

## Political participation and three theories of democracy: A research inventory and agenda

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**Abstract.** This article proposes an agenda for political participation research aimed at providing empirical answers to questions derived from normative political theory. Based on a threefold distinction between responsive, participatory and deliberative models of democracy, the article first distinguishes three conceptions of political participation: as influencing attempts, as direct decision making, and as political discussion. Second, it is argued that each of the three models is associated with different desired consequences of political participation: equal protection of interests, self-development and subjective legitimacy. Third, a procedural standard is identified from which to evaluate the mechanism generating the three types of participation. By analogy with theories of distributive justice, this mechanism should be sensitive to incentives but insensitive to resources. The empirical questions thus implied are finally drawn together into an integrated agenda for future participation studies.

The study of mass political participation has grown into one of the most important subfields of political science. Originating in the early American election studies of the 1950s, the proliferation of primarily survey-based participation studies has reached a global scale in the last decade (see, e.g., Brady 1999; Dalton 2000; Norris 2002). Although usually inspired by normative concerns, however, the field remains surprisingly loosely coupled to normative theories of democracy. The classic reference is a simplistic notion of ‘participatory democrats’ urging more participation, as opposed to ‘realist democrats’, who allegedly take no interest in levels of participation at all (see, e.g., Parry et al. 1992: 4–5; Norris 2002: 5). Others, like Verba and Nie (1972) in their seminal study of participation in America, raise both normative and empirical questions at the outset, but in the end exclusively deal with the empirical ones – leaving the suggested connection to normative theory unexplored. Verba et al. (1995) no doubt improved upon earlier studies by explicitly appealing to a normative view of the participatory process as ‘undistorted representation’. As pointed out by critics, however, this view excludes other important notions within democratic theory (Mansbridge 1997).

In this article, I argue there is more to the connection between normative theory and empirical research on political participation than these examples suggest. I shall thus be addressing the more general tendency that normative

and positive theories of democracy ‘grow out of literatures that proceed, for the most part, on separate tracks, largely uninformed by one another’ (Shapiro 2002: 235). The purpose, simply put, is to tighten the strings connecting the two literatures on one specific theme: political participation. To this end, I explore the existing field of empirical participation research in the light of a new theoretical framework. Normative democratic theory plays a double role in this framework: it suggests what questions are important to ask and it provides the standards needed to evaluate the empirical findings. By identifying the blind spots left by participation research in the past, I propose an agenda for how it should be conducted in the future. Although methodological issues will be noted in passing, I concentrate on the questions that need be answered.

In the normative realm, I focus on three models of democracy: responsive, participatory and deliberative. While the varieties of modern democratic theory no doubt go beyond this simple threefold division (see, e.g., Held 1987), my argument aims to show it fruitful enough to balance the cost of generality. The discussion is organized into three different themes: the conceptualization, the causes and the consequences of political participation. I conclude with a summary of the empirical research agenda suggested and a discussion of possible reversed feedback from empirical results to normative theory.

### **Conceptions of political participation**

What types of human activity fall under the category ‘political participation’? I shall argue that the answer to this conceptual question depends on which normative model of democracy to which one adheres. According to some extreme elitist versions of democratic theory, such as Schumpeter (1942) and Sartori (1987), the role of citizens is limited to that of voting their leaders out of office. These theorists adhere to what Riker (1982) termed a ‘liberal’ model of democracy, a view with three defining constituents: citizens only hold meaningful preferences over the personnel of government; these preferences are only expressed indirectly through a system of representation; and are considered to be fixed and exogenous to the democratic process itself. With such a thin conceptualization of participation, little is left for empirical investigation. As we shall see, however, by altering each of the three conditions in turn, three models of democracy ensue with conceptions of political participation richer in empirical content.

#### *Participation as influencing attempts*

Consider the definition of political participation given by Verba and Nie (1972: 2): ‘Political participation refers to those activities by private citizens

that . . . aim at *influencing* the government, either by affecting the *choice* of government personnel or by affecting the *choices made by* government personnel. This is the conception of participation as *influencing attempts*. It has almost entirely dominated the empirical field of participation studies. The two large cross-nationally comparative studies of participation in the 1970s adhered to it (Verba et al. 1978: 46; Kaase & Marsh 1979: 42). So did the two large-scale studies in Britain and America in the 1990s (Parry et al. 1992: 16; Verba et al. 1995: 37). Textbooks and review articles confirm that this definition has become the received view (Nagel 1987: 1–3; Brady 1999: 737–738).<sup>1</sup>

What this definition adds to the narrow elitist view of democracy is to allow citizens to express their preferences over ‘the choices made by government personnel’ – that is, over policies (Miller 1992: 78). Participation is an instrumental act through which citizens attempt to make the political system respond to their will. ‘Participation is a mechanism for representation,’ writes Verba (1996: 1), ‘a means by which governing officials are informed of the preferences and the needs of the public and are induced to respond to those preferences and needs.’ In other words, system *responsiveness* to citizens’ needs and preferences is the key normative issue being addressed. Although this is what Riker (1982) referred to as ‘populist democracy’, I prefer to term this the ‘*responsive model of democracy*’. This is more in keeping with Dahl’s (1971: 2) strategy ‘to reserve the term “democracy” for a political system one of the characteristics of which is the quality of being completely or almost completely responsive to all its citizens’.

