

Political Activism

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Many believe that in recent decades European democracies face a hazardous and difficult pathway steering between the twin dangers of political activism where the public is neither too lukewarm nor over heated, the Scylla and Charybdis of contemporary politics. One potential danger is that European citizens are becoming increasingly disengaged from civic affairs, as indicated by falling electoral turnout since the early-1990s and eroding grassroots party membership. In the June 2004 elections to the European parliament, for example, more than half of the electorate (54%) stayed home, rising to almost three-quarters (74%) abstaining across the ten new member states. Voter turnout in these elections fell to a new low of 47.6% in 2004, down from 62% in 1979. When asked in spring 2008 whether they planned to vote in the June 2009 European elections, two-third of the European public responded negatively, and, when asked why, the most popular reasons were that people they did not believe that their vote could change anything, they did not know enough about the European parliament, or they simply were not interested (Eurobarometer 2008). Similar indicators are widely regarded as signaling public disaffection and the growth of more critical citizens, especially when coupled with low or declining levels of trust in core state institutions, including parliaments, parties and elected politicians (Norris 1999, Dalton 2004, Hay 2007).

The other risk is that citizens are indeed intensely involved but in ways which may potentially destabilize the state and undermine democratically-elected authorities. This threat is illustrated most vividly by the sudden outbreak of violent street riots, including firebombs outside of parliament and anarchist shop looting, injuring more than seventy people, which occurred for more than a week in Greece in late-2008, triggered by the death of a teenager in the hands of the police. But there are many other events which show similar outbursts, from cases of fuel strikes in London to violent riots among immigrants living in Paris suburbs, protests over the Muhammad cartoons in Copenhagen, and farmer's dumping food on the streets of Brussels. These diverse cases may or may not have similar underlying roots. But interpretations commonly perceive contentious politics as threatening. In a thermostat model, the democratic state is commonly seen to flourish best which encourages moderate

participation, especially acts channeled through the conventional mechanisms of elections and parties in liberal democracies. This argument is far from novel, indeed its roots can be traced back more than half a century (Eckstein 1961). But it is heard today with increasing urgency. The risks to order and stability are most real in fragile states, exemplified by outbreaks of 'people power' over-throwing Ramos in the Philippines, populist uprisings supporting Chavez in Venezuela, and political crisis leading to a military coup in Thailand. No one believes that this phenomenon poses a major risk today to the ultimate stability, cohesion, and unity of most European states (with the possible exception of Belgium, where divisions appear to have deepened between Dutch-speaking Flemings and French-speaking Walloons). But if democratic societies lack the capacity to contain sporadic outbreaks of contentious politics, and if they are simultaneously unable to bring citizens to the ballot box, this becomes a matter of serious concern.

To examine these issues, Part I in this chapter will first consider the standard paradigm which evolved in social psychology to explain citizen engagement in public affairs. Part II will then identify the major contemporary normative and empirical challenges to the classic model and the revised model of political activism which informs current research, emphasizing the macro-level and mezzo-level context within which citizens' respond. Part III will briefly review some of the evidence about the patterns of voting participation available from the European Social Survey. Lastly, the conclusion will summarize the main results and reflect upon their implications for democracy.

The standard social psychological paradigm of political participation

Research on political activism compares the ways that citizens participate in the public sphere, the processes that lead them to do so, and the consequences of these acts. The standard social psychological model of political participation quickly became adopted as the orthodox paradigm following Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's path-breaking *The Civic Culture* (1963/1989, 1980). The intellectual roots of this study, and the sociological and psychological explanation for political behavior, originated during the inter-war era with the Chicago school, notably Charles Merriam's study on *The Making of Citizens* (1931), as well as Harold Lasswell's *Psychopathology and Politics* (1930). Harry Eckstein's (1961) work *A Theory of Stable Democracy* was also highly influential. Building upon this foundation, *The Civic Culture* theorized that stable democracies ideally required equilibrium with the mass public finely balanced between the dangers of either an excessively apathetic and disengaged citizenry, on the one hand, or an overly-agitated and destabilizing engagement, on the other.

The idea that societies differed in their political culture was hardly novel; indeed it had been the subject of philosophical speculation and normative debate for centuries, in classic works from Aristotle and Montesquieu to de Tocqueville. But one of the more radical aspects of the civic culture study was the way that empirical support for the theory was derived from a path-breaking cross-national opinion survey, demonstrating that citizen's orientations could be examined empirically among the mass publics in Mexico, Italy, Britain, France and Germany. The civic culture study and the use of cross-national survey methods established a quantum leap in the methods and concerns common in comparative political science. It was followed in 1963 by the 8-nation *Political Participation* study sponsored by the International Social Science Council, with Asher, Richardson and Weisberg et al. as the principle investigators. A few years later, Sidney Verba expanded upon his earlier work in the U.S. (Verba and Nie 1972) and developed the *Political Participation and Equality* survey in seven nations in 1966 (Verba, Nie and Kim 1978). The eight-nation 1973 and 1981 *Political Action Surveys* by Samuel Barnes, Klaus Allerbeck, Max Kaase, Hans-Dieter Klingemann, Alan Marsh and Ronald Inglehart expanded upon this foundation to understand 'unconventional' forms of protests and mass demonstrations which were widespread among the trilateral democracies during this decade (Marsh 1977, Barnes and Kaase, 1979, Jennings and van Deth 1989).

