

Original Paper

Populism & Political Participation

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Abstract

This article defines both populism and political participation, tells why they are both important and how they interact and interrelate. Program and policy implications are drawn.

Keywords

participation, political, cooperatives, democratic, power, populism, grassroots, elites, dialogue, deliberation, volunteering, corruption, adulthood, oligarchy, learning, top-down, bottom-up

1. Introduction

This topic is critical to the health and survival of the world's greatest democratic republic. My first political book offered a then and now, still controversial theme—a core, simple, gosh-a-rootie populist theme: WOW!—the American people should be the key actors in the political process. A “key actor?”, YES!, YOU!, via participation in politics. You could be a powerful participant, especially in concert with others. To revive what should be but is unfortunately not now ours—OUR democratic system!

2. Method

The method of our investigation is twofold, Socratic and exegetical. Socratic: A systematic asking of questions from general to specific; e.g., from “What is populism?” to “What the specific factors that induce people to get involved in the political process?”.

Exegetical: In so far as we seek to characterize and categorize modalities of human behavior in light of

3. Result

What is political participation? It comes in many forms. Voting is the most featured and familiar and yet it is only the end of a long process of prior activities. Voting then signals the beginning of others. Priors to voting include:

- Paying attention to what’s going on in politics and government at all levels;
- Joining with others in a political club, party or other organization devoted to electoral and/or other public issue concerns.

Remember:

“We either hang together or hang separately”.

- Talking about political issues with friends, family, relatives, workmates and others.
- Selecting issues and organizations with which you would like to be involved and/or in communication.
- Volunteering to help candidates or organizations with their campaigns.
- Serving on governmental committees.
- Writing letters to editors, essays or “Op-Ed” pieces on the major issues of your concern.

After voting is done and elected officials begin or continue their jobs for “We the People”, the hard part begins—tracking their performance and trying to influence the gestation, development, passage and implementation of laws and regulations. The main challenge here is that of bringing people-power to bear on administrative agencies—parts of government now popularly recognized as “The Swamp”. People’s political participation at this stage is critical to influencing whether they can truly “take back” their government. Since this stage has been dealt with in a little-noticed but great old book by Holtan Odegard, and by this author in his latest book as well, this essay will focus on participation in electoral politics.

Why is such participation important? Because it determines:

- ❖ Whether politics is truly ours (of, by and for “We the People”), or whether we let it become someone else’s game (which it now largely is).
- ❖ The nature and meaning, or even the existence of, citizenship. Several comparable nations; for example, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, France and the U.K., do not offer citizenship as a right of birth. For every right there is a corresponding responsibility. Genuine citizenship in a democratic republic requires citizens to assume some responsibility in order for that republic to survive and prosper. Australia, for example, requires its citizens to vote.
- ❖ The degree and nature of one’s growing up to adulthood. Growing up is a process of broadening horizons, deepening understandings, and increasing responsibilities, so “time is of the essence”. Now at age 77 and looking back, I realize how important participation was to bringing this process to fruition in my own life.
- ❖ Whether and how we learn to talk to, learn from and work with a diverse set of others on serious matters of concern in the public domain that we share with others. The keyword is “learn”.
- ❖ The extent to which we share in power.
- ❖ The depth of personal satisfaction and gain we can get from making new friends and contacts, as well as “making a difference” in the otherwise presumably impersonal world of politics.

The time for revival of political participation is now—for four reasons:

- 1) We are in the midst of another “Great Transformation” driven by entrepreneurship, innovation and new, high-technology-driven modes of production featuring Peer to Peer (P2P), Do-It-Yourself (DiY), and “Wikinomics”. These are substantially less capital intensive, smaller scale and more democratic in nature than old industrial development patterns. They also tend to put more people out of work.
- 2) Internet technology has put cheap, powerful information and communications tools in the hands of most everyone, enabling the emergence of collective intelligence and masses of people readily organized to demand change 4.
- 3) The country’s elites have failed us. There is no reason to assume we can rely on them to govern us. We can and must find ways to better govern ourselves.
- 4) Political and governmental systems have become corrupted, dysfunctional and unable to solve our basic problems. “Altogether now!”, “We the People” can do so. How?—by becoming coproducers of a new politics; a crowd-sourced, collective intelligence and wisdom, and Internet-enabled democratic politics that would enable us to take back our government.

