

Lecture II: Political Participation and Civic Engagement in the United States

Political Participation (Putnam, # 2)

- Political participation is a good yardstick of the quality and functioning of a democracy
- “With the single exception of voting, American rates of political participation compare favourably with those of other democracies”
 - But rates of political participation are worse than they used to be in the past.

→ U.S. Voting Turnout

- 1960 (Kennedy vs. Nixon): 62.8%
 - 1996 (Clinton vs. Dole): 48.9%
 - 2000 (Bush vs. Gore): 51.0%
 - 2002 (Congressional midterm elections at times of war): two-thirds of the electorate stayed home.
- This means that voting turnout has decreased by 25% over less than half a century.

→ But these data actually **underestimate** the real decline in Americans’ commitment to voting. In the past, voting used to be hampered by two **barriers**:

- 1) **Registration requirements** that have been greatly relaxed over the last four decades (“Motor Voter” Act through which voters can register directly at the voting booth).
- 2) **Disenfranchisement in the South**, especially for blacks (due to poll taxes, literacy tests, fraud and violence): thanks to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, millions of black voters in the South were able for the first time in the 20th century to vote.

→ “This influx of new voters partially masked the decline in turnout among the rest of the American electorate”

→ “Even facing a lower hurdle, fewer Americans are making the jump”.

→ Why so?

→ Key answer: **generational change**: “Virtually all the long-run decline in turnout is due to the gradual replacement of voters who came of age before the New Deal and World War II by the generations who came of age later”.

The boomers and especially their children (the X generation) are less interested in politics, less informed about politics, and less likely to participate in politics.

“Throughout their lives and whatever their status in life and their level of political interest, baby boomers and their children have been less likely to vote than their parents and grandparents. As boomers and their children became a larger and larger fraction of the national electorate, the average turnout rate was inevitably driven downward.”

→ Generational change (*intercohort*) is a long-run, fluid, and almost inexorable change if compared to *intracohort* change: if people from different generations have different attitudes and values, then society will change *even if no individual ever changes*.

- Example of intracohort change: SUV vehicles.
- Example of generational change: sexual mores.
- Example of both: adoption of new technologies implying both people changing their habits and younger people picking up new technologies easier and faster than old people.

→ What about Italy?

Generation effects have been detected with respect to voting behaviour:

- elderly: men equally likely to vote right or left, women more likely to vote right
- adults (35-60): more likely to vote left (the 1968 generation)
- young people (24-35): more likely to vote right
- youngest (18-24): more likely to vote left.

→ Why is the reduction of voters is important?

- 1) “Not to vote is to withdraw from the political community”
- 2) Though not a typical (or the only) mode of political participation, voting is positively correlated with other forms of political participation and civic engagement: “declining electoral participation is merely the most visible symptom of a broader disengagement from community life.”

→ Political information and interest in politics

American citizens know as much about politics as their grandparents did in the 1940s.

This despite the fact that “we are much better educated than our grandparents, and since civics knowledge is boosted by formal education, it is surprising that civics knowledge has not improved accordingly.”

This also despite the fact that sources of information have proliferated over the last half century (cable, satellite, the Internet). → But the increase of available political information has come together with an increase of media outlets and contents which actually displace politics from the choice of viewers/readers/surfers: **the costs of free choice.**

→ Overall, **Americans’ interest in politics has decreased by 20 percent** over the last 25 years. This is as well due to the generational effect mentioned above, and therefore the reduction is not linked to the fact that politics or the news about politics have become boring in an objective sense.

→ Voting and following politics are quite undemanding forms of political participation, and they do not require nor produce social capital, because they can be done by individuals alone.

→ Party organization and activities

- Party organizations are as strong as ever in the U.S. both at national and local level. They have become “bigger, richer, and more professional”.
- Party finance skyrocketed over the last two decades (2000 elections cost about 3 billion dollars). “The business of politics in America has never been healthier, or so it would seem”.
- But what about the consumers’ perspective?
- Party identification has fallen from 75% in 1960 to less than 65% in the 1990s.
- In the 2000 campaign, half the electorate could not see any difference in the parties’ agendas and proposed policies and in the parties’ ability to deal with the different issues.
- This is again mostly due to a generational effect, and so it is a trend that is bound to continue.
- Fewer and fewer Americans directly take part to party and campaign activities.

→ Paradox: “while the parties themselves are better financed and more professionally staffed than ever, fewer and fewer Americans participate in partisan political activities.”