The paradigmatic approach derived from *The Civic Culture* used mass surveys to document levels of activism within and across nations, distinguishing several distinct 'modes' or dimensions of political action. The literature established a series of well-known findings about the distribution and the causes of mass activism, illustrated schematically in Figure 1, which continue to inform conventional wisdom today.

- (i) Political participation is a multidimensional phenomenon, with acts differing in the demands they placed upon citizens and their modes of engagement.
- (ii) Voting turnout was the only mode of political participation involving a majority of citizens, and it was distinctive since it required only minimal investment of time, skills, and money.
- (iii) Beyond this, only a minority of the population were engaged in the more demanding forms of 'conventional' participation, including campaigning and party work, contacting officials, and community organizing.

- (iv) Protest politics, exemplified by involvement in demonstrations, petitions, and political strikes, and regarded as another distinct form of activism, was similarly confined to small elites.
- (v) In explaining who became active, the 'baseline model', developed by Almond and Verba (1963) and Verba and Nie (1972), suggested that social structural resources played a significant role, notably the distribution of educational qualifications, income, and occupational status, along with the related demographic factors of sex, age, and ethnicity/race.
- (vi) Cultural attitudes and social psychological predispositions, closely related to socioeconomic status and education, were also important for motivating engagement; participation was greatest among those who felt informed, interested and efficacious, who cared strongly about the outcome, who had a sense of party identification, and who felt a sense of duty to participate in civic affairs.

[Figure 1 about here]

The prime focus of social psychological analysis was therefore something about the individual citizen, not something about the context within which they acted. Throughout this body of literature, the roles of specific formal and informal institutions, as well as the broader political system, were acknowledged as theoretically important for mass activism. For example, Verba, Nie, and Kim (1978) noted that national levels of voter turnout were influenced by registration procedures and by group affiliations with mobilizing agencies and organizations, such as labor unions, religious organizations, and political parties. They also drew attention to the broader political institutions and historical legacy which differentiated each of the countries under comparison. In the empirical analysis, however, these macro-level contextual factors were essentially designated as bit players, relegated to the side of the stage. The ways that the political environment established the hurdles and incentives for citizen engagement in public life was given far less emphasis than the social psychological predispositions of individual citizens.

In part, this approach arose from the bias towards methodological individualism in the sub-field; the predominance of individual-level behavioral survey analysis, based on samples representative of the general adult population within each nation, meant that the empirical analysis of macro-level contextual effects remained underdeveloped. Comparisons within each country are typically made between groups (for example, turnout among African-Americans versus Hispanics), over time (for example, trends in electoral turnout since 1960), and occasionally across regions or states (such as the effects of

registration requirements). Single nation surveys, such as the standard series of national election studies, are usually not well-designed to study institutional effects unless there are significant variations across sub-units (such as the registration or balloting procedures used in different US states) or major systemic changes functioning as natural experiments over time (such as electoral reforms occurring in New Zealand or Italy). Most cross-national surveys during the 1970s and 1980s were commonly based on convenience samples of a small number of established democracies and post-industrial societies, implicitly based on the 'most similar' comparative design. This tries to compare like-with-like, such as selecting post-industrial societies with relatively similar levels of democratization or development to analyze variations in behavior. As a result, individual-level variance among groups of citizens *within* each society was usually greater than systematic national-level institutional variance *across* types of societies, for example by levels of economic development, global cultural region, or types of regimes. The importance of individual-level structural resources and cultural attitudes was replicated and confirmed in numerous survey-based studies of specific nations and types of participation. The core theoretical claims of the social psychological model became the standard textbook view of political participation from the 1960s until at least the late-1980s, particularly in the American literature (see, for example, Milbrath and Goel 1977; Bennett 1986; Conway 2000). Normal science research continues to replicate, applying the old classic theoretical paradigm to expand the geographic basis of our generalizations. The paradigm continued to fit diverse countries. For example, a recent edited volume by Krishna (2008) examined whether social inequality helps to explain patterns of political participation in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America. The study concluded that lack of education – but not wealth – continued to be one of the most important barriers to participation in these countries, reflecting one of the key findings originally observed by Verba, Nie and Kim (1978) three decades earlier.

The revised model of political activism

As the internal tensions within the traditional paradigm become more apparent, however, and it was recognized that its explanatory power was limited in certain important regards, social science experienced greater innovation. The new opportunities for comparison have encouraged scholars to rethink the underlying research design, methods, and theoretical expectations shaping what we know about political activism. Since the early-1990s, the focus of our understanding has shifted as new challenges have arisen to the normative and empirical claims at the heart of this paradigm. The emphasis on the broader institutional context has not entirely overthrown the old social psychological

baseline models, which persist in the literature, but it has provided fresh ways to understand the macro-level context for individual-level political activism.

