RECONCEPTUALISING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION¹

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Abstract: This article offers a critical examination of various interpretations of “political participation” and shows that there is a lack of consensus among scholars concerning the definition of this particular concept. The lack of consensus has led to various conflicting outcomes (even when applied to the same problem) in the research on political participation. The main purpose of this paper is to offer a new definition of political participation that effectively addresses the challenges facing modern civil societies and the emerging era of Web 3.0. The present study argues that “civic engagement” should be differentiated from political participation such that the former is not counted as part of the latter; civic engagement fosters political participation and refers entirely to social activities. Moreover, I argue that online political actions should be accepted as an integral part of political participation if they fulfil all of the criteria of the phenomenon as defined in this article.

Key words: political participation; civic engagement

Introduction

Political participation has been the focus of attention in recent studies on the political behaviour of citizens, democratic legitimacy, “democratic functioning along with the rise of populist sentiment” (Oser & Hooghe, 2018, p. 711), civil society, and the electronic revolution. Political participation is important for democratic legitimation (Johnson, 2015, pp. 765-766, p. 769), as it lies at “the heart of modern democracy” (Eder & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2017) and “civil society, and without it there can be no effective democracy” (Whiteley, 2012, p. 34). Political participation is believed not only to *revitalise* democracy, but also to lead to accountability, human development, and balanced socio-economic growth (Brodie, Cowling, Nissen, Paine, Jochum, & Warburton, 2009, p. 6; Ivaldi, Bonatti, & Soliani, 2017, p. 605).

However, the wide variety of definitions of political participation has led to divergent research outcomes, including those that count non-political civic engagements as political participation. For example, in some studies, “wearing a badge or sticker” (Oser & Hooghe, 2018, p. 718), “attend[ing] a civic forum, [and] sign[ing] up to follow a politician”

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(Yamamoto & Nah, 2018, p. 2076) are considered political participation and measured along with more clearly defined political actions. Henn, Oldfield, and Hart (2018, p. 721) even included certain social activities, such as “be[ing] active in a voluntary organization, like a community association, charity group, or a sports club” and “discuss[ing] politics with family or friends”, as non-institutionalised political actions. Similarly, Kilybayeva, Nassimova, and Massalimova (2017, p. 65) considered the following activities to be political participation in their research: discussing political issues with family and friends, “young people’s interest and attention regarding politics”, young people’s opinion that politics is important, reading and watching the news, and “civic participation (volunteering, charity, etc.)”. Strömbäck, Falasca, and Kruikemeier (2018, p. 432) asked their respondents whether they “visit a website of a political party/youth organization”, “read a blog about politics and society”, “comment on or discuss issues related to politics and society online”, and “follow any politician or political party via Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram”, all of which they presented as forms of online political participation. Numerous additional research studies consider social activities to be political participation. If one counts watching the news or reading political blogs as political participation, then one can say that the vast majority of people participate in politics. But this is not entirely accurate. As a result, the misuse of the concept of political participation has led to various studies having exaggerated outcomes, including studies that have investigated the effects of some independent variables, such as social media and the Internet.

The concept of *participation* has been extensively used with a broad range of meanings in various fields, ranging from politics to communication and media (Brodie et al., 2009, pp. 4, 12; Carpentier, 2011). According to Livingstone (2013, p. 24), participation means taking part in something and “it is important to identify what that *something* [italics added] is”. Deth (1986, p. 262; 2001, p. 8) defines political participation as “taking part” in politics.

But what does “political participation” mean in the contemporary world of media and civil societies? In recent decades, many changes in societies have led to new forms of political participation, particularly the advent of new media such as social media. Many of these changes have been amplified by the development of civil societies. Thus, this paper analyses the use of the concept of political participation in both classical works and recent studies in order to develop an accurate and useful definition, taking into consideration the effects of digital media and modern civil societies.

Almond and Verba’s (1963) work focuses on the political orientations of mass populations, identifying three political cultures: (1) political “sleepwalkers” (*parochial*), (2) those who are aware of politics, but who do not act to change it (*subject*), and (3) active citizens who are aware of politics and attempt to affect the ongoing political process (*participant*). Almond and Verba (1963, pp. 22, 341) claim that *civic culture* is a mixture of these three political cultures and mediates the political system. Civic culture ensures democratic endurance and underlines the importance of citizens’ political orientations. Therefore participatory democracy “remains very much an open and live question” (Pateman, 1970, p. 102). Dahlgren (2009, p. 201) calls for a “reformation of democracy, enabling it to function better in a world shaped by globalization and new electronic media”, which he argues will lead to a new civic culture. Coleman and Blumler (2009, p. 166) propose the creation of a new *civic commons* in cyberspace, arguing that “democracy is in

trouble and the Internet possesses vulnerable potential to improve public communication". They claim that the civic potential of the Internet "is vulnerable mainly because an infrastructure for its proper realization is lacking" (Coleman & Blumler, 2009, p. 67).