→ Parties have changed the way in which they work and mobilize people: the number of people who report having been contacted by parties or party officials has grown steadily over the last three decades, while the number of people who report working for a party has decreased.

The dropout rate from campaign activities (50 percent) doubles the dropout rate from voting (25 percent).

→ “This trend is evidence of the professionalization and commercialisation of politics in America. The “contacts” that voters report are... less and less likely to be a visit from a neighbourhood party worker and more and more likely to be an anonymous call from a paid phone bank. Less and less party activity involves volunteer collaboration among committed partisans. More and more involves the skilled (and expensive) techniques of effective mass marketing.”

“While membership in a political club was cut in half between 1967 and 1987, the fraction of the public who contributed financially to a political campaign nearly doubled.”

→ **Financial capital has replaced social capital (and time) as the key resource for political mobilization.**

“If we think of politics as an industry, we might delight its new “labor-saving efficiency”, but if we think of politics as democratic deliberation, to leave people out is to miss the whole point of the exercise.”

→ **Campaigns have become a show and voters have become passive spectators rather than active participants.**

→ All other measures of participation in politics and civic life show a decline in the last four decades.

- People are 15% less likely to run for public office (including school boards, town councils, and so on). “Americans lost more than a quarter million candidates annually to choose among. It is impossible to know what price we paid collectively for the loss of these potential grassroots leaders – not only in terms of talent and creativity, but also in terms of competitive pressure on incumbent officeholders – but it is hard to believe that there was no loss at all.”
- The number of Americans who attended just one public meeting on town or school affairs in the previous years was cut by 40 percent.
- Public expression activities (signing a petitions, writing Congress, writing a letter to an editor, writing an article, giving a speech) have become less common over the last twenty years.
- “In round numbers every single percentage-point drop represents two million fewer Americans involved in some aspect of community life every year.”
- “In 1973 most Americans engaged in at least one of these forms of civic involvement every year. By 1994 *most did not engage in any*. Thirty-two million fewer American adults were involved in community affairs in the mid-1990s than would have been involved at the proportional rate two decades earlier.”
- The activities that have seen the biggest declines are those involving organization and cooperation, while those that have witnessed the lowest declines are mostly activities which one can do on his own.

→ The more such participative activities depend on the actions and collaboration of others, the greater the drop-off in participation. The less others are engaged, the less I can be engaged. **Positive feedback and vicious circle.** “It is precisely those forms of civic engagement most vulnerable to coordination problems and free-riding – those activities that bring citizens together, those activities that most clearly embody social capital – that have declined most rapidly.”

→ **CONSEQUENCES FOR DEMOCRACY?**

- **“Collaborative forms of political involvement engage broader public interests, whereas expressive forms are more individualistic and correspond to more narrowly defined interest. Any political system needs to counterpoise moments for articulating grievances and moments for resolving differences.”**

- **“This disjunctive pattern of decline – cooperation falling more rapidly than self-expression – may well have encouraged the single-issue blare and declining civility of contemporary political discourse.”**

→ Distrust in politics: in the 1960 three-quarters of Americans felt politically effective and thought that public officials care about what people think, while only one-quarter agreed on sentences like “people like me don’t have much say in government” and “public officials don’t care what people like me think”. The proportion has been reversed today.

Civic Participation (Putnam, #3)

→ “Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of dispositions are forever forming associations... Nothing, in my view, deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America.” (Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1831): **Americans are more likely than any other Western population to join associations.**

→ Why is civic participation important for our discussion?

1. Civic engagement breeds political participation
2. Civic engagement breeds **social capital**, which consists of “features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (Putnam). Social capital in turn influences our satisfaction with our social life and the degree to which we are willing to participate in social activities and to entertain social relationships.
3. Many political scientists argue that the nature and characteristics of secondary groups are fundamental for the development of a democratic citizenship. Membership in secondary groups should be cross-cutting (groups include people that come from different backgrounds and social conditions, so that each member can better understand the needs and values of different kinds of people) and overlapping (everyone should belong to different kinds of groups, so that even if each group has not a very diverse membership, multiple memberships ensure that a minimum level of diversity is encountered).

→ Some examples of associations we are dealing with:

- Educational or school service groups (PTAs)
- Recreational groups
- Work-related groups (labor unions, professional organizations, AARP)
- Religious groups (other than churches)
- Youth groups
- Service and fraternal clubs
- Neighborhood or homeowners groups
- Charitable organizations

→ Generally, American voluntary associations may be divided into three groups:

1. Community based
2. Church based
3. Work based

→ We are focusing on **community-based associations.**

→ What happened over the last three decades?

