Chapter 2
Theories of Political Activism

The first task is to see whether there has been a systematic weakening in the channels of electoral, party and civic activism. The second is to examine the most plausible explanation to account both for differences among nations and also trends over time. The most common explanation for long-term developments in political participation comes from modernization theories advanced by Daniel Bell, Ronald Inglehart and Russell Dalton, among others, suggesting that common social trends such as rising standards of living, the growth of the service sector, and expanding educational opportunities have swept through postindustrial societies, contributing towards a new style of citizen politics in Western democracies. This process is believed to have increased demands for more active public participation in the policymaking process through direct action, new social movements, and protest groups, and at the same time weakening deferential loyalties and support for traditional hierarchical organizations and authorities such as churches, parties and traditional interest groups.

In contrast institutional accounts emphasize the way that the structure of the state sets opportunities for participation, exemplified by arguments by Powell and by Jackman that electoral laws, party systems, and constitutional frameworks help explain differences among nations in voting turnout. Trends in participation can also be accounted for by changes in the rules of the game, such as the expansion of the franchise or reforms in campaign spending laws. Agency theories exemplified by Rosenstone and Hansen focus on the role of traditional mobilizing organizations in civic society, notably the way that political parties, trade unions, and religious groups recruit, organize, and engage activists. Putnam’s account emphasizing the role of social capital also falls into this category. Lastly, the Civic Voluntarism model, developed by Verba and his colleagues, emphasizes the role of social inequalities in resources like educational skills and socioeconomic status, and motivational factors like political interest, information, and confidence, in explaining who participates.

In the light of these theories, the challenge is to try to sort out the relative importance of each of these factors. Figure 2.1 illustrates the core analytic model used in the book.

[Figure 2.1 about here]

Societal Modernization

The central claim, and indeed the seductive appeal, of modernization theories is that economic, cultural and political changes go together in predictable ways, so that there are broadly similar trajectories, which form coherent patterns, even if particular circumstances mean that what occurs in any given society cannot be predicted exactly. Modernization theories are rooted in the sociological classics of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. These accounts became increasingly popular in the late 1950s and early 1960s in much of the literature on socioeconomic development and democratization, popularized in the work of Seymour Martin Lipset, Daniel Lerner, W.W. Rostow, Karl Deutsch, and Daniel Bell, among others. Lipset’s core thesis was that growing wealth, education, urbanization and industrialization were the social foundations for democracy and for mass participation in the political system. This theory subsequently became unfashionable, in part because democracy failed to take root in many Asian and Latin American nations that had experienced rapid economic development in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Brazil, Chile, the Republic of Korea, and Taiwan. Critics lambasted the ethnocentric assumptions of linear ‘progress’ towards a Western model of democracy, and the economic determinism inherent in early cruder versions of the thesis. It appeared that many of the central tenants of modernization theory – such as the automatic link assumed between progress towards scientific rationality and the decline of religiosity – turned out to be far more complex, with counter-secularization trends and
religious revivals among conservative, orthodox or traditionalist movements in some postindustrial societies as diverse as the United States, Israel and Japan.

In recent decades the emergence of ‘third-wave’ democracies has spurred fresh interest in reexamining the association between socioeconomic development and the process of democratic transition and consolidation. Non-linear theories of cultural modernization have experienced a revival in political science, fuelled largely by the work of Ronald Inglehart, while Alex Inkeles and Anthony Giddens have offered alternative interpretations about the consequences of modernity in affluent nations.

‘Modernization’ refers to a multitude of systemic-level trends - social, economic, demographic and technological - transforming the structure of societies from rural to industrialized, and from industrialized to post-industrial. In turn these developments are believed to exert a decisive influence upon the process of democratization, including the political attitudes and participatory behavior of citizens.

