Civic Engagement in American Democracy

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12 Civic Participation and the Equality Problem

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If CIVIC ENGAGEMENT is on the skids, does it really matter? Discussions about the health of civil society are ordinarily conducted as if the reasons for concern are self-evident. When we bother to ask why we care about civic engagement, however, several answers suggest themselves. Participation in voluntary activity matters for three broad categories of reasons: the development of the capacities of the individual, the creation of community and the cultivation of democratic virtues, and the equal protection of interests in public life.[1] In this chapter, we focus on the last of these and explore the implications of patterns of citizen participation in American politics for equal protection of interests.

1. Robert Putnam (1996, p. 27) makes the point that many discussions of the decline in civic engagement proceed from the unstated assumption that civic engagement is beneficial to society and that its decline is to be regretted. There are, however, a number of helpful discussions about why we care about civic engagement; among them are Mansbridge (1980, chap. 17); Parry, Moyser, and Day (1992, chap. 1); Putnam (1993); Skocpol (1996); Newton (1997); Edwards and Foley (1997); and Warren (1998). Different authors use different rubrics to categorize the salutary consequences of civic involvement. In proposing tripartite benefits from voluntary activity, we make no claims of either novelty or definitiveness. Rather we seek to position our work within an ongoing dialogue.

Why Care about Civic Engagement?

Of the three broad justifications for concern about civic engagement, the first—that it develops the capacities of the individual—derives from John Stuart Mill. According to the various versions of this perspective, voluntary action is educational, and those who take part become in many ways better human beings—more independent, efficacious, and competent, larger in their capacities for thought, greater in their respect for others and their willingness to take responsibility, better able to appraise their own interests and those of the community.[2]

The second argument made on behalf of civic engagement, its salutary implications for the creation of community and democracy, is in many ways a corollary to the first. In this case the educational effects of civic participation are valued not for their meaning for the individual but for their consequences for community and democracy. The heirs to Tocqueville who make this argument stress several themes. They point to the democratic orientations and skills that develop when people work together voluntarily: social trust,[3] norms of reciprocity and cooperation, and the capacity to transcend narrow points of view and conceptualize the common good. In short, when there is a vigorous sector of voluntary involvement—and the strong associational foundation that underlies it—it becomes easier for communities, and democratic nations, to engage in joint activity and to produce public goods.[4] Moreover, a vital arena of voluntary activity between individual and state protects citizens from overweening state power and preserves freedom.

The third rationale for concern about civic engagement shifts the emphasis from shared community interests to the conflicting interests of individuals and groups and focuses on equal protection of interests. Interestingly, this perspective draws nourishment from Madison's fundamental insight in *Federalist* No. 10 that differences of opinion are sown in the nature of humankind, especially in the unequal acquisition of property. Through the medium of political participation, citizens communicate information about their preferences and needs for government action and

2. See, for example, Bachrach (1967); Pateman (1970); and Parry (1972).

3. This perspective clearly draws from Coleman's (1988) concept of social capital.

4. Many commentators point out that the inevitable result of collective action is not necessarily to foster community and democracy. Some groups—for example, militias—hardly promote democratic values. Moreover, organizations of like-minded individuals beget conflict as well as cooperation. See, for example, the arguments and references contained in Foley and Edwards (1997) and Berman (1997).

generate pressure on public officials to heed what they hear. Of course, we know that public officials act for many reasons, only one of which is their assessment of what the public wants and needs. And policymakers have ways other than the medium of citizen participation to learn what citizens want and need from the government. Nonetheless, what public officials hear clearly influences what they do. Therefore, as long as citizens differ in their opinions and interests, the level playing field of democracy requires that we take seriously the fact that citizens differ in their capacity and desire to take part politically. The democratic principle of one-person, one-vote is the most obvious manifestation of the link between voluntary participation and equal protection of interests. However, for forms of voluntary political participation beyond the vote—for example, writing letters to public officials, attending protests, or making political contributions—there is no such mandated equality of participatory input.

