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POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

How and Why Do People
Get Involved in Politics?

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LESTER W. MILBRATH

State University of New York at Buffalo

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POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND CONSTITUTIONAL DEMOCRACY

MOST AMERICANS have been told, and have come to believe by the time they reach adulthood, that in order for democracy to flourish, it is essential for citizens to be interested in, informed about, and active in politics. If democracy is going to be rule "of the people, by the people, and for the people," the people, by definition, must be interested and active. Many citizens believe that a decision made by all the people is better than a decision made by only part of the people. When only part of the people participate, the government is likely to be directed so as to violate the interests of the nonparticipants. Disinterest and apathy are not approved because, should they become widespread, power could easily be usurped and the quality of government seriously decline. An important preventive is to have a societal norm proclaiming a duty for all citizens to be interested, informed, and active.

It should be obvious from reading the foregoing pages that very few United States citizens measure up to that prescription. Although the data are not quite so good for other countries, those we do have suggest that very few persons living in Western democracies measure up to it either. Is there reason, then, to fear for the future of democracy? This question has received a good deal of attention by some eminent political scientists in recent years. (Almond & Verba, 1963, Ch. 15; Berelson, 1952; Berelson, et al., 1954, Ch. 14; Campbell, et al., 1960, Ch. 20; Dahl, 1954; Dahl, 1961, Bk VI; Duncan & Lukes, 1963; Eckstein, 1961; Key, 1961, Ch. 21; Lane,

1959, Ch. 22; Lane, 1962; Lipset, 1960b, Ch. 13; McClosky, 1964; Prothro & Grigg, 1960). Although these scholars are not in total agreement in their analyses, none expresses great concern about the future of democracy. One reason for this lack of intense concern is that these scholars are confronted by evidence from many societies, accumulated over a considerable period of time, that, despite the low level of political interest and activity, democratic governments continue to flourish and provide reasonably satisfactory governance for their citizens.

In reconciling the fact of low participation with the fact of adequately functioning democracies, political scientists have enlarged their understanding of the political process and of the role of the average citizen in that process. The role of the citizen has evolved into something different from that envisaged by classical democratic theorists such as John Locke. He had in mind a small homogeneous society where most persons were engaged in primary economic activities (agriculture, forestry, fishing, and the like) and where any average man was considered qualified to hold public office and to resolve public issues (which usually were much simpler than those confronting society today). Each man was expected to take an active role in public affairs.

Modern society, in contrast, has evolved a very high division of labor, not only in the economic sector but also in politics and government. Political roles have become highly differentiated and specialized. This enables some men (elected and appointed officials) to devote their full attention to the complex public issues facing modern society. This division of labor allows other men (most of the citizens) to pay relatively little attention to public affairs. Politics and government are a peripheral rather than a central concern in the lives of most citizens in modern Western societies. As long as public officials perform their tasks well, most citizens seem content not to become involved in politics.

The fact of indifference to politics by many citizens should not be taken to mean that government would function well if citizens ignored it completely. In order to keep public actions responsive to the wishes and desires of the people,

citizens must at least participate in the choice of their public officials. The institutions of modern democracies have so evolved that policy leadership is left in the hands of elected officials who at periodic intervals go before the people at an election to see which of two or more competing elites will have policy leadership in the next ensuing period. Both the leaders and the public acknowledge the essentiality of this electoral link between the public and its governing elite.

The burden upon the citizen is much less if he is called upon only to select who his rulers will be than if he is asked to decide the pros and cons of an abstract policy. Furthermore, choices of public officials confront the citizen only at periodic elections, thus taking very little of his time. Society has evolved helpful mechanisms, called political parties, to simplify further the choice between alternative sets of public officials. Instead of having to become informed about a number of individual candidates, the citizen can manage simply by knowing the record and reputation of the political parties under whose labels the candidates run. Parties also are helpful in calling the voter's attention to the failures of the opposition party and to their own successes. The citizen does not need to dig for information, it is literally thrust at him.

Another device for keeping public officials responsive to the people is to require and insure open channels of communication, so that citizens who so wish can be heard or consulted when public officials are making policy decisions. In part, this is achieved by constitutional provisions for freedom of speech, press, assembly, and petition. Society also has evolved social institutions, such as interest groups and the mass media, which keep citizens informed of what public officials are doing and public officials informed of what citizens want. The fact that top officials are placed there by election is very significant in insuring that channels of communication stay open between the public and their leaders. If an official should refuse to listen (thus closing the channel), he would probably pay for his folly by losing his position at the next election.

