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Title: The 'black box' problem in the study of participation

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In: *Journal of Civil Society*, 5(3), 209-226., 2009

Link to the article:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a917121502~db=all~jumptype=rss>

## **To refer to or to cite this work, please use the citation to the published version:**

Hustinx, L. & Denk, T. (2009). The black box problem in the study of participation. *Journal of Civil Society*, 5(3), 209-226.

## The Black Box Problem in the Study of Participation

LESLEY HUSTINX & THOMAS DENK

**ABSTRACT** *Research on citizen participation has been guided by two core issues: first, the observation of a widening repertory of modes of participation, and second, the argument that participation is not an undifferentiated phenomenon, but must be conceived as an inherently multidimensional reality. In this article, we argue that conventional participation research has focused too one-sidedly on quantitatively expanding the range of types of activities, while the complex dimensionality is not reflected in the measures used. We formulate a methodological critique by using the metaphor of the 'black box', which refers to the implicit and unquestioned assumption that distinct types of activities and associations represent homogeneous and consistent realities that do not warrant further analytical decomposition. Surveys of participation allocate individuals to different 'participation boxes' by means of a binary logic, leaving a void of what is actually happening inside the boxes. To conclude, we reflect upon the fundamental dilemmas the black box of participation raises for theory and research, and offer conceptual and methodological keys to unlock the participation box.*

**KEY WORDS:** Participation, Conceptual Developments, Survey Research, Methodological Critique, Triangulation

### Introduction

Research on citizen participation has been guided by two core issues. The first is the observation of a widening repertory of modes of participation beyond the basic act of voting. Since the 1960s, there have been substantial efforts to refine and expand our theoretical and empirical understanding of participation, with a particular focus on the study of unconventional forms of action (Carmines & Huckfeldt, 1996; Schlozman, 2002; Miller, 1996). The second core issue is the argument that participation is not an undifferentiated phenomenon, but must be conceived as an inherently multidimensional reality (Verba, Nie & Kim, 1971). This argument is expressed in the development of a number of conceptual frameworks that identify different dimensions of participation and classifications of participation.

Early studies of citizen participation were already preoccupied with the question of change and the notion of expanding repertoires of action. Scholars like Milbrath (1965), Verba, Nie & Kim (1971, 1972, 1978), and Barnes, Kaase & Allerbeck (1979) argued that the classic elitist's notion of what participation should be had become unsatisfactory as a result of the profound socio-economic changes that Western liberal democracies were experiencing since the 1950s. With rising levels of prosperity and education, the narrow equation of participation with electoral activity, that is, '[m]ass inputs carefully channelled through elite-dominated institutions' (Barnes & Kaase, 1979, p. 14), became contested. An extended conceptual framework, beyond the limited focus on participation in voting and campaigning, was developed. In addition to the basic distinction between electoral and non-electoral activities (Verba, Nie & Kim, 1971), non-electoral participation was further divided into conventional and unconventional forms of action (Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Barnes & Kaase, 1979). The inclusion of unconventional or non-institutional activity in participation research was prompted by the observation that 'in the 1960s, demonstrations occurred with sufficient and increasing frequency [...] to warrant consideration and inclusion in empirical studies' (Barnes & Kaase, 1979, p. 35). These conceptual distinctions clearly broke with the former

view of participation as an undifferentiated phenomenon and resulted in the inclusion of an extended range of activities in participation research.

Recently, a second stage of re-conceptualization in the study of citizen participation can be observed. Norris (2002) even speaks of a 'reinvention' of civic engagement. Indeed, international scholarship has been convincingly arguing that, in the wake of the broader transition to a postmodern society, a third participatory wave is emerging, represented by a new generation of citizens with a fundamentally new mode of participation. Protest activity, once considered to be highly unconventional and even illegitimate, has become normalized and citizens increasingly are adopting mixed repertoires of action (Norris, 2002; Norris, Walgrave, & Van Aelst, 2005). Today, key participatory changes are brought about by processes of globalization and individualization, resulting in more self-directed, lifestyle-related, and loosely networked modes of citizen involvement (Stolle & Hooghe, 2005). Citizens take a more critical stance towards institutionalized channels of participation, and their activities are increasingly taking place in other arenas than the political. Ideology is interchanged with self-expressive values and identity politics, and citizens develop a more informal sense of belonging. As a result of these changes, common distinctions between political and non-political, conventional and unconventional, and public and private action are increasingly blurred (Bennett, 1998; van Deth, 2001; Micheletti, 2003; Micheletti & Stolle, 2007; Norris, 2002; Schudson, 2006; Stolle & Hooghe, 2005).

This article argues that recent re-conceptualizations pose fundamentally new challenges to the study of participation. Whilst early theoretical and methodological innovations focused on legitimizing the study of participation beyond institutional demarcations, accounting for a wider repertoire of *types* or *modes* of activity, participation research now appears to be confronted with a different, and seemingly more complex challenge: to grasp the apparently changing *nature* or *style* of involvement. Where classic participation research has emphasized the relationship between the types of actions and the *institutional system*, recent theories seem to take as the main frame of reference the citizen as an *individual actor*, who puts together his own repertoire of action depending on personal needs and preferences. The 'newness' or 'distinctiveness' of contemporary participation, consequently, consists not so much in new types of activities, that is, in *what kinds* of activities citizens are involved, but rather in *how* they perform and give meaning to these activities, irrespective of whether these activities represent more traditional or unconventional participation repertoires. This shift towards a more *qualitative understanding* of the nature of participation, consequently, warrants a more systematic investigation into the *dimensionality* of participation.