What are we to bequeath to our children and grandchildren? Here are the options we face in terms of basic questions that can only be answered by “We the People”:

- ❖ An economy in which 90% of the gains go to the top 1% of those receiving income?, or one in which a majority of the gains go to a majority of workers?
- ❖ An unequal society of less opportunity in which your child is significantly less likely to get into a good college or pull down a good, well-paying job?, or an equal opportunity society in which your child has the same chances as the child in a family of the top 1%?
- ❖ A top-down rather than a bottom-up political/governmental system?
- ❖ An elite, major-media dominated, so-called “democracy”, or a real democracy grounded on a grassroots, people-based politics?
- ❖ A country ruled by a rigid, dictatorial oligarchy or a plutocratic system, or one energized by a new politics that empowers ordinary working folks who care deeply about their families, their community and their country?
- ❖ A politics-as-usual dominated by big money, political pro's and the powers-that-be.
- ❖ A politics dominated by people who are thought to be “ordinary” only because they are so seldom presented with opportunities to show just how extra-ordinary they are, or a politics that continues to show us day after day just how little we count in the game of politics-as-usual?

Would a bit of personal history help? I didn’t get involved in politics until I moved to New York City at age 25. An old friend invited me to attend a meeting of the Village Independent Democrats. There, over several years, I made many new friends, met my wife-to-be, and got involved with some great campaigns. Politics has been my avocation ever since. Subsequently, I ran for office ten times. My election record is mediocre. I was elected only three of the ten. Nevertheless, politics has added much to my life. I am still active, writing primarily on political issues. Family influence? None. My father’s

only “political” comment?

“Throw the bums out!”

The big question still remains: What influences the extent to which people participate in what should be but now is not, THEIR politics? To begin to find a multi-faceted answer, take a look at the FIGURE to follow in which “PP” stands for political participation both here and hereafter. There are four major influences in the Figure defined as sets, as follows:

1) PERSONAL: Including factors—Envy/Ambition/Energy/Drive/Extroversion/Experience/Fear/Curiosity/Responsibility/Age/Sex/Work/Children/Income and Wealth/Ignorance/Inequality/

2) RESOURCES: Including factors—Culture/Time/Information/Friends/Family/Organizations/Memberships/Affiliations/Community/Education/Jobs/Inequality/

3) CONTEXTS: Including factors—Laws/Institutions/Gaps/Organizations/Culture/Community/Events/Issues/Inequality/Media/Difference/

4) BARRIERS & CONSTRAINTS (B&C): Including factors—Circumstances/Time/Culture/Institutions/Laws/Family/Experience/Media/Community or Place/Let us now focus on each set in-order.

FIRST—Personal [see DIAGRAM, below]:

4. Diagram

Envy and ambition are drivers for those who see political participation (hereafter labelled “PP”) as an entry-level requirement for careers in politics and government. Energy and drive obviously help the ambitious to succeed. It’s hard to imagine an introverted personality stepping out of his or her shell sufficiently to get involved in politics.

Experience counts here, too, as elsewhere, but there is a threshold to cross. Too many people harbor a fear or a reluctance to get involved, so they don’t gain any political experience. There is a vicious circle here: Lack of experience discourages PP, which further decreases experience. Fear as a factor may also be aggravated by barriers and constraints as indicated further on.

“Reluctance” correlates with indifference, but the latter may be more important. It arises from lack of information and low economic status along with other factors connected with both. Low income folks in particular see no value in PP because, as studies have revealed, little or no attention is paid to their opinions as influential.

People not oriented to political career paths may get involved out of curiosity or responsibility. The latter is especially important. Citizenship demands the assumption of political responsibility. It’s not a choice like buying sausages or twinkies; it is a requirement for citizens of a democratic republic.

The set of attributes asked about in the Census also count as influences on PP. Age: Younger and older folks may be deterred from PP; the younger for lack of voter registration; the older because of

overwork, health, childcare and other factors (see more under Barriers & Constraints). Sex: The need for two-incomes to support a family, number of children, and the lack of balance in family responsibilities may diminish the likelihood of PP by women (though here, thankfully, “the times they are a’change’n”).

Work, Income and Wealth: Statistics have revealed that:

Occupational status is a significant factor. PP rises with such status. People working in jobs that require less education, for example, are less likely to vote. Also note that:

PP is higher, the higher are persons’ income and wealth.

These are dangerous numbers, especially because they reveal vicious cycles at work. Levels of income and wealth correlate with occupational status and PP correlates with both. But economic inequality has been rising—significantly. Thus, “one-man, one-vote” is increasingly meaningless. The votes of those of lesser means count less in a society where money counts for more and those of greater means exert greater influence. Thus, economic inequality spells political inequality. We are in danger of becoming a society stratified by class. This means there is little meaningful society overall, only one defined for the group that sponsors society balls. We have become a country separated by economic class.