Drawing on classics such as Dahl (1956) and Downs (1957), most attention within this model has been paid to party competition in general elections as a means to bring about responsiveness (Miller 1983). Social choice theoretical accounts distilled from all ‘mediating mechanisms’ have also been proffered (Elster 1986: 104–112). The key contribution of Verba and Nie, then, was to add another variety of citizen activity that could be conducive to responsiveness – namely political participation ‘beyond voting and campaign activity’ (Verba & Nie 1972: 2). In keeping with the elitist notion, however, participation is still only considered as an indirect action *vis-à-vis* the policy outcomes. Thus, the citizenry does not directly determine the outcomes themselves. Similarly, no reference is made to the origins of the preferences and perceived needs upon which citizens act. Relaxing these two conditions in turn brings us to the other conceptions of participation.

### *Participation as direct decision making*

From an etymological point of view, the term ‘participation’, in its democratic context, refers to the act of taking part in person in the decision-making

process (Sartori 1987: 113). This is also the meaning assigned to the word by adherents of the so-called 'participatory model of democracy' (Pateman 1970: 67–71). Political participation, according to Gould (1988: 259), for example, 'is characterized by direct and immediate involvement in the process of decision making by the individuals concerned. Thus, in this process, the authority of the individuals is not delegated to some representative but is exercised directly by them.' Or, in Barber's (1984: 151) words: '[P]olitics in the participatory mode . . . is self-government by citizens rather than representative government.' In contrast to seeing participation as an attempt to influence decision makers, then, what participatory democrats have in mind is participation in *direct decision making* (Nagel 1987: 19). However, this definition should not be interpreted as an argument to abolish all representative institutions. What participatory democrats suggest is instead to widen the opportunities for direct participation by providing new arenas outside the traditional representative system, mostly in small-scale settings. In her classic defence of the participatory model Pateman (1970) almost exclusively deals with decision making in the workplace, whereas Gould (1988: 260) speaks of 'local political institutions that have the power to decide local issues'. Thus, the point is to make citizens more involved in solving community problems, even if this take place within a larger framework of a representative democracy.

### *Participation as political discussion*

The so-called 'deliberative model of democracy' presents a challenge to the view that people's preferences are fixed and exogenous to the democratic process (see, e.g., Habermas 1996; Gutmann & Thompson 1996; Bohman & Rehg 1997; Elster 1998b). Whereas participatory democrats seem to remain silent on this issue, advocates of both the extreme elitist and the responsive models share the view that 'the aim of democracy is to aggregate individual preferences into a collective choice' (Miller 1992: 75–78). Both Riker's 'liberalism' and 'populism', then, lack a normative standard from which to evaluate the process through which individual preferences are formed. To provide this is the purpose of the deliberative theory of democracy.

Theorists of deliberative democracy argue over what should count as deliberation. One point of controversy is whether deliberation is required to be collective or could be carried out individually, 'weighing reasons and arguments in a mental dialogue' (Fearon 1998: 61). Another disputed issue is whether deliberation is a way of making decisions or simply the process through which individual opinions are formed. Elster (1998a: 8), for example, defines deliberation as 'decision making by means of arguments', whereas Chambers (1996: 171; emphasis added) claims it to be 'directed not so much

at the decisions taken but at the formation of opinion which *precedes* decisions'. By defining participation within the deliberative model as *political discussion* instead of deliberation, I believe both these contested issues can be resolved (for a related argument, see Conover et al. 2002: 23–25). As argued by Fearon (1998: 63), 'while it makes sense to say, "I deliberated on the matter", it does not to say, "I discussed the matter with myself"'. Since to participate is to engage in some kind of collective endeavour, defining deliberation as discussion is more adequate as a concept of participation. Moreover, if we define deliberation as political discussion (i.e., as a process of opinion formation rather than a procedure for decision making), we can avoid blurring the line separating deliberative and participatory models of democracy. This blurring partly stems from the fact that most forms of direct decision making provide opportunities to take part in political discussions.<sup>2</sup> The point in defining deliberation as political discussion is that discussions aimed at forming opinions may occur even if no collective decision is to be reached.

In sum, participation according to the responsive model is defined as an attempt to influence those who have a say in government. According to participatory democrats, by contrast, participation is to have a say in government oneself. The deliberative model, finally, defines participation as a way of finding out what to say. By defining participation in these three ways, a first set of empirical questions drawn from democratic theory ensues. These questions are simply related to the level or amount of participation in a given democratic polity. The more participation of each type that can be found, the more satisfactory the result when evaluated from any of the three normative perspectives. In order to avoid the perennial question of what level of participation should then count as 'satisfactory', at least three comparative yardsticks could be applied: comparing the amount of different types of participation in the same polity, and comparing the amount of the same type of participation in either different polities at the same time or in the same polity over time.

