A2 Sociology

Revision
Power
and
Politics

The Nature of, and Changes in,
Different Forms of Political Participation, including Voting Behaviour

Chris. Livesey: **www.sociology.org.uk**

Political Participation: Nature and Changes

Participation

Leach and Scoones (2002)

Choice

People may be allowed some choice over whether or not to exercise such rights or participate in the political process.
Example: Voting in the UK, for example, is not compulsory (unlike in countries such as Australia or Belgium).

Universal

Under this model everyone is entitled to certain rights, safeguarded by the State, such as legal equality, the right to own property, to vote and so forth. These rights are *automatically* given, although there may be some restrictions (in terms of *age*, for example).

Liberal

Focus on the idea of individuals "who act rationally to advance their own interests, while the State's role is to protect and enforce their rights".

Inclusion

Adopted by Labour in the 21st century, with their ideas about social *inclusion* and *exclusion* reflected in attempts to create or develop local self-help communities and initiatives. On a broader scale, *communitarian models* are characteristic of some forms of New Social Movement.

Social Capital

Putnam: "Social networks of trust and reciprocity" (people, in other words, are willing and able to help each other). **Cohen and Prusak** (2001): The "social glue" that binds people in (political) networks of mutual help and co-operation.

Embedded

This participatory model focuses on the concept of a socially embedded citizen, whereby the "good of the community" has priority over the interests of the individual. The focus here is on the ways people form and sustain local communities (neighbourhoods, for example) through their general participation in the political life of that community.

Communitarian

Example: Etzioni (1993) and **Putnam** (2001) - in particular the latter's concept of "Bowling Alone".

Synoptic Link
Crime and Deviance

One example of this idea is the development of Community Security Officers to patrol local areas and neighbourhoods.

Models

Civic

This model represents political participation in terms of the development of specific groups that, in turn, attempt to participate in - and influence - wider political processes.

Sectional

Model reflects idea of sectional interests - groups who develop around a common theme or purpose and try to influence the decisions made by those in power. This model can be applied to a wide range of groups - from citizens banding together to oppose the development of a new road neighbourhood to the general behaviour of *pressure groups*.

Identity

Politics

Although similar to the civic model, the focus is on identity politics - the idea that certain types of group (women, ethnic groups and the like) develop *group identities* based around a common theme (such as feminist politics or religious beliefs). For this type, the distinction between personal and public political participation is generally blurred - the personal experiences and beliefs of individual members are directly transferred into public political actions.
Example: The development, especially in American politics, of New Right ("Born-Again") Christian groups who attempt to impose their personal religious beliefs into the general political sphere (in terms of, for example, an anti-abortion position).

Parties

Membership

Both main UK parties experienced decline in the post-war period.

Granik (2003): Party membership not necessarily stable over time

Types

Discontinuous

People whose membership may fluctuate as they join, lapse and rejoin their chosen party. This membership pattern is not necessarily evidence of party discontent; members may *forget* to renew their membership or *move away* from the area in which their membership was based.

Continuous

Those who consistently renew their membership and have a long-term commitment to their chosen party.

Decline

Decline for major parties has been absolute, but not steady. Parties attract and lose members in ways that reflect their changing electoral support.
Sparrow (2004): Labour membership increased in the early part (1998) of Tony **Blair's** leadership and has since declined.

	Labour	Conservative
1950	1 million	3 million
2004	280,000	300,000

Reasons

Morris (2004)

Fragmentation

In postmodern societies people no longer see "social problems" as solvable on a grand scale. As perceptions change, people lose faith in the ability of "mass movements" (such as political parties) to confront and solve "micro-management" problems (like regional and neighbourhood poverty) since mass movements are, almost by definition, organisations designed for macro-management - operating, in other words, at the national and international political level.

Synoptic Link
Wealth, Poverty and Welfare
Poverty has many faces and dimensions that cannot be confronted "head on" - the idea "poverty" can be eradicated. Each dimension must be addressed in a different way and from a different angle - there is no longer the belief in a "one-size-fits-all" solution.

Globalisation

Power is increasingly dispersed across a range of social institutions (both national and international) and political parties are no longer at the centre of power.
Lyotard (1984): There are "Many centres [of power in postmodern society] and none of them hold". It is, therefore, no longer possible for parties to monopolise political power - they face competition from pressure groups and social movements, for example.