The questions raised by an emphasis on equal protection of interests are somewhat different from those raised by a focus on the development of the individual or the nurturance of community and democracy. First, the cooperative voluntary activity that fosters individual faculties or promotes community and democracy need not be explicitly political. Indeed, some versions of the neo-Tocquevillian argument about community and democracy focus explicitly on voluntary activity in the zone between state and market. In contrast, when equal protection of interests is at stake, the voluntary activity that counts is necessarily political. Furthermore, when it is a matter of the education of individuals or the cultivation of democratic habits, the aggregate quantity of civic engagement is critical. When we move from a conception of congruent community interests to one of clashing individual and group interests and, thus, to a concern with equal protection of interests, questions of representation come to the fore. What matters is not only the amount of civic activity but also its distribution, not just how many people take part but also who they are. In short, concern for democratic equality forces us not only to inquire how many people are bowling and whether they do so solo or in leagues, but also to ask who bowls.

Animated by our concern with equal protection of interests, in this chapter we probe the contours of citizen participation in American politics. We investigate from a variety of perspectives the issue of participatory equality—asking what and from whom the government hears.[5]

5. This chapter draws heavily from the findings of our jointly authored book (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady [1995]), as well as subsequent investigations reported in Brady, Schlozman, and Verba (1999).

The Citizen Participation Study

We employ data from the Citizen Participation Study, a large-scale, two-stage survey of the voluntary activity of the American public. The first stage consisted of over 15,000 telephone interviews of a random sample of American adults that we conducted during the last six months of 1989. These twenty-minute screener interviews provided a profile of political and nonpolitical activity as well as basic demographic information. In the spring of 1990, we conducted much longer, in-person interviews with a stratified random sample of 2,517 of the original 15,000 respondents chosen so as to produce a disproportionate number of those active in politics as well as of African Americans and Latinos. The data in this chapter are from the 2,517 respondents in the follow-up survey.[6] The data presented are weighted to produce an effective random sample.

Understanding Political Participation

Through their activity, citizens in a democracy seek to control who will hold public office and to influence what the government does. Political participation provides the mechanism by which citizens can communicate information about their interests, preferences, and needs—and generate pressure to respond. In a meaningful democracy, the people's voice must be clear and loud—clear so that policymakers understand citizen concerns and loud so that they have an incentive to pay attention to what is said. Since democracy implies not only governmental responsiveness to citizen interests but also equal consideration of the interests of each citizen, democratic participation must also be equal.

In thinking about why some people are active and others are not, we find it helpful to invert the usual question and to ask instead why people do *not* take part in politics. Three answers immediately suggest themselves: because they can't; because they don't want to; or because nobody asked.

"They can't," suggests a paucity of necessary *resources*—time to take part, money to contribute to campaigns and other political causes, and skills to use time and money effectively. "They don't want to," focuses

6. A more detailed description of the sample, the sample weights that allow the sample to be analyzed as a random sample, and a listing of the relevant measures can be found in the appendixes to Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995).

attention on the absence of political *engagement*—lack of interest in politics or little concern with public issues, a belief that activity can make little or no difference, little or no knowledge about the political process, or other priorities. "Nobody asked," implies isolation from the networks of *recruitment* through which citizens are mobilized to politics. These three components—resources, engagement, and recruitment—form the backbone of an explanatory model of citizen participation that we call the Civic Voluntarism Model. Our discussion of participatory inequalities in this chapter focuses on the first and last of this trio of participatory factors.

Participatory Inequality in America

As it is in so many other ways, American politics is special when it comes to citizen participation. That voter turnout in the United States lags behind voter turnout in other democracies is well known. What is less frequently acknowledged is that in other forms of political activity—for example, campaigning, being active in the local community, or contacting government officials—Americans are as active as, or substantially more active than, citizens elsewhere. What is distinctive about political participation in America, however, is that it is so unequally distributed, hewing more closely to the fault lines of social class. In the United States the skew introduced by the relationship between high levels of education or income and high levels of political activity—a bias characteristic of political participation in democracies around the world—is especially pronounced.

Recent trends in American politics have significant consequences for the nature of political activity and the extent of participatory inequalities. The nationalization and professionalization of both our political parties and organized interests have redefined the role of citizen activist as, increasingly, a writer of checks and letters. The rise of mass mail and electronic communications and the concomitant rise of citizen groups and political action committees dovetail with media-intensive and increasingly costly election campaigns to enhance the relative importance of cash as a medium of participatory input. This development has profound implications for political equality among citizens. A participatory system in which individual financial contributions figure so importantly is characterized by extreme inequalities of participatory input. The range of people whose voices are heard and the range of issues articulated are narrowed with the result

that the democratic ideal of the equal representation of the needs and preferences of all citizens is jeopardized.