The *normative* underpinnings of the standard paradigm of political participation have come under sustained critique, especially from theorists emphasizing the virtues of deliberative democracy. *The Civic Culture* evaluated the consequences of civic engagement such as voting and working for parties mainly by how far this established the legitimacy of the democratic state and the accountability of elected officials. By contrast, ideas of deliberative democracy have been heavily influenced by the philosopher and social theorist Jürgen Habermas, who argued that citizen involvement should be valued for the quality of informed public opinion and for rational deliberation within the public sphere (Habermas 1991). This provides a richer and more comprehensive vision about the quality of democratic participation and its educational potential for citizen awareness, as much as for state legitimacy (Guttman and Thomson 2004). Ideas of deliberative democracy are not merely theoretical and confined to academic debate; instead they have been embodied in innovative forms of citizen decision-making which embody the deliberative ideal. Diverse new channels have expanded in the last decade, exemplified by the use of participatory budgeting in Brazil, social audits in India, deliberative opinion polls, national issue forums, online consultation processes, citizen juries, experiments in community decision-making processes, and the growing use of referenda and plebiscites in many states (Gastil and Levine 2005). It remains difficult to monitor the extent of mass public engagement in each of these diverse channels and forums, which lend themselves best to quasi-experimental 'before' and 'after' research designs among participants, but these are clearly very different to the standard notions of political participation which informed the behavioral tradition.

Moreover the *empirical* basis for the standard account of political participation has also been challenged. One reason has been the growth of electoral democracies worldwide, and the export of social scientific surveys which accompanied this process. This allowed the study of public opinion to expand around the globe, as exemplified by the series of cross-national surveys conducted in Latin America, post-Communist Europe, Asia, and Africa. Many new large-scale cross-national surveys of the electorate have become available in recent decades, such as the Global-barometers, the European Social Survey, and the World Values Survey (Norris 2009). This has strengthened the capacity of analysts to compare political activism within a wide range of contexts, in newer consolidating as well as in established democracies, among countries in the global North and south, as well as under power-sharing and power-concentrating regimes.

These developments have encouraged sustained attacks to the standard social psychological approach from at least four distinct strands of the analytical literature, each of which emphasizes certain formal or informal institutions (Books and Prysby 1988, Norris 2007). It is increasingly recognized that ‘context matters’, with individual citizens embedded within specific mezzo-level informal institutions of organizations, communities, neighborhoods, and social networks, as well as being nested within the even broader environment set by the formal state institutions and the social context within each nation (see the schematic model illustrated in Figure 2). Despite this common acknowledgment, rival theories offer alternative visions, each focused upon slightly different types of activism, and a new paradigmatic consensus has not yet emerged about which particular contextual factors are most central.

[Figure 2 about here]

One popular perspective is offered by theories emphasizing the role of *formal state institutions*, which rational choice accounts explain through the role of institutions in shaping the incentives for citizens to participate. Of course this is far from a novel claim; rational choice theorists had long emphasized the conscious calculation of ‘costs’ and ‘benefits’ involved in any political act, as argued by Downs’ *An Economic Theory of Voting* (1957) and by Olson’s *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965). Nevertheless the strong assumptions underpinning rational choice accounts of participation, and the empirical evidence supporting these claims, has always proved highly controversial (Blais 2000). The role of formal institutions has most often been applied to compare electoral turnout across countries or sub-national units. In particular, voter turnout studies now commonly include the effect of formal electoral rules, such as those governing the registration and balloting processes used within American states (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, Teixeira 1992) and voting facilities such as the use of weekend polls, and postal or absentee ballots (Pintor and Maria Gratschew 2004; Massicote, Blais and Yoshinaka 2004); the franchise qualifications including the legal minimal voting age for suffrage (Franklin 2004); the eligibility criteria disqualifying felons, immigrants, and related minorities (McDonald and Popkin 2001, Miles 2004); the frequency of sub-national, national and supranational contests (Franklin 2004); the closeness of party competition (Powell 1980, 1982, 1986); the use of compulsory voting (Norris 2002, 2004); and the impact of the type of electoral system (Jackman and Miller 1995, Blais and Dobrzynska 1998, Blais 2000, Norris 2004).

Moreover the role of institutional rules is also recognized theoretically as an important aspect of other types of participation, although reliable cross-national data coding these rules is usually less easily available. For example, campaign funding laws and regulations which either provide public finance

or else cap donations to parties and candidates are likely to affect patterns of grassroots party membership and local campaigning, such as how far parties depend upon raising resources from members or whether they rely upon public funding, and whether they campaign using a network of local volunteers or else employ paid workers (Austin and Tjernström 2003). The legal requirements governing the taxation status of the non-profit sector, as well as the safety-net provided by state-funded welfare services, are also likely to affect levels of volunteer activism within philanthropic organizations and interest groups. The even broader context of levels of democratization, including respect for basic human rights and fundamental freedoms of association, assembly and expression, also set the context for engagement in public life. Major limits on human rights persist in states such as Belarus, Russia, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, influencing how far citizens are free to express criticism of those in authority through public demonstrations, protests, and the mass media. Turnout in newer democracies is also affected by the historical legacies of authoritarian regimes, the modes of transition, and the initial 'founding' election (Kostadinova and Powers 2007). Interest has also expanded to consider the plebiscitory role of electoral participation within electoral autocracies; states like Belarus which allow multiparty competition although manipulating or rigging campaign coverage and the outcome in favor of the predominant party or leader (Schedler 2006).