Various definitions and approaches to "political participation"

There has been a dramatic increase in research on political participation since the mid-twentieth century, covering topics from voting and campaigning to protests and social movements (Deth, 2001, pp. 5-6). The term *political participation* has had various meanings, covering many societal changes over time. As a result, different definitions of political participation have emerged and been discussed over the past decades.

Verba, Scholzman and Brady's (1995, p. 9) definition is a traditional one in the field, and defines political participation as an "activity that is intended to or has the consequence of affecting, either directly or indirectly, government action". Many scholarly works (e.g. Chae, Lee, & Kim, 2019, p. 39; Towner & Muñoz, 2018, p. 35) since have adopted this definition. Four years after Verba and colleagues' study, Henry Brady characterised political participation as "action by ordinary citizens directed toward influencing some political outcomes" (Brady 1999, p. 737). What we may infer from this definition is that there are three components of political participation. Firstly, there must be an *action* or *activity* that citizens take part in, possibly even including their *behaviour*. Secondly, the term "ordinary citizens" refers to individual private citizens, not elites or people in power. Thirdly, political participation occurs when an action is aimed at influencing people in power and some of their policies that concern public issues. In other words, political participation takes place when an ordinary citizen concerned about public issue/s takes an action to influence some policies of the people in power.

However, both Verba et al. (1995) and Brady's (1999) concepts are insufficient because they do not differentiate between civic engagement and political participation, are limited in terms of the targets of political actions and because "some political outcomes" is not a clear phrase. Also scholars tend to define political participation in different ways due to the lack of consensus on the theoretical and methodological frameworks used in relation to this phenomenon. Some scholars (e.g. Huntington & Nelson, 1976, p. 4; Parry, Moyser, & Day 1992, p. 16; Verba et al. 1995, p. 37) accept political participation as the activities of citizens that intend to influence the decision-making of public officials. This view explains political participation as the actions of citizens aimed at influencing government policies and structures, crucially through elections. Traditionally, voting is considered the most common form of political participation in liberal democracies. Pippa Norris (2002, p. 16) largely agrees with the above definition, expanding it to include "any dimensions of activity that are either designed directly ... or indirectly to impact civil society, or which attempt to alter systematic patterns of social behavior". Norris (2000, p. 311) argues that in Europe and the United States, because of a "virtuous circle", attention to the news media gradually reinforces civic engagement, just as civic engagement prompts attention to the news". Other scholars have further enlarged the concept to encompass "civil" activities such as volunteering and social engagement (Putnam, 2000, as cited in Deth, 2001, p. 6). Since the late 20th century, the range of activities considered to be political participation has

expanded, to almost 70 types of activities (Deth, 2001, p. 7). In a similar vein, Wajzer (2015, pp. 8, 12) when discussing the problems of conceptualising political participation points out that political participation has become a catch-all term, as many scholars use the concept of “social participation” as a synonym for the concept of political participation, “if not entirely, then at least in part”. He claims that this is due to the lack of “consensus among researchers about the content and scope of this concept”.

Verba and Nie (1987, pp. 52-54) distinguish four main types of political participation: voting, campaign activity, citizen-initiated contacts, and cooperative activities. In their interesting study, Parry et al. (1992, pp. 51-53) suggest six main types of political participation: voting, party campaigning, contacting, collective action, direct action, and political violence. Teorell, Torcal, and Montero (2007, pp. 340-341) characterise five main types of political participation: electoral participation, party activities (e.g. party membership, donating money to a party), protest activities such as participation in strikes and demonstrations, contact activities (e.g. contacting organisations, public officials, and politicians), and consumer participation (e.g. political consumption, signing petitions, donating money, and boycotting). Some scholars, such as Ekman and Amnå (2012, p. 292) and Opp et al. (1981, as cited in Goroshit, 2016, p. 27), distinguish between “formal” or “informal” and “legal” or “illegal” political participation, while others (e.g. Deth 2001, p. 14; Lamprianou, 2013, pp. 25-27; Saunders, 2014) group it as “conventional” or “unconventional”. When dividing political participation into distinct groups, many scholars characterise voting, participation in election campaigns, becoming a party member, contacting officials, and other traditional and lawful political actions as “legal”, “formal” or “conventional” forms of political participation. Research on political participation since the 1970s has often distinguished political protests, social movements, and demonstrations as “unconventional” or “informal” forms of political actions (Deth 2001, p. 6).