In this article, we argue that conventional participation research as yet has failed to grasp the complexity of change because it has focused too one-sidedly on *quantitatively expanding* the range of types of activities as the key method to study (trends in) citizen participation (cf. van Deth, 2001). Although various theoretical dimensions have been identified in the available literature on the topic, this analytical complexity is not reflected in the measures used.

To formulate our methodological critique, we use the metaphor of the 'black box'. The black box refers to the implicit and unquestioned assumption that distinct types of activities and participatory repertoires represent homogeneous and consistent realities that do not warrant further analytical decomposition. Available measures allow us to allocate individuals to different 'participation boxes' (i.e. different types or modes of activities) by means of a binary logic (participation yes/no and thus inside or outside the box), but at the same time provide insufficient information about what is actually happening inside the boxes. Instead, a straightforward attribution of certain characteristics (and thus a particular dimensionality) to distinct types of activities or modes of participation can be observed. The complex nature of participation, in other words, remains untouched and thus locked in the black box.

In the remainder of this article, we first review key conceptual developments with regard to the modes and dimensions of participation. Next, we examine how survey questions about participation have developed over time, and discuss the main characteristics of the survey measures. With these two sections as a background, a methodological critique of participation research is formulated by means of the metaphor of the black box. To conclude, we reflect upon the fundamental dilemmas the black box of participation raises for theory and research.

## Modes and Dimensions of Participation: Conceptual Developments

Conceptual developments in participation research have largely concentrated on constructing an analytical framework that differentiates among distinct types of participation. Lester Milbrath (1965) presented a seminal conceptual framework of political participation. This framework consisted of a set of dichotomies decomposing a general active-inactive dimension. From these subdimensional characteristics, Milbrath divided citizens in three groups: *passive* (withdrawal from the political process), *spectators* (minimal involvement in politics) and *gladiators* (active combatants). Different modes of participation reflected a hierarchical ranking of different types of activities according to time and energy costs of different levels of participation (Milbrath, 1965, p. 19). This classification expressed a unidimensional view of participation, dividing the American public into three broad categories of *participation intensity* (Milbrath & Goel, 1977, p. 11). Acts are thus differentiated, but in terms of one dimension only (Verba, Nie & Kim, 1971, p. 10).

This unidimensional view of participation was later criticized, and replaced with frameworks that were multidimensional. An influential study by Verba & Nie (1972) discerned four distinct *modes* of participation – that is ‘identifiable sets or clusters of activities’. The core argument put forward was that participation has been mistakenly considered to be a unitary phenomenon: ‘Citizens differ not only in the *overall amounts of participation* they perform but also as to the *types of acts* in which they choose to engage’ (Verba, Nie & Kim, 1971, p. 8 – our emphasis). More specifically, the authors assumed that different modes of participation represent significantly different ways in which citizens become involved, and that citizens who are active in one type of activity within a particular mode are more likely to be active in other ways within the same mode. The four key modes or clusters of activities identified are: voting, campaign activity, cooperative activity, and citizen-initiated contacts.

To differentiate among modes of participation, Verba et al. identify ‘some general dimensions along which citizen acts can be arrayed’ (Verba & Nie, 1972, p. 47). Each mode of participation has a unique relationship to this set of underlying dimensions. The first dimension refers to *the type of influence* exerted over leaders by the mode of action. According to Verba & Nie, the type of influence has two aspects: pressure on the leaders, which may be high or low; and information directed to the leaders, which also may be high or low. The second dimension deals with *the scope of the outcome*. Some actions have outcomes that affect the society, while other actions have outcomes that affect the individual only. The third dimension focuses on *the degree of conflict*, highlighting if there are conflicts between interests when the modes of action are performed. According to the framework some modes of action are more conflictual than other modes of action. The fourth dimension refers to the *amount of initiative* that different modes of action require. This reflects how difficult the modes of action are to perform (Verba & Nie, 1972, p. 44ff). Verba et al. (1978) later completed their framework with a fifth dimension: *the amount of cooperation* with others entailed by the act. The amount of cooperation is also considered to vary between different modes of action (Verba, Nie & Kim, 1978, p. 53ff). The authors thus present a conceptual

framework of *participation as a differentiated and multidimensional phenomenon*. The four modes of participation that Verba & Nie identify in their study vary across the five dimensions.

Other influential conceptual frameworks distinguished between conventional and unconventional forms of actions (Barnes et al., 1979), or between elite-challenging and elite-directed actions. The latter division by Ronald Inglehart (1977, 1990, 1998) differentiates forms of action according to their *relationship to the elites in society*. Inglehart claimed that citizen action either supports the elites or undermines their positions. In elite-directed actions, citizens are mobilized through ‘hierarchical organizations in which a small number of leaders... led masses of disciplined troops’, while elite-challenging actions are ‘issue-oriented and based on ad hoc groups rather than established bureaucratic organizations’ (Inglehart, 1998, p. 169).

