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Author(s): Jan E. Leighley

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## FIELD ESSAY

# Attitudes, Opportunities and Incentives: A Field Essay on Political Participation

JAN E. LEIGHLEY, TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

One of the ironies of the behavioral movement in political science is that scholars following in its wake were more likely to study attitudes than behavior. Nonetheless, over the past several decades political scientists have produced an abundant body of research on mass political participation (for recent reviews of this research, see Conway 1989; Crotty 1991). In this essay, I provide nonspecialists a substantive overview of the major theoretical models and empirical findings of this literature. I also focus part of the discussion on the assumptions and applicability of several theoretical orientations evidenced in the subfield today and propose a brief research agenda for the subfield; scholars specializing in the subfield will find these points of particular interest.

Three broad conclusions drawn from my review of the literature structure the proposed research agenda presented in the concluding section. First, the discipline broadly accepts as a basic model of participation the “standard socioeconomic model,” which emphasizes individuals’ socioeconomic status and civic orientations as predictors of participation. Yet a growing body of research emphasizes the importance of mobilization as a major factor influencing participation in U.S. politics. Hence, *mobilization factors simply cannot be ignored if we are to develop a complete understanding of who participates and why they do so.*

Second, political participation is typically equated with voter turnout, although citizens participate in a variety of political activities, with varying levels of involvement over time. We will improve the theoretical rigor of our models of participation by studying this variety of political acts and how it changes over time; focusing on voter turnout alone—as discrete acts structured by the electoral calendar—offers no such advantage. *We must therefore shift the focus of our study to alternative forms of participation.*

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Third, rational choice models have attained significant theoretical stature in the study of political participation. For instance, Paul F. Whiteley draws on over fifty such studies in the essay which appears in this issue.<sup>1</sup> The implicit use of a rational choice framework is common as well. Discussions of how the demographic characteristics associated with participation modify the costs and benefits of participating, for example, reflect the logic of the rational actor model. However, the findings of many empirical analyses using the rational choice framework are difficult to interpret due to problems relating to the operationalization of concepts critical to this perspective. And the implications of empirical findings regarding the importance of expressive incentives in predicting participation have not been resolved. *The value of future rational choice studies of participation will be enhanced by scholars addressing these issues.*

These substantive points lead to a proposed research agenda that emphasizes increased attention to elite and informal mobilization activities and how they determine the nature, timing, and consequences of individuals' participation. This requires that scholars develop creative research designs—not necessarily more national, election-oriented survey samples—that incorporate a variety of mobilization factors as well as participation types, and how they vary over time. Data collected to analyze these variations would provide critical empirical tests regarding the relationships between socioeconomic status, political attitudes, mobilization, and participation.

This tack would also benefit scholars working from a rational choice perspective. Studying participation other than voting, for example, is likely to shift the focus to acts that are “more” instrumental than the act of voting, or at least to those in which the individual is more likely to be instrumental in obtaining a preferred outcome. Incorporating mobilization factors into models of political participation might modify previous empirical findings on the relative importance of various types of incentives. And conceptualizing participation and mobilization as processes that occur over time requires that tests of the costs and benefits (i.e., incentives) of participating account for these estimates varying over time.

To provide the intellectual background on which these proposals are based, I now turn to review the major substantive findings which have emerged from the study of political participation over the past several decades. I first review the socioeconomic status model and related empirical evidence and discuss its assumptions.

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<sup>1</sup> Readers should study Whiteley's discussion of the theoretical rigor of these models, for he covers a number of issues which I do not.

### THE SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS MODEL

Nearly all empirical studies of political participation rely on the “standard socioeconomic status model,” developed most fully by Verba and Nie (1972; see also Almond and Verba 1963; Barnes and Kaase 1979; Milbrath 1965). In this model, participation is primarily driven by individuals’ resources (i.e., time, money, skills) and civic orientations—attitudes which individuals hold toward themselves or the political system which predispose them toward political action. Because high-status individuals are located in social environments which encourage and enforce positive attitudinal and participatory norms as well as civic skills, they are more likely to participate in politics than are low-status individuals.

Though Verba and Nie (1972: 136–7) claim no “causal priority for social class over other social characteristics,” empirical studies of political participation rely almost exclusively on the socioeconomic status (SES) model as the theoretical framework guiding their expectations as to who participates in politics.<sup>2</sup> And evidence in support of the SES model is abundant. Individuals with high levels of education are more likely to participate in politics than individuals with low levels of education; the evidence is almost as persuasive for the relationship between income and participation, though the effect of income on participation is typically less than that for education; and these findings are generally consistent across different types of participation (Acocck and Scott 1980; Barnes and Kaase 1979; Conway 1991; Dalton 1988; Kenny 1992; Leighley 1990; Nie, Verba, Brady, Schlozman and Junn 1988; Salisbury 1980; Verba, Nie and Kim 1978; Verba, Schlozman, Brady and Nie 1993a).<sup>3</sup>

More detailed investigations of particular aspects of individuals’ social characteristics and political participation highlight the value of multivariate analyses over bivariate comparisons of participation rates across demographic

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<sup>2</sup> Following Verba and Nie (1972), most empirical analyses focus on *who* participates in each type of activity, rather than *why individuals participate in one mode rather than another*. The “tradeoffs” between types of participation, or how participation of one type might affect participation of another, are rarely discussed. I return to this point in the concluding section.