### **Consequences of political participation**

The three models of democracy, however, are not only – probably not even primarily – interested in the levels or amount of participation. We can derive a further set of empirical questions by interpreting each of the three models as a 'best result' theory of democracy. A best result theory holds that 'fair terms of political participation are those that are likely to produce the most desirable result' (Beitz 1989: 20). This view of democratic theory is outcome-oriented. It

involves a consequentialist approach to the evaluation of political participation in which a social state can be judged in terms of whether some desired consequence of participation is attained. The three models differ, however, in what particular consequences they prefer. Put differently, they offer different arguments as to why political participation is desirable. The responsive model prefers system responsiveness, leading to equal protection of interests at the individual level, whereas the participatory model demands self-development. The deliberative model, I shall argue, is concerned with the legitimacy of the democratic system itself.

### *Influencing attempts and equal protection of interests*

Advocates of more participation as influencing attempts generally view elections as too weak in transmitting information from citizens to the political system. At the polls, the ordinary citizen must choose from bundles of policy positions predetermined by the political parties. Some of these may reflect their own views, but others may seem more remote. Moreover, institutional constraints generally impair the formation of new parties potentially capable of better incorporating the full set of policy views of citizens. When taking part in other forms of political activity such as contacting officials and protest behaviour, by contrast, citizens may express their views on one issue at a time. The information thus transmitted could be much more specific and targeted directly towards the actors responsible for dealing with the issue. In this way, political participation conceptualized as influencing attempts should make the system more responsive to citizens' needs and preferences. At the individual level, this means that citizens strengthen the protection of their interests.

This outcome-oriented evaluative criterion is given its fullest account in Verba et al.'s (1995) volume on participation in America. Their title, *Voice and Equality*, is suggestive in this regard. On the one hand, they are concerned with 'voice': what 'preferences and needs' are being transmitted to the political system through acts of political participation? On the other hand, they assess whether this voice is consistent with a principle of 'equality': are the activists representative to the general public in terms of the preferences and needs they transmit to the system? If not, the preferences and needs of each citizen are not given equal consideration. Taken together, these two facets form a picture of the degree of distortion in the participatory process. The more such distortion there is, the more imperfect is the protection of citizens' interests (Verba et al. 1995: esp. Chapters 6–8, 16).

There are three notable features of this evaluative criterion. First, the requirement of *democratic* responsiveness adds something to the idea that

elected officials should be attentive to any influencing attempts (cf. Manin et al. 1999: 9). This additional element is expressed in Verba et al.'s concern for *whose* preferences and needs are expressed through participation. Successful influencing attempts are a necessary but not sufficient condition of democratic responsiveness. What remains is the requirement that the preferences and needs expressed through participation should give an undistorted picture of the preferences and needs of the entire citizenry. In other words, the normative standard could be stated more precisely as *equal* protection of interests.

Second, the interests that should thus be protected actually come in two guises. According to Verba et al. (1995: 171), equal consideration should not only be given to the expressed *preferences* of the public, but also to the *needs* implicit in their social characteristics. 'We cannot dismiss demographic characteristics from the list of characteristics that are potentially politically relevant. . . . Apart from the explicit demands made by activist publics, there is implicit information in their social characteristics.' Admittedly the posited link between 'implicit needs' and 'social characteristics' could be questioned. It certainly adds complexity to the task of empirical measurement. Nevertheless, to add needs to the list of characteristics to which the political system should respond is an important contribution. It makes the evaluative standard sensitive to what Lukes (1974) termed the 'third face of power': the fact that a group of individuals might possess a common interest for some government policy or social outcome even if that is not reflected in their manifest preferences.

Third, however, what is lacking in Verba et al.'s empirical account is the actual impact assessment. In their own words, 'to demonstrate that policy makers are responsive to what they hear from citizens' is beyond the scope of their volume (Verba et al. 1995: 30). In the earlier study by Verba and Nie, by contrast, this second aspect of responsiveness was a central part of the story. By deliberately designing their study so as to permit cross-sectional comparisons between 64 'target communities', the proposition could be tested that participation should make political leaders responsive to the citizens of their community. Their findings by and large confirmed the hypothesis. Higher levels of participation did improve responsiveness, although only above a certain threshold (Verba & Nie 1972: Chapters 17–19).

It is a troubling fact that so little empirical work has been done to assess the effects on responsiveness since. One explanation for this might be the problems involved already at the conceptual level. As pointed out by Verba and Nie (1972: 301–302) themselves, policy makers 'can be responsive to citizens in many ways': 'They may be responsive in terms of knowing what the citizens want, in terms of agreeing with those priorities, in terms of making an effort to

deal with those priorities, or in successfully dealing with those priorities.' For reasons of data accessibility, Verba and Nie relied on the first three meanings of responsiveness mentioned. In the only other study of the impact of participation known to me, responsiveness in the second sense was measured (Parry et al. 1992: Chapter 17). From the perspective of normative democratic theory, however, I would argue that the fourth meaning is what really matters. True, the first three meanings may be regarded as important – in some cases perhaps even necessary – conditions required for bringing about responsiveness in the latter respect. All things considered, however, a democratic system could hardly be considered responsive if it never successfully deals with the priorities of its citizens.

In sum, the responsive model of democracy puts two questions on our proposed research agenda. The first concerns the representativeness to the general public of those who engage in influencing attempts. The second relates to the impact of those influencing attempts on the actions taken by the government or other institutions in society. In terms of research design, answers to these questions would require data on preferences, needs and activity at the level of individual citizens, supplemented with elite level data from elected representatives and other key decision makers. Since responsiveness is an aggregate-level phenomenon, it must then be measured either across time within the same democratic system, or simultaneously across several systems. This would allow the necessary evaluation of the entire linkage chain running from citizens' needs and preferences, over preferences expressed through participation, to preferences perceived, acted upon and dealt with by the elites.