Modernization theories in the work of Daniel Bell run along the following lines. Traditional societies are characterized by subsistence livelihoods largely based on farming, fishing, extraction and unskilled work, with low levels of literacy and education, predominately rural populations, minimum standards of living, and restricted social and geographic mobility. Citizens in rural societies are strongly rooted to local communities through ties of ‘blood and belonging’, including those of kinship, family, ethnicity and religion, as well as long-standing cultural bonds. The shift from traditional towards industrialized society concerns the move from agricultural production to heavy manufacturing, from farms to factories, from peasants to workers. This phase occurred in Britain during the mid-to-late 18th Century and then spread throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries throughout the Western world. The familiar litany of social changes that accompanied these economic developments include:

- The population shift from rural villages to metropolitan conurbations;
- Growing levels of education, literacy and numeracy with the spread of basic schooling;
- Occupational specialization and the expansion of working class employment based in heavy industry, manufacturing and processing;
- The rise of the urban bourgeoisie and the decline of landed interests;
- Growing standards of living, rising longevity, and expanding leisure time;
- The greater availability of the printed press, and growing access to movies, radio, and television;
- The growth of Weberian bureaucratization and reliance on legal-rational authority in government;
- The development of the early foundations of the welfare state;
- The shift from extended to nuclear families and the entry of more women into the paid workforce.

The early studies suggested that the key stage involved the shift from agricultural processing to industrial production, but the subsequent literature emphasized that a further distinct stage can be distinguished, as a non-linear process, in the rise of advanced industrialized or postindustrial societies. For Daniel Bell, the critical tipping point was reached when the majority of workers has moved from manufacturing into the service sector, producing a far more educated, skilled and specialized workforce employed in sectors such as finance and banking, trade, insurance, and leisure, as well as in science and technology. This development is conventionally understood to have started in the most affluent parts of the Western world after the end of the Second World
War, a process that continues to spread and expand. This stage is fuelled by multiple developments, and the ones most commonly highlighted include:

- The rise of the professional and managerial occupations in the private and public sectors;
- Rapid technological and scientific innovation;
- The process of globalization breaking down the barriers in the nation-state;
- Economic growth generating and expanding middle class, rising standards of living, and growing leisure time;
- Increased levels of human capital and cognitive skills generated by wider access to university education;
- Growing equality of sex roles in the home, family and workplace and the rise of women in the paid labor force;
- The shift in the mass media from broadcasting towards more specialized narrow-casting in the digital age;
- The growth of immigration across national borders and the rise of multiculturalism;
- The move from ascribed occupational and social roles given at birth towards achieved roles derived from formal educational qualifications and careers;
- Greater social and geographic mobility;
- The diffusion from urban areas to suburban neighborhoods,
- The shrinkage of bonds connecting the extended family and changing patterns of marriage and divorce, and
- The process of secularization weakening religious ties.

There is a broad consensus that common socioeconomic developments have been sweeping across many societies, although alternative interpretations continue to dispute the exact periodization and the appropriate weight to be given to different components. There remains considerable controversy, however, surrounding the political consequences of these changes, in particular the impact of human development on democratization and civic engagement. One difficulty is that the abstract concept of ‘societal modernization’ encompasses so many different dimensions of social change that it can be a Rokarsch test where different theorists see whatever they want to see. Social change contains crosscutting developments, some of which could possibly depress activism, while others seem likely to encourage civic engagement. As Brody points out, there is a puzzle at the heart of claims about the political impact of human development, since many of the factors most closely associated with societal modernization should push electoral turnout upwards - like rising levels of literacy, education, leisure, and affluence, the expansion of the professional middle class, and the movement of women from the home into the paid workforce. Growing levels of human capital, in particular, should plausibly serve to buttress and strengthen citizen participation: studies have long established that education, and the cognitive skills that it provides, is one of the factors that most strongly predicts individual political activism.

