

Lecture I: Introduction to political participation and mass communications

1. What is political participation?

→ Political participation is a collection of actions and attitudes that seek to influence, directly and indirectly, the decisions of those who exercise power, and the decisions as to whom is to make decisions; political participation can take place legally or illegally, the borderline between legal and illegal activities been historically and culturally determined.

→ Two dimensions of political participation:

- **Instrumental participation:** my act of participation is aimed at achieving a certain outcome: therefore, I measure my involvement against the difference it can make in determining the goal I wish to obtain. *Free-rider problem:* why vote for a loser?
- **Expressive participation:** I participate to reaffirm my identity, my belonging to a group or an association, my ideas as to what “the Good society” should be like. Therefore, I do not take into account the extent to which my single act of participation actually contributes to the achieving of some goal.

→ Two meanings of the verb “to participate”:

- **To take part to something:** to contribute to a decision, to be actively involved, to bring a contribution, to exert influence.
- **To be part of something:** to adhere to a group, to provide consent, to identify with some people or ideas, to express (and enjoy)

→ A writing on the walls of *La Sorbonne* University (Paris):

“Je participe, tu participes, il participet, nous participons, vous participez, ils s’aprofitent.”

→ Participation is an activity that involves organization, authority, hierarchy, and belonging. Therefore, it is rarely “democratic” because groups are not democratic themselves. Most of participants participate in the second sense of the word (to be part of something), and only few are active participants (to take part to something).

2. How do people participate?

→ The means and instruments of political participation vary across space and time.

Some attempts at listing ways of political participation:

a. Milbrath, 1965:

- To expose oneself to political stimuli
- To vote
- To start a political discussion
- To try to persuade someone else to vote in a certain way
- To carry a political badge
- To be in contact with a political operative or manager
- To contribute money to a party or a candidate
- To take part to a rally or a public meeting
- To contribute one’s time to a political campaign
- To become an active member of a political party
- To take part to a meeting where political decisions are made
- To solicit financial contributions for political causes
- To become candidate for an elective office
- To occupy public or party office.

b. Verba, Nie, Kim, 1978

- To take part to electoral campaigns

- To collaborate to group activities
 - To vote
 - To make contacts with political managers and parties (both for personal and social problems)
- c. Barbagli e Macelli, 1985
- To spend time and work for a party
 - To go to see a political debate
 - To take part to a procession
 - To subscribe to a party
 - To give money to a party
 - To take part to a rally
 - To ask a politician for help with a personal or family problem
 - To send letters or formal complaints to public authorities
 - To try to convince other people to vote for a certain candidate
 - To try to convince other people to vote for a certain party
 - To sign a petition for a law or a proposition (*referendum*)
- d. Barnes, Kaase *et al.*, 1979
- To adhere to a boycott
 - To refuse to pay rent or tax
 - To occupy buildings and factories, to take part to a sit-in
 - To adhere to an illegal strike
 - To stop traffic with a demonstration

→ What do these definitions tell us?

- a. There are differences between countries: political participation in Italy seems to be more connected with the activities of the parties, while in the U.S. it owes more to personal initiative or to the activities of associations and other organized groups.
- b. Political participation does not include being informed about politics: political information is nevertheless a very important pre-condition to political participation, though it is related to other socio-economic variables.
- c. Voting is usually the form of political participation undertaken by most citizens, and often the *only* form of involvement in politics.
 - Voting has a limited impact on public policy.
 - Voting carries a limited amount of information (what did they vote for exactly? Party, candidate, public policies, ideology...)
- d. Nowadays, other forms of political participation, both orthodox and heterodox, are available. To name just a few:
 - To write an e-mail to a politician
 - To take part to a “round dance” (*girotondo*)
 - To stop trains that carry weapons
 - To call a campaign’s 800 number
 - To take part to an on line discussion
 - To inform other people about some facts that are not perfectly uncovered by the media (e.g. Weblogs)
 - To hang a “peace” flag outside one’s window (fashion or real involvement?)
 - ...

3. Who and why participates?

→ Political participation is positively related with SES (Socio Economic Status). This means that people who enjoy higher educations, higher income, higher social status, good occupational conditions, who live in urban areas and adhere to the dominant religious confession participate more and more actively in politics.

