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## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

How and Why Do People  
Get Involved in Politics?

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centration on this objective means that other considerations must be slighted. Exhaustive evaluations of methods and of the quality of evidence are not possible in the text. Rather than report the findings of any given study in full detail and in a single location in the text, findings are brought in to support points in the natural progression of discussion. Since studies are cited many times, only author and date of publication are given in the text and footnotes, but full citations can be found in the bibliography. The book is not a bibliographic essay on political participation, and the author makes no pretense that every relevant citation is given for each proposition. He has attempted, however, to be comprehensive in reporting empirically supported propositions about political participation. In the text, propositions are distinguished by level of confidence. Those in italics are propositions for which there is some evidence, but of which the author is not as confident as he is of those propositions in bold-face type. In the latter case, there is generally more than one study in support of the proposition.




### CONCEPTUAL PROBLEMS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

**THE FIRST TASK** is to find a way to think about political participation. Participation must be defined; variables relating to it must be specified; and the subject must be bounded so that it is kept to manageable size. A model to facilitate thinking about participation is sketched later in the chapter.

Clarity in social science research is facilitated by specifying a level of analysis. The distinction is usually made between macro and micro levels. In social science, the macro level refers to large social units such as a nation, or political system, or organization. The micro level refers to individuals and their behavior. "Micro" and "macro" are comparative rather than absolute terms, however, and in other sciences may have a different specific meaning. In biology, for example, "macro" means unusually large and "micro" means unusually small.

Although the emphasis in this book is on micro political behavior, some attention is given to macro characteristics as well. The behavior of the two systems is often interrelated; individual (micro) political behavior affects the behavior of the larger political system (macro); macro characteristics, in turn, affect micro behavior. The level of inquiry adopted by the analyst is determined partially by the kinds of questions he wishes to ask. The question, "How does a system of political parties affect the stability of a political regime?" requires a macro level of analysis. The major question for this book, "How and why do people get involved in politics?" requires emphasis on the micro level. Certain questions re-



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quire a bridging of the two levels. Two such questions for this book are: "How do the characteristics of the political system affect the manner and extent of citizen participation in politics?" and "How do the participation patterns of citizens affect the functioning of the political system?"

### DECISIONS ABOUT PARTICIPATION

Taking any political action generally requires two decisions: one must decide to act or not to act; and one must also decide the direction of his action. For example, a person not only decides to vote or not to vote, but also decides whom to vote for. Usually, the decision to perform an action like voting precedes the decision about the direction of the action, but the time sequence could be reversed. Sometimes, a person decides that he likes a candidate or a party before he makes up his mind to cast a vote. Certain actions do not involve a directional choice; for example, one cannot choose the government to which one wishes to pay taxes (without changing one's residence).

Decisions to act in a particular way often are accompanied by a third decision about the intensity, duration, and/or extremity of the action. Persons may lend political support mildly or vigorously, in a single instance or repeatedly. This third choice is intimately related to the other two. A person who takes vigorous and sustained political action very probably is strongly attracted in a certain direction. The very fact that he feels intensely makes it more likely that he will participate. This book focuses mainly on decisions to act or not to act and on decisions about the intensity and duration of the action.

Decisions about the direction of political action are properly another topic, and the book would be unduly expanded and complicated if an attempt were made to cover them here. Research findings about directional political choices are quite voluminous; furthermore, they are difficult to summarize, since the directions are specific as to setting and time. Generalizations applicable in one setting very likely are not applicable in other settings. For example, explanation of

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the factors leading some persons to prefer Eisenhower and others to prefer Stevenson in the 1956 presidential election in the United States<sup>1</sup> has little generalizability to the choice the voters made between candidates in the 1960 or 1964 presidential elections.

Settings have one thing in common, however—the concept of *status quo*. Persons can defend or try to change the *status quo*. Its defenders often are called conservatives, and those trying to change it often are called liberals. Liberal-conservative contention about what should be done with the *status quo* is a familiar theme through many centuries of political writing. Unfortunately, many directional choices cannot be fitted to this general liberal-conservative dimension; they are even more specific as to setting and time and, therefore, are even more difficult to summarize.