A very recent attempt to arrive at a more fine-grained set of distinctions was presented by Teorell et al. (2007). The authors present a new conceptual framework of political participation that consists of two dimensions. The *channel of expression* refers to the relationship between the actions and the institutions of representative democracy. Some actions are within the logic of representative systems, some are outside the logic. The *mechanism of influence* can be exit-based or voice-based (cf. Hirschman, 1970). Furthermore, voice-based action may be directed towards specific institutions inside the representative system, which results in a further subdivision as illustrated in Figure 1 (Teorell et al., 2007, p. 340). The framework is innovative in that it firstly considers modes of participation outside the logic of representation, and secondly replaces the usual conventional/unconventional dichotomy by an ahistorical and more complex differentiation of extra-representational participation in terms of exit and voice (Teorell et al., 2007, p. 343).

\*\*\* Figure 1 about here \*\*\*

In spite of these nuances, in our view, these different models all have in common their *institutional perspective* of participation. The dimensionality of participation to a large degree reflects how modes of involvement *relate individuals to the polity differentially*. Although the presented frameworks have put increasing emphasis on extra-representational channels of expression, the basic distinction remains institution-based. Recently, however, there has been a new strand of theorizing that seeks to understand participation rather from a more subjective citizen point of reference. As a result of advanced processes of modernization and individualization, participation is increasingly embedded in highly personalized biographical conditions and narratives (Bennett, 1998; Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003; Micheletti, 2003). A new generation of highly individualized and self-reflexive citizens with a new style of participation is entering the stage. The nature of this emerging style of participation can no longer be grasped exclusively in terms of the conventional institution- and structure-based categories. Rather than analytically delineate yet another set of activities: it is the profile of the citizens themselves that seems to be changing, that is, their lifestyles, identities, value orientations, and motivations. The thesis of an individualization of participation puts the individual citizen and his/her private conditions and concerns at the centre. This view is reflected in a series of new conceptualizations in terms of the ‘politics of choice’ (Norris, 2003), ‘lifestyle politics’ (Bennett, 1998), ‘personal responsibility-taking’ (Micheletti & Stolle, 2007), ‘everyday-making’ (Bang & Sørensen, 2001), or ‘monitorial citizenship’ (Schudson, 1998).

These observations seem to go beyond the institution-based notion of extra-representational participation by grasping a fundamentally new quality of civic engagement. It is not just the form of participation that shifts towards more informal, local, small-scale,

individual and ad hoc activities. More importantly, the dividing line between the public and the private is breaking down. Citizens take their private interests and personal life projects as a main point of departure, and see their participation in terms of personal transformation and self-actualization (see, among others, Micheletti, 2003; Schudson, 2006; Stolle & Hooghe, 2005). Stolle and Hooghe (2005, pp. 160-162) characterize the new participation mechanisms by means of four dimensions: their *structure* (from formal and bureaucratic to horizontal and flexible); the *substantive issues* they address (less concerned with institutional affairs and more with lifestyle elements); the *ways in which they mobilize* (from fixed memberships to more spontaneous and irregular mobilization); and the *style of involvement* (potentially less collective and group-oriented in character, more individualized acts). Norris (2002, p. 4) argues that participation is transforming in terms of the *who* (the *agencies* or collective organizations), *what* (the *repertoires* of action), and *where* (the *targets* that participants aim to influence).

However, others have argued that there is no linear relation between individualized dispositions and observed practices, and that both traditional and new types of activities and structures may coexist (Hustinx, 2006). It follows that the newest participatory wave is characterized by a more cultural and subjective turn, rather than a structural transformation. According to Micheletti (2003), for instance, individualized citizens can frame their own aims and channels for political action by using established political homes as a base to work with their own preferences and priorities, or create their own alternative. In other words, the same activity can mean different things and can be rooted in different kinds of agency. The qualifying difference with former modes of participation, consequently, exists not so much in the type of activity, but rather in citizens' subjective dispositions and levels of autonomy and reflexivity.

From this overview, we conclude that various important studies have dealt with the issue of dimensionality of participation at the conceptual level. Combining the classical, institution-based frames of reference with the new, individual-oriented perspectives on participation, a highly complex, multilayered dimensionality emerges. At the same time, however, there seems to be no basic agreement about what dimensions are essential to a systematic understanding of the phenomenon. There is no established set of dimensions. Each author applies a different set of dimensions, and little theoretical argumentation is provided for the selection of categories.

## **Modes and Dimensions of Participation: Overview of Survey Research**

Next, we take our argument one step further by demonstrating that the theoretically conceived dimensionality is ill reflected in the empirical research tradition. Characteristic for research on citizen participation is the use of survey questions, and the availability of cross-national survey data has rapidly expanded. Jan van Deth (2001) has provided an overview of the actual items used in six of the most significant surveys of political participation during the past half century, ranging from the seminal study by Verba & Nie to one of the most recent questionnaires in this area, developed as part of the 'Citizenship, Involvement, and Democracy' (CID) project (hereafter referred to as the CID population data). Van Deth identified about 70 activities that have been considered in one or more studies, and concluded that the repertoire of participation has expanded enormously, departing from activities directly connected to elections and political parties, over unconventional modes of action, to the inclusion of involvement in voluntary associations and social participation: 'By now, the modes of political participation include virtually every type of activity with the exception of clearly private behavior' (van Deth, 2001, p. 8). Thus, what is characteristic about these

surveys is that all of them focus almost exclusively on the modes of action used by citizens, as well as the types of associations in which they are involved. In contrast, questions about the dimensionality of modes of participation have not been integrated.