### *Direct decision making and self-development*

Apart from their focus on direct decision making, the distinguishing feature of participatory democrats is their argument that this kind of participation fosters desirable personal and social qualities in democratic citizens (Dahl 1989: 92; Warren 1992: 9, 11). According to Kaufman (1960), credited with being the one who first coined the term 'participatory democracy', citizen participation is crucial because it contributes to 'the development of human powers of thought, feeling and action'. Similarly, Pateman (1970: 42) argues that: 'One might characterize the participatory model as one where maximum input (participation) is required and where output includes not just policies (decisions) but also the development of the social and political capacities of each individual, so that there is "feedback" from output to input.' Thus, self-realization or *self-development* is the primary consequentialist criterion proffered by participatory democrats (Macpherson 1977: 2; Gould 1988: 40–42,

46–51, 287). The exact definitions of the concept of self-development vary, but they all share an idea of a not fully realized potential in the human self that could be transformed or even perfected through political participation (Warren 1992).

Thus, there is again a straightforward causal proposition involved that is derived from democratic theory. Does participation in direct decision making foster self-development? Following Pateman (1970: Chapter 3), most research in this regard has focused on the effects of participation on ‘the sense of political efficacy’. However, some of the tests that have been performed look at the effects of political participation defined as influencing attempts (Finkel 1985, 1987; Stenner-Day & Fischle 1992). This misses the point of the participatory argument. What is needed, of course, is an empirical assessment of the alleged effects of direct decision making. In this respect, there is some evidence that curbs the hopes of participatory democrats, but, most importantly, this evidence is scarce (Sniderman 1975; Pedersen 1982). To remedy this situation, experimental and case study research would most likely be preferable in the future (Mansbridge 1997: 424; cf. Pedersen 1982: 558–569). The reason is that we are dealing with propositions on the *potential* nature of certain relationships. Participatory democrats argue that *if* opportunities for participation in direct decision making were widespread – at the workplace, in the neighborhood, in the local community or elsewhere – *then* self-development would ensue. It could be argued, however, that no democratic country in the world provides such widespread opportunities to the population at large or at least that the cross-country variation is not large enough to allow meaningful impact assessment. Controlled experiments or well-designed case studies of participatory initiatives at the local or organizational level, by contrast, could enable researchers to explore whether participation in direct decision making really pays the psychological dividends that participatory theorists claim.

### *Political discussion and subjective legitimacy*

Deliberative democrats have presented several outcome-oriented arguments on the effects to be expected from political discussions. The first is that giving citizens widespread opportunities for discussion would ‘increase the quality of democratic judgements’ (Warren 1996: 46). This argument has been extensively deployed in Fishkin’s (1991: 1; 1995: 4) defence of so-called ‘deliberative polls’, which gives special credence to the idea that discussion leads to more *informed* public opinion. A second line of reasoning tries to reconcile deliberative theories of democracy with models concerned with pure preference aggregation, the argument being that what political discussion can accomplish

is to make contestants in an argument 'agree about the dimensions over which they disagree' (Knight & Johnson 1994: 282–283). As a result, the instability and arbitrariness that bedevils any democratic mechanism for preference aggregation, at least according to the social choice theory of democracy, may be overcome (Miller 1992; Dryzek & List 2003). Third, and finally, deliberation has been accredited with the capacity to bestow legitimacy on democratic procedures and outcomes (Manin 1987; Cohen 1989; Habermas 1996).

I shall argue that these three views need not be incompatible, but that assessing the third effect (i.e., on legitimacy) poses the most ultimate challenge to deliberative democrats. One of the problems that have confronted theories of democracy that assume fixed citizen preferences is what should make people support a political system where they, in case of conflict, persistently turn out to be on the losing side. This is an especially salient issue within deeply polarized societies, or within those characterized by a plurality of cultural minorities (Barry 1979). The point put forward by deliberative democrats, however, is that the relationship between outcomes and preferences is the wrong place to look for such support. Instead, parties to the losing side of a persistent conflict may still comply if the arguments for both sides have been heard and weighted; in other words, if the outcome is preceded by political discussion. In the words of Gutmann and Thompson (1996: 41–42): '[E]ven with regard to political decisions with which they disagree, citizens are likely to take a different attitude to those that are adopted after careful consideration of the relevant conflicting moral claims.' Yet why should discussion yield this desirable effect on the legitimacy of the outcome? One answer might be: because it makes discussants more informed and more likely to 'agree about the dimensions over which they disagree' – that is, the first two effects of discussion posited above may, when seen from a wider perspective, be viewed as possible mechanisms responsible for enhancing legitimacy.