<sup>3</sup> Studies which focus on one particular form of participation are far too numerous to list; but for recent representative analyses on voter turnout, see Conway 1981; Leighley and Nagler 1992; Tate 1991, 1993; Teixeira 1987, 1992; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; on group activism, see Cook 1984; Curtis, Grabb, and Baer 1992; Knoke 1990a, 1990b; Rothenberg 1992; on campaign contributions, see Brown, Hedges and Powell 1980; Kenny and Parent 1991; on citizen-initiated contacting, see Hero 1986; Hirlinger 1992; Sharp 1982, 1984; Thomas 1982; Vedlitz, Durand, and Dyer 1980; Zuckerman and West 1985; and on political protest and violence, see Barnes and Kaase 1979; Chong 1991; Gibson 1989; Jennings and van Deth 1989; Mason 1984; Nice 1988.

groups. Controlling for education, income and sex, participation increases with age, with some drop-off reported among the elderly for more demanding types of participation (Jennings 1979; Jennings and Markus 1988; Jennings and Niemi 1981; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; for evidence that there is no drop-off, see Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). This pattern is generally interpreted as a "life-cycle" model, with young individuals being more mobile and less integrated into the community.

The effects of gender, race, and ethnicity on participation are not summarized as easily, with large bodies of somewhat conflicting research in each area. The relative turnout rates of men and women have changed significantly over the past several decades. Women are now about equally likely to vote in presidential elections as are men (Conway 1991; Leighley and Nagler 1992; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Teixeira 1987), with slight differences (in both directions) noted in participation levels in other types of activities (Nie et al. 1988; Schlozman, Burns and Verba 1993; Verba, Schlozman, Brady and Nie 1991). The question of why—until recently—women were less likely to participate in politics than men has not been resolved, with substantive explanations ranging from differential socialization, to family responsibilities, to demographics (Andersen 1975; Andersen and Cook 1985; Beckwith 1986; Bourque and Grossholtz 1974; Carroll 1989; Clark and Clark 1986; Hansen, Franz and Netemeyer-Mays 1976; Jennings 1983; Klein 1984; Krauss 1974; McDonagh 1982; McGlen 1980; Rapoport 1981; Sapiro 1982, 1983; Schlozman, Burns and Verba 1993; Welch 1977, 1980).

Evidence regarding race-related differences in participation rates varies, with institutional factors often cited as structuring these differences. Controlling for socioeconomic status, minorities are sometimes more and sometimes less likely than whites to participate, depending on the exact type of participation and time period investigated (Berry, Portnoy and Thomson 1990; Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Ellison and Gay 1989; Nie, et al. 1988; Uhlaner, Cain, and Kiewiet 1989; Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Schlozman, Brady, and Nie 1993a, 1993b).

Consistent with these mixed findings regarding relative participation rates, Nie et al. (1988) report that between 1967 and 1987, patterns in participation rates of blacks and whites reflect changes in the institutional structure of U.S. politics: the declining visibility of the civil rights movement resulted in blacks being less likely to participate in 1987 than in 1967. Mohai (1991) demonstrates how these variations in participation rates are institution-specific: blacks in environmental groups are less likely to participate in environmental politics beyond the group, while blacks in other types of groups are more likely to participate in (general) politics beyond the group. This suggests that differences in participation levels among whites, African-Americans and Latinos

reflect structural barriers or differential mobilization patterns to participation.<sup>4</sup>

Race-related differences in voter turnout are probably small in magnitude.<sup>5</sup> When controlling for education and income, blacks are about as likely to vote as are whites; yet when controlling for demographics and civic orientations, blacks are slightly more likely to vote (Teixeira 1992). Many of the standard treatments of race-related differences in voter turnout, however, typically ignore the role of group consciousness as a predictor of participation (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Miller, Gurin, Gurin, and Malanchuk 1981; Shingles 1981; Tate 1993; Uhlaner 1991; Uhlaner, Cain, and Kiewiet 1989). However, these findings may be sensitive to the turnout measure used. According to Abramson and Claggett (1984, 1986, 1989), misreporting is higher for blacks than for whites (see also Katosh and Traugott 1981; Silver, Anderson and Abramson 1986).

#### COMMENTS ON THE SES MODEL

Verba, Schlozman, Brady, and Nie's *Citizen Participation Study*—a random national probability sample supplemented by an oversample of activists—focuses on individuals' acquisition of resources, with particular attention given to gender and race (Verba et al. 1991, 1993a, 1993b). Verba et al. conceptualize individuals' decisions to participate as reflecting the resources accumulated through the individual's life cycle (see also Strate, Elder, Parrish and Ford 1989).<sup>6</sup> Adult experiences such as job type, organizational memberships, church attendance, and family structure determine the skills that individuals bring to the political sphere. The development of these skills is critical to understanding participation because individuals may choose not to participate "because they can't, because they don't want to, or because nobody asked" (Verba, Schlozman, Brady and Nie 1991).

