Symposium

A conceptual map of political participation

Jan W. van Deth
Universität Mannheim, Seminargebäude A5, Mannheim, 68131, Germany.
E-mail: jvdeth@uni-mannheim.de

Abstract How would you recognize a mode of participation if you see one? Owing to the rapid expansion of political activities in the last decades this question has become increasingly difficult to answer. Neither the development of all-embracing nominal definitions, nor deductive analyses of existing modes of participation seem to be helpful. In addition, the spread of expressive modes of participation makes it hard to avoid purely subjective definitions. The aim of this discussion paper is to develop an operational definition of political participation, which allows us to cover distinct conceptualizations systematically, efficiently and consistently. This goal can only be arrived at if the conventional approach of presenting nominal definitions to solve conceptual problems is left behind. Instead, available definitions are included in a set of decision rules to distinguish three main variants of political participation. A fourth variant is distinguished for non-political activities used for political purposes. Together, the four variants of political participation cover the whole range of political participation systematically without excluding any mode of political participation unknown yet. At the same time, the endless expansion of the modes of political participation in modern democracies does not result in an endless conceptual expansion. Implications for research and various examples are discussed.
Acta Politica (2014) **49,** 349–367. doi:10.1057/ap.2014.6; published online 9 May 2014

Keywords: participation; engagement; democracy; concept formation

> 'That's a great deal to make one word mean', Alice said in a thoughtful tone.
>
> 'When I make a word do a lot of work like that', said Humpty Dumpty, 'I always pay it extra'. (Carroll, 1871, pp. 186–187)

Introduction: The Challenges of Endless Expansions

Casting a vote, boycotting some product, donating money, running for office, forwarding emails, contacting an alderman, attending a political poetry slam – the list of modes of political participation is long and gets longer almost daily. The continuous expansion of available modes of participation in the last decades underlines the relevance of

political participation for democracy and democratization: participation is the *elixir of life* for democracy. Yet especially discussions about the increase of opportunities for political involvement are accompanied by growing conceptual ambivalences in at least two ways. First, conclusions about the changing nature of participation differ widely depending on the concept used. Summarizing the consequences of applying similar concepts for different phenomena, Hay notices:

> … those with the most restrictive and conventional conceptions of political participation identify a strong and consistent pattern of declining political participation and engagement over time, whilst those with a more inclusive conception discern instead a change in the *mode* of political participation. (2007, p. 23; emphasis in original)

In other words, actual conclusions about important changes in democratic societies depend on the participation concept used. Dalton (2008) studied political action in the USA and highlights the importance of depicting changes in political participation. His main conclusion is that: '… the trends in political activity represent changes in the style of political action, and not just changes in the level of participation' (Dalton, 2008, p. 94). The two, however, cannot be disentangled so easily because meaningful conclusions about 'styles' and 'levels' require a common understanding of 'political participation' at different points in time. If no such common understanding is available, conclusions should be restricted to distinct arguments about the 'level' of participation for each 'style' separately. Another example is provided by Fox's (2014, p. 502) critique of an empirical study on participation in Britain using a concept of participation that is '… too restrained in the light of social changes and technical advancements' and, therefore, we cannot be sure that '… a realistic and valid assessment' of participation and its decline in Britain has been captured. As these examples show, the assessment of changes in political participation and democratic developments are not primarily contingent on theoretical approaches or empirical findings, but on the ways in which political participation is conceptualized.

A second conceptual ambivalence is also related to the expansion of the modes of participation. Many newer, 'creative', 'personalized', 'individualized' or 'conscious' modes of participation such as political consumption, street parties or guerrilla gardening are non-political activities used for political purposes. Only the expression of political aims or intentions transforms these activities into modes of political participation: boycotting a brand of athletic shoes is, as such, not a political activity, but it can easily become one if the shopper explicitly expresses her intention that her refusal should be understood as an utterance for legislation restricting child labour. Yet accepting intentions and aims of people as a necessary criterion to characterize political participation would imply an extreme form of subjectifying our main concepts. In this way, literally every mode of behaviour would classify as political participation: we only have to ask the individual concerned whether she considers repairing her bike, signing a petition or buying a brand of shoes as 'politically'

motivated and all these activities become specimens of political participation. Reversely, no political participation would be witnessed if she visits the ballot box for purely personal or private reasons. Unattractive as these implications are, simply neglecting the goals or intentions of citizens as a defining feature of political participation would throw out the baby with the bath water. How, then, can we arrive at a fruitful conceptualization of political participation taking the expressions of people involved into consideration without being forced to follow the same procedure for a clearly political phenomenon such as voting?

The continuous expansion of the modes of participation has confronted many researchers with the dilemma of using either a dated conceptualization excluding many new modes of political participation or stretching their concepts to cover almost everything (cf. van Deth, 2001). Fox's (2014) question – 'Is it Time to Update the Definition of Political Participation?' – can be answered affirmatively, but how to avoid that the endless expansion of the modes of participation results in endless conceptual expansions? The aim of this article is to contribute to this discussion by developing an operational definition of political participation, which allows us to cover distinct conceptualizations systematically, efficiently and consistently. This goal can only be arrived at if the conventional approach of presenting nominal definitions to solve conceptual problems is left behind and the role of aims and intentions of participants is explicitly dealt with.

Defining Political Participation

Political participation can be loosely defined as citizens' activities affecting politics. The simple appearance of this definition is deceptive. The list of specimens of political participation is virtually endless and includes such divergent phenomena as voting, demonstrating and boycotting – but also guerrilla gardening, volunteering, flash mobs and even suicide protest. Usually, participation is considered to be an abstract concept (measured as a continuum) covering these specific modes of participation as manifestations or expressions (or positions on a continuum). The term 'repertoire' refers to a range of things that someone can do; that is, a repertoire of political participation compromises all available activities affecting politics (cf. Tilly, 1995, pp. 41–48; Tilly, 2008, pp. 14–15). All these depictions – abstract concept, latent construct, continuum, repertoire – move beyond the analysis of a particular mode of political activity and focus on a more general or abstract idea of political participation.