Of Time and Money

If we compare the distinctive properties of time and money as forms of participatory input, we can understand why, as money gains in relative importance, the participatory system becomes less equal. As resources for politics, time and money differ in that time is both more constrained and more evenly distributed than is money. Time, unlike money, cannot be banked for later use if not expended today. Furthermore, in contrast to money, there is a fixed upper bound on time: the best-endowed of us has only twenty-four hours in a day. Because time is inherently limited, disposable time is more evenly distributed among individuals than is disposable income. Even allowing for the difference in the metrics, the gap in dollars between the richest and poorest is far wider than the gap in hours between the busiest and most leisured. Indeed, of all the resources that facilitate political involvement, money is the most stratified.[7]

Who enjoys the luxury of excess money or time to devote, if desired, to political participation? In case it was not apparent before Hemingway's famous observation, we now know that the rich have more money. What is more, it is well known that income and wealth are distributed more unequally in the United States than they are in other developed democracies. With respect to the question of whether those who are financially well off also have more free time, we might have contradictory expectations. On one hand, we might guess that the rich would have more free time because they can hire others—gardeners or accountants, for example—to do what most people have to do for themselves. On the other hand, we might expect the rich to have less free time because they manage to accumulate wealth by dint of the long hours they log at work.[8] In fact, our data demonstrate that income and other measures of socioeconomic status are not related to the availability of free time. Instead, what determines how much time is available are such life circumstances as having a job, a spouse who works, or children, especially preschool children. Thus, unlike all other politically relevant resources—not only money but also education and various kinds of civic skills—free time does not hew to the fault lines of social stratification.

7. On the multiple resources that are useful for political participation, see Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995, chaps. 10–11).

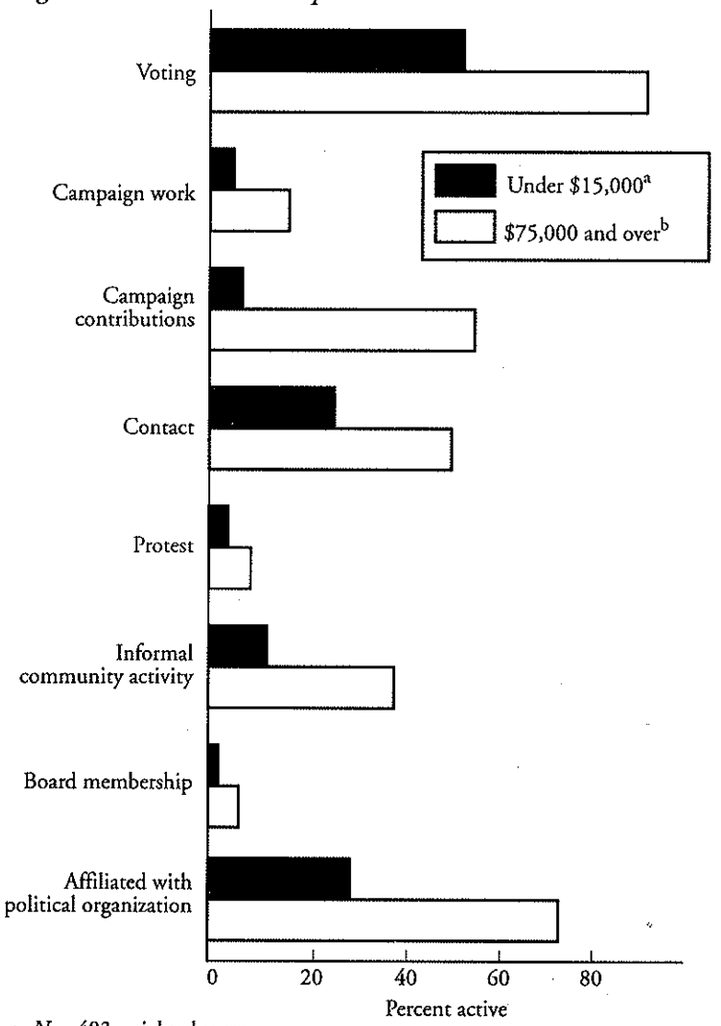
8. In fact these conjectures reflect the contradictory predictions of economic theory, which holds both that an income effect would produce more leisure for the wealthy because they are able to purchase it and that a substitution effect would produce less because their wages raise the opportunity cost of free time. See Mincer (1962).