At the same time certain other social trends such as individualism, secularization, and suburbanization associated with postindustrial societies may tug in the contrary direction. In particular, modernization theories suggest that long-standing and stable orientations rooted in traditional habits and affective loyalties are likely to be replaced by more instrumental motivations, weakening stable links to traditional institutions like parties, unions and churches. The population shift from rural areas and urban cities
towards more anonymous and atomistic suburbs may have contributed towards the
dilution of traditional community associations. Industrialization generated the trade union
movement to organize and mobilize the manual working class, but economic shifts
towards the service sector have shrunk manufacturing and processing industry in the
rust-belt – the Detroit auto production lines, the Ruhr steel mills, the Glasgow shipyards -
depleting the number of blue collar workers, eviscerating working communities, and
possibly diluting union membership. Theories of partisan dealignment argue that,
compared with the 1950s and 1960s, contemporary citizens in postindustrial societies
have become less strongly anchored for their lifetimes to political parties, and there is
considerable evidence that the bonds of social class exert a weaker impact on voting
choices.17

The claim that secular trends in postindustrial society may have caused public
engagement in civic affairs to flow through alternative channels remains controversial.
Some indicators point in this direction: for example, the most comprehensive recent
survey of political participation in the United States, by Verba, Schlozman and Brady,
reported that the modest drop in voting turnout since the 1960s has not been
accompanied by a general decrease in political activism, instead Americans have
become more engaged in contributing money towards campaigns and in contacting
officials.18 Time devoted to voluntary activities like attending campaign or party meetings
had been replaced by checkbook contributions towards candidates and causes. Secular
social trends can be expected to produce citizens with improved cognitive and political
skills, and with the financial resources and time that facilitate political engagement.
Education and socioeconomic status, in particular, have long been regarded as among
the most significant determinants of civic engagement. Verba, Nie and Kim suggest that
these long-term developments in society generate the motivation and resources for mass
political engagement, as citizens become more aware of the wider world of politics, as
they acquire norms of civic engagement, and as they develop the cognitive and
organizational skills needed for political activity.19

Along similar lines, Richard Topf presented one of the most thorough recent
examinations of participation in Western Europe from 1959 to 1990 and he found that,
while electoral turnout had remained stable, forms of political participation beyond voting
had been rising dramatically, especially among the younger generation of well-educated
citizens.20 Topf concluded that alternative forms of public participation in Western Europe
might have been altering, not simply eroding. Bernhard Wessels compared 16
industrialized nations, based on the 1990 WVS, and found a positive relationship
between membership in social and political organizations and indicators of modernity,
such as growing levels of urbanization, education and the size of the service sector.21
Russell Dalton has also suggested that participation in citizen-initiated and policy-
oriented forms of political participation is increasing, including citizen action groups,
communal participation and direct democracy methods, producing new challenges for the
traditional institutions of representative democracy. Sidney Tarrow argues that modern
societies have seen a rise in volunteerism and networks of social activists who often
vigorously challenge power-holders and political authorities, a development that has
proved healthy for democratic states: “Social activism is not dead: it has evolved into a
wider variety of forms.”22

Moreover Ronald Inglehart has developed the strongest case that social trends in
postindustrial societies have fuelled a revolution in cultural values, especially among the
younger generation of well-education citizens, who have less interest in the old left-right
issues of the economy and greater concern about the post-materialist agenda of quality
of life issues, such as the environment, gender equality and human rights. Inglehart
suggests that support for traditional hierarchical and bureaucratic organizations like
parties and churches has declined, but the younger generation in affluent societies has
become increasingly active in politics via new social movements and transnational
advocacy networks, with a rise during the 1980s in political interest and discussion,
petition signing, and willingness to demonstrate and engage in boycotts: "As we shall see, though voter turnout has stagnated (largely because of weakening political party loyalties), Western publics have not become apathetic: quite the contrary, in the last two decades, they have become markedly more likely to engage in elite-challenging forms of political participation." Yet despite the range of voices like Tarrow, Dalton and Inglehart expressing the view that dimensions of public activism are evolving in postindustrial societies, the evidence supporting the transformationist case remains far from water-tight, and the declinist thesis continues to hold sway as the conventional wisdom. If the modernization process has altered patterns and modes of political participation then we should find parallel trends evident during the post-war period among similar types of Western societies. Moreover if the process of societal modernization has gradually transformed electoral turnout, party membership and civic activism, then this should be evident in significant contrasts found today among the traditional, industrialized, and post-industrial societies compared in this study.