By contrast to the macro-approach, the *campaign mobilization* approach has focused attention upon informal mezzo-level institutions drawing citizens into activism. This includes a diverse range of organizations, notably the traditional role of informal political discussion within local communities (Huckfelt and Sprague 1995), the activities of political parties in grassroots campaign organizations (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, Whiteley and Seyd 2002), the impact of the mainstream media (Norris 2000, van Kempen 2007, de Vreese 2005), as well as the newer development of viral communications and social networking on the Internet, such as through blogging, text messages, and videos on YouTube, engaging people in transnational social movements and virtual communities (Kluver et al 2007). The closely-related *social capital* approach, associated most closely with Putnam (2000, 2002), has reinvigorated interest in the role of horizontal social networks in civil life. An expanding range of comparative studies have examined participation in voluntary associations and organizations, and the consequences for social trust, tolerance, and the ties of sociability which root us to local communities (van Deth 1997, Hooghe and Stolle 2003, Howard and Gilbert 2008, Castiglione, van Deth and Wolleb 2009). Lastly, another strand of the literature has theorized about the *opportunity structure* for contentious politics, emphasizing the importance of tolerance of dissent by regimes, the strength of group alliances, and the impact of specific catalytic political events in triggering outbursts of mass

protests and demonstrations via new social movements (Tarrow 1994, Tilly 1978, Adrian and Apter 1995, McAdam, Macarthy and Zald 1996).

Reexamining the European evidence

These studies focus on organizational (mezzo) and national-level (macro) factors drawing citizens into active engagement and thereby acting as the broader environment conditioning the role of both individual-level resources and social psychological attitudes. Much of the literature on each dimension has developed in parallel, for example examining national-level electoral systems on national-level voter turnout, or the role of social networks and associational membership on interpersonal trust, but this really calls for an integrated multilevel analysis. To reexamine some of the empirical evidence, this study uses multilevel regression analysis to analyze patterns of political activism across two-dozen European nations.¹ For individual-level data, the study draws upon the cumulative file for the European Social Survey (ESS).² This is a rich resource which monitors multiple dimensions of political activism as well as containing a variety of social psychological, structural and demographic characteristics of respondents. The pooled ESS dataset covers three waves in 2002, 2004 and 2006, which contain in total almost 125,000 respondents, a sufficiently large number to compare sub-samples, such as non-citizens. Moreover the survey covers respondents living in two-dozen European countries, including Nordic, Northern and Mediterranean, and post-Communist Central European societies. To measure pattern of political activism, the ESS included a number of standard items, listed in Table 1, including those which factor analysis revealed fell into three dimensions.³

[Table 1 about here]

Reported *voting participation* in national elections engaged on average almost three-quarters (72%) of the European public, although the proportion ranged from just over half the electorate in Estonia, Switzerland, Luxembourg and the Czech Republic up to over 80% in Italy, Belgium, Greece and Denmark. The patterns of reported voting closely related to official records of vote turnout, measured as a proportion of the registered electorate, in national elections to the lower house of parliament (see Table 3). Although the most widespread type of political activity, as many have observed, voting turnout is also atypical of other forms of engagement.

Forms of *conventional* activism undertaken during the preceding twelve months were monitored by three items which were closely related, including contacting an official (elected or bureaucratic) (15%), belonging to a political party (5%) and working for a political party or action group (4%). Each of these can be regarded as conventional ways to become involved in representative

democracy, making higher demands upon cognitive skills and knowledge, time and energy than voting. What these traditional repertoires share is that they are focused primarily upon how citizens can influence representative democracy indirectly (through parties and public officials).

Lastly, activism in *contentious* or *protest* politics during the preceding twelve months was measured by five items which clustered together, including working for another organization (15%), signing a petition (23%), boycotting certain products (15%), demonstrating lawfully (7%), and wearing a campaign badge or sticker (8%). Although contentious politics was once regarded as confined to a small group of students and workers, the distribution shows that all these activities are now more common today than party work. Petitioning and consumer boycotts are particularly popular activities in the Nordic region as well as in many North European societies, while contentious politics was less widespread in the post-Communist societies of Central Europe as well as in most of the Mediterranean nations.

How reliable are these survey estimates? Often sample surveys are the only evidence which is available to gauge how many people have experience of certain acts, like demonstrations and consumer boycotts. But for comparison some independent evidence can be derived from other official sources. Table 2 provides national estimates of the number of party members expressed as a proportion of the electorate, derived from official party records, as collated by Mair and van Biezen (2001). The comparison with the estimates provided by the ESS shows a remarkably strong correlation ($R=0.898^{***}$), given the different time periods, the potential measurement errors for both sources, and the different methods of data collection. Comparisons can also be drawn in Table 3 from official estimates of electoral turnout, measured as the proportion of the eligible age population who cast a valid ballot in national elections held during the 1990s. Again there is usually quite a high correlation ($R=0.611^{**}$) between the ESS estimates and official data on electoral turnout, given the difference in time periods, with some notable exceptions where reported voter participation in the ESS survey was either substantially higher than the official average electoral turnout (Hungary, Switzerland and Ukraine) or else substantially lower (Slovakia, Czech Republic).