Because those who are financially well off are more likely than the less well heeled to take part, the increased emphasis on making financial contributions as a form of political activity has potential consequences for participatory equality. Figure 12-1 compares two income groups at the extremes, roughly the bottom fifth (who had family incomes below $15,000 at the time of our survey in 1990) and the top tenth (who had family incomes above $75,000), and shows that, with respect to all forms of activity, the former are much less active than the latter. They are less likely to vote, only half as likely to go to a protest or to get in touch with a government official, only one-third as likely to engage in informal activity within the community, and only one-tenth as likely to make a campaign donation.

It matters not only whether citizens take part politically but also how much they do. Earlier we mentioned that, as the only act for which there is mandated equality in each citizen's input, the vote is unique among political acts. For other acts, the volume of activity—letters written, dollars contributed, meetings attended, and so on—can be adjusted according to the willingness and wherewithal of the activist. Although the affluent are more likely to be active as both campaign workers and campaign donors, their relative advantage grows when we consider not simply the fact of their activity but also the amount of their activity. Figure 12-2 presents data only for those who were active and shows that, among those who worked as volunteers in campaigns, those in the lowest income group actually gave more time—an average of four hours a week more—than those in the highest income category. Among those who gave money to campaigns, however, the situation is, not unexpectedly, very different. Among givers, those at the top of the income ladder gave, on average, nearly fourteen times as much as those at the bottom.

We can push this line of reasoning one step further by using units of participatory input rather than individuals as our metric. Figure 12-3 gives us a politician's-eye view of what the citizenry would look like if each income group's visibility depended on the amount of political activity it produced. The upper-left section of Figure 12-3 presents as a baseline the distribution of various family income groupings within the population.

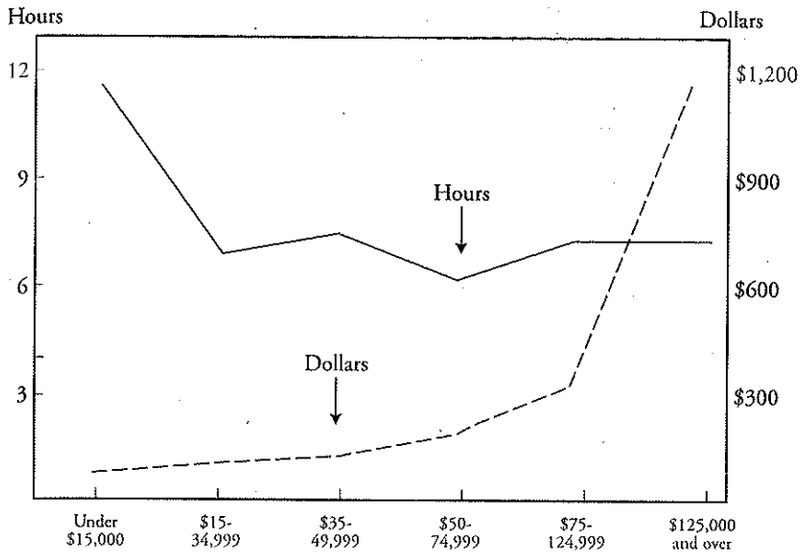
Figure 12-1. *Percentage Active in Various Activities: High- and Low-Income Groups*



a. N = 483 weighted cases.
b. N = 224 weighted cases.

Source: This and subsequent figures and tables have been adapted from Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (Harvard University Press, 1995) and Brady, Schlozman, and Verba (*America Political Science Review*, 1999).