The idea that political participation is not just an enumeration of some specific modes or activities underlies all available definitions of political participation. Nonetheless, political participation has been defined in many ways (cf. Brady (1998) or van Deth (2001), and more recently Fox (2014) for overviews of the literature). Four points seem to be common and relatively unproblematic.[1] First, political participation is depicted as an activity (or 'action') – simply watching

television, visiting websites or claiming to be interested in politics does not constitute participation.[2] Second, political participation is understood as something done by people in their role as citizens, not as, say, politicians or professional lobbyists. Third, political participation should be voluntary and not enforced by law, rules or threats. A fourth common aspect is that political participation deals with government, politics or the state in a broad sense of these words ('political system', 'policy process') and that it is neither restricted to specific phases (such as policy making, or the input side of the political system) nor to specific levels or areas (such as national elections or contacts with public representatives and officials).

An enlargement of the conceptual area is most clearly visible in the definition presented by Norris (2002, p. 16) who claims that activities '… to impact civil society, or which attempt to alter systematic patterns of social behaviour' are specimens of political participation. Adding these kinds of activities to actions dealing with government and politics implies an immense expansion of the concept political participation. Especially authors following the revival of Tocquevillean and communitarian ideas in the last two decades stress the gains obtained by using this expanded approach and commonly refer to 'civic engagement' instead of political participation. In their report on citizenship and democracy to the American Political Science Association, Macedo *et al* (2005, p. 6) start with the remark: 'We do not draw a sharp distinction between "civic" and "political" engagement because we recognize that politics and civil society are interdependent'. For them '… *civic engagement includes any activity, individual or collective, devoted to influencing the collective life of the polity*' (Macedo *et al*, 2005, p. 6; emphasis in original). Applying a similar approach, Zukin *et al* (2006, p. 52) point to the broad repertoire of engagement among young people in America where '… the boundaries between political and civic engagement are not clear ones'. A closer look at their definition of 'civic engagement' underlines the arbitrariness of a demarcation between the two types of participation: '… civic engagement is defined as organized voluntary activity focused on problem solving and helping others' (Zukin *et al*, 2006, p. 7).

Many specimens of 'problem solving and helping others' are evidently distinct from political participation: repairing your bike and lending a pound of sugar to your neighbour should not be covered by this label.[3] However, Zukin *et al* stress the need of activities to be *organized* in order to be examples of civic engagement, which brings us very close to Norris' idea of political participation as an '… attempt to alter systematic patterns of social behaviour'. Macedo *et al*, however, do not stress the need for organized or social behaviour, but return to the aim of the activities as included in older definitions of political participation. Whereas Zukin *et al* point to activities '… to affect change', Macedo *et al* prefer a more specific aim '… devoted to influencing the collective life of the polity'. In this way, the conceptual distinction between political participation and civic engagement disappears: apparently, any organized action or social behaviour or any activity aimed at change or at influencing collective life is covered by these broad approaches.[4]

This brief exploratory journey into the definitional area of political participation already shows the conceded as well as the disputed zones. Political participation is an abstract or general concept that covers voluntary activities by citizens usually related to government, politics or the state. In addition, these activities can be aimed at solving community problems or, in even more general terms, they can be 'attempts to alter systematic patterns of social behaviour' being 'devoted to influencing the collective life of the polity' or aiming to 'induce significant social reform'. Other authors prefer even broader concepts by simply referring to participation as 'a categorical term for citizen power' (Arnstein, 1969, p. 216) or to all activities aiming '… to influence or to chance existing power structures' (Brough and Shresthova, 2012). No clear lines of demarcation are visible and it is hard to avoid the conclusion that political participation can be almost everything (cf. van Deth, 2001).

An Operational Definition of Political Participation

Searching for common aspects among available definitions of political participation does not seem to result in an encompassing conceptualization. A more pragmatic approach is needed based on the identification of indispensable requirements for some phenomenon to be recognized as a specimen of political participation. In other words, the key question is not what a comprehensive (nominal) definition could look like, but: *how would you recognize a mode of participation if you see one?*

In his seminal work on taxonomies and classifications, Hempel (1965) pointed to two general requirements for operational definitions, which seem to be very helpful for a fresh approach to the conceptualization of political participation.[5] First, he states that an operational definition should provide '… objective criteria by means of which any scientific investigator can decide, for any particular case, whether the term does or does not apply' (Hempel, 1965, p. 141; see also Sartori, 1970, p. 1045). With modes of political participation now ranging from casting a vote to buying athletic shoes and public suicides this is a very useful proposal. As we have seen several of these criteria are used already – what is needed is a systematically developed set of *decision rules* to answer the question whether we depict a specific phenomenon as political participation. Second, Hempel states that these decision rules have to be unambiguous, but especially that they have to be efficient. In a hierarchical ordered classification, each subgroup is '… defined by the specification of necessary and sufficient conditions of membership' (Hempel, 1965, p. 138). Following this recommendation for political participation, we need to develop a *minimalist definition*[6] of the concept before more complex variants are considered.[7] This baseline set of decision rules, then, can be used to develop further sets of decision rules to define distinct conceptualizations of political participation systematically.

Suppose we have some phenomenon of which we want to know whether the term political participation does or does not apply. This question can be answered for any

phenomenon by going through the various steps depicted in Figure 1. The initial three rules cover the relatively unproblematic aspects of political participation mentioned in the previous section. These aspects are explicitly included here to systemize the set of decisions to be taken. Already with the positive option of the fourth rule we reach a *minimalist definition* of political participation as a voluntary activity by citizens in the area of government, politics or the state (rules 1^+, 2^+, 3^+ and 4^+).[8] These rules can be briefly summarized in the following way:

Rule 1: Do we deal with behaviour?