[Tables 2 and 3 about here]

What factors are more plausibly linked to each of these dimensions of political activism? Without testing all potential components or types of activism identified in Figure 2, in this chapter we can examine a simpler two-level model of voting turnout where a representative sample of individual respondents (level 1) is nested within national-level contexts (level 2). The theory offered in this chapter

predicts that individual structural and social psychological characteristics will have a significant direct effect on voting turnout. In particular, we expect that those who are more educated and more affluent will also prove more active, as numerous studies have documented over the years since *The Civic Culture*. Education provides cognitive skills, strengthens a sense of internal efficacy (a feeling of competence to engage), and increases knowledge and awareness about public affairs, which facilitate taking part in all types of activism. Educational qualifications are also closely associated with subsequent levels of household income and social status, which function in similar ways. Traditionally, men have usually been slightly more engaged than women in activism within unions and parties, although the voting gap has closed and even reversed in some contemporary societies, and the social capital gender gap depends heavily upon the type of association under comparison (Burns, Schlozman and Verba 2001, Inglehart and Norris 2003). The age effects are expected to prove curvilinear for voting (peaking in late middle age), with the older generation slightly more engaged than average in conventional forms of activism, while the younger generation is slightly more involved than average in types of protest politics (Norris 2002). Patterns of citizenship also have a direct link to voting turnout, and the proportion of non-citizens who are entitled to vote in each country varies across Europe depending upon the legal citizenship and suffrage qualifications, as well as patterns of immigration and the openness of labor markets to migrant workers across national borders.

In addition to all these familiar patterns, the account predicts that the national context will also prove important. To simplify the factors under comparison, we can test for the macro-level effects of contemporary levels of economic development (measured by per capita GDP in 2006 in US\$) and the historical legacy of democratization in each state (measured by the sum of Freedom House annual index of political rights and civil liberties during the third wave era from 1972-2006). The comparison includes some of the most affluent societies in the world, including Luxembourg, Switzerland and Norway, as well as those which have experienced rapid economic development during recent decades (such as Portugal and Spain) and other emerging economies which have moderate or low income levels today (Hungary and Ukraine). During the third wave period, Europe also contains states with very different historical legacies and political traditions, including long-standing stable democracies, interrupted democracies (such as Greece), and consolidating democracies emerging from dictatorships in Spain and Portugal, and from Communist party rule in Central Europe. Moreover we can also compare the impact of certain variations in state institutions on voter turnout, including whether the state uses a proportional, mixed, or majoritarian electoral system for national parliamentary contests, and whether there are any compulsory voting laws, as classified and discussed in detail elsewhere (Norris 2005). We would predict

that proportional electoral systems and compulsory voting laws will both exert a positive impact upon voter turnout in national elections, the former indirectly by expanding party choice and the latter directly, where enforced with any penalties, by increasing the cost of non-compliance.

[Table 4 about here]

Table 4 presents the results of the analysis. As expected, all the individual level factors proved significant and in the expected direction; voting turnout was indeed higher among the middle aged and older generation, among those with greater educational qualifications, and among those with national citizenship. At the same time, the traditional gender gap has now reversed in Europe, with women voting today at slightly higher rates than men (as well as predominating in numbers among the older electorate, due to patterns of longevity). As numerous other studies have documented, political interest and internal efficacy (where someone felt competent about civic affairs) were also significant predictors of whether people cast a ballot. Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) argue that education is a strong predictor of these civic attitudes, by strengthening civic skills and competencies, awareness and information which helps to make sense of electoral choices and issues in public life.

Turning to the contextual variables, the strongest factor proved the use of compulsory voting laws. This may not appear that surprising but it should be emphasized that the type of penalties and, in particular, whether these regulations are actually enforced in practice, does vary from one place to another (Norris 2002). The most stringent enforcement occurs in Luxembourg and Belgium, both countries which we have already seen had the highest turnout of any of the countries under comparison. By contrast, enforcement was far weaker in Italy and Greece. If the convention threshold for evaluating statistical significance is slightly loosened ($P > .067$), then the democratic history and traditions of a country can also be regarded as important; in general the longer that a country has enjoyed civil liberties and political rights (as measured by the total cumulative Freedom House score on these indices during the third wave era), the greater the level of voter participation. The more free and fair elections which a country has held, the more that citizens acquire the habits and party loyalties that encourage voting. Yet by contrast contemporary levels of economic development (measured by per capita GDP in 2006), which might be expected to prove important, proved insignificant in the model. One possible reason is that, although there are some important variations in levels of economic development across the European countries under comparison, such as contrasts between Ukraine and Luxembourg, compared with the rest of the world, even the middle-income post-Communist societies in Central Europe have almost universal literacy and relatively high tertiary education. The impact of