As we think about the role of the average citizen, then, we should not expect him to give a lot of attention to, and be

active in resolving, issues of public policy. Nor should we expect him to stand up and be counted on every issue that comes along. The most we can expect is that he will participate in the choice of decision-makers and that he will ask to be heard if an issue comes along that greatly concerns him or on which he can make some special contribution. Many citizens do not even vote or speak up on issues, yet their passive role has the consequence of accepting things as they are. Indeed, it is impossible to escape at least a passive role in the choice of decision-makers. The choice process can proceed and government can continue to function even if many citizens choose to be so inactive as to fail to vote.

In evaluating citizen roles, we should keep in mind that citizens play two roles at once. At the same time that they try to make the government respond to their wishes, citizens also must play the role of obedient subjects of the regime under which they live. The participant and subject roles pull in opposite directions, and it is important that they be kept in balance. It is difficult for a compliant subject also to question the performance of his rulers and to try to influence their policy decisions. Similarly, it is difficult for a very active and intense participant in politics to subject himself readily to every policy and law decided on by the government. Most citizens work out a balance between the two roles in their daily lives, although there are individual differences in emphasis; some lean more toward the subject role, and others lean more toward the participant role. The moderately active, rather than the highly active person is more likely to achieve satisfaction in balancing the two roles.¹

A similar type of balance needs to be achieved at the system level, too. We want a government that is responsive to the wishes of the people but, at the same time, we want an effective government that is able to carry policies through to completion. There is a high probability of conflict between these two objectives. A government overly responsive to every whim of the public cannot pursue a consistent policy. The Fourth French Republic, which saw twenty changes of government in the twelve years following World War II, is

¹ Much of this argument is indebted to Almond & Verba (1963).

a good example of a government made ineffective by responding too readily to every fluctuation in public opinion. Conversely, a government which pursued a given program without paying any attention to the wishes and desires of the public would be thought of as autocratic and unsatisfactory. Most dictatorships are in this latter category. In maintaining a balance between responsiveness and the power to act, the system is aided by the efforts of individual citizens to balance their participant and subject roles. As subjects, they tend to allow a government to develop and pursue a policy for a certain period before passing judgment. As participants, they scrutinize the actions of officials, communicate their policy desires to the officials, and prepare to replace them with other officials if they do not perform adequately. The system balance is further aided by the fact that some individuals prefer to emphasize the role of subject, while others prefer to emphasize the role of participant. If everyone were highly active in politics, or if everyone were passively obedient, it would be more difficult to maintain system balance between responsiveness and power to act.

Moderate levels of participation help societies find another type of balance, that between consensus and cleavage.² It is in the very nature of politics that disputes will arise concerning issues and candidates, thus producing cleavages in the society. These must be bridged in some manner, however, if the society is to cohere and function adequately. Agreement on some larger principle, even though it is vague and platitudinous, often helps to bridge a cleavage.³ Resolution of a conflict by peaceful means, such as an election, facilitates movement toward consensus. The important point here is that societies having large numbers of people who are intensely interested and active in politics (it is virtually impossible to have high activity without intense interest) tend to have wide and deep cleavages that are very difficult to bridge. A current example is the controversy over civil rights in the

² Berelson (1952) and Almond & Verba (1963) have made this point.

³ McClosky (1964) has argued that agreement on large abstract principles is functional for political society, even if there is little agreement on specific applications of those principles.

American South. The intense feelings on both sides of that issue have assuredly stimulated active participation in politics by many who were formerly apathetic, but their political activities have also served to deepen the cleavage between the contending forces, making consensus increasingly remote. It is much easier to forget about past disputes or to take a broad perspective on present ones if those disputes are not considered vital by the participants. It is paradoxical that the kind of issue that stimulates widespread participation in politics is also the kind of issue likely to create wide cleavages in society.

Although it must be conceded that governments continue to function adequately with moderate to low levels of participation in politics, would they function even better if many more people became highly active? Although it can be argued that participation in politics develops character,⁴ there is doubt that the society as a whole would benefit if intense interest and active involvement in politics became widespread throughout the population.