Nominal definitions of participation all start with references to behavioural aspects. Yet stressing the behavioural nature of any phenomenon eventually to be labelled as a specimen of political participation does not avoid all ambiguities. Specific abstentions of activities – for instance, boycotting certain products, staying away from the ballot box, refusing to donate money – are, strictly speaking, no instances of activities or actions. Nonetheless, many people '… regard their own decision not to participate in formal politics as itself a highly political act' (Hay, 2007, p. 26). In case abstentions are used in similar ways as activities, these 'activities', too, should be treated as a satisfactory fulfilment of the requirement formulated in this first step. That is, only the refusal to buy truly *obtainable* products, to stay at home on an *actual* election day or to refuse to pay *charges* are accepted as specimens of relevant 'activities' here.

Rule 2: Is the activity voluntary?

The next step is to make sure that the activity is optional; that is, it should not be a consequence of force, pressure or threats, but be based on free will. Examining a person's free will is highly problematic in empirical research and even the existence of such a condition is seriously challenged on various grounds (cf. Harris, 2012). For these reasons, a negative formulation emphasizing the absence of observable coercion – including unreasonable high costs – seems to be more practical. Examples of these coercions are, first of all, legal obligations or mandatory tasks, but also economic or social extortions. However, paying taxes, standing in a traffic jam or appearing in court are all examples of involuntary acts with (potentially) political consequences that should be excluded from the concept of political participation.[9]

Rule 3: Is the activity done by citizens?

Most definitions explicitly refer to citizens in order to differentiate the relevant behaviour from the activities of politicians, civil servants, office-bearers, public officers, journalists, and professional delegates, advisors, appointees, lobbyists, and the like. Essential as the accomplishments of these functionaries and officials might be for the political system, using the concept political participation in these instances would stretch the range of relevant behaviour to cover conceptually

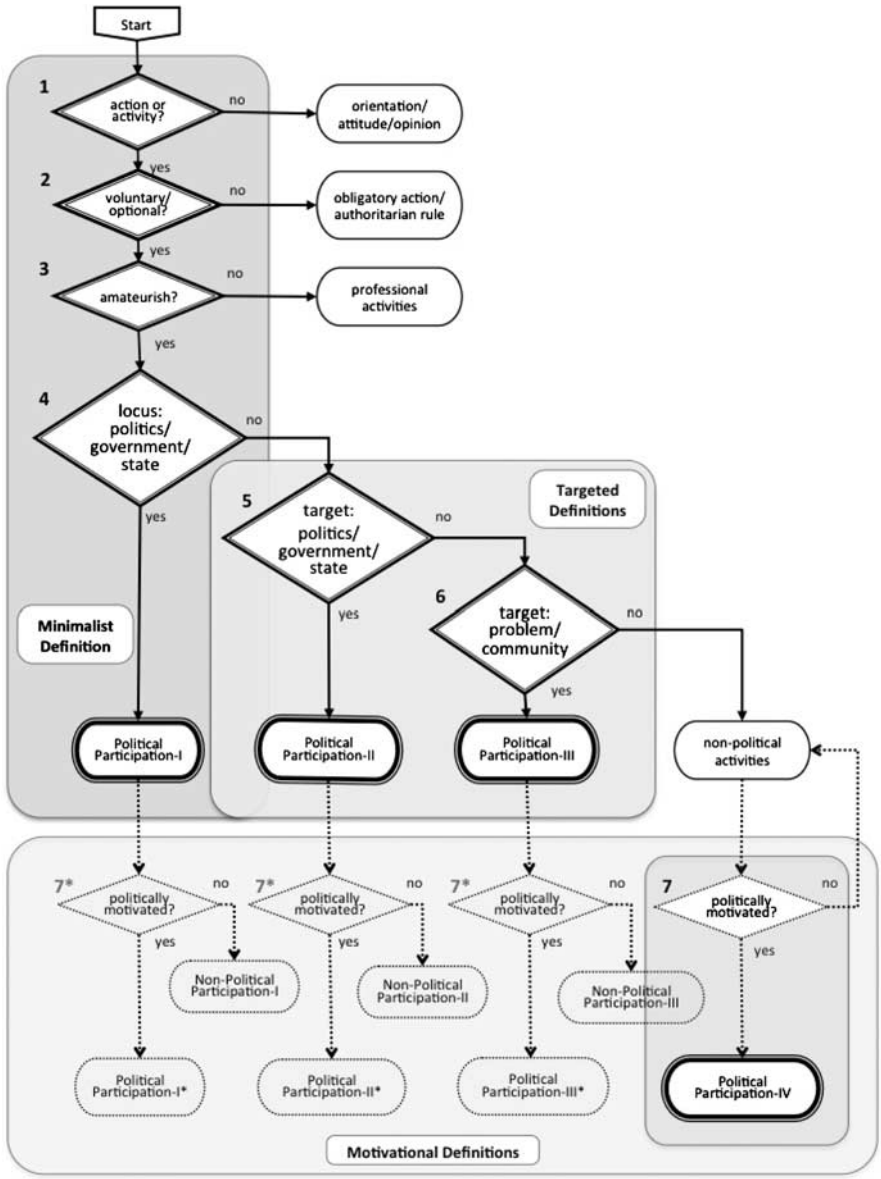

Figure 1: A Conceptual map of political participation (minimalist, targeted and motivational definitions).

and functionally very different phenomena. Therefore, the term 'citizen' is explicitly incorporated in many definitions to underline the non-professional, non-paid, amateurish nature of activities (Barber, 1984, p. 152; Stoker, 2006, chapter 9). Some authors use the term 'citizen participation' to avoid any misunderstanding (Callahan, 2007; Michels, 2012).

