

Contemporary Political Participation and Its Countervailing Effects on Civic Culture

Edited by

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Series in Politics



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Introduction

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Citizen participation stands as a pillar of democracy, embodying principles of popular sovereignty, government accountability, and public trust. Participation is usually considered a valuable element of democratic citizenship and decision-making, many theorists claiming that public participation in government has numerous positive effects on the quality of democratic government, such as increasing issue knowledge, civic skills, and public engagement, and contributing to the support for decisions among the participants (Michels, 2011). The importance of civic culture for the functioning of democratic institutions cannot be overstated, as citizen participation significantly predicts institutional performance. Putnam (1994) famously finds remarkable concordance between regional government performance and the degree to which social life approximates an ideal civic community.

Before embarking on the goal of understanding the role of the public in government in the twenty-first century, it is important to distinguish the interrelated concepts of social capital, civic culture, and political participation. Social capital refers to connections among individuals and groups taking the form of goodwill, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse (Hanifan, 1916). This concept is characterized by a set of informal values or norms shared among members of a group that permits cooperation among them (Fukuyama, 2000). Putnam (1994) argues that trust and cooperation are key elements of social capital, and these characteristics can be developed over time with repeated interaction in a community. Social capital is a concept that has also been studied by sociologists, mostly centering around the concept of social networks and the complexities therein. From social network theory, we know that not all memberships to organizations are created equally, as some foster looser connections than others (Granovetter, 1973). In addition, networks likely have differing effects on trust among the community, trust in government, and civic engagement (Kreuter & Lezin, 2002). Social capital supposedly increases capacity for political engagement, thus increasing the likelihood that a citizen will participate in government (Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998; Teney & Hanquinet, 2012). Patterns of social ties build up trust and reciprocity, and this resulting social capital enhances the ability of the citizenry to work together towards

common goals of collective action, thus enhancing civic engagement (Lowndes, 2004).

Social capital is an important prerequisite for civic culture, in which political and civic engagement are important components. Civic culture, according to Putnam (1994), is a society characterized by high levels of trust, civic engagement, and voluntary associations. Putnam's argument centers around the idea that civic participation, particularly in America, is in decline, and as a result, this will negatively impact the functioning of its democratic institutions. With the advent of social media and its sometimes-isolating effects on individual connection, we may assume that people indeed are "bowling alone" in the twenty-first century.¹ This decline is not just uniquely American. For example, world voting turnout has declined by almost five points in the period after 1990 (IDEA, 2006). Many of the variables that Putnam used to capture civic culture (social groups, newspaper reading, referenda voting, and preference voting) are not as common in democracies today. It is likely the case that civic culture and civic participation, as classically operationalized, may be on the decline in today's culture. However, critics have pointed out that many of the memberships in decline are relics of an earlier time (e.g., 4-H Clubs, the American Legion, etc.) and that new civic activities have filled the void (Kreuter & Lezin, 2011).

Political participation is no longer defined as a unidimensional set of activities centering on narrow pursuits relating to voting behavior, but rather encompasses a vast array of actions by private citizens by which they seek to influence or to support government and politics (Milbrath, 1981). And moving beyond the 1980s and 1990s, political participation and civic engagement manifest differently than they did in decades past. In the information age, there are avenues of political participation and civic engagement that have not been previously understood. These new methods of political participation offer the opportunity to more richly understand the interface of government action and human connection and participation. In the following chapters, we see that political participation and civic engagement encompass a range of activities beyond voting behavior, including public information requests, jury nullification, and political engagement and activism through social media. Political participation also occurs on an international scale through civil society organizations within the United Nations. Political participation can even be extended to include actions that have a more indirect role in politics through activities focused on private corporations with an eye towards affecting policy. This private political activity may serve to

¹ This phrase is the product of a phenomenon discovered by Putnam (2000), who observed that although the number of individual bowlers in the United States rose by 10 percent between 1980 and 1993, league bowling declined by 40 percent during this same period.

pressure corporations or non-political advocacy groups to respond to their interests through political consumerism.

Beyond expanding our understanding of contemporary forms of political participation and civic engagement, in what follows, we also learn about implications for enhanced civic engagement. Subsequent chapters find that under certain conditions, citizen participation may serve to increase trust in public institutions, with implications for civil service, courts, police, the military, and other public services. While other chapters demonstrate the countervailing influences of social media on civic engagement and civic culture through its potential to expand conspiracy ideology and simplified messaging. This interdisciplinary exploration of political participation navigates the complexities from various perspectives, delving into recent global events, technological shifts, and societal changes that shape civic engagement in the contemporary landscape.

Overview of Chapters

This compiled volume of multi-disciplinary research highlights political participation in its many forms and its implications. The following chapters explore the many varied aspects of civic engagement, beginning with an understanding of the transformation of citizenship over the past decade and an examination of public versus private political participation. Section 1 introduces political participation in the twenty-first century and the nuances therein. The first chapter examines the consequences of austerity measures on political activism. It delves into the phenomenon of influencers, simplified messaging, and their potential threat to democratic ideals. Chapter two highlights the difference between private and public political participation, examining the mechanisms through which citizens may attempt to influence economic and political activity through private entities.

