

# POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Political participation that is voluntary sets up some curious questions. Why people take part in the political arena at all when it is costly, time-consuming and requires long-term commitments, why some take part in political participation whereas others do not, and why certain types of political participation are preferred to others are all questions that have no set answers. Political participation then, is an undertaking that people commit to regardless of obstructions and inclinations towards more unpremeditated action that can yield immediate dividends.

## How? Modes of Political Participation

### Sites of Participation

Political participation takes place in different arenas and political contexts. People can be involved in (i) forum politics in the public arena via the community, in the streets or through the media to publicise and disseminate demands to those willing to listen; (ii) targeting policymakers in the legislative or executive branches with their communications and requests; (iii) choosing those who go on to policy-making roles in the legislature or executive branches. All these sites have different levels and intensities of involvement as one can move from sporadic and voluntary to consistent and elected participation.

The breadth of risk inherent to political participation depends on the political regime and climate in which it operates. The less liberal a regime is regarding people's freedom of political expression via organised action, the greater the risk and potential costs. This is true even if the political expression articulated is relatively restricted and mild. In contrast, in democracies, participating in communication with government officials and participating in nominating and choosing officials are low risk activities.

### Modes of Participation

**Social movements** are the mode of political participation that involves and utilises the public forum, of the community, the street, or the media to make policy demands of the government. There is no membership in official membership in social movements and there is no strongly articulated organisational structure.

**Interest groups** are the form of political participation that involves communicating with decision-makers in the legislature or executive branches directly to communicate preferable policy outcomes, demands and threats. Interest groups are centralised entities that have a formal membership scheme and regulations, with these features rendering them as distinct and preferable partners in policy making as opposed to more.

**Political parties** are the form of political participation that involves people in the electoral process of a country. Participants collaborate on nominating candidates for the legislature, help them campaign and build a supporter base, and work to maximise turnout for these candidates.

All of the above constitute the setting up of political parties without which isolated candidates cannot run for office successfully.

### **Why? Determinants of Political Participation**

Political engagement is not the only avenue available for people to have better life opportunities. They can rely on family and community associations or the market and often do. It is when these preliminary mechanisms of support fail to offer solutions that people turn to politics. As such, political participation is a last resort to affect a binding resolution on a given conflict.

The aim of much political participation is to provide collective goods to all, even those who had no part in their production. This is called the collective action paradox. If for instance, a person resolved to minimise costs of benefits and decided that others should bear the cost of production of the collective good, that becomes a free rider, no good may be produced at all. A solution to the free-rider problem is the offering of selective incentives that provide benefits to those who are best organised to provide a particular public good. All of this, however, must not take away from the possibility that some people participate in collective action considering it to be a reward in itself, or because the costs of participation are viewed as negligible.

### **When and Where? Macro-level Participation**

In democratic nations with electoral systems that regularly elect the legislature and executive branches to office through universal franchise, many avenues for political participation are available. Social movements, interest groups and political parties are all able to operate in these liberal, plural environments as they tend to be wealthier and possess more resources to encourage participation. In authoritarian regimes, the executive branch is all powerful and lies outside democratic accountability; however, they may allow some social movements, interests groups or political parties if elections are held. In extremely harsh, dictatorial regimes all political participation is restricted and monitored. They are restricted in that organised participation from below may be made impossible, and monitored in that top-down policies may make participation in state-run projects mandatory.

The particular political issue at stake can also direct the nature of political participation. Social movements generally crystallise around a single issue that people deem is important, but they lack structural coherence and hence longevity. Organising consistently around a set of closely related issues over time brings interest groups into existence. Political parties form when intricate, interconnected problems require coordinated, sustained problem-solving achieved through electing party officials to office.

## **Who? Micro-level Participation**

On an individual basis, people with more time, social connections, disposable income, and cognitive ability are more inclined to take part in politics than those with less resources.

Adapted from Herbert Kitschelt and Phillip Rehm, 'Political participation' in Daniele Caramani (ed), *Comparative Politics* (OUP 2020)

## **Further Reading**

Samuel H Barnes and Max Kaase, *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies* (Sage 1979)

Russell J Dalton, *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (6th edn, Chatham House Publishers/Seven Bridges Press 2013)

Arend Lijphart, 'Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma' (1997) 91 *American Political Science Review* 1, 14

Aboobacker Rameez, 'Political Participation of Women in Local Governance: A Case Study of Selected Local Government Bodies in Eastern Sri Lanka' (2018) 53 *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 1043, 1061

Celeste Koens and Samanthi J Gunawardana, 'A continuum of participation: rethinking Tamil women's political participation and agency in post-war Sri Lanka' (2021) 23 *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 463, 484