Rule 4: Is the activity located in the sphere of government/state/politics?

Obviously, the adjective 'political' is a crucial part of any conceptualization of political participation. Circular definitions are widely available and easily recognizable by the inclusion of terms such as politics, political system, public policy or policy process in definiens and definiendum. Somewhat more informative are references to 'government', 'government agencies' or 'public representatives and officials'. Although 'politics', 'government' or 'democracy' are essentially contested concepts (Gallie, 1956) and citizens vary widely in their ideas about 'politics' and 'political' (Fitzgerald, 2013), no conceptualization of political participation can avoid the question whether the activities considered are located in the political sector of society; that is, the sector directed by government under the jurisdiction of state power. As we want to arrive at a minimalist definition of political participation first, this rule should be based on the most straightforward condition available. The institutional architecture of the political system ('polity') seems to fulfil this requirement.

These four decision rules already suffice to reach a *minimalist definition of political participation*. By focussing on the locus (or arena) of participation – rather than on outcomes, outputs, intentions and so on – as the defining characteristic, all amateurish, voluntary activities located in the sphere of government/state/politics are specimen of political participation as defined by this minimalist definition (Political Participation-I in Figure 1; rules 1^+, 2^+, 3^+ and 4^+). These modes of participation include activities such as casting a vote (both in elections and referendums), submitting an official petition or supporting a party or candidate, but also being active in forums such as 'participatory budgeting' (cf. Pateman, 2012). Frequently used terms for activities meeting the requirements of the minimalist definition are 'conventional modes of participation' (cf. Kaase and Marsh, 1979), 'institutional modes of participation' (cf. García Albaceta, 2011; Hooghe and Quintelier, 2013) or 'elite-directed action' (Inglehart and Catterberg, 2002).

In any vibrant democracy, new modes of political participation are introduced outside the regular government/state/politics sphere continuously.[10] In fact, many of these forms explicitly challenge the *status quo* or the legitimacy of state authorities and institutions.[11] This expansion of the political repertoire establishes a major theme in research on political culture and participation (cf. Inglehart, 1990). Hay (2007, p. 75) points out to forms of political participation that '… take place outside of the governmental arena, yet respond to concerns which are formally recognized politically and on which there may well be active legislative or diplomatic agendas'.

In case the activity concerned is not located in the sphere of government/state/politics (rule 4^{-}), a further rule is required:

Rule 5: Is the activity targeted at the sphere of government/state/politics?

Activities that are not located in the government/state/politics arena can be considered as modes of political participation if they are targeted at that sphere. Many of these modes are used to attract attention to problems that either have not been perceived as problematic or have not been recognized as problems requiring governmental/state involvement so far. Certainly, in the initial stage of their application these modes intend to challenge the conventional understanding of the scope and nature of politics in a society. Labels such as 'contentious politics' (Tilly, 2008, p. 5) or 'elite-challenging politics' (Inglehart, 1990, pp. 338–340; Inglehart and Catterberg, 2002) underline this feature.

By using the target of voluntary activities, a second main type of participation is conceptualized: *targeted political participation* (Political Participation-II; rules 1^{+}, 2^{+}, 3^{+}, 4^{-} and 5^{+}). Although targets are crucial for this type of participation, the decisive point is that this feature refers to the targets of the activities considered and not to the aims or intentions of activists. Targeted political activities are covered by, for example, the Cross-National Time-Series Data Archive definition of 'peaceful demonstrations' as: '… any peaceful gathering of more than 100 people for the primary purpose of displaying or voicing their opposition to government policies or authorities' (Banks (2009) as cited by Teorell, 2010, p. 168). This definition shows clearly how the targets of the activities can be depicted without relying on the goals or intentions of the people involved.

Especially the discussions about political participation and civic engagement indicate that participation seems to be increasingly focussed '… on problem solving and helping others' (Zukin *et al*, 2006, p. 7). This conceptualization is too broad to arrive at a useful definition of political participation. Yet problem solving or helping others certainly can be accepted as modes of political participation if clearly private or non-public activities are excluded. To attain the adjective 'political' for problem solving and helping others, these activities should be aimed at shared problems, which usually means that community problems are at the centre. Hay (2007, p. 70) brings this conceptualization to the point: '… actions might be deemed political only in so far as they either arise out of situations of collective choice or are likely to have collective consequences, at whatever point these consequences arise'. To deny the adjective 'political' to attempts to solve collective or community problems would imply a restriction to government- and state-centred definitions of political participation, and – what is much more problematic – to an exclusion of activities by people who explicitly reject some borderline between 'politics' and 'society' (cf. Cornwall and Coelho, 2006, pp. 1–2).[12] For that reason, these activities are distinguished from other modes

of participation, but not eliminated from the broader conceptualization of political participation:

Rule 6: Is the activity aimed at solving collective or community problems?

Amateur, voluntary activities that are not located in, or targeted at, the sphere of government/state/politics can be considered as modes of political participation if they are aimed at solving collective or community problems. Notice that the *character* of the problem dealt with has to be collective or shared, not the organizational aspects of the activities undertaken. Especially newer modes of participation are labelled as 'individualized collective action' to underline this distinction (Micheletti, 2003, p. 28; Shirky, 2008; van Deth, 2010).