We have learned to be very cautious in generalizing about liberal-conservative directional choices. Although rational deliberation plays some role in a person's choosing a liberal or conservative direction, the rational aspect of such a choice should not be overemphasized. We shall see that relatively few people have sufficient information or sufficient understanding of the political system to be able to make a completely rational political choice. Furthermore, personality predispositions incline a person to screen out uncongenial stimuli from the mass that impinge on his sensory system. Research evidence suggests that at least some persons have personalities which are inclined either liberally or conservatively (McClosky, 1958; Milbrath, 1962). Presumably, persons inclined liberally or conservatively would adopt a corresponding position with respect to the *status quo* no matter what setting or era they lived in. For lack of empirical evidence, this assumption must remain purely speculative.

But one can ask, in turn, where liberal or conservative personalities come from. In part, a liberal or conservative inclination comes from environment: certain environments tend to produce liberals, and other environments tend to produce conservatives. It is a well-known generalization,

<sup>1</sup>For a very sophisticated analysis of these factors, see Campbell, et al. (1960).

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for example, that lower-class environments tend to produce status-changers (liberals), and that upper-class environments tend to produce status-defenders (conservatives). But environment does not seem to account for all the variance in political personality; persons coming from very similar environments may have quite different personalities. This suggests that heredity also is a factor inclining some persons liberally and others conservatively. It is likely that there is a very complex interaction between heredity and environment which produces a personality inclined in a certain political direction. Social scientists, at this point, have only a very dim understanding of that interaction.

Many other factors can intervene between personality inclination and choice of political direction. Pressures from family or peer groups are very important. Predominant community beliefs tend to structure the way a person sees his political world. The presence of a certain configuration of information about a current political choice (in contrast to an alternative configuration of information) can strongly influence that choice.

The complex interaction of these multiple factors influencing direction of political choice produces decisions that may seem rather inconsistent to the political analyst. Studies of the American electorate show, for example, that a "liberal" position on foreign policy (internationalism in contrast to isolationism) is not related to a "liberal" position on domestic economic policy (welfare state in contrast to laissez faire). These two positions, in turn, seem to show no correlation with a "liberal" posture favoring integration in contrast to segregation (Campbell, et al., 1960). In the United States, the issue of the welfare state versus laissez faire most clearly and consistently distinguishes the Democratic (liberal) party from the Republican (conservative) party. It is only in this very limited way that the two American parties can be characterized as liberal or conservative. If the political setting should change, one could anticipate that labels about the political direction of a party might also change.

The point of this short digression concerning the factors involved in making choices about political direction is to

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suggest to the reader the complexity and magnitude of the problem of trying to explain such choices. It would take us too far afield to attempt a full explanation here. The reader need only be aware that a choice to take action nearly always requires a second choice about direction. Most of the findings to be discussed in this book are valid, no matter what directional choice the political actor makes.

### THE ACTIVE-INACTIVE DIMENSION

Acting politically seems to have two types of contrasts: inactive and passive. Most citizens have both active and passive postures toward politics. Every person participates at least passively in the political system in which he lives. Mere compliance gives support to the existing regime and, therefore, is a type of political behavior.<sup>2</sup> There are other essentially passive responses to the political system: obeying laws, paying taxes, experiencing order and security. These passive behaviors are to be distinguished from the inactive counterparts to political action: nonvoting versus voting, noncontributing versus contributing, nonattending versus attending, and so forth.

Activity generally can be graded into quantities: some persons do more of a given thing than other persons. They may engage in an activity with greater frequency or regularity; they may give more hours or money at a time; they may participate in a wider repertoire of activities. Some persons are almost totally inactive; some are active in one type of behavior but passive in others; some are active in a wide variety of behaviors. Inactivity may be thought of as a zero or base point from which quantities of action can be measured.

Some additional characteristics of this general active-inactive dimension are discussed later in the chapter, but it might be helpful first to discuss several subdimensions of

<sup>2</sup>Almond & Verba (1963) have distinguished three roles: "participant," "subject," and "parochial." They have made the valuable point that each citizen plays all three roles at one time or another. "Participant" and "subject" roles (similar to the active-passive distinction made here) are both essential to a viable political regime. The "parochials" are similar to the inactives or those we later call the "apathetics."

political action. Certain of these subdimensional characteristics may make the prospect of taking an action attractive or unattractive to a potential participant. Learning theory tells us that if the costs of the action outweigh the anticipated rewards, the person is unlikely to perform the action.

#### **Overt versus Covert**

Some political actions are taken in full public view with exposure to the possibility of criticism and acclamation, while other actions are essentially private. A particular act, e.g., writing a letter, may be private in one context (a letter to a friend) and public in another (a letter to an editor). A discussion about politics with friends in a private home is quite different from a discussion of the same subject before the public media (such as a television discussion program). It is clear that in most cases the overt action has higher costs than the covert and thus requires higher rewards before persons engage in it.