With most studies focused on skills and motivations, explanations of political participation emphasize individual characteristics as the primary deter-

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<sup>4</sup> While the significance of structural and legal factors in mobilizing African-American political participation is clearly established in studies of the Voting Rights Act and the civil rights movement, far less empirical work has been done on the institutional factors which facilitate the participation of other ethnic group members.

<sup>5</sup> This statement is based on studies which focus primarily on differences between blacks and whites in turnout in presidential elections. Turnout differences between blacks and whites in lower-stimulus races are likely to be greater, though the difference is reduced in races which are racially divided, which often coincides with black candidates running for office (Engstrom and Caridas 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Although Verba et al. do not explicitly incorporate civic orientations in their political resource model, one might interpret the new study's focus on resources as explicating the processes whereby high-status individuals accumulate both skills and attitudes which predispose them toward political activity.

minants of political participation. Contextual factors—including whether anyone has asked, for example—and institutional structures are secondary forces marginally affecting the individual's probability of participating.<sup>7</sup> As Knoke (1990a: 1058) observes:

The dominant academic paradigm was built around national election surveys that stripped individual respondents out of their social contexts. They depicted atomized actors floating unanchored in a homogenized stream of national mass-media stimuli, their perceptions unfiltered by constraining and validating personal relationships. . . . Small wonder that these researchers have yielded incomplete and unsatisfactory explanations of political involvement.

Nonetheless, the SES model is broadly accepted since few empirical studies find that socioeconomic status is *unrelated* to political participation. However, its persuasiveness is diminished when several key assumptions and oversights are considered. First, the model posits that attitudes precede behavior. That is, the standard socioeconomic model assumes that positive civic orientations are causally prior to acts of participation. Yet we know that certain types of participation enhance numerous political attitudes, including political efficacy and sophistication (Bennett 1975; Finkel 1985, 1987; Junn 1991; Leighley 1991; Madsen 1987; Tan 1980). While the use of advanced statistical techniques (e.g., two-stage least squares) and panel data have in some cases corrected this misspecification, these analyses are treated as marginal adjustments to the SES model, at best. Yet Pierce and Converse's (1990) demonstration that pre-protest measures of attitudes are insignificant predictors of protest, while post-protest measures of attitudes are strong predictors of protest, is a chilling reminder of the timeboundedness of cross-sectional survey research.

One obvious consequence of misspecifying the relationship between civic orientations and participation is to overestimate the effects of individuals' attitudes on participation. That is, when the impact of participation on individuals' attitudes is ignored, estimates of the effect of attitudes on participation—the standard socioeconomic model—will be inflated. Hence, evidence regarding the centrality of attitudes to participation must be interpreted with this in mind.

A second consequence resulting from misspecifying the relationship between individuals' political attitudes and political participation is that conclusions

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<sup>7</sup> Two major exceptions to this are in (a) comparative studies of voter turnout, where institutional features account for differences in turnout levels across countries (Jackman 1987; Powell 1986) and (b) studies of the effects of registration laws in the U.S. (Kelley, Ayres, and Bowen 1967; Leighley and Nagler 1992; Nagler 1992; Rosenstone and Wolfinger 1978; Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass 1987; Wolfinger 1993; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

regarding the relative importance of individuals' political attitudes and political mobilization as causes of participation are impossible to draw. The conventional approach to testing the relative importance of these two alternatives is to include measures of socioeconomic status, political attitudes and mobilization in a multivariate model predicting political participation. If the effect of socioeconomic status and political attitudes diminishes with the addition of mobilization indicators, the mobilization model is supported. However, given that the effects of political attitudes are likely to be overestimated in such a model, comparisons of the relative importance of these two mechanisms are not necessarily valid.

Another set of criticisms of the standard socioeconomic model relates to assumptions regarding the *act of participating*. It is assumed, first, that participation is an atomistic activity: **when an individual is motivated to participate, that is necessary and sufficient for participation to occur.** However, many types of participation are not singular pursuits: attending political meetings, signing a petition, voting in an election, joining a group, etc.<sup>8</sup> Even if one is motivated to attend a meeting or sign a petition, unless a meeting is scheduled or a petition available to sign, the act of participation is precluded.<sup>9</sup> The implications of this assumption are seen most clearly when one considers how to interpret survey data on whether individuals have participated or not. If an individual claims that she has signed a petition, we can be fairly certain that a petition was presented to the individual, and that she responded positively; but if an individual claims that she has not signed a petition, is that because she has been asked, and responded negatively, or simply because she has not been asked?

**A second, related assumption is that participation opportunities are evenly distributed across the population.** If this assumption is accurate, then the observation that high-status individuals participate at higher rates than low-status individuals is rightly interpreted as confirmation of the SES model. If the assumption is inaccurate, however, and low-status individuals have fewer opportunities to participate, then the differential rates of high-status and low-status individuals might reflect differential opportunities. Given that mobilization techniques (i.e., direct mail, door-to-door canvassing) are typically directed toward high-status individuals or neighborhoods (Godwin 1988; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993: 163–9) and that membership in voluntary organizations (which explicitly

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<sup>8</sup> Various studies have distinguished between individually based and socially based participation in an effort to identify differential effects of the social context on individuals' probability of participating; see Abowitz 1990; Giles and Dantico 1982; Huckfeldt 1979, 1986; Kenny 1992; Leighley 1990.