We would expect to find, in a society where most adults are intensely interested and involved in politics, that political concerns have moved from the periphery to the center of life interests for most persons. Probably most social relationships, in such a society, would become politicized. Some of the new African one-party states, Ghana, for example, are characterized by high politicization of social relationships. In a highly politicized society, political considerations determine a person's opportunities for education, for a job, for advancement on the job, for a place to live, for goods to enjoy. Furthermore, politics determines the thoughts a citizen can express, the religion he follows, his chances for justice. Such a permeation of politics into all aspects of life is antithetical to the basic principle of limited government in a constitutional democracy. There is a consensus in limited constitutional democracies that all the relationships (areas of life) mentioned above are out of bounds to politics.

If societies could be arrayed along a continuum according

⁴ Duncan & Lukes (1963) have cited this as a reason for holding to high participation as a democratic norm.

to the level of politicization of relationships, at the one extreme all social relationships in the society would be politicized; at the opposite extreme, none of them would be. It is difficult to imagine societies being on either extreme, but some examples come to mind that lean strongly toward extremes. Life in medieval Europe, with its fixed class divisions, hereditary rulers, and prescriptive norms for every aspect of social relationships, is an example of a society close to the nonpoliticized extreme. Some politics-like choices were made in the governing hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church and also within the courts of princes and kings, but so many human relationships were prescribed by customs, norms, and rules that only a small area of life was left open to political choice-making.

Approaching the highly politicized extreme are several new one-party states in Africa and the one-party Communist states of eastern Europe. A few areas of life are not politicized in these societies, especially relationships governed by tradition, but even these are under assault by forces bent on sweeping away the old order and using political passions as a weapon. Limited constitutional democracies, on the other hand, tend to be only moderately politicized. Citizens in these societies expect politicization of some aspects of life, such as decisions about land, resources, goods, and services held in common. By mutual consent, however, other areas are outside politics. In the five-nation study, about 90 per cent of respondents in Great Britain and the United States said it would make no difference if their child married a supporter of the opposition party. They are "saying, in effect, that personal relationships ought to be governed by values other than political ones. The family ought not to be allowed to be divided by partisan considerations" (Almond & Verba, 1963, p. 297). Sometimes the boundaries between political and nonpolitical areas are spelled out in written constitutions (e.g., the freedom of speech and freedom of religion guarantees in the Bill of Rights); sometimes they are arrived at by common consent and tradition (e.g., parents have the primary right and responsibility in the bringing up of their children).

Knowing the boundaries of politics is basic to the ability

of citizens to discriminate legitimate from illegitimate actions by their rulers. Being able to discriminate legitimate from illegitimate actions is, in turn, basic to the ability of a body politic to act in concert to forestall tyrannous actions by their rulers. The social wisdom which enables a body politic to discriminate areas rightfully governed by politics from areas rightfully outside politics has evolved slowly and painfully over many centuries in Western society. Such boundaries would be difficult to maintain if a high percentage of citizens should become intensely interested and involved in politics. A study of participation rates and of the factors stimulating participation suggests that there is little likelihood that intense political interest and involvement will develop so long as government functions adequately, enabling citizens to keep politics as a peripheral concern in their lives.

The point that high levels of political interest and participation may not be beneficial to constitutional democracy should not be taken to mean that moderate levels of participation automatically guarantee the maintenance of constitutional democracy. A special burden of responsibility for the maintenance of the system rests on the shoulders of the political elites. If these elites are to perform their roles adequately, it is important that they array themselves into two or more competing groups (usually called political parties). As these elites compete for the support of the voters, they perform functions of vigil and criticism *vis-à-vis* their opponents that moderately interested and active citizens might not perform for themselves. Partisan criticism functions best if it is tempered by the realization that after the next election the elite currently in the role of critic may be called upon to govern. This tempered criticism not only gives the party in power a chance to carry a program through to completion and stand responsible for it, but it also enables bridging of cleavages and helps maintain over-all coherence of the society.