macro-level education on voting participation worldwide seems to have the greatest impact in the early stages of societal development, where growing literacy in some of the poorest democracies around the globe, such as Mali and Ghana, provide access to mass media and related information sources (Norris 2003). Once primary and tertiary schooling is widely available to the general public, then education no longer helps to predict societal-level variations in turnout. This is most clearly illustrated by the particular case of Switzerland, one of the most affluent and well-educated nations in the globe, but with one of the lowest patterns of voting turnout for national elections of any established democracy, in part due to the constitutional power-sharing arrangements used in this state. The type of electoral system was also significant at the lower level ($P > .10$) but as Table 3 showed, most countries under comparison used proportional representation (PR) party list electoral system for national parliamentary elections. There were only four cases of mixed (combined) systems (Italy, Hungary, Ukraine and Germany) and only two cases of majoritarian/plurality electoral systems (Britain and France) under comparison. A broader and more systematic comparison of major and minor types of electoral systems used worldwide showed far stronger effects on average levels of voting participation for the lower house of parliament during the 1990s, with proportional representation (PR) elections usually having about 10 per cent higher turnout than majoritarian systems (Norris 2004, p162). The most plausible reasons are that the broader range of parties typically standing for office and elected to parliament under PR systems expands party competition and voter choice at the ballot box, and the lower vote threshold of PR systems minimizes the 'wasted vote' syndrome, where supporters of minor parties, which are destined to lose under plurality rules, decide to abstain.

Conclusions and implications

We can conclude that participation is indeed something about citizens (notably, as the standard model has emphasized, their age, education, and motivational attitudes) and also something about elections (such as the institutional and political context) (Franklin 2004). What does this observation imply – especially for the broader issues of the consequences of participation for democratic health and stability? Political activism has always been central to the study of political behavior, where widespread participation is commonly regarded as indicative of a healthy level of public support for the political system. Indeed disquiet about falling turnout during the last decade, coupled with eroding membership within mass-branch parties, has been widely interpreted as an indicator of public disaffection with democratic governance in Europe and elsewhere. Many commentators couple this phenomenon with other indicators – such as low or eroding trust in parliament and politicians – to diagnose signs of civic

malaise (Hay 2007). At the same time, outbreaks of radical mass activism and contentious politics, such as violent street riots or occasional outbreaks of people-power, are also usually viewed with alarm, as another danger symbolizing a break-down of the state's capacity to safeguard law and order, or even a phenomenon capable of destabilizing or undermining fragile democratic states.

In practice, however, a glance at some of the persistent outliers quickly reveals that there is no optimal level of participation which ensures stable and effective democratic states. Interpreting the implications for democracy following from the behavioral evidence is far more complex than is often assumed. Political interest and efficacy are important attitudinal predictors of activism but, by contrast, although popular commentators commonly link declining participation to an erosion of trust and confidence in political institutions, in fact the empirical evidence for such a link is often thin or non-existent (Norris 1999, 2002). Critical citizens who are mistrustful of institutions may become more motivated to become active, in order to reform the state, not less. The evidence for a long-term erosion of voter turnout in established democracies is not consistent, and even trends in basic indicators such as national levels of party membership, trade union membership, and partisan identification often display patterns of trendless fluctuations over time, rather than an inevitable secular decline during the era since World War II (Schmitt and Holmberg 1995, Pintor and Gratschew 2004, Norris 2002). Much attention has focused upon the supposedly apathetic younger generation of Americans, but newer studies suggest that in fact young people are engaged and active, but in a diverse array of organizations, causes and movements, rather than through the traditional channels of civic activism (Dalton 2009). Moreover countries such as Switzerland and the United States have persisted over the centuries as some of the most stable democracies around the world, despite the fact that they have experienced consistently low levels of voter turnout over a long series of national elections. There are multiple drivers of the democratization process, including the critical role of power-sharing institutions, and political culture is only one aspect among many (Norris 2008). Moreover the underlying normative judgments about what level of citizen participation is intrinsically valuable, which often color evaluations of the empirical evidence, remain open to debate. It is commonly assumed that the democratic state which flourishes best is one which encourages moderate participation, as Eckstein asserted over half a century ago, but the systematic linkages between mass political behavior and the stability of democratic states involves a long and complex chain, and a more cautious interpretation of the broader implications would be wise.