Second is the set of “Resources”. Culture:

Besides being guided by a set of values and goals, any culture may enhance or inhibit PP, just as there are cultures that encourage learning and some that do not. Article 1 of our Declaration of Independence implies that the U.S.A. should be a politically activist culture. Recall:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness... That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed... (and) whenever any form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government...”.

Our over-commercialized culture has come to override the active civic/political culture indicated by the Declaration, just as it increasingly intrudes on the values of Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter all other valued holidays.

Time: Lack of this severely limits PP. PP becomes discretionary because of competition from other activities deemed more necessary to health and well-being. Time management of PP with respect to other human needs is crucial. Time often depends on location, especially with regard to meetings:

“Their timing and location can... serve to lock out activists from engaging...” For example, the choice of Sunday afternoon in a location other than church “will make sure that no working parents... show up to the meeting, as this is prime family time”.

It is also important to set strict time limits for meetings. Priorities!

The perception, utilization and value of time are by strongly influenced by contexts established by the historical and other pre-existing, higher level values and goals of specific cultures. Political cultures

also vary. In Thailand, for example, though less “developed” than the U.S., activities are pursued in a more leisurely or more relaxed manner lacking the haste of American culture. There is much more on this subject than this essay can accommodate. The matter of time is the subject of many books.

Information: Lack of it is often equated with lower levels of education. Other factors are the disappearance of local news outlets, the decline of public education, and lack of sufficient public information through either direct provision (e.g., political flyers) or advertising.

Family and Friends: One is more likely to at least take an interest in politics if a friend or family member is already involved. How many of your friends or family members are politically active? The answer depends on economic status, especially given the severe decline of unionism. Here again, inequality raises its sometimes-ugly head: economic stratification leads to political stratification.

Organizations: Organizational structure is another major factor in PP—the more hierarchical, the less PP among employees. It’s always important, before entering into employment or membership in any organization, for one to assess the extent to which the organizational environment facilitates or discourages one’s participation in politics. Organizations, like culture, reveal the huge influence of context on behavior, a feature that is the subject of the 3rd section of this essay.

Most organizations either actively discourage or fail to encourage PP. Contrast a democratic political organization, which: “may resemble a traditional hierarchical organization. However, it is important to understand that the role of (organizational) scaffolding is not directing and controlling the masses...Rather, its role and value is in supporting the other 95%...which makes its own decisions...”.

Organizational environs with respect to PP are even more problematic when the level of organization is the administrative state. Holtan Odegard was the first to address this issue nearly 50 years ago. He asked: “What can be done to make (government) administration democratic”. His startling answer is still a...challenge today:

“In place of the vast effort to manipulate... is to be envisioned a democratic, self-governing, self-controlling re-organization, with participation and scientific-experimental development”.

Another perspective has been provided by Michel Bauwens and his P2P Foundation. They advocate broad adoption of cooperative forms at all levels:

“...the state form is always also a class institution which defends a particular arrangement of social privilege...” the welfare state has slowly given way to the contemporary corporate welfare state (sometimes called the “market state”), which only helps the privileged, (and) guts social solidarity mechanisms...fatally weakening the middle class.

Enter “The Partner State”, first theorized by Italian political scientist Cosma Orsi. It is:

“a state form that: enables and empowers the social creation of value by its citizens. It protects the infrastructure of cooperation that is the whole of society”.

As “infrastructure”, this moves to the top of our public priorities. It is more than just bridges and roads.

Institutional innovations are also called for at sub-national levels, such as land trusts and cooperatives devoted to various purposes. Note, for example, the Dynamite Hill-Smithfield Community Land Trust.

Founded in 2015, it has: “adopted 2.5 acres across eight empty lots (for planting) in the...black neighborhood named after the dozens of Klu Klux Klan bombings there...”.

This is but one aspect of a 10-year strategy led by the Magic City Agricultural Project [MCAP] in Birmingham, AL, to “create an autonomous cooperative economy in Birmingham”. MCAP, in turn, is a member of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, also part of a “resurging co-op movement in small cities across the United States...”.

Community and Education: Any group may be informal; i.e., not a legal form of organization. Nor is education necessarily provided by organizations. Witness the growing importance of home-schooling. Yet, communities may be governed by local elites—often dubbed “the good old boys”—that may discourage an education that would encourage PP.

The lack or shortcomings of so-called “Civics” education in the public schools reinforces rather than reduces the lack-of-information factor cited earlier. Here, home-schooling is not the answer. It is an option primarily open to those who are already better-off, who can afford money to pay for both public school taxes and the expenses of homeschooling. Politically activist households among them may do a better job of teaching civics, but this hardly suffices to offset the overall lack thereof. Reporting on the 2018 mid-term elections, Steve Hilton, TV host of the Next Revolution and author of POSITIVE POPULISM, remarked on his program that “The education gap has increased between college and no-college voters”. Inequality again!