Several conditions are critical to the adequate functioning of a system of competitive elites in a constitutional democracy.⁵ It is important that the elites be committed to democratic values and believe in the rules of the game. It must be

⁵This section is largely indebted to Key (1961, Ch. 21).

taken for granted, for example, that the elites will compete for mass support and that expression of that support in an election will determine which elite will rule for the ensuing period. Several bits of research suggest that participation in politics builds a commitment to democratic values and that elites are much more likely to understand and adhere to specific applications of general democratic principles than are average citizens (Almond & Verba, 1963; McClosky, 1964; Prothro & Grigg, 1960). An elite in power must have a live-and-let-live policy *vis-à-vis* its opponents out of power; elite political actors should be gladiators but not revolutionaries. Property rights may be important to insure that opponents out of power have some way to support themselves until they can regain power. From another perspective, no elite will readily relinquish power, should it be defeated in an election, if it has no alternative base of economic support. That base might be income-earning property, practice of a profession, jobs in industry not controlled by the government, and so forth. An elite also will be reluctant to relinquish power if it is convinced that its opponents will destroy the group, perhaps by imprisonment or other harassment, once the opponents have been given power.

In order that the interests of all sectors of society be adequately taken care of by the government, it is important that each elite recruit from many sectors of society. An elite from a single class or group would have difficulty gaining the confidence of the people, and competitive elites would be reluctant to entrust it with the reins of power. New recruits should have easy access to the center of power in the elite to prevent the inner group from getting out of touch with the people. It is vital that the recruits be socialized to elite norms and customs, especially basic democratic principles and the rules of the political game.

The system demands much less from the political beliefs and behavior of the mass of the citizens than from the elites. To perform its role, the attentive public must believe in the right of the public to watch and to criticize the behavior of the elites. It also needs a minimal sense of involvement in

public matters and a sense of loyalty to the whole community rather than to only a segment of the society. It must perform the minimal chore of selecting among the elites at election time. This low level of attention and control by the mass of the public leaves a wide latitude to the elected elite for creative leadership.

Although we expect only this minimal surveillance by the public and their participation in the choice of elites, is even this effort too much to expect? What is to prevent a society from becoming widely apathetic and allowing an unscrupulous elite to destroy the chances for an opposing group to compete fairly? In the final analysis, there is no iron-clad guarantee that this will not happen; eternal vigilance is still the price of liberty. Careful training of elite members in the norms and rules of democratic politics is one insurance against such an eventuality. Another is the outcry from the opposing group against the tactics of the party in power. This outcry has meaning, however, only if the public is listening, understands, and responds decisively.

In order for the public to respond adequately to dangers to their political system, it is essential that the system be kept open. There are two aspects to this openness. First, the communications network which provides the major linkage between actors in the political system must be kept open. Further, this network should carry a fairly high level of political content so that actors can, with minimum effort, find out what is going on in politics and government at any time. Lack of an open communications network would make it easier for an unscrupulous elite to subvert democracy. Almost the first act of elites seizing power by *coup d'état* is to grasp control of the communications system.

Secondly, the system should be kept open so that any citizen who so chooses can readily become active in politics at any time. Conversely, gladiators should be able to retire from politics readily and gracefully whenever they choose. This is important not only in circulating and replenishing elite memberships but also to the proper role behavior of gladiators, spectators, and apathetics. The potentiality that

apathetics may become spectators and that spectators may become gladiators is an important property of the system confining and controlling the behavior of political elites.

A good deal of citizen influence over governmental elites may entail no activity or even conscious intent of citizens. On the contrary, elites may anticipate possible demands and activities and act in response to what they anticipate. They act responsively, not because citizens are actively making demands, but in order to keep them from becoming active (Almond & Verba, 1963, p. 487).

In this respect, it is important to continue moral admonishment for citizens to become active in politics, not because we want or expect great masses of them to become active, but rather because the admonishment helps keep the system open and sustains a belief in the right of all to participate, which is an important norm governing the behavior of political elites.

The democratic myth of citizen competence... has significant consequences. For one thing, it is not pure myth: the belief in the influence potential of the average man has some truth to it and does indicate real behavioral potential. And whether true or not, the myth is believed (Almond & Verba, 1963, p. 487).

It is a curious social fact that a norm, such as that which says citizens should be interested and active in politics, which is violated wholesale, still can be an important ingredient in the functioning of the political system. Should that norm wither or vanish, it would be much easier for unscrupulous elites to seize power and tyrannize ordinary citizens. Elites believing in that norm are more likely to welcome new recruits, are more likely to relinquish office easily when defeated in an election, are more likely to try to inform and educate their followers, are more likely to keep communication channels open and listen to the desires of the people, than are elites not believing in that norm. Perhaps one of the reasons the norm remains viable is that elites realize a decline of the norm