**The State Structure**

The socioeconomic context represents one plausible determinant of dimensions of political participation, like an inevitable tide sweeping across the globe, but much comparative research also highlights the importance of political institutions. The structure of opportunities for civic engagement within each society may be shaped and influenced by the state and the constitutional rules of the game, such as the type of majoritarian or proportional electoral system, the level of competition and fragmentation in the party system, and the degree of pluralism or corporatism in the interest group system, as well as by overall levels of democratization, and the existence of political rights and civil liberties. The role of the state is likely to prove particularly important in explaining differences in patterns of participation among societies at similar levels of development, like levels of party membership or electoral turnout in Australia, Britain and the United States.

The role of the state structure is perhaps most easily illustrated in accounting for cross-national differences in electoral turnout. Direct factors most proximate to the act of casting a ballot include the legal regulations and administrative arrangements within each country; the qualifications for citizenship and the franchise; the efficiency of registration and balloting procedures; the use of compulsory voting laws; the ease of getting absentee and postal ballots; the frequency of electoral contests; the number of electoral offices and referenda issues on the ballot; whether polling day is a national holiday, and so on. For example Wolfinger and Rosenstone concluded that if US registration laws were similar to those common in Europe then turnout in American presidential elections would increase by about 9 percent. To these must be added the impact of indirect structural factors, including many broader constitutional arrangements setting the rules of the game. This includes factors such as whether the electoral system is proportional, mixed or majoritarian; whether the election is presidential or parliamentary; the type of party system (in terms of the number of electoral and parliamentary parties and their ideological distribution); and levels of electoral competition. If institutional theories are correct, then we should find that the structure of the political system plays an important role in shaping dimensions of mass participation, such as cross-national levels of turnout, as well as patterns of party activism or associational membership.

The stability of political institutions appears to make this account less plausible as an explanation of change over time, yet alterations in the performance of political institutions can offer important insights here; for example if party systems gradually become less competitive, because incumbents build safer majorities in electoral constituencies, then this provides less incentive for citizens to cast a vote. Minor innovations like the adoption of ‘motor-voter’ registration in the US, and the occasional introduction of major constitutional reforms, like the switch between majoritarian and
proportional electoral systems in the early 1990s in New Zealand, Japan and Italy, also provide case studies or natural ‘pre-post- experiments monitoring the impact of changes to the rules of the game on levels of electoral turnout, holding the culture and societal structure relatively constant.  

**Mobilizing Agencies**

In contrast, organizational theories give greater weight to the role of agencies and social networks engaged in activating citizens, including parties, unions and churches, voluntary associations, and the news media. Even within relatively similar groups of countries, such as Anglo-American majoritarian democracies or consociational political systems in the smaller European welfare states, there can be very different levels of group mobilization produced by civic organizations. Rosenstone and Hansen exemplify this approach in the United States: “We trace patterns of political participation – who participates and when they participate – to the strategic choices of politicians, political parties, interest groups, and activists. People participate in politics not so much because of who they are but because of the political choices and incentives they are offered.”

Traditional accounts of representative democracy regard political parties as the main channels linking citizens’ demands to the state and political scientists like E.E. Schattschneider have concluded that ‘modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of political parties.’ Parties can serve multiple functions at mass level: simplifying electoral choices, educating citizens, and mobilizing people to vote, as well as articulating and aggregating political interests, coordinating activists, recruiting political candidates and leaders, organizing parliaments and allocating government offices. Political parties have long played a vital role in organizing and mobilizing supporters, encouraging peripheral groups of citizens to turn out on polling day in ‘get out the vote’ drives, generating volunteers for campaign work such as canvassing and leafleting, providing organizational skills for members and activists, and facilitating an important channel of recruitment into elected office. Kitschelt argues that this process is likely to prove particularly important where mass-branch labor and social democratic parties have electoral strategies and party activities designed to encourage working class participation.