<sup>9</sup> See Hansen's (1985) discussion of the importance of the existence of interest groups in studying group membership levels over time.



mobilize their members to participate) is concentrated among high-status individuals (Knoke 1990b; Rothenberg 1992; Verba and Nie 1972), the existence of differential opportunity structures across socioeconomic classes is likely.

The relevance of the structure of participation opportunities is also suggested by Hansen and Rosenstone's finding that individual participation varies "over time, probably in response to shifts in life circumstances and in the political environment" (1983: 7; see also Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Yet the SES model provides no insight as to why high-status individuals will engage in political activity at one point and then later abstain; were civic orientations highly responsive to the immediate political environment, then perhaps this fluctuation would be expected. But, to the extent that these attitudes, or other resources available to high-status individuals, are more stable, why high-status individuals "quit" participating remains a puzzle.<sup>10</sup>

Third, differences across participation types are assumed to be unimportant. As presented by Verba and Nie (1972), the socioeconomic model is used to estimate the overall level of participation as well as four particular types of participation, though with differential levels of explanatory power. There is, however, ample evidence that various predictors are significantly related to one, but not all, types of participation (Bennett 1975; Dalton 1988; Hansen and Rosenstone 1983; Huckfeldt 1986; Leighley 1991; Neuman 1986; Zipp and Smith 1979; Zipp, Landerman, and Luebke 1982).

Hansen and Rosenstone's findings are particularly relevant to this point. They report that there is little overlap between those individuals who participate in electoral activities and those who participate in non-electoral activities. While the SES model would predict that both sets of individuals are high-status, it does not provide any guidance as to why some high-status individuals choose to engage in electoral activities while others choose to engage in nonelectoral activities. Verba and Nie's (1992) participation typology suggests that this choice results from high-status individuals' preferences for conflict and competition. An alternative explanation is that some individuals are mobilized through political parties while others are mobilized through non-electoral groups (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993).

### THE MOBILIZATION MODEL

More broadly, the mobilization model asserts that participation is a response to contextual cues and political opportunities structured by the individual's environment. Individuals' personal resources and psychological motivations are still components in the mobilization model, though they occupy significantly

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<sup>10</sup> Studies of individuals' level of participation over time are rare. Exceptions to this include Conway (1991) and Sigelman, Roeder, Jewell and Baer (1985).

different conceptual positions, in two respects. First, socioeconomic status (i.e., personal resources) structures individuals' civic orientations *as well as the level and nature of their political mobilization*. High socioeconomic status individuals have greater personal resources, but they are also more likely to have the opportunity—through formal institutional (e.g., party, campaign, group) mobilization or informal social mobilization (e.g., political discussion)—to use such resources to engage in political behavior. Thus, mobilization is an alternative to civic orientations (or resources) as a mechanism that mediates the relationship between socioeconomic status and political participation.

Second, the mobilization model includes both participation and mobilization as causes of individuals' civic orientations. Studies of the effects of political participation consistently show that participation enhances individuals' political attitudes; it can also be argued that individuals develop more positive attitudes toward politics when their involvement is solicited. With mobilization and participation postulated to enhance individuals' attitudinal motivations, both the nature and conceptual priority of attitudes as stimuli of participation is modified: they are not only "internally driven," but externally determined as well, and their correlation with participation reflects a reciprocal relationship.<sup>11</sup>

The most abundant evidence of the external motivation of political participation focuses on voter turnout, where aggregate studies consistently demonstrate that turnout is higher in elections that are close, in politically competitive jurisdictions, where campaign spending is high, and when simultaneous races for higher office are underway (Boyd 1989; Caldeira and Patterson 1982; Cox and Munger 1989; Gilliam 1985; Patterson and Caldeira 1983; Tucker 1986). Evidence using individual-level data is a bit inconsistent, in part a function of the type of election considered and the contextual unit of analysis used (Caldeira, Patterson and Markko 1985; Copeland 1983; Leighley and Nagler 1992). Jackson (1993), for example, finds that spending in congressional races as well as in simultaneous senatorial races increases turnout in (off-year) house races; at the same time, neither spending in a simultaneous gubernatorial race nor party competitiveness at the state level affect turnout.