Applying the six rules results in a *second variant of a targeted definition of political participation* aimed at solving collective or community problems (Participation-III; rules 1^+, 2^+, 3^+, 4^-, 5^- and 6^+). Examples of activities belonging to this category are citizens' initiatives or neighbourhood committees. As with the government/politics/state-targeted definition, no references to aims or intentions of participants are included in this second variant. Especially authors working in the field of civil society and social capital favour the depiction of activities aimed at solving collective or community problems as modes of political participation. As we have seen, Macedo *et al* (2005, p. 6; emphasis in original) define 'civic engagement' as '… *any activity, individual or collective, devoted to influencing the collective life of the polity'* – a definition very similar to the two variants of a targeted definition of political participation.

After applying the first six rules we arrive at 'non-political activities' if neither the minimalist nor one of the two targeted definitions appear to be relevant (rules 1^+, 2^+, 3^+, 4^-, 5^- and 6^-). However, this does not mean that we have reached the ultimate border of a conceptual map of political participation as non-political activities become specimens of political participation if they are used for political purposes. Especially newer, 'creative', 'expressive', 'personalized' and 'individualized' modes of participation seem to fit this category: buying a brand of coffee is, as such, not a political activity, but it can easily become one if the shopper explicitly expresses his intention that this purchase should be understood as an utterance against import regulations. Many definitions of political participation include explicit references to the goals or intentions of people involved and embrace references to activities that 'intend' or are 'aimed at' influencing government policies or the selection of its personnel. Undoubtedly, participation usually is initiated and guided by the wish to have some impact on existing arrangements (cf. Milbrath, 1965; Wuthnow, 1998; Schlozman *et al*, 2012). The question, therefore, is *not* whether teleological aspects can or should be included in conceptualizations of political participation after we have dealt with minimalist and targeted definitions – the question is *how to include such aspects consistently*. After applying the first six rules we do not need a

general answer to this question. The introduction of subjective aspects can be restricted to the endpoint reached for non-political activities (rules 1^+, 2^+, 3^+, 4^-, 5^- and 6^-):

Rule 7: Is the activity used to express political aims and intentions of participants?

Any activity that fulfils the first three rules – activity, voluntary, citizen – but is neither located in the political arena nor aimed at political actors or collective problems can be depicted as a form of political participation if it is used to express political aims and intentions by the participants. For example, Micheletti (2003, p. 14) stresses that '… political consumerism is politics when people knowingly target market actors to express their opinions on justice, fairness, or noneconomic issues that concern personal and family well-being'. In a similar way, Willis and Schor (2012) speak of 'conscious consumption' and Bennett (2012, p. 30) observes the '… profusion of self-actualizing, digitally mediated DIY politics'.

Depending on the aims and intentions of the participants, applying rule 7 results in a *motivational definition of political participation* (Political Participation-IV; rules 1^+, 2^+, 3^+, 4^-, 5^-, 6^- and 7^+). This type covers all voluntary, non-political activities by citizens used to express their political aims and intentions. An important aspect of these newer modes of political participation is that they typically '… refer not to "politics" as a noun, but to the "political" as an adjective, describing the motivations of actors wherever such motivations might be displayed' (Hay, 2007, p. 63).[13]

With non-political activities used for non-political goals (rules 1^+, 2^+, 3^+, 4^-, 5^-, 6^- and 7^-) we obviously reached a final borderline of a conceptual map of political participation. Yet there is no reason to restrict the application of rule 7 to activities that could not be categorized under the minimalist or the targeted definitions. Although the intentions and aims of the people involved are not necessary to define these three types of participation, that does not exclude teleological aspects for further refinements of these concepts of political participation. Following the distinctions proposed by Hay (2007, pp. 74–75), each type of political participation can be distinguished in 'political' and 'non-political' activities depending on the question whether the activists are primarily motivated by political or by non-political aims or intentions, respectively.[14] A modified version of rule 7 – that is, a version dealing with activities, which are already acknowledged as types of political participation – allows us to refine each of the three types of participation further:

Rule 7: Is the political activity used to express political aims and intentions of participants?*

Referring to the aims and intentions of the participants in this way, we arrive at sub-variants of political participation and not at new types. For each of the three types of participation, a 'political' and a 'non-political' sub-variant can be distinguished.

For example, people can attend demonstrations as an opportunity to find a partner or to cast a vote to help some acquaintance. Downs (1957, p. 7) famously excluded casting a vote for party B instead of the preferred party A from his concept of rational behaviour if for some voter '… preventing his wife's tantrums is more important to him than having A win instead of B'. Obviously, Downs correctly stated that 'employing a political device for non-political reasons' is 'irrational' (1957, p. 7), but that certainly does not affect voting as a political act with clearly political implications and consequences. The use of rule 7* allows to depict such conceptual distinctions accurately and consistently.

The bottom part of Figure 1 shows the results of applying decision rule 7* three times presenting additional conceptualizations based on the motivations of the people involved (Participation-I*, II* and III*). By using rule 7* for modes of participation covered by the minimalist definition, we arrive at the two variants of voting by the Downsian citizen: a politically motivated form for those who base their vote for Party A on their political preferences, and a non-political form for those who prefer Party A, but vote for B to avoid further conflicts at home. In this way, the question whether the phenomenon under consideration is a specimen of political participation does not depend on the intentions or aims of the people concerned as the minimalist or targeted definitions are reached before intentions and aims of participants are introduced.

Implications and Applications

The set of decision rules developed offers – as Hempel suggested – 'objective criteria' to decide whether the term political participation applies to some phenomenon. Table 1 shows an overview of the four main variants of political participation arrived at, commonly used labels for each of the members of this quartet, and specimens of typical modes of political participation. This overview underlines the fact that many disputes in this area – Are civic engagement or political consumerism types of political participation? Are intentions required to define political participation? What is gained by distinguishing between 'politics' and 'the political'? Is 'clictivism' participation? and so on – basically concern terminological matters confused by a strong faith in nominal definitions. The use of an operational definition allows for the methodical identification of *any* phenomenon as a specimen of political participation and for a systematic distinction between various types of participation. In other words, it is not important which labels are chosen for the four types as long as the distinctive features of each variant are recognized.