As opposed to elitist or responsive theorists of democracy, then, 'the source of legitimacy' according to deliberative democrats 'is not the predetermined will of individuals, but rather the process of its formation, that is, deliberation itself' (Manin 1987: 351–352). An important question, however, is what 'legitimacy' means in this case. Even if we agree upon a generic definition such as 'moral acceptability', one must ask: moral acceptability for whom? For an outside observer trying to assess the legitimacy of a certain state of affairs, or for the participants operating within the system itself (Weatherford 1992: 150–151)? While the former type of legitimacy may be termed 'normative' or 'objective' legitimacy, the latter should rather be called 'subjective' since it is based on a judgement of moral acceptability made by each individual. Although Habermas (1996: 27) would probably hold that democratic deliberation should ultimately promote both these

forms of legitimacy, a more modest claim – and more amenable to empirical testing – is that political discussion preceding a decision leads to a greater acceptance of the outcome for the actors involved. In other words, that it promotes *subjective* legitimacy.

In terms of research design, the ordinary opinion poll again suffers from limitations when it comes to assessing this causal proposition. The main problem is to gather reliable information on the real-life conditions under which people engage in political discussions. In a controlled experimental setting, by contrast, discussions held by the subjects of the experiment could be observed, video-taped and subjected to careful examination. In addition, opinions could be measured both before and after to enable an assessment of changes in opinion structure and perceptions of legitimacy. Although the so-called ‘deliberative poll’ (Fishkin 1991, 1995) is an interesting innovation in this regard, truly experimental designs hold more promise in successfully isolating the effects of political discussion (see, e.g., Sulkin & Simon 2001). A major drawback of the experimental set up, however, is the impossibility of recreating ‘all the crosscutting conditions that shape deliberation in an ongoing political community’ (Chambers 2003: 318). Thus, the most promising venue for future empirical studies on the effects of deliberation appears to be combinations of either survey and experimental designs (Mutz 2002) or surveys and community case studies (Conover et al. 2002).

## Causes of political participation

Let us now turn to the other side of participation: the question of its causes. Most empirical approaches to political participation have sought to explain why some people engage in politics whereas others do not. The underlying standard from which these explanatory models are assessed is their overall predictive performance (see, e.g., Leighley 1995; Whiteley 1995). Seen from the viewpoint of positive science, this is a perfectly justified way of proceeding; however, if we are to take normative democratic theory as our point of departure, the perspective changes. In this section I shall argue that instead of seeking to attain maximum overall explanatory power in our assessment of what causes participation, we should try to ascertain whether certain specific causes are supported by empirical evidence. More precisely, the evaluative standard I shall propose involves determining whether political participation is primarily driven by incentives or resources.

This view follows from a *procedural* interpretation of our three models of democracy, rather than the best result version adhered to in the last section. We are now no longer interested in the outcome of participation. What the

procedural view entails is instead ‘the idea that the *terms* of participation in democratic procedures should themselves be fair’ (Beitz 1989: 22; emphasis added). To identify the conditions under which the terms of participation can be regarded as fair, we must make a critical distinction between opportunity and realization; or, in Sen’s (1992) words, between ‘the actual achievement’ and ‘the freedom to achieve’. ‘Achievement is concerned with what we *manage* to accomplish, and freedom with the *real opportunity* that we have to accomplish what we value. The two need not be congruent’ (Sen 1992: 31). In other words, one could picture a situation where the rates of participation were unequally distributed, and yet there were equal opportunities to participate. This would be the case, for example, if those who did not participate remained passive out of a free choice and not as a consequence of structural constraints. Given the same incentives, they could have chosen to act just as easily as the participants did; thus, ‘if some citizens do not participate because they freely choose not to be active . . . then participatory inequalities do not compromise democracy’ (Verba et al. 1995: 26–27).

By analogy with theories of justice, we could think of the causes that enable citizens to participate as a distributive mechanism – an allocation scheme according to which some are entitled to the ‘social goods’ called participation, while others are not. What ‘fairness in the terms of participation’ then requires is a constraint on the design of this distributive mechanism (Beitz 1989: 17). Following Dworkin (1981: 311), we could say that ideally the mechanism generating political participation should be ‘endowment-insensitive’ but ‘ambition-sensitive’ – that is, whether people end up as participants or not should ‘depend on their ambitions (in the broad sense of goals and projects about life), but should not depend on their natural and social endowments (the circumstances in which they pursue their ambitions)’ (Kymlicka 1990: 75). Although I prefer the terms ‘resources’ instead of ‘endowments’ and ‘incentives’ instead of ‘ambition’, this means we have two rival explanations for political participation to assess. Are resources or incentives the prime mover? What follows from this, then, is another normative standard from which to evaluate the empirical world of political participation. This time the standard is common to all three models of democracy. What differs between them is only what kind of participation is being explained: influencing attempts, direct decision making or political discussion. I will now discuss the two generic types of causes – resources and incentives – in turn.

### *Resources: Physical, human and social capital*

Broadly speaking, resources come in three forms: physical, human and social capital (Coleman 1990: 304). *Physical* capital covers all material assets

available to an individual. If we extend the concept to include financial capital, factors like income, wealth and private property immediately come to mind. With the rapid development of information technology, access to equipment such as telephones, radios, televisions, fax machines, personal computers, cell phones and Internet connections most certainly should be added to the list of material factors conducive to participation. As indicated by the proverb 'time is money', access to spare time could be counted as a material asset as well.