Figure 1: The standard social psychological theory of political activism



Figure 2: The revised contextual model of political activism

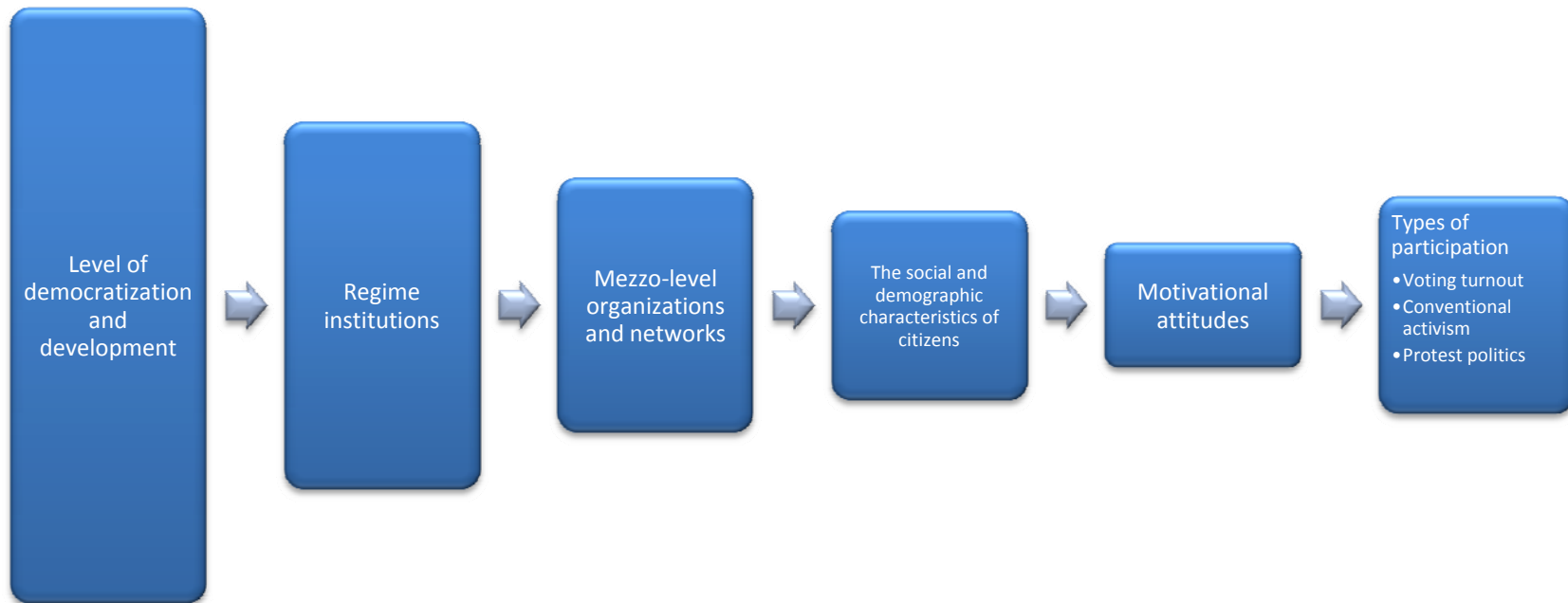


Table 1: Distribution of political activism in Europe

European region	Country	Voted	Conventional activism			Contentious politics				
		Voted in last national election	Contacted official	Worked in party or action group	Member of political party	Worked in another organization	Signed petition	Demonstrated lawfully	Boycotted certain products	Worn campaign badge/sticker
Nordic	Denmark	87	19	4	6	22	31	7	25	7
	Finland	73	22	4	7	32	27	2	28	15
	Norway	79	23	8	9	27	38	9	23	23
	Sweden	82	15	4	7	25	44	6	33	13
Northern	Austria	74	20	10	14	23	24	7	20	8
	Belgium	81	17	5	7	21	29	8	11	7
	France	66	16	4	2	16	33	15	27	12
	Germany	74	12	4	4	20	30	9	24	5
	Ireland	74	22	4	5	13	25	6	12	8
	Luxembourg	56	20	4	8	20	25	18	15	5
	Netherlands	79	14	4	5	22	22	3	9	4
	Switzerland	53	15	7	8	15	38	8	28	8
	United Kingdom	65	17	3	3	9	39	4	23	9
	Mediterranean	Spain	73	12	6	3	16	24	23	11
Greece		84	14	5	6	5	4	5	7	3
Italy		82	13	4	4	8	15	11	7	8
Portugal		68	8	2	4	4	5	4	2	4
Central	Czech Republic	55	19	4	4	10	14	4	8	5
	Estonia	51	10	3	3	4	5	2	4	3
	Hungary	76	12	2	1	2	5	3	5	2
	Poland	61	8	2	1	5	7	1	4	3
	Slovenia	70	13	3	5	2	10	3	4	2
	Slovakia	67	8	3	2	8	21	3	11	4
	Ukraine	83	9	4	4	2	7	14	1	9
Total		72	15	4	5	15	23	7	15	8

Note: Mean distributions for each nation by each type of activism. **Source:** The European Social Survey Cumulative file 2002-2006. N. respondents 124,659 N. countries 24.

Table 2: Comparison of party membership estimated in the ESS and in official party records

Country	Party membership, 2002-6, ESS	Party membership as a % of the electorate, late-1990s	Difference
Austria	14	17.7	-3.7
Norway	9	7.3	1.7
Switzerland	8	6.4	1.6
Finland	7	9.6	-2.6
Sweden	7	5.5	1.5
Belgium	7	6.5	0.5
Denmark	6	5.2	0.8
Greece	6	6.8	-0.8
Netherlands	5	2.5	2.5
Ireland	5	3.1	1.9
Italy	4	4.0	0
Czech Rep	4	3.9	0.1
Germany	4	2.9	1.1
Portugal	4	3.9	0.1
Spain	3	3.4	-0.4
France	2	1.6	0.4
Slovakia	2	4.1	-2.1
Hungary	1	2.1	-1.1
ALL ABOVE	5	5.2	-0.2

Note: Party membership in the late-1990s is measured as a proportion of the electorate.