A chief implication of the use of the conceptual map to identify a specific phenomenon as a type of political participation is that the same phenomena do not always end up in the same category. For instance, in political systems allowing for official petitions submitted to legislative bodies a signature action will be covered by

Table 1: Concepts, types and typical modes of political participation

Operational concepts (see Figure 1):			*Types and commonly used labels*	*Specimens of typical modes*
Minimalist definition		Political Participation-I	● conventional political participation ● institutional political participation ● elite-directed action ● formal participation ● …	● voting ● budget forums ● party membership ● contacting politicians ● …
Targeted definitions	Target: government/ politics/state	Political Participation-II	● unconventional political participation ● non-institutional political participation ● protest ● political action ● contentious politics ● elite-challenging action ● everyday activism ● …	● signing a petition ● demonstrating ● blocking streets ● painting slogans ● flash mobs ● …
	Aimed at: problems or community	Political Participation-III	● civic engagement ● social participation ● community participation ● …	● volunteering ● reclaim-the-street-party ● …
Motivational definition		Political Participation-IV	● expressive political participation ● individualized collective action ● personalized politics ● …	● political consumerism ● buycotts ● boycotts ● public suicides ● …

the minimalist definition, whereas the same action is a targeted mode of participation in systems that do not recognize petitions officially. These different depictions of similar phenomena are to not be considered as shortcomings of the conceptual map developed. On the contrary: exactly because submitting a petition apparently is a different type of participation in different political systems a systematic conceptual distinction between these two variants should be possible. In this way, the set of decision rules enables to avoid conceptual ambiguities and a focus on the relevant properties of the phenomena studied.

Replacing nominal definitions of political participation by the conceptual map developed here does not only appease battles over the meaning of words. Empirical studies of democracy and participation could gain from these operational definitions in various ways. The most significant advantage is that intentions and aims of citizens attain an unambiguous position in the conceptualization of political participation without reducing the concept to subjective features. As for many modes of participation the political nature of the activity is evident, modes of participation covered by the minimal definition and the two targeted definitions can easily be identified by referring to objective features of these activities. In this way, the political orientations of citizens involved are explicitly excluded from these concepts and – what is more important – they remain available to explain citizens' behaviour. By considering the intentions and aims of participants, political and non-political modes of participation can be distinguished further for each of these first three definitions developed. The explicit depiction of necessary features for each mode and type of participation straightforwardly identifies all aspects to be operationalized in surveys, content analyses and other data collection strategies. The conceptual map allows to recognize modes of participation, but can also be used the other way around; that is, to specify operationalizations systematically and efficiently. Standardized procedures such as surveys with closed questions and coding of manifest content can be relatively easily applied to the study of the first three variants of political participation discerned here. In addition, depending on the specific goal of the study, the questions whether and how instruments to obtain information about aims and intentions of participants should be included can be dealt with systematically.

A second clear advantage of the conceptual map of political participation is related to the rapid spread of individualized and creative modes of participation. This expansion is very likely to be continued in the near future, which means that non-political activities will be increasingly used for political reasons. In fact, growing numbers of citizens reject a definite boundary between 'politics' and other aspects of their lives. These activities can only be fruitfully studied when intentions and aims of the people involved are taken into account as distinctive features. Obviously, one cannot code a Tweet or ask a respondent whether she (i) has been involved in any non-political activities recently, and (ii) whether she has used any of these activities for political reasons. These modes of participation can only be captured in empirical research by *starting* with political arguments articulated by people involved. Standardized procedures seem to be hardly useful here. Instead, open-ended questions

and qualitative explorations of expressions and public statements seem to be much more adequate as they leave it to the citizens involved to define not only what is 'participation', but especially what is considered to be 'politics' and 'political'.

Finally, the four main and three additional types of political participation enable a systematic reappraisal of the relationships between participation and democracy. In a vibrant democracy, the distribution of the four main types is probably not stable, but moves towards more emphasis on the second variant of the targeted definition as well as the motivational defined types. The explanations for these movements can be studied comprehensively on the basis of the characteristics for each of the four variants. Furthermore, by distinguishing between politically and non-politically motivated activities, the consequences and implications of these activities for democracy can be much more clearly specified and evaluated. In addition, proposals for democratic renewal can be based on these differentiated findings: whereas for the three non-motivational conceptualizations institutional and policy changes are most relevant, the remaining variants should be debated with an evident focus on the motivations and aims of the people involved.

In Conclusion

How would you recognize a mode of participation if you see one? Owing to the rapid expansion of political activities in the last decades this question has become increasingly difficult to answer. In addition, the spread of expressive modes of participation requires the inclusion of aims and goals of participants to characterize political participation. Relying on a subjective definition provides an easy answer to our main question: you simply recognize a mode of political participation if the person involved says that her behaviour should be understood as such. This approach is unavoidable when dealing with suicides or buying athletic shoes, but makes the depiction of many modes of political participation gratuitously complicated. Do we really want to decide whether voting or demonstrating are modes of political participating *or not*, by scrutinizing the political nature of the aims and goals of voters and demonstrators? Obviously, aims and goals are usually highly interesting aspects of political phenomena, but we do not need them to depict most modes of political participation. Ockham's razor should be used whenever possible.