Originally developed within economics, the concept of *human* capital is normally used to signify human skills and capacities that enable action (Becker 1964). In the study of political participation, prominent examples include such well-known determinants as education, knowledge and skills. 'Political knowledge,' we are told, 'is to democratic politics what money is to economics: it is the currency of citizenship' (Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996: 8). Verba et al. (1995: Chapter 11), in turn, elaborate on the concept of 'civic skills', by which they imply linguistic facility, communication and organizational proficiency.

The notion of *social* capital, which has gained wide currency among political scientists mainly through the works of Putnam (1993, 2000), may require more than just a cursory note with regard to its conceptual meaning. The most influential definition is no doubt the one given by Coleman (1990: 302): 'Social capital is . . . not a single entity, but a variety of different entities having two characteristics in common: They all consist of some aspect of social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of individuals who are within the structure.' Social capital defined as social networks, then, is a social resource, not an economic asset or a cognitive disposition. 'Unlike other forms of capital, social capital inheres in the structure of relations between persons and among persons. It is lodged neither in individuals nor in physical implements of production' (Coleman 1990: 302). Although they might be empirically linked, social resources and socioeconomic status must thus be treated as theoretically separate entities (Campbell et al. 1986).

Leaving aside some of the disputed issues involved in this definition (see Lin 2001: 8–12), I shall here concentrate on how it can be used to develop an idea of social capital as a resource engendering participation. The basic idea is simple: access to social networks increases the likelihood that a person is being recruited to political participation (Knoke 1990: 1042; Verba et al. 1995: Chapter 5; Teorell 2003). This could imply solicitations to join some influencing attempt, some arena for direct decision making or some political discussion group. As argued by Granovetter (1973) and Burt (1992) among others, social networks serve to structure the flow of information surrounding an individual. Since large but loosely coupled networks link people to a wider context, access to such networks increases the probability of being exposed to appeals for

political action. Although the logic is primarily developed with reference to informal networks, it might easily be taken to apply in the case of formal groups as well. Involvement in multiple organizations increases the likelihood of being reached by many diverse others (Granovetter 1973: 1362–1365, 1375). Hence, it increases the likelihood of being recruited to participation.

*Incentives: General and selective*

Apart from having ample access to physical, human and social capital, people must have a desire to take part. They must be both willing and able. More formally, we can think of resources as the first of two successive filtering operations. Among the full set of actions available to an individual, resources work as a constraint that delimits a smaller set of feasible actions. Within this smaller set, the second filter determines which action will actually be carried out. This latter role is the one played by incentives (Elster 1989: 13–14).

The literature on incentives for political action usually takes as its starting point the provocative claim by Olson (1965) that rational actors should not engage in activities oriented towards a common good. Since one could reap the benefits of these *general incentives* even if others provide them, each individual has a rational motive to abstain. The fact that people do engage in collective endeavours must instead be explained with reference to *selective incentives* – that is, benefits that only accrue from the act of actually contributing to the outcome oneself (Olson 1965: 51).

Whereas Olson was almost exclusively concerned with material benefits, a range of other more psychic and less tangible selective rewards to political participation have been suggested over the years (see, e.g., Rosenstone & Hansen 1993: 16–20; Verba et al. 1995: Chapter 4; Whiteley 1995; Finkel & Muller 1998). One such set of factors may be termed ‘process incentives’: people may participate out of sheer excitement, regardless of what outcomes are at stake. A related selective reward is often called ‘expressive incentives’: people may participate simply in order to express their support or reaffirm their identity (Calvert 2002). Yet another set of selective incentives are related to social norms (Elster 1989: Chapter 12; Coleman 1990: Chapters 10–11). Both an internalized sense of duty to the wider community and norms supported by the threat of social sanctions may engender citizen participation (Knack 1992). While these selective incentives have primarily been developed for explanatory models of participation defined as influencing attempts, they easily translate to the other types of political participation as well. If people were only to engage in direct decision making or join political discussion for the pursuit of collective goals, then again any single individual seen in isolation would be better off remaining inactive. Selective incentives such as

process incentives, expressive awards or norms could however still explain why some do engage in these activities.

*The interplay of resources, incentives and action*

In sum, the two generic propositions as to what makes people engage in politics are: because they have the resources and because they have the incentives to do so. The most crucial test from a normative standpoint is whether resources have a causal impact at all. To the extent they do, the mechanism generating participation is not endowment-insensitive – and, hence, the terms of participation cannot be considered fair. Let me point out two caveats in this evaluative approach, however. The first one concerns the nature of the relationship between incentives and resources. We can hardly assume they are independent of each other (see, e.g., Elster 1989: 16–20). To begin with, a willingness to achieve could be used to invest in resources that are productive for that purpose. An individual's holding of resources cannot be assumed constant over the life cycle. It is not only affected by 'natural and social endowments', but by 'ambition' as well. To the extent that resources deliberately accumulated in this fashion generate participation, the distributive mechanism should still be considered fair. What needs to be assessed in this situation, then, is only the causal impact of resources *controlling for* incentives.