Source: Peter Mair and Ingrid van Biezen. 2001. 'Party membership in twenty European democracies, 1980-2000.' *Party Politics* 7:1.

Table 3: Voter turnout in Europe

Country	National elections for the lower house of parliament					EU contests
	Reported voting, ESS 2002-2006	Official voter turnout in the latest election	Year of latest contest	Electoral system	Compulsory voting	Official voter turnout in EU elections June 2004
Luxembourg	59	91.7	2004	PR	Strict	90.0
Belgium	81	91.1	2007	PR	Strict	90.8
Cyprus		89.0	2006	PR		71.2
Denmark	87	86.6	2007	PR		47.9
Sweden	82	82.0	2006	PR		37.8
Austria	75	81.7	2008	PR	Partial (a)	42.4
Italy	83	80.5	2008	Mixed	Weak	73.1
Netherlands	80	80.4	2006	PR		39.3
Norway	79	77.4	2005	PR		N/a
Spain	73	75.3	2008	PR		45.1
Greece	84	74.1	2007	PR	Weak	63.4
Ireland	76	67.0	2007	STV		59.7
Finland	73	65.0	2007	PR		39.4
Czech Republic	55	64.5	2006	PR		28.3
Hungary	76	64.4	2006	Mixed		38.5
Portugal	69	64.3	2005	PR		38.6
Slovenia	70	63.1	2008	PR		28.3
Ukraine	82	62.0	2007	Mixed		N/a
Estonia	51	61.9	2007	PR		26.8
United Kingdom	67	61.4	2005	PR		38.9
Latvia		61.0	2006	PR		41.3
France	67	60.0	2007	Majoritarian		42.7
Slovakia	67	54.7	2006	PR		16.9
Poland	61	53.9	2007	PR		20.9
Germany	74	53.4	2008	Mixed		43.0
Lithuania		32.4	2008	Mixed		48.4
Switzerland	55	48.3	2007	PR	Partial (b)	N/a
Total	72	72.0				47.6

Note: Official voter turnout is measured as the number of valid votes cast expressed as a proportion of the total registered electorate (Vote/Reg) in the latest national parliamentary and European elections. Compulsory voting either strictly or weakly enforced: (a) Only in the regions of Tyrol and Vorarlberg. (b) Only in one canton. Otherwise none is used. N/a Not a member state of the EU. **Sources:** European Social Survey Cumulative file 2002-2006; International IDEA Voter Turnout database www.IDEA.int; European Parliament <http://www.europarl.europa.eu>.

Table 4: Multilevel regression models explaining European voting activism

	Estimate (beta)	Std Error	Sig (P)
INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL			
Demographic and social characteristics			
Age (years)	.137	(.001)	.000
Gender (male=1)	-.009	(.001)	.000
Non-National citizenship	-.121	(.001)	.000
Education 9-pt scale	.071	(.001)	.000
Cultural attitudes			
Political Interest	.065	(.001)	.000
Political efficacy	.018	(.001)	.000
NATIONAL-LEVEL			
Societal and political context			
Democratic history	.025	(.013)	.067
Level of economic development	-.027	(.021)	.210
State Institutions			
Majoritarian electoral system	-.027	(.014)	.063
Compulsory voting law	.047	(.013)	.001
Constant (intercept)	.732		
Schwartz BIC	105,776		
N. respondents	116,120		
N. nations	19		

Note: All independent variables were standardized using mean centering (z-scores). Models present the results of the REML multilevel regression models. The dependent variable is whether the respondent reported voting in the last national election. Models report the estimated beta coefficient slopes (b), standard errors (in parenthesis), and their significance. Significant coefficients (probability less than the 0.10 level) are highlighted in **bold**.

Source: European Social Survey cumulative file 2002-6.

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Bio

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Notes:

¹ The danger of using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression for analysis is that the standard errors of the regression coefficients can be inaccurate for contextual and cross-level variables, by overestimating the degrees of freedom, and therefore tests of significance can prove misleading. The models in this chapter use restricted maximum likelihood techniques (REML) to estimate direct effects for hierarchical data. Individual respondents are grouped into nation-states. Each nation-state has a different set of parameters for the random factors, allowing intercepts and slopes to vary by nation. In hierarchical linear models, as is customary, all independent variables were centered, by subtracting the grand mean (which becomes zero). The standardized independent variables all have a standard deviation of 1.0. This process also helps to guard against problems of collinearity. The independent variables were treated as fixed components, reflecting the weighted average for the slope across all groups, while nation was treated as a random component, capturing the country variability in the slope. The strength of the beta coefficients (slopes) can be interpreted intuitively as how much change in the dependent variable is generated by a one-percent change in each independent variable.

² For full methodological details, see <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>.

³ Principle components factor analysis with varimax rotation revealed that the nine items clustered into three dimensions, as described in the text.