#### **Autonomous versus Compliant**

All action is a response to a stimulus of some sort, but there is an important difference between a person who responds to an inner or general environmental stimulus (e.g., awareness that a campaign is in progress) and a person who responds to solicitation. Action taken in response to a request is certainly action rather than inaction, but it has passive overtones when compared to autonomous action. If the stimulus becomes virtually irresistible, such as a governmental order to pay taxes, action in compliance with the order may be seen as more passive than efforts to avoid compliance. It also is possible for a person to receive a request not to take an action; inaction, in this case, should be seen as compliance. Although the boundary between autonomy and compliance may be indistinct, there is an important difference in emphasis. Compliant behavior should, in most cases, be seen as the route of least cost or greatest reward.

#### **Approaching versus Avoiding**

Approaching behavior is characterized by a positive valence between actor and object, in contrast to avoiding

behavior, characterized by a negative valence between actor and object. A valence is a relationship of either attraction or repulsion. If one likes ice cream, for example, he has a positive valence toward it. If one hates giving speeches, he has a negative valence toward the action. A valence is a property characterizing the actor and must have an object referent of which the actor is aware. The mere absence of action is not necessarily avoidance; the actor must withdraw or consciously abstain from an object or action before his behavior can be characterized as avoidance. For example, a person who does not make a political contribution because he is unaware that anyone wants him to contribute is not avoiding, but a person who does not contribute when he is requested to do so is. Avoiding behavior probably flows from anticipation of high costs, whereas approaching behavior probably follows the anticipation of high rewards.

#### **Episodic versus Continuous**

Some political action, such as voting, takes place only at specified times. The decision to take the action usually is conscious and often is preceded by a build-up period such as a campaign. Other actions, such as contacting a politician, holding an office, supporting a party, can be taken up at any time and for extended periods of time. Actions that can be continuous often become part of living patterns and may take on a routine character with little conscious decision to act or not to act. Continuous action generally has higher costs than episodic action, and a significant reward structure, preferably built in (like a salary), is needed to insure performance of the action. When measuring quantities or magnitudes of political action, it is important to note the episodic or continuous character of the action.

#### **Inputs versus Outtakes**

Certain behaviors constitute inputs to the political system (voting, campaigning, contacting officials, seeking office), in contrast to those which are outtakes or withdrawals from the system (services, public order, conflict resolution, justice). Scientists often speak of inputs and outputs when analyzing systems. Our concern here is to classify behavior

of an individual with respect to a system; therefore, we speak of inputs and outtakes. This distinction can characterize the orientations or postures of individuals as well as characterize specific acts; some individuals emphasize outtakes in their orientation to the system and others emphasize inputs. It would be a little oversimple to classify inputs simply as costs and outtakes simply as rewards; many inputs carry auxiliary rewards (e.g., pleasure in voting), and many outtakes carry auxiliary costs (e.g., court costs in seeking justice).

#### **Expressive versus Instrumental**

Expressive political action focuses on symbol manipulation; mere engagement in the behavior is satisfying or drive-reducing. Instrumental action, in contrast, is oriented primarily toward manipulating and changing things. This subdimension of action is a motivational distinction, and the classification is made by looking at the situation and motivation of the actor. Consequently, it is difficult to classify specific acts as expressive or instrumental in every case. Casting a vote, for example, may be primarily expressive in one situation or for one person but primarily instrumental for another situation or person.

A person who behaves politically to satisfy expressive needs seems to consume the experience of engaging in the action. As his needs are satisfied by engaging in the action, his drive reduces, and the behavior ceases until a new need for expressive consumption arises. Participating in a demonstration, shouting a protest, engaging in political argument, pledging allegiance, are examples of specific acts that in most situations are expressive. The classification is one of motivation and emphasis; such acts also may have instrumental consequences.

Instrumental action typically follows through a long chain of events and intermediary goals leading to a final goal. Although participation in the action may be immediately satisfying to the actor, mere participation is not sufficient reward to produce the action; rather, reaching the goal is the source of drive reduction. Participating in a campaign, collecting information, volunteering for a job, are examples of acts that

are primarily instrumental in orientation and emphasis, even though their performance may provide expressive rewards as well.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Verbal versus Nonverbal**

Most political acts require the use of verbal symbols, but some (talking about politics, writing letters, making speeches) demand much more verbal ability than others (stuffing envelopes, marching in parades). A person who does not possess verbal skills has a barrier to verbal participation; the cost of participating in the activity may be so great that he avoids or withdraws from verbal activities.