Social Change

Local party structures played a more central role in individual and community life in the past. Party membership was an important aspect of people's identity and could be used as a networking platform for social and economic contacts. In contemporary society people have a wider range of social and political institutions from which to choose, each offering differing levels of participation and commitment.

Communication

The development of 24-hour News channels, the Internet and so forth means parties may no longer need the organisational structure they had in the past - rather than communicate with voters through party structures they can now communicate directly with the electorate through the media:

- **Political broadcasts**
- **Media "events"**
- **Email and SMS**
- **Poster** and **direct-mail campaigns**
  Paid political advertising is not allowed on UK TV (unlike America where TV advertising is a central feature of political campaigns.
- **Websites**
  Parties have their own sites and forums through which they can communicate directly - and receive feedback from - the electorate. Websites potentially reach a massive audience cheaply and efficiently while also party hierarchies a high level of control over presentation and content.

Turnout

Decline

Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2000): Declining voter turnout is a global phenomenon.

1950: 85%
1983: 73%
2001: 59%
2005: 60%

Trend in major UK elections is downward (although for European elections the recent UK trend has been upward - from a 24% turnout in 1999 to 38% in 2004). Local elections are generally decided on a very low voter turnout (41% in 1994 and 25% in 2003).

Reasons

Technical

Outdated electoral rolls
Elections occasionally occur when the list of registered voters has not been updated. The recently deceased, for example, may remain on the electoral register.

Geographic mobility
People may be registered in one area but, having subsequently moved, fail to update their registration (something quite common amongst students, for example).

Failure to register
For whatever reason people fail to register to vote (even though required to do so by law).

Choice

Where voters are offered a choice between two parties pursuing roughly the same ideological and policy agendas there is less reason to vote since, unless you are particularly committed to a party, you're likely to see little difference between them.

Competition

In situations where the election is considered a "foregone conclusion" there may be little incentive for any but the most ideologically committed to vote.

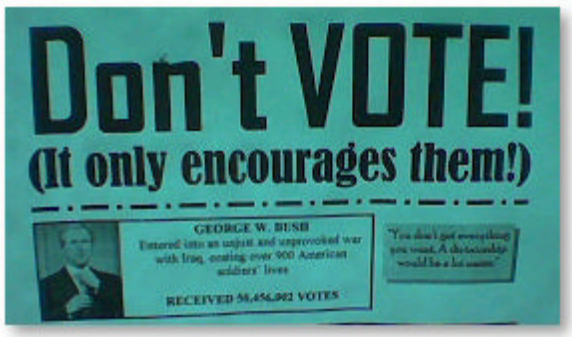
Perceptions

In situations where some parts of the electorate see Parliament and / or the policies of political parties as irrelevant to their immediate needs and concerns there is little incentive to vote.

System

In addition, the "First Past the Post" electoral system can provide strong voting disincentives; in situations where a "minority party candidate" has no chance of winning, for example, their supporters may simply decide not to vote.

Protest



For an unknown number of the electorate the decision not to vote is a conscious statement of protest against either the voting system or the policies of the parties standing in the election.

Pressure Groups

Membership

Margetts (2001): Recent membership trends are downward (following rapid rises in 1980's).

Measurement

Definitional
Our ability to define pressure / interest groups in a consistent and coherent fashion is often limited by the blurring of distinctions between pressure groups and New Social Movements.

Participation
Unlike with political parties, the same person may be a member of a number of different pressure groups.

Jordan and **Halpin** (2002): Problems involved in "counting members":

Numerical
Estimates of size are hampered by the lack of reliable membership data released into the public domain by pressure groups.

Normative
This relates to the idea of different types of membership (such as *active* and *passive* involvement). Deciding what "level of participation" actually counts as "participation" is a *methodological problem* that has consequences for how we measure membership.

Support

Most pressure group participation is relatively *passive* and "membership" and "support" are frequently the same thing - by gathering support *through* (a relatively passive) membership pressure groups enhance their ability to influence governments and political parties (they represent substantial number of people)
Jordan and **Halpin**: The majority of members rarely play a *direct* participatory role.

