Political Participation Among the Unemployed

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There is evidence that periods of unemployment can change political attitudes (for example Margalit 2013; Kiewiet and Udell 1998; Bell 1997 ; Burden and Wichowsky 2014). But, it doesn't matter what you want from a political system if you do not participate in it. Citizens in most democracies can always vote for no one. A concurrent (if not precursory) question regarding how unemployment affects opinion is *how the individual experiences of unemployment effects engagement with the political system?* This "insight" is not novel; since at least 1932, social scientists have periodically attempted to answer this question (Jahoda and Zeisel 1974 [1932]). However, since unemployment is a bundle of several potentially countervailing treatments, the results to date our ambiguous.

An initial point worth specifying when evaluating the literature on unemployment and participation is that unemployment exists both as a personal experience and as contextual condition. It directly effects the unemployed and indirectly effects the rest of society. Thus, aggregate macro unemployment may increase overall turnout, even while decreasing turnout among the unemployed. It would be an ecological fallacy to assume from studies which show increased aggregate unemployment results in increased voter turnout (e.g. Cebula 2017; Burden and Wichowsky 2014) the effects of an individual being unemployed on their behavior – though these studies may update our prior regarding the plausibility of such an individual effect. There are many theories on the general effect of the state of economy on aggregate behavior,[1] which are beyond the scope of this review. Here I focus only on theorization and evidence regarding the political behavior of the unemployed.

On the one hand, unemployment is expected by many scholars to result in withdrawal from the political system due to its negative effect on *resources*, *mobilization*, and *motivation*[2]:

[1] While unemployment is generally considered an economic indicator, an analysis of data from Australia indicates that aggregate unemployment is seen both a signal of the quality of the economy and the rise of social ills (Blount 2002).

[2] Additionally, the state may differential respond to the political mobilization of the poor, structurally suppressing the political engagement of the unemployed. This has been common in American history for example (Loomis 2018). However, for the purposes of this discussion, we will assume no additional legal barriers for the poor to participate

- "The money, time, and energy spent combating extreme economic adversity provide payoffs that are more immediate and valuable than the benefits that might be gained from investing in electoral politics (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 130)."
- "The chance to acquire civic skills in the workplace depends, first of all, on having a job (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 314)."
- "loss of a job might push the unemployed in a funnel of exclusion from various layers of social life and weaken social bonds (Giugni and Lorenzini 2013, 180)."
- "Prolonged unemployment leads to a state of apathy in which the victims do not utilize any longer even the few opportunities left to them (Jahoda and Zeisel 1974 [1932], 1)."[3]

While this is the dominant hypothesis, there exists a counter-argument: unemployment will stir political participation as economic hardship encourages people to participate to pressure the state for redress of grievances.[^1] Some scholarship has found such a mobilizing effect (e.g. Burden and Wichowsky 2014).[4] Moreover, these grievances are further thought to fuel anger and resentment, potentially leading to radical and violent action (Gurr 1970). As a result, unemployment is often believed to play a significant role in emergence of radical politics (e.g. De Witte 1992a).[5]

Negotiating these countervailing effects of unemployment is the key challenge to understanding how joblessness impacts political participation. As one scholar put it: "Given

are added.

[3]The reasons why unemployment may lead to apathy are many. First, as Jahoda points out, work ties individuals to society: "it imposes a time structure on the waking day; it compels contacts and shared experiences with others outside the nuclear family; it demonstrates that there are goals and purposes which are beyond the scope of an individual but require a collectivity; it imposes status and social identity through the division of labour in modern employment and, last but not least, it enforces activity (Jahoda and Rush 1980, 11–12)." These features are valuable to mental health. Furthermore, work is often a source of identity and value (historically, particularly for men), which when deprived of can injure efficacy and increase stress (Marx and Nguyen 2016; Paul and Moser 2009). Finally, and perhaps most obviously, financial strain on its own is a major source of stress (Paul and Moser 2009).

[4]A further mechanism, less common in the literature, is that employment has selection effects. Employers prefer workers who are neither apathetic (i.e. lazy) nor politically militant (i.e. unionists). Thus, firms will disproportionately push both the most engaged and least engaged into unemployment, which may result in no difference in average participation but will change the distribution of behavior at the extremes. Thus, the unemployed may both be more radical and less engaged on average than the employed worker (as discussed in De Witte 1992b).