#### **Social versus Nonsocial**

This subdimension of action is closely related to the verbal-nonverbal subdimension, but the two are not identical. Writing a letter or a speech, for example, is highly verbal but does not require social interaction. Nearly all political acts entail some minimal kind of social interaction, but it is useful to distinguish the amount required. Soliciting political funds or campaigning from door to door, for example, requires much more social interaction than voting, attending a meeting, joining a party, or making a monetary contribution. The cost of participating in activities requiring a good deal of social interaction is very high for persons who are not skilled or at ease socially. Contrariwise, persons with a strong need for social interaction may find sociable political activities very rewarding.

#### **SUMMARIZING BEHAVIORAL DIMENSIONS**

Unless the political analyst has thoroughly conceptualized the dimensions of political action, his ability to think about antecedent conditions for that action is limited. This is especially important if one wants to be sure that he has measured behavior in all its richness, or if one wishes to

<sup>3</sup> The most elaborate statement of expressive-instrumental orientation to politics has been made by Himmelstrand (1960a; 1960b), but allusion to a similar classification was made earlier by Riesman (1952).

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FIGURE 1. Abstract Map of an Individual's Political Behavior.<sup>a</sup> The political acts shown in the various cells are illustrative for a hypothetical individual; for another individual, certain specific acts might appear in different cells.

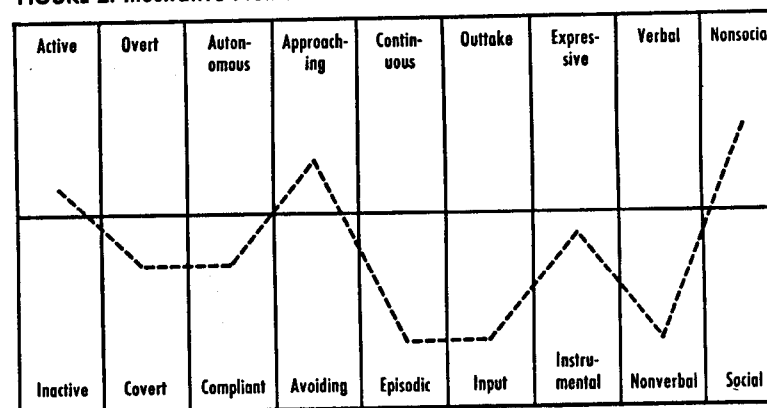
		Inputs to the System by Individuals	Outtakes from the System by Individuals
Active	Instrumental	Leader selection (vote) Party activity Contributing money Keeping informed Volunteering Disobedience	Stewardship Communication opportunities Services Economic opportunities Conflict resolution Justice
	Expressive	Allegiance Demonstrations Protests (vote) Political argument	National symbols Sense of identification Governmental protests Sense of superiority
Passive		Obedience Compliance Conscription Paying taxes Indifference	Public order Security

<sup>a</sup> I am indebted to Professor David W. Minar, Northwestern University, for suggesting an earlier version of this figure.

measure all the relevant antecedent conditions. On the other hand, some means must be found for summarizing or classifying these dimensions to facilitate thinking about them. Classifications alert us to the ways that specific acts are similar or different and thus facilitate the search for variables that explain the occurrence of acts.

If one is concerned with only two or three dimensions of specific political acts, one possible way of summarizing these dimensions is shown in Figure 1, where the active-passive dimension is modified by the expressive-instrumental subdimension and by the input-outtake subdimension. The six-celled table or abstract map shown in Figure 1 suggests pigeonholes into which political behavior might be classified for certain analytical purposes. The acts shown in the various cells are illustrative for a given individual and are not analytically exclusive. The classification shown is from the perspective of the individual actor rather than of the

FIGURE 2. Illustrative Profile of a Political Contribution.



political system. A given act (a vote, a protest, a contribution) may be primarily expressive in one setting or for a given individual but may be primarily instrumental in another setting or for another individual. Similarly, a specific act, such as making a contribution, may be primarily passive in one setting and primarily active in another.