Neither the development of all-embracing nominal definitions, nor deductive analyses of existing modes of participation seem to be helpful to find a comprehending solution for the conceptual problems triggered by the continuous expansion of participation. Alternatively, a conceptual map developed here results in the depiction of four analytically unambiguous types of political participation as well as various sub-variants. Together the four types cover the whole range of modes of political participation *systematically* and *efficiently*: a minimalist definition is developed first and additional variants are based on indispensable additional features only. More aspects can be taken

into account – legality, legitimacy, effectiveness, non-violence, Internet use and so on – but are not compulsory for the conceptualization of political participation. Moreover, especially the use of rules 7 and 7* to distinguish modes of participation on the basis of the aims and intentions of participants contributes to the *consistency* of the conceptual map by applying this rule both for political and for non-political activities. The four variants offer a comprehensive conceptualization of political participation without excluding future innovations that are the hallmark of a vibrant democracy.

With respect to the continuous expansion of the modes of participation in many democracies Fox's (2014) question, 'Is it Time to Update the Definition of Political Participation?', certainly should be answered affirmatively. However, the conventional approach of expanding and revising nominal definitions has (so far) not resulted in conceptual clarity. More importantly, the rise of expressive modes of participation requires the inclusion of aims and goals of participants, but should not force us to expand our concepts and to make them unnecessarily complicated. Before we follow Humpty Dumpty's suggestion to offer extra pay for words that do a lot of work, a careful look at the exact work to be performed is always helpful. As the crucial aspect of democracy, political participation certainly deserves extra payment, but it can only meet our expectations if its tasks are clearly specified.

Acknowledgements

For helpful comments and stimulating suggestions on earlier versions of this article, I am very grateful to Gema García Albacete, Rüdiger Schmittt-Beck, Kateřina Vráblíková, and especially Yannis Theocharis.

About the Author

Jan W. van Deth (1950) is Professor of Political Science and International Comparative Social Research at the University of Mannheim (Germany). He has published widely in the fields of political culture, social change and comparative research methods. At present, van Deth is Head of Department-B of the Mannheim Centre for European Social Research, Corresponding Member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, and German national coordinator for the European Social Survey.

Notes

1 Probably the best known proposal to base a definition of political participation on a list of common aspects of available concepts is provided by Conge (1988).

2 A few authors propose to include attitudes and use the term 'latent forms of political participation' for these non-behavioural variants (Ekman and Amnå, 2012). To secure the distinction between effects and

potential determinants of participation, the almost unanimous restriction to participation-as-an-activity is followed here.

3 Fiorina (2002, p. 515) brings these differences to the point with his remark that civic engagement refers to the '… voluntary activities of people in their communities, workplaces, churches, and other social contexts. Such activities can be highly political, entirely non-political, and anything in between'.

4 The confusion is hard to avoid: whereas many authors consider voting as a clear specimen of political participation, Macedo *et al* (2005, p. 7) state: 'Civic engagement most obviously includes voting'. Whiteley (2011, p. 2) simply mixes all concepts: 'Civic engagement is about ordinary citizens trying to influence the policies and the personnel of the state'. Other authors struggling with these distinctions admit: 'How exactly we resolve these problems is not clear' (Martin, 2012, p. 90). Berger (2011) strongly argued to distinguish between 'civic engagement' and 'political participation'.

5 Notice that the term 'operational definition' here is not used to refer to the common (behaviouralist) practice to 'operationalize' some previously defined theoretical concept. The term 'intensional definition' (Sartori, 1984, p. 24; cf. Goertz, 2006, chapter 3) would have been more appropriate, but almost certainly would have led to confusions about 'intentions' (see Rule 7).

6 Definitions are 'minimal' if they '… deliberatively focus on the smallest possible number of attributes that are still seen as producing a viable standard' (Collier and Levitsky, 1997, p. 433).

7 See Sciulli (2010) for a similar approach to the concept 'democracy'.

8 In this notation '1^{+}' means that decision 1 is affirmed; '1^{-}' that decision 1 is rejected.

9 Strictly speaking, this rule also excludes 'compulsory voting' from the concept of political participation. Yet this phrase is commonly used as an (incorrect) shorthand for the fact that in some countries citizens are obliged to call at the poll station on election day. Casting a vote, of course, cannot be mandatory in any system guaranteeing secret elections and is therefore not excluded by the requirement of voluntarism.

10 The term 'nongovernmental politics' is used to characterize these modes of participation (cf. Feher, 2007). Already in the first paragraph of his early overview, Milbrath (1965, p. 1) explicitly rejected this expansion.

11 A popular radical pamphlet recommends a complete rejection of the existing order and denounces 'purely social protest' as '… a prevalent strategy to criticize this society – in the unavailing hope to rescue this civilization' (Unsichtbares Komittee, 2010, p. 71; translation JvD). See for similar arguments 'The Nightmare of Participation' (Miessen, 2011).

12 'Citizens still exercise citizenship as they stand in line at their polling place, but now they exercise citizenship in many other locations. They have political ties not only to elected public officials in legislatures but also to attorneys in courtrooms and organized interest groups that represent them to administrative agencies. Moreover, they are citizens in their homes, schools, and places of employment' (Schudson, 1998, p. 299).

13 Some participants even see this as the main aim of their activities: 'The whole series of nightly attacks, anonymous assaults, destructions without gibberish takes credit to have widened the gap between "*politics*" and "the *political*" as far as possible' (Unsichtbares Komittee, 2010, p. 7; translation JvD; emphasis in original).

14 Notice that, as the aims and motivations of the participants are crucial here, the question whether the aim of the activity is *political* can only be answered by the person involved. Rare research on the scope of 'politics' indicates wide variations among citizens (Fitzgerald, 2013).

References

Arnstein, S.R. (1969) A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35(4): 216–224.