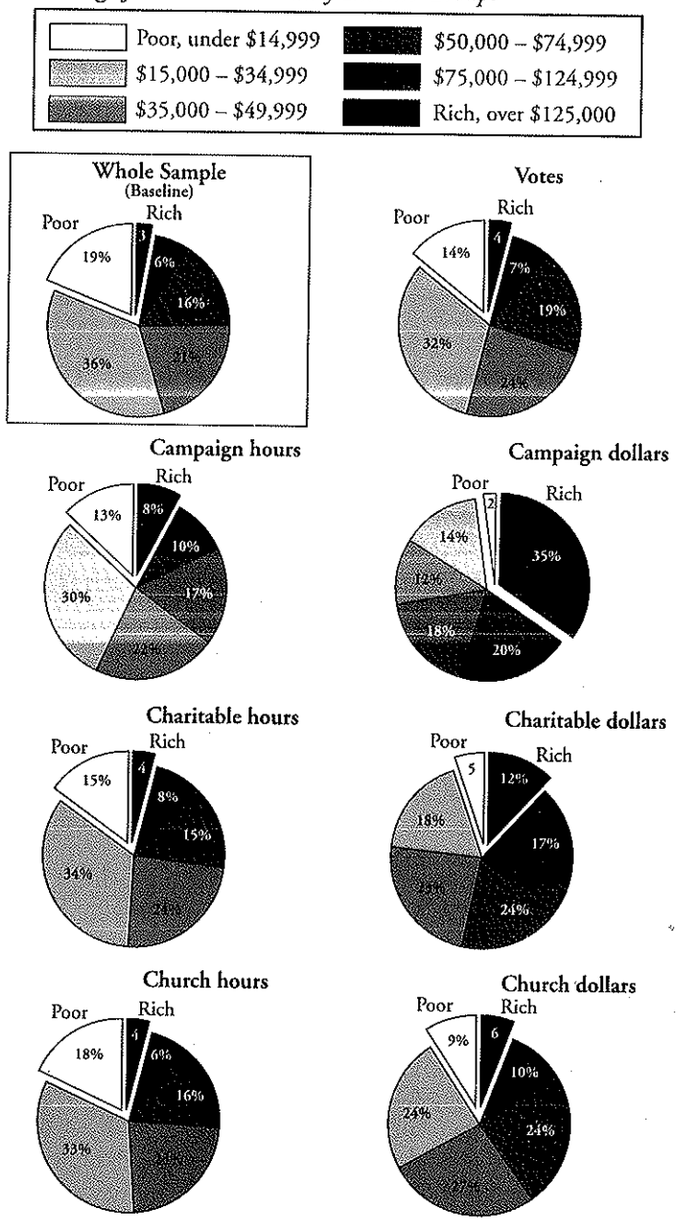
Figure 12-2. *Mean Hours and Dollars Given to Political Campaigns, by Family Income*



The other graphs show the proportion of the population in various income categories weighted by the amount of activity produced by that income group: by the votes citizens cast, the number of hours they work in campaigns, and the number of dollars they contribute to candidates, parties, and campaign organizations. For comparison, we provide information about voluntary activity in nonpolitical domains: the proportion of hours and dollars contributed to charity and to religious institutions by different family income groups.

The activist population provides a very different income perspective from the population as a whole. Those at the top of the income hierarchy produced more than their proportionate share of votes, campaign hours, and campaign dollars. However, the distortion is much less pronounced for votes than for campaign time and, in turn, less for campaign time than for campaign money. The 3 percent of the sample with family incomes over $125,000 are responsible for 4 percent of the votes, 8 percent of the hours devoted to campaigning, and fully 35 percent of the money contributed. Indeed, the top two income groups, who constitute less than 10

Figure 12-3. *Volume of Political and Nonpolitical Activity: Percentage from Various Family Income Groups*



percent of the sampled population, donated more than half of the money used to conduct campaigns. At the other end of the family income scale are those with family incomes under $15,000, who constitute 19 percent of the sample. They were responsible for 14 percent of the votes and 13 percent of the hours volunteered in campaigns. However, they are barely visible in electoral contributions—donating only 2 percent of the campaign dollars.

Figure 12-3 also shows comparable figures for the hours devoted to charitable activity and to educational, social, or charitable activities associated with a church (beyond attendance at services), as well as for the dollars contributed to charity and to religious institutions. In terms of the volume of voluntary activity, the poor are underrepresented and the affluent overrepresented. Further, the distortion is generally greater in the domain of politics than in other arenas and much greater for money than for time. With respect to hours, the poor are underrepresented in all three domains, but by the largest amount for campaign activity. The affluent are overrepresented by a substantial amount in campaigning, and by a smaller amount in charitable hours. They are proportionately represented in the number of hours devoted to church work. Note, in fact, that both the highest- and lowest-income groups contribute a proportional share of the church hours, suggesting that the religious domain is the one of greatest relative equality. In terms of dollars, the affluent are overrepresented and the poor underrepresented in the money contributed in all three domains. However, the bias is much less pronounced for donations to religious institutions than for donations to charities.[9] And the bias is greatest for campaign contributions.

