 General Social Survey.

Dalton, The Good Citizen, p. 49.
FIGURE 3.7 Predictors of Citizenship Norms

Citizen Duty

- Age, income, religious attachments, and a Republican party identification significantly increase citizen duty, but duty is lower among African Americans.

Engaged Citizenship

- Education, racial minority, and religious attachments significantly increase engaged citizenship; but age, income, and Republican party identification lower engaged citizenship.

*Statistically significant effects (exceeding .05).

Note: Table entries are standardized coefficients from a multiple regression analysis; each bar represents whether the predictor has a positive or negative effect on citizenship norms.

Source: 2004 General Social Survey.

Trends in Political Participation

Putnam described a disengagement in the U.S. that went far beyond our growing (at the time) inclination to stay home on election day – a disengagement that emerged basically over the last third of the 20th century and involved all kinds of civic involvement, from . . .

- participation in politics (less voting, less campaign activity, less involvement in community affairs, less willingness to sign a petition or write a letter to one's congressman) to . . .
- participation in civic organizations of one sort or another (less PTA membership, less membership in chapter-based associations such as the League of Women Voters, B'nai B'rith, and the Knights of Columbus) to . . .
- participation in religious activities (less church attendance, and the churches we go to being less engaged with the wider community, i.e., in terms of social outreach services or programs) to . . .
- connections forged in the workplace (less union membership, less membership in national professional associations) to . . .
any number of other things (less likely to have dinner with one's family or to invite friends over, less likely to stay married, less involvement with neighborhood or homeowners associations; and while crime watch groups were becoming more common, there was less participation in bowling leagues and less giving to religious and charitable organizations).

Why was this happening? Among the possible reasons cited by Putnam:

- television (often a substitute for civic engagement)
- pressures of work (time and money, esp. in two-income families)
- suburban sprawl (commuting takes time)

Dalton: Balderdash! Focusing specifically on the political realm: “Rather than disengagement, the repertoire of political action has broadened” (p. 77). Measuring trends in participation is difficult with existing survey data, but here’s some of what we do know:

Table 4.2: Trends in Political Participation, 1967–2004

Participation in elections and voting has decreased, but most other activities have increased or held fairly constant.

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you interested in politics and national affairs?</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report voting in the last presidential election</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Official vote statistics in last presidential election (voting age public)</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What about local elections—do you always vote in those?</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Campaign Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>1967</th>
<th>1987</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2004</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you ever try to show (2004: convince) people why they should vote for one of the parties or candidates?</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you done (other) work for one of the parties or candidates?</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the past three or four years, have you attended any political meetings or rallies? (2000: last year)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the past three or four years, have you contributed money to a political party or candidate or to any other political cause?</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Contacting

|------------------|------|------|------|------|
| Have you ever personally gone to see, or spoken to, or written to some member of local government or some other person of influence in the community about some needs or problems? | 21   | 34   | —    | 28
| Contact state/national government | 20   | 31   | —    | —    |

Community Action

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<tr>
<td>Have you ever (2000: last year; 2004: past five years) worked with others in this community to try to solve some community problems?</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Protest

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have you participated in any demonstrations, protests, boycotts, or marches in past two years (2004: past five years)?</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Over the past five years or so, have you done any of the following things to express your views about something the government should or should not be doing: contacted a politician or government official either in person, or in writing, or some other way?

FIGURE 4.2  Protest Activity

Participation in various forms of protest activity are increasing.

Note: Figure entries are the percentage who say they have done the activity.