Though most studies of voter turnout operationalize mobilization with campaign spending, several scholars have also demonstrated the effectiveness of party, candidate or issue organization contacting (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992; Rosenstone, Hansen, Freedman and Grabarek 1993; Wielhouwer and Lockerbie 1994). Yet another form of mobilization that occurs during campaigns is

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<sup>11</sup> Rosenstone and Hansen (1993: 174–76) disagree on this point, based on analysis of NES data. They do not, however, discuss the analysis extensively.

that of informal political discussion (Gilbert 1993; Kenny 1992; Knoke 1990a; Leighley 1990; Smith and Zipp 1983; Weatherford 1982).<sup>12</sup>

Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) provide the most comprehensive treatment of the mobilization model by examining both electoral and nonelectoral forms of participation. They argue that political leaders mobilize participation in non-electoral activities around issues; at the national level, mobilization results from the direct efforts of voluntary associations or indirectly via television coverage of political events and issues. Mobilization into electoral activities is a function of party contacting, electoral competitiveness and social movement activity. They claim that mobilization factors account for approximately half of the decline in voter turnout since 1960, as well as the decline in party-related participation activity.<sup>13</sup>

Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) identify voluntary associations as playing a critical role in mobilizing individuals' political activity, although they offer rather limited evidence on this point due to the sparse data on group membership available in the NES.<sup>14</sup> Other researchers have investigated the group mobilization process in greater detail. According to Verba and Nie (1972: 184), voluntary organizations

... increase the propensity of the individual to be a participant because they give him an opportunity for training in participation within the organization that can be transferred to the political realm. ... what counts is not mere membership but the opportunity for activity that the organization affords.

Verba and Nie (1972) find that active memberships in voluntary organizations increase individuals' overall participation level; that explicitly political organizations (i.e., organizations that have political goals or in which political discussions take place) have stronger effects on individuals; and that this impact is greatest for communal activity, campaign activity and voting. Similar findings are reported by Alford and Scoble (1968), Denney (1979), Knoke (1990a, 1990b), Olsen (1972), Pollock (1982), Rogers, Bultena and Barb (1975) and Sallach, Babchuk, and Booth (1972).

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<sup>12</sup> Stoker and Jennings (1992) examine marital relationships as another type of social interaction which potentially affects individuals' levels of participation; rather than marital status itself enhancing participation, as many analysis suggest, they argue that the political characteristics of the spouse influence participation.

<sup>13</sup> More conventional explanations of voter turnout rely on changes in individuals' psychological involvement in politics or social connectedness (Abramson and Aldrich 1982; Aldrich 1993; Brody 1978; Conway 1981, 1992; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Shaffer 1981; Teixeira 1987, 1992); for alternative explanations of turnout decline, see Boyd 1989; Miller 1980, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> On the role of the church in mobilizing political participation, see Harris (1994).

The significance of group mobilization is highlighted by Verba, Nie and Kim (1978), who argue that group mobilization processes explain cross-national differences in the relationship between socioeconomic status and participation. They demonstrate that where group mobilization processes directed toward the lower class are weak, the relationship between socioeconomic status and participation remains strong; where group mobilization processes are strong, the relationship between socioeconomic status and participation is typically insignificant. Similarly, Davis (1983) analyzes survey data from Mexico and Venezuela and finds that workers in the more exclusionary regime do not convert their socioeconomic resources into political activity. Thus, he concludes that cross-national differences in the relationship between socioeconomic status and conventional political participation reflect the polity's opportunity structure.

Participation in social movements is also attributed to group mobilization or, less formally, knowing a movement participant (Briet, Klandermans and Kroon 1987; Cable, Walsh and Warland 1988; Clarke and Egan 1972; Klandermans and Oegema 1987; McAdam 1986; Morris 1981; Snow, Zurcher and Eklund-Olson 1980; Staggenborg 1987). According to Klandermans and Oegema (1987), participants in social movements are drawn from the mobilization potential—those individuals who are favorably disposed toward the movement's means and goals—through formal and informal links to the social movement (see also Briet, Klandermans and Kroon 1987; Snow, et al., 1986).

Klandermans and Oegema (1987) provide evidence that the higher individuals' levels of education, the more formal and informal links they reported to the peace movement. This suggests an alternative interpretation of evidence regarding the SES model: high socioeconomic status is associated with political participation because it places the individual in a social context where participation opportunities are abundant.

The significance of the political opportunity structure has been noted by political scientists both at the elite and mass level. Bowman and Boynton (1966) report that the most frequent reason (26 percent) provided by local party leaders for becoming active in party politics is that *they had been asked to do so*; among these individuals, almost one-half were recruited by friends or relatives. Beck and Jennings (1979) find that "conventional wisdom" was reversed in the late 1960's, when younger individuals were more likely to participate than were older individuals, and liberals were more likely to participate than were conservatives. They conclude that these relationships resulted from the unique political opportunity structure of the late 1960s: youth and liberals participated more than their older or more conservative counterparts because *there were more opportunities to do so*.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Hansen (1985) argues similarly that changes in group membership reflect mobiliza-

### THE RATIONALITY OF PARTICIPATION

It is generally assumed that political participation is rational. That is, individuals engage in political activity to pursue particular goals, and they decide to participate when the benefits of such activity outweigh the costs (for descriptions of rational choice models, see Aldrich 1993; Downs 1957; Jackman 1992; Opp 1989; Whiteley 1995). Though Verba and Nie (1972) discuss some aspects of rationality, they do not confront the logical dictate of collective action: because nonparticipants cannot be excluded from collective benefits, it is not in the interest of any single individual to bear the costs of participating (Olson 1965; see also Whiteley's [1985] discussion of the collective action problem and proposed solutions).