- The number of voluntary associations has increased dramatically: from 10,299 in 1968 to 22,901 in 1997.

- An analogous increase was recorded for interest groups (lobbies) in Washington.
- But few of all these associations actually have mass membership. A great deal of them have no members at all, and the average membership is quite low. This is a sign of social fragmentation: a more fragmented society gives birth to a wide array of different, narrowly focused groups.
- On the other hand, groups that used to have mass membership have seen their membership collapse. Examples: Greenpeace, Parent-Teacher Association (PTA).
- **More groups, but most of them much smaller. → The boom of associations does not imply a boom of grassroots participation.**
- The headquarters of these associations are usually located in Washington, where all lobbies are located (at 6th and E Streets). They do not have local chapters where people can meet, discuss, and get to know each other.
- Like political parties, these associations are professionally staffed organizations, whose main goal is **to express policy views in the national political debate, rather than to provide regular connection among individual members at the grassroots.** “These are mailing list organizations, in which membership means essentially contributing money to a national office to support a cause. Membership in the newer groups means moving a pen, not making a meeting.” Best example: American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), the most rapidly growing association in the U.S.
 - Even though they might well articulate and represent their members’ views, these groups do not provide connections and social capital. “In many respects, such organizations have more in common with mail-order commercial organizations than with old-fashioned face-to-face associations.” The AARP was originally a mail-order insurance firm. Triple A is formally an association, but it is actually a service company.
 - They can be considered “tertiary groups” in the sense that they do not provide direct interaction among their members as “secondary groups” (church, parties) do.
 - These groups have a great, and feared, influence in Washington because of their large mailing lists, but ironically they have very little power to directly involve their members with government and with themselves.
 - What kind of involvement can these groups generate among members? Not the kind of involvement that comes from face-to-face, direct interaction, but **ties to common symbols, common leaders, and perhaps common ideals.** Members are like fans of the same baseball team, or buyers of the same brands: they are what we call an imagined community that lives mostly within and through the **media** (both national mass media and media that are specific to single organizations, such as newsletters or Web sites). Example: the NRA campaign against Al Gore in the 2000 elections, starring Charlton Heston.

→ Not only have the groups changed: the people have changed the way they engage in groups, besides “carrying a card”.

- Between 1973 and 1994 the number of men and women who took any leadership role in their organization (serving in a committee or as an officer) was sliced by more than 50 percent.
- In the same time period, the average numbers of meetings Americans attend was cut from 12 to 5 a year.
- 64% of all Americans used to attend at least one meeting a year; now only 38% do.
- Nearly half of all Americans in the 1960s invested some time each week in clubs and local organizations, as compared to less than one-quarter in the 1990s.
- Oscar Wilde: “The problem with socialism is that it would take up too many free evenings”.

→ Virtually all of this decline is attributable to generational replacement. These declines in associative involvement are even more striking if we consider the increase in levels of education:

the fact that more and more Americans have the skills and the social resources to take part to associative life is masking the real decline in civic participation.

Conclusions

1. American civic and political life used to be quite lively and engaging by most standards in the 1960s: even the voting turnout, which used to be lower than most Western democracies, could be explained by unique barriers to voting that were removed in the 1960s, mostly due to the mobilization that took place in those years as the members of a “civic generation” reached the peak of their involvement. [Some people took this sequence of facts as a demonstration of the theory that “too much participation is harmful for democracies” because extending participation poses demands that the political system cannot satisfy, thus disappointing citizens and eventually alienating them.]
2. Rates of political participation and civic life have decreased dramatically since the end of the 1960s, mostly due to a generational effect. Cohorts of politically and civically engaged people were replaced by cohorts that are much less engaged. Such generational effect ought to be explained, and we will see one possible explanation next time.
3. Whatever the cause, we already see that politics and civic life have changed dramatically as a result. Not only is politics less participated: the way political organizations work to mobilize people has changed impressively. Parties and membership groups rely on communication technologies (from mail to e-mail to cell phones) to contact people directly and as individuals (rather than members of a community), and on mass communication channels to promote image campaigns that should sustain a certain political agenda in Washington. Members are no longer required to meet and discuss political issues, but only to write checks and, occasionally, to make a phone call send a fax or an email to Washington or to their local representatives.