Friends of the Earth
Support Us
DIRECT Debit

"The best way to support Friends of the Earth is through a regular gift because it provides the dependable income we need to mount long-term campaigns to protect our environment".

Social Movements

Involves external problems of definition (how, for example, different types of movement differ from pressure groups) and internal problems (the distinction between "old" and "new", for example).

Membership

For **Old Social Movements** (OSMs) such as Trade Unions membership is easier to estimate.

Conglomeration

Fewer, but larger, Unions. The three largest UK Trade Unions now represent nearly 50% of all Union members.

Decline

Labour Force Survey (2005), over the past 25 years both membership numbers and the percentage of the workforce who are Union members have declined (from 13.2 to 7.3 million and 55% to 28% respectively).

Reasons

Decline in traditional forms of manual manufacturing work and an increase in service employment and part-time working patterns that are less likely to involve Union membership).
Putnam (1995): Decline in all kinds of organised political participation.

Choice

Is decline in organisational participation (parties, pressure groups, social movements) the result of fewer people choosing to overtly participate?

Change

Is "decline" a function of a different form of political participation - one channeled through both conventional and non-conventional organisational structures? Political participation has become professionalised – carried out by professional negotiators backed by relatively passive forms of public support in the form of media coverage, donations and membership subscriptions.

New Social Movements

Membership

Difficult to analyse in terms of membership because New Social Movements (NSM's) are not "conventional political organisations" like parties and pressure groups. NSM's frequently exist "on the boundaries" of conventional political behaviour and organisation which makes reliable measurement of participation difficult.

Participation

Active

Margetts (2001) argues for a "dramatic upsurge in single-issue protest activity and unconventional forms of political participation" that is "…not accompanied by a rise in membership. Newer environmental groups rely on symbolic action rather than mass mobilization for their effectiveness".

Doherty (1999), notes, newer forms of environmentalist groups "…have no central organisation and no centralized pool of resources and there is a strong ideological commitment to avoiding any institutionalization".

Symbolic

This might represent a new form of political action and participation, whereby a relatively small group of activists draw attention to a particular set of ideas or grievances by relatively small scale - but dramatic and hence newsworthy - events.

It might simply represent the fact that "symbolic actions" (such as those carried out by "Fathers For Justice" in 2005) are not "mass demonstrations" precisely because such organisations don't actually command very much public support or participation.

Cultural

Martin (2000): Rather than trying to measure or assess political participation through overt means (membership numbers, activists, supporters and so forth), suggests we should conceptualise participation in cultural terms. Thinking in these terms involves making an assessment of the impact NSM's have on the cultural life of our society:

Influencing perceptions
Of the social and natural worlds

Changing people's attitudes
To a wide range of issues. (such as environmental issues, animal rights, consumption and consumerism and the like).

Changing the nature of political debate
Considered in terms of how decisions are made, the influences that can be brought to bear on decision-making and so forth.

Problems

This approach either stretches the concept of participation to breaking point (since it's possible to argue that political participation has increased without any overt, measurable, increase in such behaviour) or introduces a new and different way of thinking about the concept.

There are clear problems of measurement if we adopt this approach - how, for example, is it possible to reliably / validly assess different levels of "cultural participation" (what indicators of participation could we use, for example?).

Voting Behaviour

Models

Focus on how voting behaviour is influenced by a range of factors (such as *primary and secondary socialisation*) that influence both party identification (the particular political perspective we choose) and how we decide to vote. Social class has traditionally been seen as the basis for party identification, although in ideas about the relationship between age, gender and ethnicity have also been incorporated in various ways.

Hyde (2001)

Instrumental

Expressive

Social Determinist

Early models argued for a consistent relationship between social background and political choice. **Lazerfeld et al** (1944): "Social characteristics determine political preference" - voting behaviour is influenced by the socialising influences of the family, workplace, etc.

Party Identification

Partisan Alignment

Andersen and **Heath** (2000): Such models introduce a two-way element into the relationship between the social background of the voter and the Party for which they vote - people vote for the Party that best reflects and matches their particular social background. In other words, the influence of social background (and parents in particular) leads people to associate themselves with particular ideologies and parties.

Gerber and Green (1998): People both see themselves as members of coherent social groups and associate parties with their overall social identity. How parties present and position themselves is significant for identification - part of a "two-way communication" process, whereby voters identify with the party that reflects their social background and parties, in turn, compete with each other to represent particular political constituencies.