The collective action problem is probably identified most closely with the study of voter turnout. Downs (1957) and Riker and Ordeshook (1968) posited formal decision theory models of voter turnout, which are the basis of "the calculus of voting" (for a review of these models, and research that followed, see Aldrich 1993; on game theoretic models, see Grafstein 1991; Palfrey and Rosenthal 1983, 1985). Because an individual's probability of determining the outcome of an election is almost always very small, the costs of voting will always outweigh the benefits and individuals will therefore abstain.

The "paradox of participation" is that, contrary to predictions of rational choice models (zero turnout or no participation, in most cases), voting in elections and other types of participation are fairly common. In the case of group membership, Olson's (1965) primary solution to this paradox is to provide selective incentives to individuals who join—that is, provide a benefit to those who choose to contribute.

A number of solutions have been proposed in the study of voter turnout.<sup>16</sup> Downs (1957) added a "D" term, representing the individuals' value, in the long run, of maintaining democracy. Later scholars interpreted this term as representing the expressive or consumptive values of voting (Crain and Deaton 1977; Fiorina 1976; Hinich 1981; Riker and Ordeshook 1968, 1973). Alternatively, Ferejohn and Fiorina (1974) propose the "minimax regret" decision rule; rather than being determined by the probability of affecting the election outcome, individuals' decisions to vote are guided by their preference to minimize the probability that their least preferred option (candidate) occurs (wins).

Morton (1991) and Uhlaner (1986, 1989) use group approaches to solve the paradox. Uhlaner (1989) argues that individuals' decisions to vote reflect

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tion patterns. Hence, individuals' participation decisions reflect in part the opportunities available to them; even when threatened financially or politically, individuals cannot join groups which do not exist.

<sup>16</sup> See Aldrich (1993) and Whiteley (1995) for a discussion of these approaches.

group leaders' efforts in mobilizing their vote, so that the group can obtain benefits from elected politicians (e.g., closer issue positions). Hence, individuals' decisions to vote are investment decisions, and not just expressive or consumptive behavior. Morton (1991) demonstrates that this result holds only if candidates are unconstrained in position-taking.

Aldrich (1993) argues that reinterpreting Downs' "D" term to include both consumptive (expressive) and long-term beliefs and values is particularly appropriate because voting is a relatively low-cost, low (potential) benefit activity. As such, he argues, it is probably the least appropriate type of participation to consider as an empirical study of the collective action problem, which Olson (1965) identifies as characteristic of high-cost, high (potential) benefit activities (see also Whiteley 1995). This illustrates a limitation of the rational choice literature, where the most work has been done in explaining a type of political behavior that is least appropriate to be studied within this framework, as well as the limitations of studying voter turnout alone.

The only empirical evidence we have on high-cost, high (potential) benefit participation focuses on protest as a form of collective action. Opp and various colleagues have investigated protest activity (both legal and illegal) and protest potential in West Germany and the United States. Opp and his colleagues conclude that in the absence of selective material incentives to participate, individuals' valuation of the provision of a public good acts as a *psychological* selective incentive that stimulates participation (Finkel, Muller and Opp 1989; Finkel and Opp 1991; Muller and Opp 1986, 1987; Opp 1986, 1988, 1989, 1990).

Klosko (1987) takes issue with Muller and Opp's (1986) use of public good valuation and other psychological benefits as selective incentives (see Whiteley's [1995] discussion on altruistic solutions to the paradox; for a response to Klosko, see Muller and Opp [1987]).<sup>17</sup> This controversy aside, however, these studies of political protest highlight some of the practical (research design) problems generally associated with empirical studies of rational choice models. First, measures of various incentives for participation or other concepts central to the rational choice model are often questionable. Finkel and Opp (1991), for example, include as "public goods incentives" measures of policy dissatisfaction, feelings of personal influence in achieving the public good, perceptions of the likelihood of group success, collective rationality ("perceptions of the strategic and ethical necessity of the participation of all group members in collective political action"), and moral justification (duty to participate). Even if

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<sup>17</sup> This controversy regarding the use of psychological selective incentives is similar to conflicts over the meaning of the "D" term in the voter turnout equation, noted earlier. It is also essentially the same as an issue raised in the study of group membership regarding expressive incentives. Hence, I return to this point at the end of this section.

the parsimony of the models estimated is not challenged, one might take issue with how closely these measures operationalize the concept of a public good, let alone its value, as defined by Olson.

Second, these studies share with others the use of self-reported motivations for participating, with the attendant difficulties this raises: such motivations or beliefs might well be developed post-hoc as a justification for individuals' behavior (Pierce and Converse 1990). And, third, much of the research necessarily relies on samples of protestors (or participants) only, which introduces selection bias to model estimates (Achen 1986; Berk 1983; Dubin and Rivers 1989/90).<sup>18</sup>

Valid tests of rational choice models require more appropriate research designs and improved measures of central concepts (incentives, benefits, costs). The utility of empirical studies of rational choice models should also be evaluated more critically by specialists in the subfield, with particular attention devoted to these research design issues. Ignoring these issues will seriously limit what we gain from future studies using the rational actor model.