As already discussed, item batteries of types of activities have been mainly used to identify different modes of participation. For example, Verba & Nie (1968) identified four modes or clusters of activities: voting, campaign activity, cooperative activity and citizen-initiated contacts. Later, this finding has been challenged or modified by other studies (e.g. Newton & Montero, 2007; Teorell et al., 2007). However, one important conclusion that continuously returns in these studies is that citizens tend to select types of activities from one mode of participation. They may select several types of action within one mode, but rarely from other modes (Dalton, 2002, p. 33). To date, the idea of clustering different kinds of activities has remained operational, resulting in the recent identification of a new mode on the basis of the CID population data (Teorell et al., 2007). The separate activities are the ‘most disaggregated level of analysis’ (Teorell et al. 2007, p. 340). It is thus assumed that each and every activity represents a distinct, that is, clearly delineated and internally homogeneous form, devoid of any further dimensionality.

In a similar vein, participation research has focused on the measurement of different types of associational involvement. An important thesis preoccupying the study of associational participation relates to the observed shift from ‘secondary’ to ‘tertiary’ associations (Putnam, 1995), or from membership to management (Skocpol, 2003). This shift from face-to-face involvement in horizontal voluntary associations to a passive allegiance to professionally led advocacy organizations is associated with a decline in social capital and civic engagement, allegedly leading to a more passive and less trusting citizenry (Putnam, 1995). The empirical validity of this contested thesis is typically explored by measuring the intensity of involvement (passive/active) in a pre-structured list of associations.

On the basis of the CID population data, for example, Morales & Geurts assess the *breadth of associational involvement* across Europe by counting the number of types of associations in which citizens are engaged. According to the authors (Morales & Geurts, 2007, p. 137), the CID questionnaire represents an innovative measurement of associational involvements because it firstly includes a spectrum of 27 associational types, ‘the most detailed break-down available so far’, and for each of them, secondly, provides information about several different types of involvement: membership, participation in activities, donations and voluntary work. In spite of these differentiations, the measurement approach reflects a unidimensional view of participation. The dimensionality ingrained in these multiple forms of engagement is reduced to an analysis of the *gradation of citizens’ organizational involvement* (Morales & Geurts, 2007, p. 139 – our emphasis) by constructing a scale of citizens’ associational involvement ‘that spans the range from completely uninvolved to activist’ (Morales & Geurts 2007, p. 142). While their measure of associational involvement ‘of all types’ is unidimensional, the authors further differentiate according to associational types based on their constitutive goals (individual versus collective) and compare patterns of involvement within these types. However, we may note that these are also broad categorizations hence relatively closed boxes (for a more complex typology and measurement based on associational functions, see Kriesi and Baglioni 2003; see also section 5 of this paper).

In sum, although the presented measures are considered to reflect the dimensionality of participation, they nonetheless are but a very limited operationalization of the existing conceptual frameworks. The multilayered dimensionality of participation is clearly reduced to about two to three dimensions. The *scope* or *extensity* of participation is the core dimension that recurs in all surveys. It is a quantitative measure that allows for counting the number of activities or associational involvements, and aggregating them into distinct clusters or modes

of participation. In the analysis, it is a common approach to further differentiate the scope of participation in terms of different *types* of activities (e.g., conventional versus unconventional) and associations (e.g., secondary versus tertiary). To further assess the extent of participation, respondents have to position themselves on various rating scales, that either relate to the *propensity* to perform certain activities, the actual *participation* (yes / no), or some form of assessing the *intensity* (or *frequency*) of participation (such as the four different ‘gradations’ of associational involvement in the CID survey). Figure 2 summarizes the key dimensions grasped in the presented surveys.

\*\*\* Figure 2 about here \*\*\*

In conclusion, conventional survey research has mainly developed in terms of an increasing number of *modes* of actions or associational types to be measured, thus *quantitatively* expanding the *scope* of research, but did not aim at developing a more *in-depth* or *qualitative* exploration of the analytical dimensions of participation. Participation research has been successful in establishing which modes of action citizens use in their participation repertory. Additionally, prominent studies have also been occupied with testing different explanations about why citizens select different modes of participation. Nonetheless, the main focus is clearly on *what* citizens do, as well as on the *volume* of participation, but not so much on *how* they do it and make sense of it. We may conclude that, from a methodological point of view, there has been a persistent emphasis on the development of cross-national, comparative measures of an increasingly widening repertory of activities, and this at the expense of a qualitative refinement of the dimensionality of participation.

### The Black Box Problem

Notwithstanding the indispensability of a comprehensive assessment of existing and emerging modes of participation, the one-sided emphasis on an expanding action repertory has resulted in a poor dimensionality in survey measures, as demonstrated above. In spite of the long since established assumption that participation should be regarded as a multidimensional phenomenon, the base line in the survey tradition has been to differentiate among types (and, consequently, modes) of activities. Although this is a valid operationalization of the view that participation is not a unitary reality, it by no means represents a theoretically sophisticated, multidimensional assessment of participation. For even if clear distinctions between different modes of participation are drawn, it is likely to be in terms of *one dimension only*: the type of activity/association, and/or the extent of participation, and/or some rough measure of the intensity of participation (active/passive).