Nevertheless, these distinctions have already been contested by some scholars. For example, Lamprianou (2013, p. 27) argues that the categorisation of political participation as conventional/formal and unconventional/informal is “outdated and needs to be radically redefined” due to new modes of political participation; signing a petition or taking part in demonstrations “have increasingly become acceptable—and definitely much more widespread across the political spectrum”. Moreover, some researchers have gone beyond the aforementioned classification system and proposed new forms of political participation. For instance, barricading a community is considered “elite-challenging” (Marsh, 1990, as cited in Lamprianou, 2013, p. 25), while shooting at police officers is described as “unorthodox” (Bourne, 2010, as cited in Lamprianou, 2013, pp. 26-27), and electronic dance music culture is characterised as “alternative participation” (Rilley et al., 2010, as cited in Lamprianou, 2013, pp. 26-27).

Recent developments in the field of modern technology (e.g. social media) have led to a renewed interest in political participation and the construction of two distinct forms—“online” and “offline” political participation. Salovaara (2015, p. 164) asserts that new media technologies are causing significant changes “not only in political communication, but also in the social, political, and participatory experiences of communities”. The coloured revolutions, for instance, were orchestrated through new media as a way of criticising and deposing leaders of “authoritarian” governments as well as promoting democracy through direct actions (Lane, 2009, pp. 114, 131).

Towards a new definition of “political participation”

Taking into account the various descriptions of political participation, one can state that political participation is a variable phenomenon that changes over time and space. We can observe that many forms of political action—ranging from voting and political campaigning to protests and social movements (Deth, 2001, p. 6), and even “civic” activities—have been defined as political participation. Considering the lack of consensus among scholars on what constitutes political participation as well as recent developments in new media and modern civil societies, the following definition of *political participation* is developed in this article:

Political participation is any action by citizens that is intended to influence the outcomes of political institutions or their structures, and is fostered by civic engagement.

This definition is a reworking of Brady’s (1999, p. 737), which is outdated. First, in this new definition, *any online or offline activities* are considered political participation if they are an attempt to affect the outcomes of political institutions or their structures.

Second, the main actor of political participation is the *citizen*. We are interested in the participatory characteristics of ordinary people with no political posts rather than people who specifically seek political power.

Third, in both online and offline actions there must be an *intention* to influence the outcomes of political institutions or their structures. This means the outcomes might be both positive and negative. However, one of the main attributes of any political action is that it attempts to influence political outcomes, whatever the modes and techniques applied.

Fourth, the definition restricts political participation to actions devoted to influencing the *outcomes of political institutions or their structures*, whereas civic engagement need not have this aim. For example, cleaning up a neighbourhood park cannot and should not be classified as political participation; it is civic engagement. The previous definitions of political participation mainly considered the government and decision-making by public officials to be targets of political participation, which does not seem to hold true in the context of contemporary civil societies. Therefore, the government, and all political institutions and their structures, should be described as targets of political participation.

Finally, the definition differentiates political participation from *civic engagement*. Although both concepts are multifaceted, there is “a clear distinction between manifest political participation” ... and less direct or “latent” forms of participation, conceptualized ... as “civic engagement”, which “is crucial to understand new forms of political behaviour and the prospects for political participation” (Ekman & Amnå 2012, p. 283). Otherwise, the study of political participation could mean studying every action, both online and offline, without distinction, as Deth (2001, p. 4) characterised it.

Let us consider the following examples to further our understanding of what political participation means in this article:

- If one attends a political rally or contacts people in power through online platforms regarding a public matter, then these actions should be considered *political participation* because in both cases the intention is to influence the outcomes of political institutions or their structures;

- *Liking* and/or sharing an online political post with friends on social media shall be regarded as *civic engagement* rather than political participation because there is no direct intention to influence the outcomes of political institutions or their structures. Liking and sharing posts provides information and promotes political behaviour or focuses public attention on certain issues. These kinds of actions should be considered examples of *civic engagement* unless the intention is to directly affect the outcomes of political institutions or their structures. We should not consider similar activities, such as merely joining a political group on Facebook, as political participation unless the aim is to influence the outcomes of political institutions or their structures; rather they should be viewed as *civic engagement* which may further encourage people to take part in political issues. Otherwise, this kind of engagement includes too wide a spectrum of activities, and if these activities are considered to be examples of political action, this may undermine the outcomes of research on political participation.
- Creating an account and/or uploading one's profile picture on social media are inert actions that are neither political nor civic participation because they have nothing to do with politics or civil society.

Conclusions

To conclude, the definition developed in this paper has a number of advantages over previous definitions. It not only differentiates between political participation and civic engagement, but also considers both offline and online actions to be political participation if the intention is to influence the outcomes of political institutions or their structures. As indicated by the final clause in the definition, civic engagement *fosters* political participation and is another concept that may promote the political actions of citizens. There is a linkage between these two concepts – civic engagement can be characterised as a likely precursor to political participation – but civic engagement is not aimed at influencing the outcomes of political institutions or their structures. If both civic engagement and political participation, and their relationship to one another, are not clearly defined, then the indications are that scholars tend to consider social activities as political actions in their investigations. Therefore, it is better to explicitly differentiate between political participation and civic engagement, as the definition presented in this paper does.

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