The basic lesson here?—That groupings at any level need to be governed by mission statements that place high priority on enabling their members to be politically active co-members of a democratic republic. And so this brings us to “Contexts”, our 3rd major set.

THIRD: Contexts:

A lot of what we have already noted, such as “culture” and “organizational environment”. Could be placed under this heading. What needs to be first recognized here, however, is the influence of contexts on behavior. The process of human development places individuals in a variety of contexts. Unless one is fortunate enough to grow up within a family setting that is politically activist or which has a politically oriented family tradition, then one must ask, as above: To what extent does any context facilitate, discourage or ignore PP? Most ignore it. Laws encourage or discourage types of behavior. State laws are primary in the case of elections. These vary considerably to the degree that they encourage or discourage people to vote.

Institutions—likewise. Educational institutions, for example, ride high because we attribute so much power and promise to their help in educating new generations. Is such attribution (handover) either justified or fulfilled? Hardly. Here, growing inequality again enters, so much so that those who can afford to do so have practically abandoned John Dewey’s vision of a public school system that is not only equal for all but is also one that promotes greater equality.

And so, given the numerous factors adverse to PP already identified, PP is practically discouraged. The “basic lesson” cited earlier is reemphasized. Events and Issues: Events sometimes spark political

involvement, e.g., concerts such as “Rock the Vote”. Others may be remarkable in the context of a person’s life, such as a death in the family, birth of a child, loss of job or an issues forum. Even more sparks are provided almost daily by news reports. Some are literal, such as those shot out of the huge fires that have destroyed hundreds of homes and whole communities in California. Others, too, have called attention to global warming/climate change (hereafter abbreviated GWCC), not only as threats to our own well-being but also to life on our planet overall. More generally, events worldwide such as GWCC are showing folks how little they can depend on established authorities to secure their well-being.

Such realizations are a great “spark” to political involvement. Issues?: Often, it takes a major issue to spark PP, especially “hot button” issues such as abortion, immigration or health costs. People wake up to realize that they must participate if their stand on such issues is to “carry the day” or “make a difference”.

Inequality and Media: The rise in inequality has made it a major public issue. Those at the bottom had long come to realize that the system is “rigged” in favor of those at the top. So, too, have many people in our country’s diminishing middle class. And so they as well as community leaders have become increasingly restive and politically active to try to un-rig the system. Apart from helping to call attention to disparities in our society, the media are mostly part of the problem even though they could as well be part of the solution. Media bias is rampant and primarily on the side of wealthy elites. Follow the money. The poor cannot afford to advertise.

Similarly, in the case of the social media. Witness Facebook and Google, for whose behavior its CEOs have had to explain the policies of their organizations to Congress, offering little more than lame apologies while they tried to do so. Other major organizations in the social media industry—U-tube and Twitter, for example, are also guilty parties. All are new but integral parts of the advertising industry. Their activities serve SO/SO (Same Old/Same Old) roles of serving up political pablum to citizen consumers rather than informing them as PP activists. Thus, they aid and abet additional increases in political and economic inequality. The tech-based and much-hyped post-industrial corporation, Apple, for example, apes its old-industrial counterparts in moving operations to China to increase its huge profits.

Difference: Contexts can be ranked by their degree of diversity, i.e., differences among and between their members, groups or parts. Too many people are judged adversely by how much they differ in their social distance from those doing the judging. At the interpersonal level, the examples of the destructive impact of such behavior are legion. How many people do you know who love difference? Difference is fractal—self-similar at all levels. If we shift our vision from the inter-personal to higher levels, what do we reach?—the hyper-partisan character of American politics overall. Love of difference must be learned. Constructive social learning takes more time than does individual learning.

And yet, various studies of the influence of diversity upon PP provide mixed results. One found two interrelated psychological processes at work:

1) “Those embedded in cross-cutting networks...are more likely to hold ambivalent political views which...discourage political participation”. And...

2) Social accountability pressures in cross-cutting networks (also) discourage PP.

Others find mixes of positive and negative influences, but they are not very comparable. Studies vary in populations (e.g., older, younger, student, non-student) as well as linkages. They also rely upon different measures of diversity, its key variates, and reciprocal effects. A few references are cited below. Fourth, Barriers & Constraints: Many of these have already been revealed by discussions of the first three. They are manifold. What else? Lack of strong, adequate leadership is barrier #1. It is hard to overcome, hard to find and difficult to generate. Most people are preoccupied with the challenges of everyday life. Even the most famous leaders and historical figures have been reduced to everyday role models of goodness and excellence rather than political activists. Martin Luther King, for example: Only now are efforts underway to rediscover his radical political legacy. George Washington is best known for not telling a lie about chopping down an apple tree. The radical history of the U.S. has been largely ignored.