The *metaphor of the black box* illuminates this fundamental methodological critique. Although the conventional survey approach allows us to allocate individuals to different ‘participation boxes’ (i.e., different modes of participation) by means of a binary logic (participation yes/no and thus inside or outside the box), they provide insufficient information about what is actually happening *inside* the boxes. The metaphor of the ‘black box’ precisely refers to the observation that *types/modes* of participation routinely are treated as a unitary reality that does not need to be analytically decomposed into more detail. The complex nature of participation in other words remains untouched and thus locked in the black box. It is precisely this non-recognition of a persisting *unidimensional* assessment of types/modes participation to which we refer as the problem of the *black box*. The dimensionality of participation is assumed to exist only *between* and not *within* different types/modes of participation.

An example of the black box already can be found in the classical study on political participation by Verba *et al.* (1997, pp. 26-30). These authors conceptualized ‘citizen-initiated contacting’ as a distinct mode of participation. In their empirical analysis, however, it did not stand out as clearly as a separate mode of activity. By means of a qualitative re-assessment on the basis of the various interpretations given by the participants themselves, this general mode was further divided into ‘contacts with a particularized referent’ and ‘contacts with a broader referent’. When re-examining the different modes of participation, the latter category clustered together with the ‘cooperative acts’-mode (and was re-labelled as ‘communal acts’), whereas the former group was re-labelled as ‘personalized contact’. This example illustrates how a certain mode of participation mistakenly was assumed to reflect an internal unity. By opening the black box, some additional dimensionality *within* this particular mode of activity could be introduced.

With regard to the study of associational involvement, Dekker & van den Broek (2005) point to a similar problem. It is assumed, ‘*with considerable degrees of freedom*, that involvement in some types of voluntary associations implies more face-to-face contacts, whereas involvement in other associations is more likely to have the mailing-list and check-book character’ (Dekker & van den Broek, 2005, p.52 – our emphasis). According to these authors, the type of association is used as a ‘rough proxy’ for type of involvement, not only in terms of the intensity of involvement (i.e., a shift from active to passive involvement), but also regarding civic orientations, since the traditional focus on the community is assumed to be replaced by more instrumental forms of belonging and direct personal interest. The problem of the black box again reveals itself in the straightforward attribution of a certain dimensionality, that is, a distinct set of characteristics, to involvement in a particular associational type. In their analysis of Norwegian population data, Wollebaek & Selle (2002) for instance do not find that active participation, compared to passive, broadens social networks or strengthens civic engagement – as advocates of the decline thesis assume.

To conclude, although survey research on participation differentiates into great detail *among* distinct types of activities/associations, it does not differentiate *within* these types. The internal complexity is not the focus of empirical inquiry. Instead, a set of qualities is attributed on the basis of empirically under-explored theoretical assumptions. The ongoing boundary-drawing between different modes on the basis of unidimensional criteria and broad binary distinctions rather represents a piling up of participation boxes (that is, distinctions between undifferentiated composites) than a systematic empirical decomposition of the dimensionality of participation.

## Opening Up the Black Box? Dilemmas and Keys

To identify the black box problem is to confront participation research with two fundamental dilemmas: *Why* (or *when*) do we need to open up the black box? And *how* could we possibly do so? The first dilemma suggests that the answer to this question is not by definition affirmative. Indeed, it is unlikely that participation research under all conditions would benefit from opening up the black box. Obviously, from a theoretical point of view, including measures that reflect a more complex dimensionality would improve the conceptual validity of research. Black box measures treat their object as if there were no internal structure, only inputs and outputs, that is, exogenous variables and dimensions. When the black box is opened, instead, endogenous variables are identified, which refer to internal structures between variables and their relations to exogenous variables. By doing so, further explanations about the processes or mechanism at work are revealed.

Thus, studies that aim at a more in-depth, qualitative understanding of the nature or dimensionality of participation, that is, which treat participation as the dependent variable, unavoidably need to focus on conditions inside the black box. For these purposes, the routine measures that treat participation as a unitary reality are unsatisfactory, as we have argued at great length above. On the other hand, when research treats participation as an independent variable, one could contend that to increase the dimensionality of measures of participation would only be reasonable if it provides more explanatory power to the measurement models. In this respect, opening up the black box can be a valuable strategy under two conditions: first, accounting for more dimensions could result in a reduction of the unexplained variance in the model; second, taking into consideration some of the dimensionality inside the box could contribute to understanding and explaining the associations found.

The second dilemma relates to the challenging question of how to open the black box in a manner that is effective and substantial. As the reality to be uncovered promises to be highly complex and unstructured, there is no magic key to unlock the participation box with one move, that is, there exists no ready-made solution to the deficiencies in conventional participation research. Indeed, no single instrument or study can ever capture the richness and variability of participation as it manifests itself in the minds and practices of individuals, in different types of organizations and networks, and in different national contexts. Moreover, the obvious tension between the breadth yet (over-)generalization of (cross-national) survey research, and the depth yet singularity of case studies, is a long-standing problem in the social sciences. As a consequence, the metaphor of the black box in the first instance represents a 'sensitizing device' that should heighten scholarly awareness of, and reflexivity towards, the limitations of mainstream participation research.