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these two contradictory possibilities, the most likely outcome is a nil overall effect, and this is precisely what most studies report (Blais 2006)." Scholarship has, however, identified several sources of heterogeneity to disentangle these differential effects. This might help to explain de Witte's finding that while unemployment decreased participation for most people, for a minority it actually increased participation and radicalization (De Witte 1992a). I organize these sources of heterogeneity into four categories:

1. Variation in the experience of unemployment
2. Variation in the circumstances of the unemployment
3. Variation in the characteristics of the unemployed
4. Variation in the type of political participation

Variation in the experience of unemployment: Examining the 1974 Current Population Survey in the US, Rosenstone found that individuals where significantly less likely to participate in politics immediately after losing work, due to the immediate life-disturbance of unemployment, but this effect diminishes with time and after four months unemployment began to manifest into greater participation (1982). A four-wave panel study from Spain (2010-2012), found that the pro-participatory effects of unemployment tend to be within the first six months, while the apathy effects are derived from long bouts of unemployment of approximately a year or more (Munoz 2013). Synthesizing these two studies, the effect of unemployment appears to curvilinear: immediately depressing political interest as it taxes capacity, then augmenting participation as grievances become salient, then finally resulting in apathy suppressing engagement.[6]

Variation in the circumstances of the unemployment: Notably, 1974 - the year Rosenstone drew his data - marked the worst recession in American history between the Great Depression and the Great Recession. Similarly, Munoz's data is immediately after the Great Recession. As a result, these findings may not be fully generalizable to all experiences of unemployment as unemployment during may have differential effects conditional on the macro

[6]This tracks with research indicating the effects of unemployment on mental health are curvilinear (Paul and Moser 2009).

unemployment rate. For economic adversity to directly effect participation it must be politicized (Brody and Sniderman 1977). Put simply, "those facing economic adversity are more likely to vote when they blame the government for economic outcomes (Arceneaux 2003)."

Thus, Incantalupo demonstrates that if you became unemployed when the unemployment rate is high, you externalized your unemployment, attributing it to the system and increasing your participation; however, if it is low, unemployment leads to apathy as you blame yourself for your condition (2011). Ayatac et al. found a similar relationship between aggregate and individual unemployment, however, instead of attributing this to internal deliberation, they associate it with mobilization: "When unemployment is high, challengers have an incentive to blame the incumbent, thus eliciting anger among the unemployed… When joblessness is low, campaigns tend to ignore it. The jobless thus remain in states of depression and self-blame, which are demobilizing emotions (2018)." These arguments are consistent with evidence indicating that an individual's level of political awareness will decline when they are unemployed, unless the economy is generally doing poorly in which case they will become more attune to political affairs (Anduiza and Marinova 2015).

In general, whether unemployed people's movements emerge appears to be tightly linked to the availability of organizations able to mobilize the disperse unemployed communities (Giugni 2010). In fact, it seems that unemployment's greater negative effect on participation is through social exclusion rather than economic exclusion (Giugni and Lorenzini 2013). Therefore, the presence of a Communist Party or other group willing to act to politicize unemployment is thought to increase the probability of participation by the unemployed (Bagguley 1991). In general, trade unions are not always willing to take on this role, often turning to protecting "insiders" rather than the general working-class (Rueda 2005; Loomis 2018).

Separately, given a primary mechanism through which unemployment impacts participation is decreased resources, it is perhaps unsurprising that Marx and Nguyen find unemployment is less detrimental to efficacy in richer countries, more equal countries, and countries with more generous welfare systems (2016). It is further plausible that unemployment is less likely to spark apathy under these conditions, as research shows that greater development, labor protections, and equality reduce the impact of unemployment on stress (Paul and Moser 2009).

Variation in the characteristics of the unemployed: As many of the negative affects of unemployment on participation are income-bound, it perhaps unsurprising that one study found unemployment to have a negative effect on the participation of low-status individuals while having no effect on the behavior of high-status individuals (Scott and Acock 1979).

Marx and Nguyen also found that unemployment had the strongest attenuating effect on efficacy among those who did not have a stated party or ideology (2016). The argument being that those with a weaker standing motivation, due to habit, heuristic, or mobilization, are more susceptible to the negative motivational effects of unemployment (and potentially less susceptible to the positive effects). Along the same lines, experimental evidence shows that triggering stress, one of the characteristics of unemployment, suppresses participation only among those without strong histories of participation (Hassell and Settle 2017). Youths have also been found to be more negatively affected by unemployment, again likely due to lack of habit or mobilization (Marx and Nguyen 2016; Emmenegger, Marx, and Schraff 2016).

Variation in the type of political participation: It is possible that unemployment changes not internal efficacy but rather external efficacy, specifically "faith in the system." Thus unemployment will influence the types of participation seen as viable, rather than willingness to engage. Clark found in a series of studies in Australia that unemployed young men were more like than similar employed youths to favor demonstrating, forming unions, lawlessness, and political violence (Clark 1985; Clark and Clissold 1982). However, this finding is contradicted by Schur's evidence that unemployment decreased all forms of participation *except voting* (2003). This result better fits with Brady et al.'s finding that voting is driven by interest rather than resources (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995).

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