→ Political participation is elitist, and therefore the needs and demands that are carried forward do not represent those of all the population, but only of the groups of people who participate.

→ Why do people NOT participate, independently of their SES?

Verba, Scholzman and Brady, *The Civic Culture*:

- a. **I can't**: I do not have the time or the resources (both economic and cultural) required for political participation: SES-related explanation.
- b. **I don't want to**: I do not feel the need or the necessity for my participation: either I am fine with the *status quo* or I do not believe that my participation can really make a difference (*sense of efficacy*, highly dependent on the structure of the political system and regime).
- c. **I was never asked**: I would like to contribute, but I have not found any organization or operative that got me involved. Political participation can therefore be explained in light of two factors:
 - **Civic culture**: a disposition to serve and work for public goals which comes from social norms and individual sense of duty (but is created and sustained by and through organisations and organised groups).
 - **Recruiting structures** that provide organisational resources to make participation happen and at the same time reinforce the civic culture.
 - Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1830/60): the American society benefits from the presence and intense activity of organizations that are created to provide solutions to collective problems.
 - “Amoral familism” in Southern Italy.
 - Where is a “civic culture” in today’s Western societies?

4. Consequences of political participation

→ High political participation breeds satisfaction for democracy and the political system because it makes governments and representative institutions more accountable, i.e., more responsive to the problems of the citizens who participate.

→ High political participation breeds a reduction of inequalities: when participation is not just an elite activity, the needs and demands of the majority can be communicated and tackled by the government. Higher inequalities are found in countries where participation is lower and the elites face very little resistance to their desire of accumulating power and wealth.

5. Mass media and democracy: an introduction

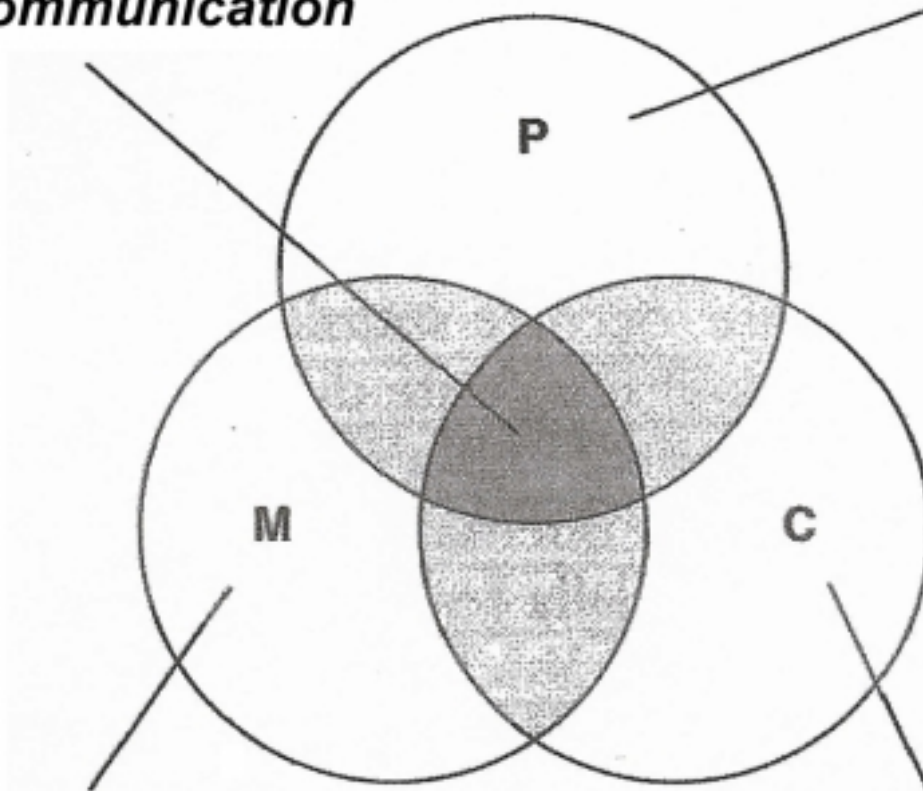
→ Centrality of the mass media in the political arena

- a. The media as a source of power
- b. The media as the “place” where many public events occur
- c. The media as a source of popular representations and meaning-making about the social and political reality
- d. The media as a source of publicity and popularity.