In addition, and more essentially, the black box metaphor is an invitation to revisit and expand the existing research agenda, so as to build a more ambitious and inclusive research program that also treats the internal complexity of participation as a systematic object of inquiry. Based on our problem assessment, it is clear that such a research agenda should deal with both conceptual and methodological challenges – hence there are two indispensable types of keys to unlock the participation box.

### *Conceptual Keys*

First, as evident from our review of existing theories and frameworks, participation should be treated as a multi-dimensional construct, beyond the common idea that different types and clusters of activity exist. However, as we have indicated, at the theoretical level, there is no basic agreement on a core set of dimensions that could be used as a heuristic device to characterize, and differentiate among, participation repertoires in a systematic and comprehensive way. Students of participation are confronted with a rather bewildering conceptual universe of ad hoc distinctions and dimensions. In general, the dimensions of participation are only to a limited extent grounded in theoretical argumentations. The question 'why this dimension' is never properly answered by means of theoretical discussion. Moreover, this lack of agreement is not experienced as problematic, nor is it recognized as a fundamental part of the research agenda. It however seems that this would be a first and indispensable step in arriving at a more extended, multidimensional set of measurement instruments.

Consequently, a primary key to opening the participation box would be to establish such a basic framework by means of theoretical deliberation and debate. Based on a systematic inventory and comparison of existing (and abundant) theories and conceptualizations, crucial conceptual distinctions could be captured, and a common set of basic dimensions could be established. While such a major conceptual exercise could not possibly be addressed in the

brief of this article, based on our concise review of existing theories and frameworks, we propose to take as the main point of departure the core observation that the participation box consists of a *multilayered dimensionality*. As a consequence, a basic framework of participation should integrate several layers and dimensions. The main layers, or *units of analysis*, are: the actions or activities, the actors, the channels of participation, and the broader context – which could range from the local community or city level to the country level. For each unit of analysis, next, a basic distinction can be drawn between a *structural-objective dimension* and a *cultural-subjective dimension*. This results in a basic analytical framework with eight core dimensions, as shown in Table 1. The various sub-dimensions of participation as discussed in the literature can be situated within these eight core quadrants, as we illustrate with some common examples. However, determining what exactly are the crucial subdimensions that could constitute a basic and general framework for participation research warrants further examination and extensive debate.

\*\*\*Insert Table 1 about here\*\*\*

Once a basic analytical framework is established, we further note that the selection of relevant dimensions and sub-dimensions could be problem-based. As already indicated, the relevance of certain dimensions may depend on the research question at hand, and thus may vary as a function of the focus of the research. Our multilayered and multidimensional framework is a heuristic tool that could introduce more structure in empirical research, as it allows for a better overview of the exact dimensions (to be) covered (and disregarded), hence improves the conceptual validity and increases the comparability of participation research.

### *Methodological Keys*

At the methodological level, the assumption of multidimensionality, preferably linked to an established set of core dimensions, would require the development of survey measures beyond the unidimensional focus on rates of participation. As we have demonstrated above, the manifold dimensions in the participation literature have only to a limited extent been operationalized into survey questions. Survey research has mainly focused on expanding the measurement of the modes or repertoires of participation, confronting respondents with ever-longer lists of types of activities and associations. It is clear that we have reached the limits of this measurement approach. For example, as mentioned above, the CID questionnaire exposes the respondents to about 60 different types of participation. It does not seem realistic to include even more items per type without facing the risk of severe respondent fatigue and related measurement problems. In addition to the question of validity of simply counting scores based on quite dissimilar activities and associations (what we have described as the piling up of different participation boxes), Roßteutcher & van Deth (2002) for instance have demonstrated that the level of involvement clearly depends on the number of items presented, and a saturation effect can be noticed, with reported levels of involvement remaining more or less constant after going through about ten associations. Going beyond these critical limitations thus requires going beyond straightforward measurement of the ‘level’ or ‘type’ of participation, that is, breaking the habit of using simple unidimensional and additive measures.

Ideally, a cross-national survey project would be devoted exclusively to the study of participation and offer ample space for the inclusion of more detailed and multidimensional measures. However, in practice, usually a parsimonious set of questions is integrated in broader cross-national survey projects (e.g. the integration of the CID questionnaire as a

rotating module in Round 1 of the European Social Survey, see Newton 2002). This limitation however does not exclude the possibility of increasing the dimensionality of the measures used. Multidimensional scales can be developed with limited indicators, as several empirical studies have demonstrated. For example, in a study of party activism in Britain, Whiteley and Seyd (2002), using a structural equation model, developed a high- and low-intensity participation scale that included eight items representing three different dimensions (i.e., contact, campaigning, and representation). Using a sample of university students in three countries, Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti (2005) used factor analysis to construct an index of political consumerism based on six items reflecting three dimensions (behavior, awareness and motivation, and frequency and habit). The authors concluded that 'political consumerism should be considered a multidimensional phenomenon including both attitudinal and behavioral elements. Therefore, the index on political consumerism proposed here includes various measurements' (Stolle et al. 2005, p. 255). A similar assumption is reflected in Hustinx's (2005) empirical classification of 'styles of volunteering', based on a latent class analysis of a multidimensional set of behavioural and attitudinal variables. These alternative measurement approaches seem to suggest that, once the multidimensional nature of participation is set as a criterion, there are innovative and reasonable pathways to multidimensional survey measures.