Barber, B.R. (1984) *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Bennett, W.L. (2012) The personalization of politics: Political identity, social media, and changing patterns of participation. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 644(1): 20–39.
Berger, B. (2011) *Attention Deficit Democracy: The Paradox of Civic Engagement*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Brady, H.E. (1998) Political participation. In: J.P. Robinson, P.R. Shaver and L.S. Wrightsman (eds.) *Measures of Political Attitudes*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press, pp. 737–801.
Brough, M.M. and Shresthova, S. (2012) Fandom meets activism: Rethinking civic and political participation, http://journal.transformativeworks.org, accessed 2 December 2012.
Callahan, K. (2007) Citizen participation: Models and methods. *International Journal of Public Administration* 30(11): 1179–1196.
Carroll, L. (1871) *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*. London: Penguin.
Collier, D. and Levitsky, S. (1997) Democracy with adjectives: Conceptual innovation in comparative research. *World Politics* 49(April): 430–451.
Conge, P.J. (1988) The concept of political participation: Toward a definition. *Comparative Politics* 20(2): 241–249.
Cornwall, A. and Coelho, V.S. (eds.) (2006) *Spaces for Change? The Politics of Citizen Participation in New Democratic Arenas*. London: Zed Books.
Dalton, R.J. (2008) Citizenship norms and the expansion of political participation. *Political Studies* 56(1): 76–98.
Downs, A. (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper & Row.
Ekman, J. and Amnå, E. (2012) Political participation and civic engagement: Towards a new typology. *Human Affairs* 22(3): 283–300.
Feher, M. (ed.) (2007) The governed in politics. In: *Nongovernmental Politics*. New York: Zone Books, pp. 12–27.
Fitzgerald, J. (2013) What does 'political' mean to you? *Political Behavior* 35(3): 453–479.
Fiorina, M.P. (2002) Parties, participation, and representation in America: Old theories face new realities. In: I. Katznelson and H.V. Milner (eds.) *Political Science: The State of the Discipline*. New York and Washington DC: Norton and American Political Science Association, pp. 511–541.
Fox, S. (2014) Is it time to update the definition of political participation? Political participation in Britain: The decline and revival of civic culture. *Parliamentary Affairs* 67(2): 495–505.
Gallie, W.B. (1956) Essentially contested concepts. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1955–1956): 167–198.
García Albaceta, G.M. (2011) *Continuity or Generational Change? A Longitudinal Study of Young People's Political Participation in Western Europe*. Mannheim: Universität Mannheim.
Goertz, G. (2006) *Social Science Concepts: A User's Guide*. Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
Harris, S. (2012) *Free Will*. New York: Free Press.
Hay, C. (2007) *Why We Hate Politics*. Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press.
Hempel, C.G. (1965) *Aspects of Scientific Explanation and Other Essays in the Philosophy of Science*. New York: Free Press.
Hooghe, M. and Quintelier, E. (2013) Political participation in Europe. In: S.I. Keil and O.W. Gabriel (eds.) *Society and Democracy in Europe*. London: Routledge, pp. 220–243.
Inglehart, R. (1990) *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Inglehart, R. and Catterberg, G. (2002) Trends in political action: The developmental trend and the post-honeymoon decline. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 43(3–5): 300–316.
Kaase, M. and Marsh, A. (1979) Political action: A theoretical perspective. In: S.H. Barnes *et al. Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, pp. 27–56.
Macedo, S. *et al* (2005) *Democracy at Risk: How Political Choices Undermine Citizen Participation and What We Can Do about It*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press.

Martin, A.J. (2012) *Young People and Politics: Political Engagement in the Anglo-American Democracies*. London: Routledge.
Micheletti, M. (2003) *Political Virtue and Shopping: Individuals, Consumerism and Collective Action*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
Michels, A. (2012) Citizen participation in local policy making: Design and democracy. *International Journal of Public Administration* 35(4): 285–292.
Miessen, M. (2011) *The Nightmare of Participation*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
Milbrath, L.W. (1965) *Political Participation: How and Why Do People Get Involved in Politics*. Chicago: Rand McNally.
Norris, P. (2002) *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Pateman, C. (2012) Participatory democracy revisited. *Perspectives on Politics* 10(1): 7–19.
Sartori, G. (1970) Concept misformation in comparative politics. *American Political Science Review* 64(4): 1033–1053.
Sartori, G. (1984) *Social Science Concepts: A Systematic Analysis*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
Schlozman, K.L., Verba, S. and Brady, H.E. (2012) *The Unheavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Schudson, M. (1998) *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Sciulli, D. (2010) Democracy, professions and societal constitutionalism. In: K.T. Leight and J.C. Jenkins (eds.) *Handbook of Politics: State and Society in Global Perspective*. New York: Springer, pp. 81–109.
Shirky, C. (2008) *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations*. New York: Penguin.
Stoker, G. (2006) *Why Politics Matter: Making Democracy Work*. Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
Teorell, J. (2010) *Determinants of Democratization: Explaining Regime Change in the World, 1972–2006*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Tilly, C. (1995) *Popular Contention in Great Britain 1758–1834*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Tilly, C. (2008) *Contentious Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Unsichtbares Komittee. (2010) *Der Kommende Aufstand*. Hamburg, Germany: Nautilus.
van Deth, J.W. (2001) *Studying Political Participation: Towards a Theory of Everything?* Joint Sessions of Workshops of the European Consortium for Political Research, Grenoble, France, http://uni-mannheim.academia.edu/JanWvanDeth.
van Deth, J.W. (2010) Is creative participation good for democracy? In: M. Micheletti and A.S. McFarland (eds.) *Creative Participation Responsibility-Taking in the Political World*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm, pp. 146–170.
Whiteley, P. (2011) *Political Participation in Britain: The Decline and Revival of Civic Culture*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
Willis, M.M. and Schor, J.B. (2012) Does changing a light bulb lead to changing the world? Political action and the conscious consumer. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 644(1): 160–190.
Wuthnow, R. (1998) *Loose Connections: Joining Together in America's Fragmented Communities*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Zukin, C., Keeter, S., Andolina, M., Jenkins, K. and Delli Carpini, M.X. (2006) *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.