It is somewhat ironic that the very type of participation that Olson (1965) focused on—group membership—has received the least attention by scholars using rational choice models. However, various group studies show that members cite solidary and public goods incentives (e.g., value placed on public policy outcomes) as reasons for joining or participating in additional activities, with material (i.e., selective) incentives typically being less important, and demonstrate the importance of ideology as a basis for membership (Cohn, Barkan and Whitaker 1993; Cook 1984; Godwin and Mitchell 1982; Hofstetter 1973; Knoke 1988, 1990b; Oliver 1984; Rothenberg 1988, 1992; Sabatier 1992; Schlozman and Tierney 1986; Tedin, Brady et al. 1977).

But the relevance of many of these studies to Olson's argument must be evaluated carefully. According to Olson, selective incentives are essential to motivating individuals to join interest groups. Olson claims this applies most strictly to economic (e.g., labor and agricultural) groups, but is less helpful in the case of noneconomic groups or "where nonrational or irrational behavior is the basis for a lobby" (1965: 161).

Yet empirical analyses of group membership typically ignore which type of group is considered, or what public good the group is attempting to supply. Furthermore, evidence based on group members alone—and relying on retrospective self-reports on motivations for joining—is highly suspect, as noted above in the discussion of studies of protest behavior. Hence, it is uncertain whether

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<sup>18</sup> See also Hardin's (1982) critique of Godwin and Mitchell's (1982a) theoretical models and empirical tests, followed by their response (1982b).

evidence from some of these studies actually refutes Olson's claims regarding selective incentives, or is an artifact of the research design employed.

The assumption of rationality has been challenged by the claim that some acts of participation may be expressive, rather than instrumental, in nature (e.g., Carter and Guerette 1992; Fiorina 1976; Hinich 1981; Niemi 1976). Consistent with this argument, expressive values are often reported by activists in empirical studies of the incentives associated with decisions to participate (e.g., Godwin and Mitchell 1982; Knoke 1988, 1990b; Rothenberg 1988, 1992).

According to Whiteley (1995), rational choice theory predicts that expressive incentives are unrelated to participation.<sup>19</sup> Yet he finds that party members with stronger party identification (i.e., greater expressive incentives) are more likely to be activists. He thus concludes that the rational choice model is incomplete (as does Knoke [1988, 1990b], among others).

Alternatively, one could argue that the rational actor model is premised on individuals' evaluating the costs and benefits of participating rather than the particular *types* of benefits (i.e., incentives) associated with participating. In other words, if a particular individual values expressing her opinions enough (so that the benefits of doing so outweigh the costs), participation is entirely rational. No assumptions are made within the framework of the rational actor model regarding *what* individuals value as benefits (incentives). And, hence, empirical findings of an association between expressive incentives and participation are entirely within the rational actor framework.

The controversy over these alternative interpretations of the relevance of expressive benefits to the rational actor model is similar to disagreements over the "D" term in models of voter turnout as well as the use of psychological selective incentives in the study of political protest. Hence, a fundamental question in the rational actor literature on participation is how to reconcile these empirical findings with the rational actor model. Do they, in fact, suggest that the rational actor model is incomplete, or are they consistent within the rational actor framework?

### CONSEQUENCES OF PARTICIPATION

It is telling that a section on the consequences of participation not only comes last, but is also the briefest in length, for that is consistent with its treatment by the discipline. Likewise, if one reads Conway's (1991) chapter on the consequences of participation, there is much more said about representation per

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<sup>19</sup> This may conflict slightly with Olson's (1965) original argument, where he notes that social and psychological incentives may in fact act as selective incentives to induce participation; see also Chong's (1991) analysis of the civil rights movement, which emphasizes "selective social benefits" and "narrowly rational expressive benefits."



se than about mass political participation. And while Rosenstone and Hansen (1993), among many others, demonstrate that the "participant population" over-represents the advantaged, little empirical evidence is provided that such over-representation influences elected officials. Many of the theoretical and empirical issues raised above likely explain the relative absence of research on this issue. For example, an overwhelming focus on voter turnout to the exclusion of other forms of participation has restricted studies of the consequences of participation to looking only at turnout. And the lack of appropriate data on participation other than voting makes it nearly impossible to assess the consequences of the types of participation that are probably most likely to have a direct influence on government officials.

Most studies addressing the consequences of low turnout rates examine attitudinal differences between voters and non-voters, and generally conclude that such differences are minimal (Bennett and Resnick 1990; Gant and Lyons 1988; Petrocik and Shaw 1991; Shaffer 1982; Studlar and Welch 1986; Teixeira 1992; Wolfinger and Rosestone 1980). More recently, however, Verba, Schlozman, Brady, and Nie (1993a) argue that the needs of voters and non-voters differ: non-voters are much more likely to mention personal economic needs as a problem than are voters.

Brady, Verba, and Schlozman (1993) argue that the signals representatives receive regarding the values, needs and preferences of citizens are distorted when they are based on the activist population alone, for this necessarily ignores the opinions of inactive citizens. And this distortion is reflected in policy decisions: higher levels of turnout among the poor are associated with higher welfare benefits (Hicks and Swank 1992; Hill and Leighley 1992; Hill, Leighley and Hinton-Andersson, forthcoming). Hence, this research suggests that who votes matters—and the earlier conclusion that turnout does not matter resulted from studying particular attitudinal differences rather than policy outcomes.