An interesting parallel could be drawn with the closely related, and partly overlapping field of research on social capital, a phenomenon that has also been defined as a highly complex, multilevel and multidimensional construct (Halpern, 2006). Van Oorschot et al. (2006) noted that social capital is considered by many a concept too vague to be meaningful, grouping a disparate range of social phenomena, and that there is a lack of standardized, reliable, and parsimonious measures. However, rather than to simply dismiss the concept, as some have suggested, van Oorschot and colleagues state that there is a need to acknowledge the multifaceted character, to deconstruct the concept, and to analyze it through its core dimensions (i.e., networks, trust, and civism). Using data from the European Values Survey 1999/2000, the authors proceeded by using a set of indicators for each dimension to examine whether these measures tapped the postulated underlying commonalities, and whether the measures could be used to construct a composite measure for each dimension. Here again, recognizing the dimensionality of the concept resulted in a more complex, multidimensional empirical assessment of the phenomenon.

Beyond empirical consideration of a more multidimensional set of measures in survey research on participation, at a more fundamental level, to open up the black box of participation also requires the building of more complex research designs with a triangulation of methods. Indeed, it is unlikely that a more in-depth qualitative understanding of the subjective dimensions of participation, as well as of contextual factors, could possibly be grasped with survey measures only.

A significant example is the innovative, multilayered research design developed by the CID network (van Deth et al., 2007; Maloney & Roßteutscher, 2007; Maloney et al., 2008; Roßteutscher & van Deth, 2002). Complementary to the development of a common core questionnaire for population surveys (cf. above), the team conducted an in-depth study of voluntary associations and their members in several European cities/communities. The research design consisted of a four-step approach, including a comprehensive inventory of all associational life in the selected cities/communities; an organizational survey of all mapped organizations; a selection of organizations for further examination; and a survey of their members (Maloney et al., 2008, p.265). Of interest, and relatively unique in the field of participation, are the multiple layers built into the design, including different contextual levels (city/country, associational universe), as well as detailed information about the associations and their participants. In addition, and different from conventional research, 'the sampling

procedure focused less on general representivity, but on *representation of variations*' (Maloney et al., 2008, p. 266 – our emphasis).

For a more in-depth consideration of the current qualitative transformation of participation, systematic qualitative research furthermore seems indispensable. The increasing emphasis on the cultural and subjective dimensions of participation calls for a more intensive interplay between studies that use surveys and studies that use ethnographic observations or in-depth interviews as methods (e.g. Eliasoph, 2003; Leblanc, 1999; Lichterman, 2005; Lister et al., 2003; O'Toole 2003; O'Toole et al., 2003). Qualitative research methods allow for a more detailed and dynamic understanding, looking at group processes and everyday interactions, and are a vital instrument to engage with the personal conceptions and interpretations of (non-)participants. For example, in an ethnographic study of the political world of Japanese housewives, Leblanc (1999) observed that politics and citizenship were not related to the common distinction between 'public' and 'private', but were defined in terms of relative 'distance'. While questions about participation, parties, or policies were usually met with silence or negation, asking whether politics seemed 'far' connected far better with these Japanese housewives' sense of politics. Moreover, to further demonstrate the complexity of meanings ingrained in these common notions, Leblanc revealed a subtle semantic difference between the frequent use of the words 'close' or 'close to me' to explain political feelings, rather than 'far'. This finding is interesting because it emphasizes the individual's own position as the standard of judgment for distance: 'politics is far from the housewife, who is central. Politics, not the housewife, is peripheral' (Leblanc, 1999, p.74).

Eliasoph (1998, 2003), in an ethnographic study of everyday interaction in volunteer groups in the US, documented the discrepancy between 'backstage' and 'frontstage' conversation. She found that volunteers avoided talking about politics in group meetings and other public settings, and only voiced their social and political concerns behind the scenes. They kept their own analyses of social problems private, thereby contributing to a culture of political avoidance in local volunteer groups, which caused 'public-spirited ideas [to] evaporate out of public circulation' (Eliasoph, 2003, p.210).

In an in-depth study of volunteering and advocacy projects in American church groups, Lichterman (2005) discovered that civic groups not always are the bridge-builders they are considered to be. Reaching outward, that is, creating bridging social ties, often threatened the solidarity of the group and highly depended on the 'different *kinds* of togetherness' (Lichterman, 2005, p.15 – emphasis in original). Through detailed and ongoing examination of the nature of group interactions and group customs, these authors succeed in deconstructing and challenging classic arguments about the dynamics and outcomes of participation in voluntary associations. The complex nature of participation is qualified far beyond the usual and straightforward active/passive distinction in the survey research tradition.

These are outstanding examples of qualitative studies that were able to reveal subjective dispositions and group mechanisms too nuanced and complex to be captured by standard survey questions. These studies offer invaluable insights for furthering our understanding of what is and happens inside the participation box, and could be used for a qualitative re-assessment and further refinement of existing participation measures. However, our observation is that as yet, too little dialogue between the two research traditions exist, hence there is too little integration of existing insights and findings. Thus, to open up the black box, ultimately, is to celebrate methodological pluralism, to aim at a more inclusive research program with a diversity of methods. This seems the most viable route to broaden and enlighten our understanding of participation.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have introduced the metaphor of the black box to refer to the gap between conceptual frameworks of participation and established survey questions. We have indicated, first, that the theoretical multidimensionality by and large remains locked in the unidimensional box of empirical measures of participation. We furthermore have argued that recent theoretical developments in terms of a re-conceptualization and reinvention of citizen participation have even widened the gap with conventional measurement approaches. The complex and multilayered dimensionality of participation, one of the basic assumptions in participation research, has insufficiently been linked to a systematic research agenda.

