



Why Do People Participate in Political Life, despite Personal Costs?

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Promoting citizen participation is essential for a sustainable democracy. The strength of any inclusive political regime depends on the regular involvement of its subjects in not only voting but also organizing, volunteering, and protesting. All these activities have one thing in common: participants are willing to sacrifice some degree of time and resources for a collective good that may or may not benefit them directly.

Despite its crucial importance, civic engagement remains puzzling. From a rational point of view, there are strong reasons why people should not engage in public affairs – personal costs can be considerable, while benefits are uncertain. Over the years, researchers have studied the ways in which ideological factors promote participation despite these obstacles. However, the role of practices (what people do while mobilized) has received far less attention. My research suggests that people are more likely to engage civically when their routines while mobilized provide a sense of respectability and consistency in their daily lives.

Counterintuitive Civic Participation

Many political activities are costly in terms of time, resources, and opportunity. Organizing, marching, canvassing, and even voting make demands on people. Collective action can also be dangerous. Across the world and throughout U.S. history as well, protesters and organizers have often risked their jobs, safety, freedom, and sometimes their lives. Furthermore, the success of mobilization is never guaranteed. Failures frequently outnumber victories, leaving activists with no option but to put their hopes in the fact that, even if only a few campaigns succeed, the persistence of protest may be the surest way to win some battles eventually.

This particular pattern of costs and benefits results in what is known as a “prisoner’s dilemma.” Since the contribution of one engaged individual is usually marginal, and given the likelihood that any collective advantage will eventually happen regardless of any particular person’s involvement, people have an intrinsic incentive to “free-ride,” that is, let others do the hard work of participating while waiting to reap the potential gains without sacrificing any personal well-being along the way.

Limits of Current Knowledge

This logic seems ironclad – yet people do participate. Why is this? Research has shown there are certain types of individuals who are more likely to contribute to social movements. For instance, people with higher socioeconomic status and fewer family/work obligations tend to participate more. Research also shows that the more extensive a person’s social network, the more likely he or she is to engage in collective action.

However, current scholarship on social movement participation has two key limitations. First, it is more informative about activism by educated, well-off people in developed nations than about protests taking place by less privileged groups in other contexts. Quite simply, most research on social movements has focused on the developed world and has reflected the experiences of middle-class activists. With some exceptions, most of scholars’ assumptions about what makes political participation possible come from a narrow array of experiences.

Secondly, existing research tells us more about the conditions that facilitate collective action than about individual reasons for participation. Discussions about people’s motivations usually center on the role of ideology. Over the past five decades, scholars have developed sophisticated understandings of how people’s worldviews influence participation. Yet much of this literature suggests there is little direct relationship

between individual opinions and engagement in social movements, indicating that other mechanisms also play important roles. The lack of a one-to-one connection between beliefs and commitment to collective action is consistent with psychological and sociological research suggesting that the regular actions of most people do not reflect a strict adherence to a cohesive set of ideas and norms.

Respectability and Consistency

My research on the unemployed workers' movement in Argentina and the immigration reform movement in the United States seeks to comprehend why individuals who face substantial obstacles to participation manage to engage in political life. Using qualitative methodologies such as interviews and participant observation, I suggest that the routines activists experience while mobilized may be as strong a motivator as the fit between their personal beliefs and the ideologies of the organizations to which they belong.

In particular, opportunities to engage in practices that convey respectability and consistency are very attractive to potential participants, especially in contexts of socioeconomic decline. When collective action gives downwardly mobile people a chance to engage consistently in everyday practices seen as wholesome, then civic activities like volunteering and protesting can become very appealing.

My findings suggest that scholars and organizers need to pay more attention to how individual and shared practices influence ongoing political participation. Research has detailed how particular ideals can encourage involvement in movements, but far less is known about how day- to- day activities sustain engagement.

The centrality of routines to long-term activism also holds important clues for strengthening democracies worldwide. Understanding what helps people appreciate participation can inform initiatives to promote civic engagement – especially at a time when growing inequality has led to widespread political apathy and disenchantment.

Read more in Marcos Perez, "Becoming a Piquetero: Working Class Routines and the Development of Activist Dispositions," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 23, no. 2 (2018): 237-253.