The other scenario, that resources sometimes shape incentives, presents a more severe difficulty. Yet there are numerous accounts of ways in which such a causal mechanism might operate, the fable of the fox and the sour grapes perhaps being the most famous one (Elster 1983). Incapacity for action weakens the will for action, as does the opposite: more action opportunities instigate more action. In other words, resources may affect participation indirectly – with incentives merely being the mediating mechanism. When this is the case, the terms for participation are unfair since endowments still exercise a causal (albeit indirect) impact. Thus, not only must the association between resources and incentives be known, so must the direction of causality operating between them.

The second caveat presents a similar problem. We have hitherto assumed that participation can be treated as fully endogenous in relation to its posited causes. This need not be the case. The act of participation may in itself lead to an investment in resources, be it physical, human or social capital. Similarly, early experience of participation may affect the future willingness to participate again. To estimate the association between either incentives or resources, on the one hand, and participation, on the other, without taking the possibility of a reciprocal relationship into account, would again flaw our assessment of the fairness of participation. Both these caveats provide strong support for

experimental or panel designs in future research on political participation (Finkel & Muller 1998). Only through random allocation of treatments or by tracking the same individuals through time will it be possible to disentangle the causal directions involved in the interplay of incentives, resources and participation.

### Conclusion: Toward an integrated agenda for political participation studies

Some three decades ago Robert Salisbury (1975: 337) noted that: 'There are so many good questions arising under the heading of political participation that it would be foolish even to attempt a summary listing.' Nevertheless, I shall make such an attempt. In Figure 1, I summarize the theoretical framework underlying this article, bringing together the empirical research questions derived from all three normative models of democracy. In the central box, the three conceptions of participation are located, bringing *descriptive* questions pertaining to the distribution of political participation to the fore. Arrows then signify the *causal* relationships that need to be assessed in order to evaluate the state of political participation in a given collective entity abiding to democratic principles. These arrows are either running to or from political participation (capturing either its causes or its effects).

Common to all three models, when given a procedural interpretation, is their definition of fairness in the terms of participation. Irrespective of whether participation as influencing attempts, direct decision making or political discussion is being considered, incentives should be the causal force, not

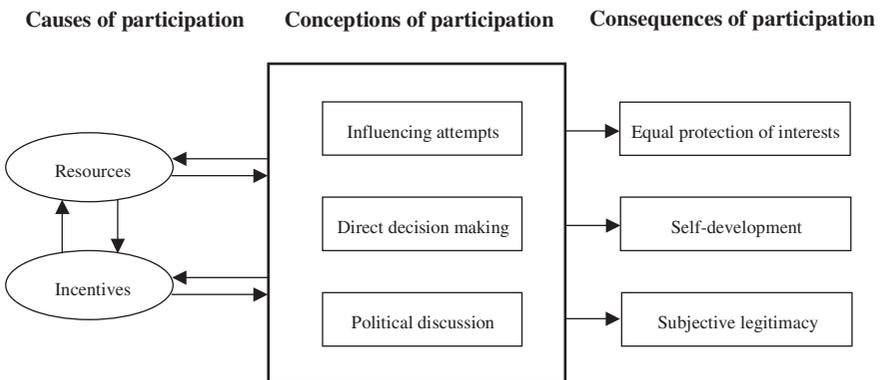


Figure 1. Causes, conceptions and consequences of political participation.

resources. Even if this was found to be the case in terms of direct effects on participation, however, the possibility that resources have an indirect effect must be taken into consideration, with incentives merely acting as an intervening variable. For this reason, the possibility of a reciprocal relationship between resources and incentives has been indicated. In a similar vein, the causal effect running from resources and incentives to participation must be disentangled from the effect running in the opposite direction.

In terms of the responsive model of democracy, the desired effect of political participation is equal protection of interests. Individual needs and preferences should be translated into collectively binding decisions by means of responsiveness to the preferences and needs expressed through participation. These preferences and needs, moreover, should give equal weight to the interest of each citizen. In contrast to all other effects indicated in the model, this is an aggregate level proposition. Both the participatory and the deliberative models primarily imply individual-level effects of participation. In the case of participatory democracy, what is required is a transformation of the personal qualities of the human being, or self-development. Deliberative democrats, in turn, are ultimately concerned with subjective legitimacy. They argue that only when arguments from each contending side has been sifted through political discussion will the outcomes of democratic decision making be morally acceptable to the individual.

Participation studies in the past have clearly covered certain areas highlighted in Figure 1 better than others. In conceptual terms, political participation defined as influencing attempts have dominated the field. With respect to consequences, the impact on equal protection of interest has attracted greater attention than the individual-level effects on self-development and subjective legitimacy, although, as was noted above, much work remains when it comes to gauging the actual impact of influencing attempts on the behaviour of state agents. By and large, the responsive model of democracy is better assessed than both its participatory and deliberative counterparts. Both resources and incentives loom largely in the empirical literature on the causes of participation (again concentrated on influencing attempts), but their theoretical status has never been assessed in terms of fairness as suggested here (see, however, Teorell, Sum & Tobiasen, forthcoming, for an attempt in this direction). This is another important blind spot that should be addressed in the future agenda for participation research.