The black box metaphor should sensitize researchers in the field of participation regarding the rather implicit yet problematic assumption in mainstream survey research that different types of activities represent homogeneous and consistent realities that do not warrant further analytical decomposition. Available measures typically allocate individuals to different 'participation boxes' by means of a binary logic (participation yes/no and thus inside or outside the box), yet do not inform us about what is actually happening inside the boxes.

To unlock the box of participation is a complex issue that requires using different sets of keys, conceptual and methodological. At the conceptual level, an indispensable key is to reach agreement on a core set of dimensions by means of theoretical deliberation and debate. Based on a systematic inventory and comparison of existing theories, crucial conceptual distinctions need to be captured, and a common set of basic dimensions should be established. We have argued that such a basic framework at any rate should represent a multilayered dimensionality. Methodological keys first relate to the introduction of a more complex dimensionality into survey research, beyond the habitual use of rather straightforward listings of types of activities and associations. If multidimensionality is made explicit as an a priori criterion, there are reasonable pathways to a more complex assessment of participation in survey questionnaires. At a more fundamental level, to gain a fuller understanding of what is inside the participation box, we would need more complex research designs complementary to the usual population surveys. More detailed surveys of associations and their members, aimed at a representation of existing variations, as well as in-depth qualitative studies of group processes and subjective meanings, are invaluable if we want to deepen our understanding of participation in a fundamental way. Ultimately, the black box metaphor thus is a call to engage in the building of a more inclusive research program with multilayered and multistage research designs and a triangulation of methods.

To conclude, there are legitimate reasons to be reluctant about opening up the black box, as participation research would not by definition benefit from doing so, and would face fundamental conceptual and methodological challenges. In this respect, it may seem we have disclosed a Pandora's Box. However, above all, like Pandora, the black box should raise our scholarly curiosity to learn more about its concealed substance. As the classic myth goes, while Pandora released all the evils of mankind, she was able to leave hope inside. Thus while there is a risk of releasing some undesirable elements, we should focus on the fresh opportunities and innovative insights to be found and venture to find new avenues to break through at least some of cross-national surveys' limitations. To open the black box of participation has the potential to heighten our substantial knowledge of participation, to strengthen the testability of theories, and to improve the explanation or understanding of causal processes, as well as the effects of participation.

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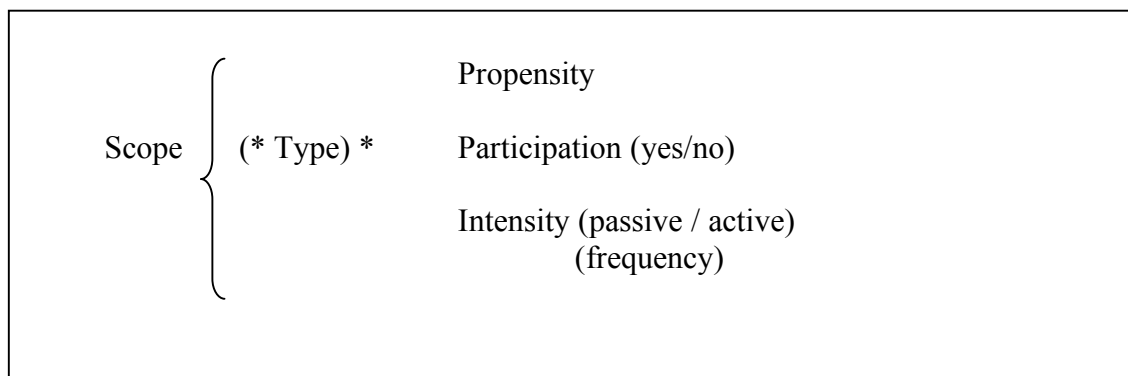
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		<i>Channel of expression:</i>	
		<i>Representational</i>	<i>Extra-Representational</i>
<i>Mechanism of influence:</i>	<i>Exit-based</i>	<b>Voting</b>	<b>Consumer participation</b>
		<i>Non-targeted:</i> <b>Party activity</b>	<i>Non-targeted:</i> <b>Protest activity</b>
	<i>Voice-based</i>	<i>Targeted:</i> <b>Contacting</b>	

**Figure 1.** A typology of the modes of political participation

*Source: Teorell et al. 2007:340.*



**Figure 2.** Dimensionality of participation in the conventional survey approach

**Table 1.** A multilayered and multidimensional framework of participation

Unit of analysis	Dimensions	
	Structural-Objective	Cultural-Subjective
Actions	<b>I</b>  (types/modes, intensity)	<b>II</b>  (substantive issues addressed, meaning/interpretation)
Actors	<b>III</b>  (resources, behavior)	<b>IV</b>  (attitudes/orientations, intentions/motivations)
Channels	<b>V</b>  (degree of institutionalization, social heterogeneity)	<b>VI</b>  (mission, value diversity)
Context	<b>VII</b>  (social expenditure)	<b>VIII</b>  (welfare ideology)