Proximity Theory

Downs (1957): People support the party they believe is closest to their own particular political beliefs. People vote for a party regardless of whether they feel it has any chance of winning.

Modified Proximity

Hope (2004): People will not vote if no party is considered "close enough" to their particular political beliefs ("dominant issue space").

Problems

Identities

The relationship between class (and other forms of identity), although strong in some respects, is not an infallible guide to voting behaviour.

Deviant Voters

Deferential voters

"Defer to legitimate authority". Some working class voters (in particular) support parties (such as the Conservatives in the recent past, according to **McKenzie** and **Silver**, 1972) they see as "best equipped" to exercise power.

Affluent votes

Affluent workers considered more likely to vote for parties traditionally associated with the middle classes - a concept related to "Embourgeoisement" (**Zweig**, 1958). Changes in the class structure were making notions of class identification redundant. The working class was rapidly disappearing and the middle class rapidly expanding. In a situation where the "majority of the population were middle class" the idea of party identification appeared less plausible.

Contradictory voters

People experiencing upward or downward social mobility were more inclined to vote for parties representing their former social positions.

Instrumental voters

This group votes pragmatically - that is, for whichever Party offered the most at a particular time. Party allegiance is, consequently, weak and open to change.

Synoptic Link

Stratification and Differentiation

Embourgeoisement argues that the class structure of modern societies is converging ("becoming flatter") - the "old divisions between social classes" are no longer relevant to our understanding of social inequality.

Instrumental

Focus on areas like issue selection (when a Party promotes an issue with which an individual strongly agrees or disagrees) and self-interest - voting for a Party that promises to lower personal taxation, for example. In some instances people will make calculations about what they believe are the best interests of a particular social group to which they belong (or in some cases the nation as a whole) and vote accordingly.

Individual

Group

Benefits are evaluated in terms of social groups:

Partisan Alignment

An individual's social background influences their voting behaviour. People vote instrumentally for the party that best represents their group (class etc.) economic interests.
Butler and **Stokes** (1974): In Britain the two main political parties have strong class associations; people understand these different interests and vote accordingly for the party that most clearly represents their class interests.

Problems

Partisan Dealignment

Crewe (1987): Partisan identities and loyalties are weak: "No form of partisan alignment theory can account for the changes in voting behaviour we have witnessed in Britain over the past 20 - 25 years".

Dealignment

It is no longer possible to correlate ("align") voting behaviour with expressive factors.
Crewe et al (1977): "None of the major occupational groups [in Britain] now provides the same degree of solid and consistent support for one of the two major parties as was the case in the earlier post-war period".
Heath (1999): "Labour gained relatively more votes [in 1997] in the middle class than it did in the working class, leading to a marked class dealignment".

Rational Choice

Based on concept of a cost-benefit analysis:
Scott (2000): "The profit a person gains in interaction is measured by the rewards received minus the costs incurred".
Martin (2000): Voting choices are "rational" because "individuals act…to maximise their benefits and minimise their costs" - instrumental voting where people vote for whatever Party offers them the best (individual) deal.
Andersen and Heath (2000): This basic model is highly individualistic in the sense each voter matches "their individual issue preferences with party platforms".

"Rational choice" explains how people vote on the basis of individual decision-making; people vote "selfishly" in that decisions are based on what they see as their own best economic interests. The model explains people's motivations for the voting choices they make.

Cost / Benefit

Purdam et al (2002): Rational choice fails to explain why people vote. If people can't individually decide the outcome of an election, the costs involved "such as the time taken to visit the polling station" outweigh the benefits.

Irrational Choice

Brennan and **Hamlin** (2006): Some rational choice theorists argue voting is irrational:

Aggregated benefits
Purdam et al: Not voting = rational behaviour / choice. If individuals can't directly influence an election (and they will incur various costs by voting) their most rational decision would be to let others do the voting.

Information
No individual voter can have all the information they need about likely benefits to make an informed rational choice about their "best interests".

Partisan

Although some form of partisan decision-making is, part of the electoral process (people have to make choices) such choices are increasingly issue-based - Party electoral support is relatively fluid, with large numbers of votes effectively "up-for-grabs" by whatever party addresses (and promises to resolve) the particular "issues of the moment" uppermost in the electorate's collective consciousness.