Constraints are rife. Many have been noted earlier. There is more to be said, however, about the two primary constraints to PP—time and information. In Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, a speed up of time leads to clocks ticking more slowly. Not so in human life. We live in a time where nearly everything has been speeded-up but our human clocks do not tick more slowly. Our perceptions are otherwise. We feel as if they, too, are ticking faster and so time’s availability is less. Who can argue otherwise, given our fixed days and mortal lives?

The only solution is setting priorities. Earlier, we became known as TV “couch potatoes” by spending an average of at least four hours a day in front of the tube. This mode of behavior has hardly been lessened by the newest technologies of “smart” phones and other electronic devices. Now we are spending hours in front of those smaller screens. Teenagers are leading the way. Have youngsters truly become the prologues for a better future? What are their top priorities? Why is PP not one of them?

Instead of letting our technologies use us, let us start to use them to ease fulfillment of major requirements, How about our responsibilities as citizens to participate in what can become OUR politics. Smart phones, for example, can facilitate PP. They can be used to build networks of political contacts, organize them into effective political groups, and otherwise turn political consumers into political producers—those who altogether can truly “Make a Difference” politically.

Why is lack of information such a serious constraint to PP? Not because of shortage in terms of quantity. We are actually overwhelmed with data points daily. But “data” is not information, nor is the overload of “information” like that provided by the daily news helpful to PP. A significant portion of news is infotainment. Some other parts hardly differ from either propaganda or advertising. These may be understatement. According to Housekeeper Dana Taff, who also reflects the views of many others: “I’m ignoring the news. I’m so angry about the lies we’re fed every day”. Dana’s spontaneous, off-the-cuff views are consistent with those of a well-known commentator, Bill Bonner, who wrote:

“While the average person is a decent human being... he is neither always good nor always bad, but always subject to influence... A skilled demagogue—a confident know-it-all with an easy solution for every problem—will always be better at stirring up the mob than an honest, humble thinker. There you have the two biggest frauds of the whole system, right together. We are all supposed to be equal. But some—using the political process for their own purposes—are able to tell the rest of us how to run our lives. And the selection process will almost always lift up the worst—not the best—candidates... And so... we end up being ruled by the biggest jackasses”.

The informational part of this problem is not one of quantity of information; it is quality. One must search for it. In so doing, recognize that the most fundamental factor affecting PP is a large amount of ignorance. Look for and try alternative TV channels such as Discover and Curiosity. Escape the TV for more and better news. Tune into National Public Radio (NPR). Above all, especially since searching takes time, place strict limits on time spent on TV and social media.

Time “spent” is not invested; it is largely wasted. In the case of children such time is likely to have adverse effects. PRIORITIES!

As for leadership, the model advocated by Falkvinge as a leader of the Swedish Pirate Party differs greatly from our conventional way. He remarks:

“The (political) activism leader would not lead activism as such, but rather support it... Whenever activists decide... that they would like to stage a rally, hand out flyers, put up posters, or... some other form of visible activism... the leader is the person responsible for the practical details[!], such as PA equipment, permits and other details...”.

5. Conclusion

Does: the solution to our central problem—lack of sufficient PP among “We the People” lie with us or with Donald Trump? By now, the main answer should be obvious: It lies with us. As the great American poet, Charles Olson, wrote: “Limits are what we are inside of”. So break out! Let us not be prisoners of our own barriers and constraints.

But we have identified a number of intermediaries that influence our behavior and encourage or discourage PP. Prime among these influences are those provided by the contexts of organizations. If we are to move away from an individualistic “dog eat dog” world, cooperative forms would be more desirable than competitive. Other intermediaries would require another paper to present. Called “democratic spaces” or “spaces for change”, they are promising, they are promising, too.

Above all, beware of leaders who represent “populism” as just voting for them-selves without recognizing that to “work for us” also means the mark of true leadership—working to build our capacity to participate in politics and govern our-selves. Steve Hilton recently lamented the failure of the President to emphasize the populist politics that got him elected. So, in both words and deeds, it’s truly up to us if the torch of freedom is to continue to burn bright. Get involved! Be engaged! Lend your good name to help honor a positive populism and give politics a better name! America needs a

new political culture whose keynote and product is “Power to the People”! PARTICIPATE!

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