It is hardly surprising that those with higher family incomes are more generous in their financial contributions, but not necessarily in the amount of time they give. After all they have more money—and, in comparison with the poor, they are relatively better off with respect to money than with respect to time. It is less obvious why they should be relatively more generous than those who are less well off in their contributions to politics than in their contributions to charity or church—especially since democratic politics is the arena of voluntary activity with the strongest underly-

9. Among those who contributed, those with family incomes under $15,000 gave on average of $97 per year to charity; those with incomes over $125,000 gave on average $1,176. The figures for church giving were $373 and $1,662 respectively. For giving time, activists among the poor actually gave somewhat more hours per week to charitable and church work than the rich.

ing egalitarian commitment. In an age when candidates rely ever more heavily on campaign contributions, the extent to which campaign dollars come from the wealthy has implications for equality in a democracy.

Participatory Equality and Government Benefits

Why should we care that some people are much more active than others and, therefore, that government officials hear much more from some quarters than from others? If those who do not take part in politics are distinctive—in their political opinions and concerns or their need for government action—then the equal protection of interests may be in jeopardy. Our data show clearly that those who are especially active in politics do not necessarily represent the views or the priorities of those who are more quiescent. The government hears different messages from members of groups that are not especially active. In particular, when those who are disadvantaged by virtue of low levels of education or income do participate, they express distinctive sets of concerns, needs, and opinions.

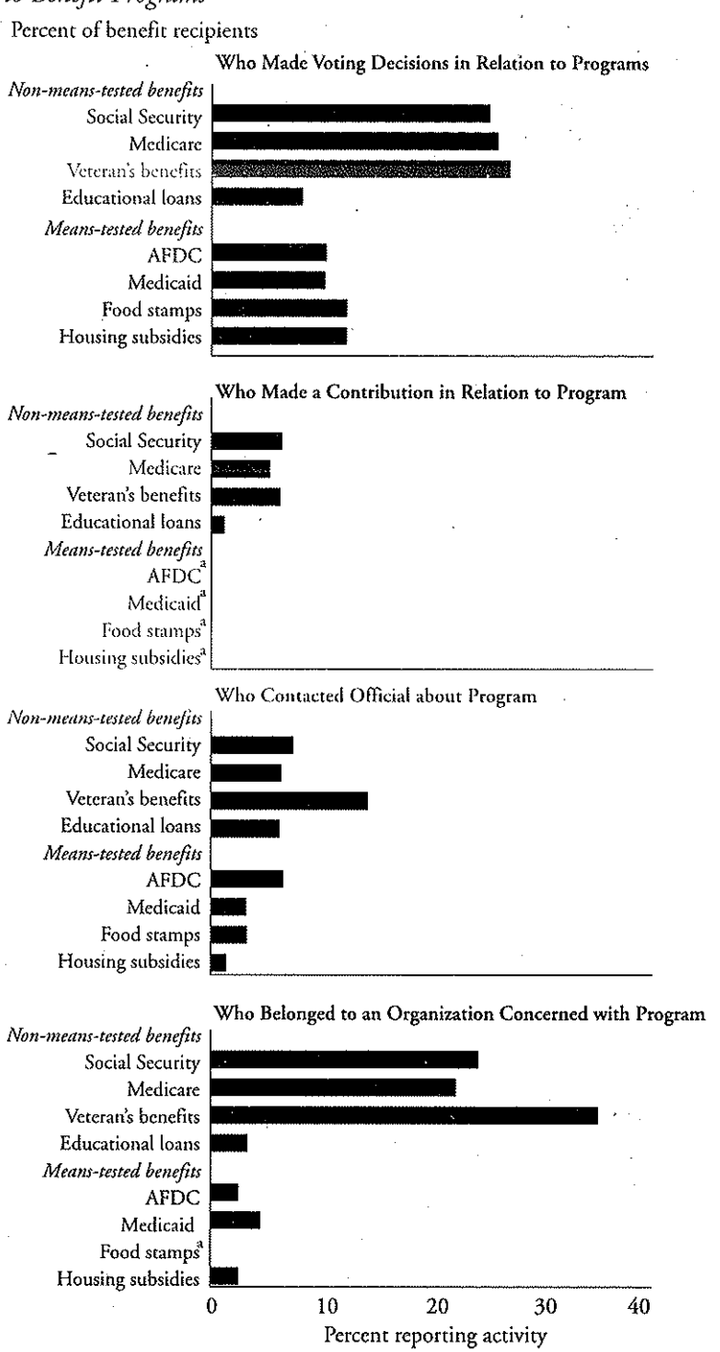
In the Citizen Participation Study, all respondents who indicated that they, or any family member in the household, received a particular government benefit were asked whether they had been active *in relation to* that benefit: Had they taken that program into account in deciding how to vote? Had they given a campaign contribution based, at least in part, on concern about it? Had they contacted an official to complain about the program? Did they belong to an organization concerned about that program? Recipients of benefits targeted at the poor (such means-tested benefits as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), food stamps, or Medicaid) are less likely than recipients of non-means-tested benefits (for example, veterans' benefits, Social Security, or Medicare) to have been active.[10]