Moreover agency-based explanations may provide important insights into short-term changes in participation, such as changes in levels of electoral turnout affecting established democracies. If the linkage mechanisms have weakened, so that agencies are no longer so capable of mobilizing voters, then this could be expected to lead towards greater electoral disengagement. Dalton and Wattenberg present clear systematic evidence for the widespread erosion in partisan identification apparent across postindustrial societies in the postwar era. Weakened long-standing loyalties connecting supporters and parties have been widely regarded as contributing towards a wearing down of electoral participation. Wattenberg’s comparison of nineteen OECD states demonstrates a 10 percent average fall in turnout from the 1950s to the 1990s, a pattern that he attributes to weakening party membership and declining partisan loyalties among the general public in established democracies. Gray and Caul suggest that the strong historic links between trade unions and Social Democratic, Labour and Communist parties has been particularly important in encouraging working class voters to turnout, and that this process has weakened over the years in postindustrial societies due to the shrinkage of the manufacturing base, the decline in union membership, as well weaker links between unions and parties of the center-left. Along similar lines, the long-term process of growing secularization and emptying churches may have shrunk the mass basis of support for Christian Democratic parties in Western Europe.

Other important agencies believed capable of encouraging political engagement include community groups, voluntary associations, and social networks, all of which can help draw neighbors, friends, and workers into the political process. Most recently Robert Putnam’s account of the role of voluntary associations, in studies of both the United States and Italy, has proved widely influential. According to Putnam’s theory of
social capital, all sorts of voluntary associations, community groups, and private organizations providing face-to-face meetings contribute towards a rich and dense civic network, strengthening community bonds and social trust. Some organizations may be explicitly directed towards politics while others are recreational clubs, ethnic or religious groups, neighborhood organizations, work-related associations like professional, business, cooperative and union groups, and so on. The core claim is that the denser the linkages promoted by these heterogeneous organizations, the more ‘bridging’ social trust will be generated that facilitates cooperative actions in matters of common concern, acting as a public good that affects even those who do not participate directly in the networks. Putnam’s work has stimulated a growing debate about how far the theory of social capital can be applied beyond the United States to comparable societies, and the evidence from case studies seems to suggest the existence of varied patterns displayed in Britain, Japan, Germany and Spain. The news media may also play an important role as a mobilizing agency. During the last decade a rising tide of voices on both sides of the Atlantic has blamed the news media for growing public disengagement, ignorance of civic affairs, and mistrust of government. Many like Capella and Jamieson believe that negative news and cynical coverage of campaigns and policy issues on television has turned off American voters from the electoral process. Yet as argued elsewhere, extensive evidence from a battery of surveys in Europe and the United States cast strong doubt upon these claims. Instead, contrary to the media malaise hypothesis, use of the news media has been found to be positively associated with multiple indicators of political mobilization. People who watch more TV news, read more newspapers, surf the net, and pay attention to campaigns, have been found to be consistently more knowledgeable, trusting of government, and more participatory. Far from yet another case of American ‘exceptionalism’, this pattern is found in Western Europe and the United States.
Social Resources & Cultural Motivation

Even within particular contexts, some individuals are more actively engaged in public life than others. At the individual-level, studies focus upon patterns of resources that facilitate political action and are at the heart of the Civic Voluntarism Model. It is well established that education is one of the best predictors of participation, furnishing cognitive skills and civic awareness that allow citizens to make sense of the political world. The central claim of the widely accepted socioeconomic model is that people of higher economic status — with higher education, higher income and higher-status jobs — are more active in politics. The resources of time, money and civic skills, derived from family, occupation and associational membership, make it easier for individuals who are predisposed to take part to do so. “At home, in school, on the job, and in voluntary associations and religious institutions, individuals acquire resources, receive requests for activity, and develop the political orientations that foster participation.” Moreover since resources are unevenly distributed throughout societies, these factors help explain differences of political participation related to gender, race/ethnicity, age and social class.