A publicistic-dialogic model of Democracy

Mediated political communication

Political system

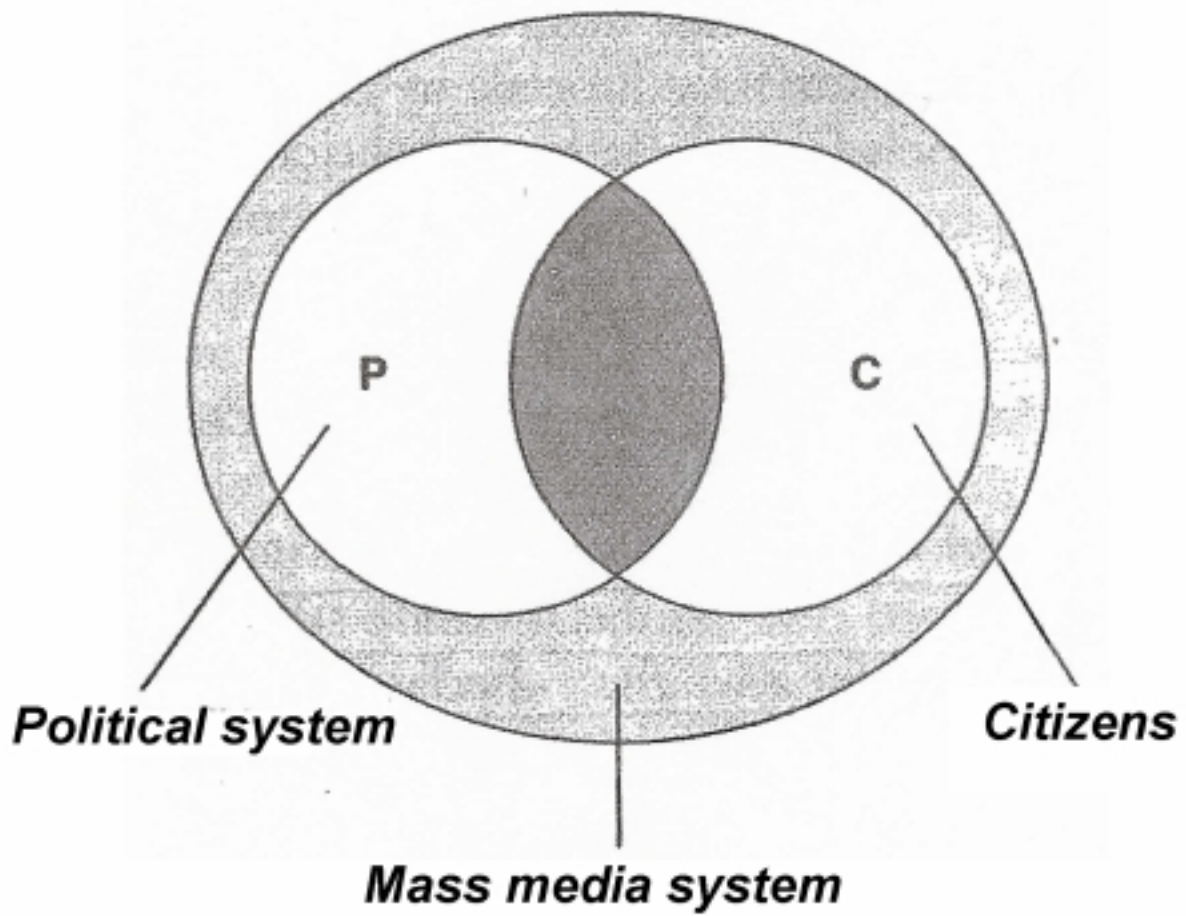


Mass media system

Citizens



A model of mediated Democracy



A typology of mass media effects

(McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction*, 1994)

→ 2 categories: time (short run vs. long run effects) and intentionality (intentional vs. unintentional effects)