Significantly more research has been done on the consequences of participation for the individual, though even this body of research is fairly small as well. As suggested earlier, participation enhances individuals' political sophistication as well as political efficacy (Bennett 1975; Finkel 1985, 1987; Junn 1991; Leighley 1991; Madsen 1987; Tan 1980). And it is likely that these effects have significant long-term consequences for the individual. Jennings (1987) reports, for example, that youth who protested in the 1960s remain distinctive from non-protestors in their political attitudes nearly twenty years later (see also Jennings and Niemi 1981). Nonetheless, it seems that identifying individual-level effects and confirming that they endure over time is but a start toward understanding the consequences of participation; and that a good understanding must eventually incorporate a more sophisticated view of the policy consequences of participation as well.

### QUESTIONS REMAINING

The breadth and depth of this review essay reflect the intellectual richness of the literature on citizen participation. We have learned much from participation studies of the past several decades, particularly with respect to *who* participates. Verba and Nie's (1972) explication of the critical role of socioeconomic status in structuring individuals' participation in the political system established an intellectual agenda which is still viable twenty years later. And, Verba et al.'s *Citizen Participation Study* is about to do the same. These studies, along with many others cited above, clearly establish that individuals with high levels of socioeconomic status, positive civic orientations and appropriate political resources are more likely to participate than those without.

However, the question of *why* people participate is not yet resolved, in two respects. First, an increasingly rich body of literature highlighting the role of mobilization suggests that a partial answer to this question is "because people have been asked to participate." *To the extent that the socioeconomic status and mobilization models offer alternative explanations as to why individuals participate, a critical set of issues to be resolved relates to the relative importance of socioeconomic status, civic orientations and political mobilization as influences on individuals' political activity.*

A second way in which *why* individuals participate has not been addressed relates to the extent to which Opp's (1989) argument regarding "soft incentives" is persuasive (see also Whiteley [1995]). As noted above (in the discussion of the rationality of participation), many studies conclude that various types of expressive (or selective psychological) incentives are associated with participating in collective action. Collectively this research raises three issues which must be considered. First, questionable measures of expressive incentives (as well as public good valuation) are often used in these analyses; more rigorous justifications of these measures must be provided in future work. Second (assuming that appropriate measures are used), many of the attitudes used to measure "soft incentives" might well be post-hoc justifications of protest activity (or group joining, as far as that goes). What, then, is the significance of these empirical findings for the rational actor model? *Third, and more fundamental: what is the theoretical significance of expressive incentives being associated with engaging in collective action? Is it, as Whiteley argues, an indication that the rational actor model is incomplete? Or does it require other assumptions regarding rationality and participation?*

Another question which remains relates to how individuals participate. Although Verba and Niels participation typology—which categorizes different participation acts according to type of influence, initiative required, level of conflict and scope of outcome—should lead to testable hypotheses regarding *which type*

of participation individuals engage in (rather than whether they participate or not), this has not been pursued. Yet individuals must not only choose to act politically, but also choose how to act, and our theories of participation should reflect this decision as well. This distinction is important both with respect to taking part in collective action as well as engaging in instrumental (i.e., problem-solving) participatory acts. *To account for more than "how much" participation, we must conceptualize the participation decision not as a choice between activity and inactivity, but rather as a choice of a particular type of political act out of a set of potential acts.*

Conceptualizing the participation decision in this way requires distinguishing among various acts as well as actors. Specifically, the potential political acts available to the mass public are different from those available to political elites; and even those acts available to both are likely to be associated with significantly different costs and benefits for citizens and elites. For example, in the case of collective action, the probability of affecting the outcome is likely to be much higher for elites than for citizens (see Whiteley 1995). *Hence, in examining individuals' participation as decisions to engage in one political activity rather than another, we might exploit various institutional contexts (e.g., interest group politics, local school politics, party politics) as alternatives to the study of "mass" participatory politics.* As Salisbury (1975: 336, italics in the original) argued:

The focus has too often been simply on whether there was more or less participation. It must instead be directed toward *what kinds of actions, in what institutional contexts, over what periods of time, with what kinds of objectives, and with what constraints in the environment.*

None of these issues, however, can be addressed satisfactorily without regard to time. Our reliance on cross-sectional survey data in studying participation has precluded development of participation models wherein participation decisions are made over time, as the costs and benefits of doing so change (e.g., Rothenberg 1988, 1992). And, as suggested throughout this essay, our current models require strong assumptions regarding causal ordering as well as the validity and reliability of individuals' self-reported incentives for participating.

Perhaps creative analyses of existing data sets might allow us to evaluate these assumptions more carefully. A more ambitious research agenda, however, would be to develop panel data on individuals' attitudes, opportunities (i.e., mobilization) and incentives to participate, along with their experiences with prior participatory acts (e.g., knowledge gain, satisfaction). This would provide not just more data, but a fundamentally *different* type of data, for the different questions which must now be addressed.

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