Preface

It is widely assumed that citizens in many countries have become disengaged from the conventional channels of political participation. This book compares systematic evidence for electoral turnout, party membership and civic activism in countries around the world and suggests good reasons to question popular assumptions of pervasive decline.

Before proceeding to articulate this argument, we should note that interpretations of the contemporary state of political participation can and often do fall into multiple potential traps, such that the wary might be warned before proceeding further.

One is the danger of mythologizing a romantic Golden Age when all the town hall meetings were packed, all the voting booths were overflowing, and all the citizens were above average\(^1\). It is all easy to equate change with decline. Familiar patterns of our parent’s and grandparent’s generations are regarded nostalgically as the norm, in a misty-eyed Jimmy Stewart small town America sort of way. But change can simply mean adaptation to circumstances.

Ethnocentrism is another common danger. The bulk of research on political participation originates in America, and it is sometimes assumed that political fashions are like the export of McDonald’s, Nike’s or Levi’s, so that patterns that first emerge in the United States (or even California) will probably become evident later among other Western publics. Yet in this regard, as in many others, as Lipset suggests, there may well be American exceptionalism. The individualistic values and particular constitutional structures created at the founding of the United States sets a specific cultural milieu so that civic ills do not necessarily creep north over the Canadian border, let alone spread widely like a virus throughout Western political systems\(^2\). Particular circumstances, particular historical legacies, and particular institutional structures may bloc generalized contagions.

Another potential obstacle concerns partial perspectives. Political science has experienced growing fragmentation and intellectual specialization; as Almond pointed out, like Rattigan’s actors, we are increasingly ‘sitting at separate tables’\(^3\). As a result, research on older mainstream channel of participation, like elections and political parties, often fails to be integrated into work on new social movements and transnational policy networks. Students of political behavior decry eroding party membership, while elsewhere international relations scholars celebrate the flowering of a cosmopolitan civic society. Psephologist mourn half-empty ballot boxes, while communications scholars herald the rise of Internet activism. A wide-ranging voyage drawing upon multiple sub-areas and many countries is needed to develop a more comprehensive and balanced perspective, even if breadth comes at the inevitable expense of some loss of depth.

Outdated theoretical frameworks provide further traps. We are often imprisoned by the uncritical inheritance of concepts for studying political participation arising from the early classics in the 1960s, but as curiously old-fashioned today as the stump speech, the railway whistle-stop tour, and the ‘I-like-Ike’ campaign button. We need to build on the past and honor the intellectual foundations that we inherit. Yet over-reliance on traditional frameworks can blind us to modern forms of civic engagement that are symbolized today by events on the streets of Seattle, Gothenberg and Genoa, and the wide repertoire of activities by environmentalists, peace protestors, human rights advocates, and women’s groups. These dimensions of participation need to be captured, as well as the way that the more conventional activities of parties and elections function, evolve and adapt in transitional and consolidating democracies like Russia, Mexico and South Africa.

Accounts can also exaggerate the value of participation. Understood through a Schumpeterian lens, democracy involves three core components: the existence of widespread political rights and civil liberties like freedom of expression and association, party competition in the pursuit of office, and opportunities for citizens to vote at regular intervals to determine the
leaders in power. As such, opportunities for participation by all citizens are a necessary but far from sufficient condition for democracy. Multiple institutions need to be working effectively to channel citizen’s voices into representative government, to ensure that the participation is meaningful rather than merely symbolic. Nor is greater participation by itself necessarily a signal of democratization in the absence of other important safeguards; mass demonstrations on the streets of Iraq, high electoral turnout in Belarus, and plebiscitary rallies in Pakistan have all been utilized to legitimize the rule of authoritarian regimes or radical anti-democratic factions.

Data limitations are yet another major barrier. Studies of trends in political participation are restricted by the availability of longitudinal time-series aggregate and cross-national survey data. Until recently this has produced a systematic bias towards studying postindustrial societies in Western Europe and the United States. Most series of survey data date back no later than the 1970s or 1960s. The number of confounding factors that can complicate the analysis once we start to compare many different regions and types of states around the world can lead to the familiar difficulty of too many variables and too few cases (nations). The ‘most similar’ research design, which focuses on a few countries sharing similar democratic political systems, cultural histories and historical legacies, has many well-established advantages. Qualitative case studies provide richness and depth. Yet this approach is also limited, particularly in how far we can ever hope to understand democracies by those who only know democracies. This is akin to feminist strategies claiming that we can understand gender best by focusing on women, rather than comparing similarities and differences among the sexes. In formal terms, the danger is to bias the inferences that can be drawn. We need to understand the process of democratization, not just for its own sake, but also because understanding the path travelled by transitional and consolidating democracies generates important insights into established democracies. The flowering of the third wave of electoral democracies since the early 1970s, and the wider availability of new sources of cross-national survey data since the 1980s, helps illuminate how far we can generalize from the comparative laboratory of older democracies to patterns evident elsewhere around the world. Recent decades have generated a flourishing range of regional studies on the transition and consolidation of democracies in Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe, Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, which can be integrated and synthesized to help understand the broad trajectory of world trends. We can start to ‘turn proper names into variables’. Globalization has gradually transformed world politics but comparative politics has been relatively slow to adapt to the new reality by becoming more global in our research designs.

Given these multiple difficulties, many with wiser heads might have been deterred from proceeding. Nevertheless the topic appeared too important, and the current systematic evidence too flimsy, to allow the conventional wisdom to occupy center stage unchallenged. My previous books had circled around issues of political participation but the time seemed ripe for a more direct approach.

This book owes many debts, as ever, to friends and colleagues. The idea for the study originated over lunch with Lew Bateman, whose constant support at Cambridge University Press has proved invaluable. It received early encouragement that I should proceed, despite the difficulties, in conversations with Russ Dalton, Jan Van Deth, Ronald Inglehart, Jane Mansbridge, David Marsh, Ian McAllister, Joseph Nye, Robert Putnam, Ben Reilly, Marian Sawer, Sidney Verba, and Paul Whiteley. The book got underway during a visit to the Research School of the Social Sciences at the Australian National University, and I would like to thank colleagues there, especially Ian McAllister and Marian Sawer, for their generous and congenial hospitality. I am also most grateful to all those who went out of their way to provide feedback on initial ideas, or to read through draft chapters and provide chapter-and-verse comments, including Andre Blais, Ivor Crewe, Mark Franklin, Michael Lewis-Beck, Susan Scarrow, and Peter Mair. The first section on turnout would not have been possible without the data kindly provided by International IDEA in Stockholm, especially the help of Bengt Sond-Saverland and Maria Gratschew. Subsequent analysis was heavily dependent upon the World Values Study, and I owe a large debt of gratitude to the Principle Investigator, Ron Inglehart, for collecting and sharing this invaluable dataset. Data and literature for specific chapters were collected by research assistants at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, including Rob Hanna, Sarah Herrup, Josh Good, and Andrea
Stephanous. I would like to thank the panel discussants and colleagues who commented as draft papers were presented at professional meetings, including the Mid-West Political Science Association in Chicago, the Political Studies Association of the UK, the European Consortium of Political Research, and the ESF conference on Social Capital at Exeter University, as well as talks at the University of Oslo, University of Orebro, and the Universidad Internacional Mendez Pelayo in Santander. Lastly this book would not have been possible without the encouragement and stimulation provided by many colleagues and students at the Joan Shorenstein Center on Press, Politics and Public Policy and the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

Cambridge, MA.

November 2001