As well as the skills and resources that facilitate civic engagement, participation also requires the motivation to become active in public affairs. Motivational attitudes may be affective, meaning relating to the emotional sense of civic engagement, for example if people vote out of a sense of duty or patriotism, or the motivation may be instrumental, driven more by the anticipated benefits of the activity. Many cultural attitudes and values may shape activism, including the sense that the citizen can affect the policy process (internal political efficacy) and political interest, as well as a general orientation of support towards the political system, including belief in democracy as an ideal, confidence in the core institutions of representative democracy such as parliaments and the courts, and satisfaction with the performance of the government. Ever since The Civic Culture, political cynicism has been regarded as one plausible reason depressing activism. Since many Americans lost faith in government during roughly the same period as the fall in turnout, these factors were commonly linked by contemporary commentators who believed that a ‘crisis of democracy’ occurred in Western nations during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Elsewhere in other postindustrial nations, declining trust and confidence in government has also fuelled widespread concern. As Putnam, Pharr and Dalton summarized the contemporary scene, while seeing no grounds to believe in a fundamental crisis of democracy: “there is substantial evidence of mounting public unhappiness with government and the institutions of representative democracy throughout the trilateral world.”

Many are concerned that widespread mistrust of government authorities in the mainstream culture may foster a public climate which facilitates the growth of anti-state movements and, at the most extreme, the breakdown of the rule of law and sporadic outbreaks of domestic terrorism by radical dissidents - whether the bombing of abortion clinics in America, threats of biological terrorism in Japan, the assassination of elected officials in the Basque region, violent racist incidents in France and Germany, heated ethnic/religious conflict in Sri Lanka, or splinter terrorist groups sabotaging the peace process in Northern Ireland and Israel/Palestine. Imported terrorism, exemplified by the destruction of the World Trade Center, can be attributed to other causes. Although many suspect that there is a significant connection between mistrust of authorities and radical challenges to the legitimacy of the state, is hard to establish the conditions which foster the beliefs and values of extreme anti-state groups, since insulated minority sub-cultures like neo-Fascist and anti-Semitic groups can flourish even in the most tolerant and deeply-rooted democratic societies. In terms of conventional politics, systematic empirical analysis has often failed to establish a strong connection at individual-level between general feelings of political trust and conventional forms of participation, such as levels of electoral turnout in the United States, Britain, Germany and France. Much commentary assumes that if people have little confidence in the core institutions of representative democracy, such as parliaments or the legal system, they will be reluctant to participate.
in the democratic process, producing apathy. But it is equally plausible to assume that political alienation could mobilize citizens, if people are stimulated to express their disaffection, throw out office-holders, and seek institutional redress.

Conclusions

Therefore many theories in the literature can help explain cross-national differences in how and why citizens get involved in public affairs. Rather than an over-simplistic monocausal explanation, the challenge is to understand the relative importance of each of these factors and the interactions among them. The underlying social and economic forces are entered first in subsequent models, such as macro levels of human development, measured by rates of literacy, education, and income (per capita GNP). Aggregate levels of political rights and civil liberties, and the institutions associated with the structure of the state, are subsequently analyzed. The strength of mobilizing organizations is entered next, followed by individual resources and motivation. Based on this approach, we can start by examining postwar trends in voting turnout to see whether there is convincing evidence of a long-term secular slide in electoral participation in industrialized societies, as many claim, and to monitor patterns of turnout in developing nations around the globe.
Figure 2.1: Theoretical Framework


7 For updated versions of this thesis see Seymour Martin Lipset, Kyoung-Ryung Seong and John Charles Torres. 1993. 'A Comparative analysis of the social requisites of democracy.' International Social Science Journal. 45(2): 154-175.


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