A drawback of the type of map shown in Figure 1 is that it cannot be used for more than three, or possibly four, dimensions at one time. If one should try to draw a map that would categorize acts on nine dimensions at once, it would become so complicated and cumbersome as to lose all its utility. If, however, one can focus on a given act, he might turn to the profile method used by psychologists to summarize personality traits. A sample profile showing how a specific political act (making a monetary contribution to a party) might be sketched is shown in Figure 2. Although more information about a given political act is shown in such a profile than in the abstract map shown in Figure 1, the profile makes an assumption that is difficult to sustain. It assumes that the distance between the two extremes of a dimension can be measured and quantified, thereby enabling the assignment of a midpoint between them. In many cases, this assumption cannot be met. Certain dimensions (e.g., input-outtake) should more accurately be called categories, because there is no quantifiable distance between them. For other dimensions, political science has no reliable yardstick showing

equal distance between units. Since the quantifiability assumption can be met only poorly or not at all for certain dimensions, such a profile may imply more precision than really exists.

The summarizing methods illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 have greater utility, at this point, for thinking about political behavior than for measuring it. They alert us to dimensions that may be overlooked in research. The reader will note as we report findings in subsequent chapters that most of these dimensions have been overlooked in research to date. In fact, a good deal of the research on political behavior has, so far, focused on a single active input: voting. Almost no attention has been given to outtakes. The discussion that follows focuses on the general active-inactive dimension (active inputs, to be more accurate) for two reasons: (1) it is a more general dimension than the subdimensions just discussed; (2) most research to date has asked simply whether a given active input occurred or not. A more elaborate dimensional framework would have no corresponding data to report.

#### THE GENERAL DIMENSION OF INVOLVEMENT

Political activity seems to have a patterning or clustering characteristic. This seems to be true in two senses: (1) variables that correlate with a specific political act tend to correlate with other political acts as well; (2) there seems to be a hierarchy of political involvement, in that persons at a given level of involvement tend to perform many of the same acts, including those performed by persons at lower levels of involvement. Each of these points is discussed in turn.

A broad generalization about political participation, which is widely supported in research findings, is that the same independent variables are related to a variety of political acts (Campbell, et al., 1960; Lane, 1959; Lazarsfeld, et al., 1944; Milbrath, 1960b; Milbrath & Klein, 1962; Pesonen, 1960; Pesonen, 1961; Rokkan, 1959; Rokkan & Campbell, 1960; Scheuch, 1961; Valen, 1961). For example, **higher socioeconomic status (SES) is positively associated with increased likelihood of participation in many different political acts; higher SES persons are more likely to vote, attend meetings,**

**join a party, campaign, and so forth.**<sup>4</sup> There are some minor exceptions to the above generalization, but the repetitiveness with which a given independent variable correlates significantly with different political acts is impressive.

In addition to the above, research findings show that variables which are associated with political activity also are associated with nonpolitical community activity. Furthermore, **persons who are active in community affairs are much more likely than those not active to participate in politics.**<sup>5</sup> A comparative survey of five countries shows that in the United States and Great Britain, where levels of political participation are higher than in Germany, Italy, and Mexico, there is also a much higher level of social and organizational activity (Almond & Verba, 1963, ch. 10). This same study shows that participation in decisions in nonpolitical organizations is cumulative: persons participating in decisions in one organization are very likely to participate in decisions in other organizations as well. This pattern of behavior carries over to politics (p. 366). This evidence suggests that political participation can be thought of as a special case of general participation in social and community activities. Not everyone who is active socially is likely to become active in politics, but *it is probably easier for a person who enjoys social activity to enter politics than it is for a person who shuns social and community participation* (Milbrath, 1960b; Milbrath & Klein, 1962).

Political participation is often spoken of as being cumulative; persons who engage in one political action often engage in others as well. Figure 3 shows a hierarchical ranking of behaviors; with those most often engaged in at the bottom, and those least often engaged in at the top. The cumulative characteristic arises from the fact that persons who engage

<sup>4</sup> See Chapter V for a more complete discussion and citations of evidence.

<sup>5</sup> Agger & Goldrich (1958); Allardt (1962); Allardt, et al. (1958); Allardt & Pesonen (1960); Birch (1950); Buchanan (1956); Campbell (1962); Campbell & Kahn (1952); Coser (1951); Dahl (1961); Dogan (1961); Hastings (1954); Jensen (1960); Lane (1959); McClosky & Dahlgren (1959); Marvick & Nixon (1961); Milbrath & Klein (1962); Rokkan (1959); Rosenberg (1954-1955). Lipset (1960b, p. 67) has cited nine studies in five countries supporting this proposition.