Chapters three and four make up Section two, which focuses on civic engagement within the criminal justice system, investigating the way citizens engage with law enforcement agencies by exploring agencies' propensity to respond to public information requests and the act of jury nullification as a form of participatory democracy.

Section three, chapters five and six, focuses on the interface between civic engagement, the use of social media, and political activism. Chapter five highlights the role of Twitter in political activism using the Women's March as a case study, while chapter six highlights a more controversial use of social media in the dissemination of conspiracist ideologies.

The final three chapters make up section four and examine political engagement in an international context, and also examine the relationship between public

participation and trust in governmental institutions. For example, the last chapter examines Rwanda, focusing on the intricacies of implementing direct citizen participation in post-conflict scenarios, highlighting challenges, discrepancies between willingness and action, and the risks associated. The concluding chapter will synthesize insights from these diverse perspectives.

Synthesizing Complexities of Participation

Whether concepts such as simplified messaging, conspiracy media, and public information requests increase social cohesion, and thereby social capital, remains to be seen. We cannot assume that every form of civic participation is a manifestation of social capital and civic culture. Especially in the twenty-first century, there are ways in which citizens interact with government (and vice versa) in a way that may have a countervailing influence on social cohesion. While technological advances of the twenty-first century have lowered some of the barriers for political engagement, they have also facilitated new ways of spreading disinformation, simplified messaging, enhanced lines of communication between government and citizenry, which may serve to magnify underlying problems, and have created an overall less encumbered but often less personal connection between people and government.

As demonstrated by the following chapters, there are several manifestations of citizen participation that serve as a countervailing influence on social cohesion and civic culture. For example, chapter six demonstrates how social media enables the spread of conspiracy ideology and the spread of misinformation. Confronted with the ubiquity of social media, political marketing strategies are highly useful, giving a short and direct message that the people, all of them potential voters, will be ready to believe with little opportunity or inclination to critically engage claims made. Chapter one argues that economic and political conditions, in tandem with social media technology, have transformed regular and traditional ways of social interaction, decreasing interaction with other members of the community. These forces have also increased the prevalence of simplified messaging and the spread of misinformation on social media, in which there is more emphasis placed on convenience and interest alignment rather than concern for information accuracy. Instead of supporting political options with a defined program, consumers are inclined towards influencers and marketing experts, who offer them simple, direct messages that they can easily understand.

There are, of course, other ways in which civic engagement and political participation are positively related to social cohesion and contribute to our civic culture in the twenty-first century. Chapter five demonstrates that social media affords enhanced mechanisms of engagement and political conversation. Taking the 2017 Women's March as a case study, we see that social media can

facilitate online political activism by enabling individuals to come together, connect, and engage with shared political goals.

Additionally, several of the following chapters explore the relationship between enhanced civic participation and important democratic outcomes such as transparency, public trust in government, and perceived public service quality. In chapter seven, we see that citizen participation may serve to enhance trust in public institutions, with implications for civil service, courts, police, the military, and other public services. In chapter nine, increased citizen participation may have important implications for unity and reconciliation as well as security and stability in Rwanda. Bozzini (2013) argues that when a nation is seeking to control and maintain low levels of state corruption, accountability, transparency, and citizen participation are key ingredients. In chapter eight, we see that civil service organizations (CSOs) act as a bridge between private citizens and governments, giving a voice to people and advocating for those who are marginalized. While the United Nations has made strides to include civil society in its processes, much of the engagement remains symbolic rather than substantive.

Citizens can also use participation through flawed institutions to engage in collective action. Chapters three and four demonstrate the importance of grassroots participation showcasing how the voices of individual private citizens can motivate change in the criminal justice system, whether through increasing police accountability, or through jury nullification whereby citizens are empowered to address institutional injustices within the justice system. by coordinating as a jury to vote for a defendant's innocence, even when there is suspected guilt. Chapter four demonstrates how citizens can work together at the grassroots level to address the social problem of mass incarceration facing America. Likewise, chapter three cites the importance of civic engagement via public information requests for outcomes such as transparency and public trust in the police.

The motivating factors for and effects of political participation are complex. The ways in which humans use the varying avenues and opportunities to engage with the government have been complicated by the increasing ubiquity of social media. Understanding political activism and engagement, and the way in which citizens have a voice in our contemporary system, helps us understand the complexity of this landscape and its implications for civic culture. The following chapters collectively display the varying avenues and purposes of contemporary public participation and civic engagement and their mixed effects on democratic outcomes, thereby providing a more nuanced view of the ways in which citizens interact with government both in the United States and globally.

Disclaimer

AI tools were used throughout the book to improve syntax and grammar, but not to generate original content.

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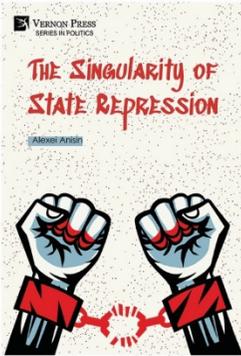
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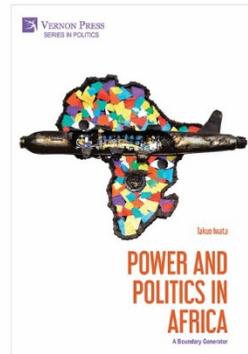
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