Dealignment

Fragmentation

Voters are no longer faced with a relatively simple choice between two distinctive political parties - they have a wide range of choices in the UK, from the Liberal Democrats through various Nationalist and single-issue political parties.

Classes, in a globalised world, are no longer coherent and effective social groupings; people have less attachment to their class in contemporary societies than they did in the past and party identification based on class is consequently no longer a viable explanation for voting behaviour.

Class

Political

State Overload theory

As political parties have increasingly promised to provide the electorate with all kinds of benefits in return for their vote people have become skeptical about the ability of governing parties to deliver on their promises.

Consumption politics

Himmelweit et al (1985): Voting behaviour as a form of "consumer decision". Deciding how to vote, just like deciding which washing powder to buy, becomes a matter of weighing the alternatives and plumping for the party that seems to offer the most - an idea that links into **Lees-Marshment's** (2004) concept of "political branding".

Legitimation Crisis

In a global political economy national governments are unable to influence events (or "deliver on their promises") and where governments and parties are seen to be "prisoners of events beyond their control" it matters little which party is actually in power - a legitimation crisis that leads to voter disillusionment, a decline in political participation and turnout and a decline in the numbers voting for major parties.

Bromley et al (2004): "There has been a decline in levels of trust in government and confidence in the political system ".

Partisan dealignment models are attractive in that they both question the idea of a simple relationship between voting and expressive attachments and offer a general explanation of "voter volatility".

Problems

Issues

Orientations

People see certain issues as important precisely because of their pre-existing political situations and influences. For a working class voter, therefore, issues surrounding things like unemployment, the minimum wage and so forth are "issues of class" precisely because class background and socialisation make them important (in the same way they may be important to a rich, upper class, voter for different reasons).

Evans and **Andersen** (2004): While political issues are important in terms of voting behaviour we need to look beneath the surface of a simple relationship between "What parties are offering" and "What voters want" to understand *why* people see some issues, but not others, as important.

Expressive Instrumentalism

Brennan and **Hamlin** (2006): *Apparently* instrumental forms of voting are always based on some form of expressive bedrock. When people vote they do so "…not to bring about an intended electoral outcome (action we term "instrumental") but simply to express a view or an evaluative judgement over the options (action we term "expressive")".

Voting behaviour (even when it *appears* instrumental and issue-based) can only be rationally explained in terms of how people perceive the act of voting (as a *duty*, for example) - something that, ultimately is rooted in an *expressive* understanding of their individual roles in a collective undertaking.

Brennan and **Hamlin**: " I can satisfy my expressive desire to voice my opinion that Z should happen, without believing that doing so will actually bring Z about, and, indeed, without any expectation that Z will happen. It is, in this case, the simple expression of the opinion that matters".

Exam Questions

Item A
The old pull of party allegiance, the loyal support for your party through thick and thin, is fading away. Nowadays there is a shop-around vote. Voters might go first one way today and another tomorrow. There is a great deal of switching party allegiance, with none of that sense of the guilt people used to feel when defecting from one party to another. Also, in ever-increasing numbers, voters are exercising their rights not to bother with voting at all.
Turnout is becoming as important an electoral indicator now as the share of the vote which each party achieves. That was evident in the 1997 election, when non-voters outnumbered the second-placed Tories. That is why the government has tried out a number of different ways to encourage more people to vote.

Source: adapted from D. McKie: Livingstone motivated voters in London, Dobson did not (The Guardian 6 May 2000)

8 marks

Identify and briefly explain two of the ways used by the government to encourage more people to vote in recent elections (Item A).

8 marks

Identify and briefly explain two measures taken by governments and / or political parties to get young people more involved in politics today.

12 marks

Examine the view that political participation among the population as a whole is declining.

12 marks

Briefly examine some of the sociological evidence for the changing nature of party allegiance in voting behaviour since 1979.

40 marks

"The British public have become increasingly disenchanted with participation in politics."

Assess the extent to which sociological arguments and evidence support this view.

40 marks

Critically examine the view that voting behaviour is no longer class-based, but is determined by a complex mix of economic, cultural and ethnic factors.

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