Thus far I have only discussed how the research agenda proposes assessments of the three models of democracy independent of one another. I have also been ignoring ways to incorporate more than one evaluative dimension in a single study. By relaxing both these constraints, we can take a first step toward an agenda for political participation studies that integrates both

normative models and evaluative criteria. First, whereas Figure 1 outlines the main effects of each participation form posited in the literature, there are a number of interesting side effects to explore that involve core concepts from the other normative models. Some of these have been mentioned in passing above. Thus, for example, most studies of self-development have been looking at the effects of influencing attempts rather than direct decision making. Moreover, political discussions may have other effects than increased subjective legitimacy, such as more informed citizens, which is a form of self-development. Political discussions may also lead to more structured preference orderings, which may facilitate the aggregation of interests into collectively binding decisions. In other words, participation in political discussion may promote the equal protection of interests.

Other causal propositions, never referred to above, now also present themselves. Through Pateman's (1970: 24–27) close reading of Rousseau, for example, two new potential effects of direct decision making may be developed. One is based on the idea that the interests of individual citizens can never be protected indirectly by elected representatives. They can only be secured through participation in direct decision making. Thus by, for example, comparing the representativeness of elected bodies with local boards of citizen self-management, one could assess a causal arrow running from participation in direct decision making to the equal protection of interests. A second hypothesis is that participation in direct decision making has a legitimizing effect. This proposition is based on the idea that citizens are only willing to accept the outcome of decision-making processes of which they have been a part.

Whereas these steps to integrate the separate components of Figure 1 have been taken vertically, there are also horizontal linkages to explore. Most importantly, explorations of the causes of participation could be incorporated into the assessment of its effects. A promising first attempt in that direction was undertaken by Verba et al. (1995: 465) in their study of how 'the *process* by which people come to participate affects the *substance* of what is communicated through their participation'. A similar strategy might be employed with respect to the development of subjective legitimacy. The deliberative model of democracy is generally considered to suffer from a scale problem in that most ordinary citizens will never be able to take part in the political discussions preceding large-scale decisions (Dryzek 2001; Parkinson 2003). Yet perhaps it is not the actual participation in political discussions that matters for subjective legitimacy, but the causes leading to that participation? According to this view, the outcome of political decisions are accepted as legitimate when opportunities for participation have been provided to those who have incentives to take part, and not in relation to their access to resources. It could be left open for investigation, moreover, whether it is the

causal mechanisms regulating people's participation in political discussions, direct decision making or influencing attempts that have the strongest impact on subjective legitimacy.

Needless to say, to answer all the questions implied by this research agenda presents a tremendous challenge to political scientists. The ideal research design would include comparative cross-sections, panel studies and community case studies of citizens and elites, as well as controlled experiments. This is not the place to dwell on the methodological challenges lying ahead. Suffice it to say that the proposed agenda probably requires a collective endeavour that goes far beyond the scope of any single research project.

If this research agenda was actually pursued to its end, could the results affect our evaluation of the three normative models of democracy? Most probably, but in different ways. Empirical research can of course never determine the desirability of responsiveness, self-development or subjective legitimacy. That is an issue to be dealt with by political philosophers (Held 1987: 7, 196–197). What positive political science can contribute to normative philosophy are, however, systematic tests of the means-to-ends relationships sometimes implied by normative argument. The participatory theory of democracy in particular is a case in point. According to Pateman (1970: 42), 'the justification for a democratic system in the participatory theory of democracy rests primarily on the human results that accrue from the participatory process'. If we are to take this quotation seriously, and if no empirical support for such 'human results' can be found, the justification for participatory democracy would, by implication, be undermined. Deliberative democrats would also suffer if it could be established that discussion, even under ideal conditions, is not conducive to subjective legitimacy. As argued above, however, deliberation has been justified in other instrumental terms than its alleged effect on subjective legitimacy. Particularly noteworthy in this regard are the efforts to reconcile deliberation with the responsive model of democracy, the argument being that discussion could be a way to avoid voting cycles and other 'impossibility theorems' inherent in the responsive model.

What about the responsive model? Would it be affected if it could be shown that influencing attempts do not promote responsiveness? This is the consequentialist proposition where most evidence has been mustered thus far. Somewhat ironically, however, the normative justification for this model seems to be the one least affected by empirical results. Advocates of responsive democracy would probably see no reason to abandon their ideal due to discouraging empirical results as regards the effects of participation. I believe the explanation for this is an important difference between this model and the other two. As alluded to already in the labeling of their models, both participatory and deliberative democrats take a certain preferred form of

participation (i.e., direct decision making and political discussion) as their normative point of departure. Their main concern is then how this particular activity can be defended. The same is not true for responsive democrats. Their core concept is responsiveness itself, while participation in influencing attempts is merely one possible means to reach this ultimate end. Should participation turn out to be inconsequential or even detrimental for democratic responsiveness, responsive democrats could turn their attention to other means, such as competitive elections, instead.

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## Notes

1. In effect, Verba and Nie's conception is narrower than the more general definition of political participation as 'action by ordinary citizens directed toward influencing some political outcomes' (Brady 1999: 737) since 'political outcomes' may be determined by other than 'government personnel' (see, e.g., Norris 2002: 193–194). However, Verba and Nie (1972: 2) were aware of this limitation in that they saw governmental decisions only as 'a close approximation' of the more general process of political decision making (see Teorell, Torcal & Montero, forthcoming).
2. Barber (1984), for example, is most commonly treated as a participatory democrat, although he also pays attention to preference formation and the importance of citizen dialogue.

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