The data in Figure 12-4 show the proportion of the recipients of each benefit who reported an activity related to the benefit program for each

10. Note that the referent in the questions about government benefits was the respondent or any immediate family member living in the household. In the text when we refer to "food stamp recipients" or "those who received veterans' benefits," the recipient may in fact have been a family member in the household of the survey respondent.

We should also note that, although there is a means test for student loans, we are categorizing them with non-means-tested benefits. The level of permissible income for student loans is much higher than for other means-tested benefits such as food stamps or AFDC, and the beneficiaries are not located primarily among the poor.

Figure 12-4. *Activities of Benefit Recipients Directly Related to Benefit Programs*



a. Less than 1 percent.

kind of activity: voting, contributing, contacting, and membership in an organization. Clearly, recipients of non-means-tested benefits were more likely to have been active than recipients of means-tested benefits. The difference is especially striking with respect to campaign donations and membership in an organization associated with the benefit—with the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and veterans' organizations presumably playing a major role. Thirty-five percent of the recipients of veterans' benefits and 24 percent of the recipients of Social Security, in contrast to 2 percent of AFDC recipients and none of the food-stamp recipients, belonged to an organization concerned about the program. However, the distinction between recipients of means-tested and non-means-tested benefits also applies to voting decisions.[11] The data on contacting a public official are interesting. We might expect that inclusion in the non-means-tested programs would be more or less automatic and thus would require people to have fewer contacts with public officials. Nevertheless, Medicare recipients were more likely than Medicaid recipients to communicate with officials about their medical benefits; Social Security recipients were more likely than AFDC recipients to contact a public official about their benefits.[12] Clearly, the government hears more from those on some programs than on others, and the ones it hears from are the more advantaged citizens.

What Messages Do They Send?

Our concern with understanding the voice of the people led us to do something novel in our survey. We asked about the issues basis of activity—what activists actually say when they take part. Every time someone indicated having undertaken some kind of political activity, we inquired whether there were particular issues or problems associated with their

11. It has been suggested to us that the seeming salience of entitlement programs for voting decisions is only a reflection of the fact that political leaders have drawn attention to these programs in campaigning and thus tells us more about political leaders than about citizens. That candidates make promises about protecting Social Security or veterans' benefits but not about means-tested benefits, however, is itself a political fact worth noting and may reflect what they are hearing from citizens and the organizations to which they belong.

12. Student loans are an exception. There is relatively little activity in relation to student loans. However, there is still more activity in relation to student loans than there is in relation to most means-tested programs.

participation.[13] Thus we were able to establish the substantive content of what public officials hear from political activists.

Table 12-1 summarizes the subject matter behind the political activity in which an issue concern was expressed and compares advantaged and disadvantaged respondents with respect to the issue concerns that animated their participation.[14] In order to ensure that we are dealing with isues that were actually communicated to public officials, we focus solely on those activities in which an explicit message can be sent: contacting an official, protesting a policy, campaign work, or contributions accompanied by a communication, informal community activity, or voluntary service on a local board. The issue-based political act is the unit of analysis, and the figures represent the proportion of all issue-based activities for which the respondent mentioned, among other things, a particular set of policy concerns.

Although both the advantaged and the disadvantaged had wide-ranging policy concerns, the distribution of their concerns differs. Compared with the issue-based activity of the advantaged, that of the disadvantaged is more than twice as likely, and that of respondents in families receiving means-tested benefits four times as likely, to have been animated by concerns about basic human needs—poverty, jobs, housing, health, and the like. Moreover, their activity was more likely to have been motivated by concern about drugs or crime. The activity of the advantaged, in contrast, was more likely to have been inspired by economic issues such as taxes, government spending, or the budget or by social issues such as abortion or pornography.

When we consider the actual number of communications, however, a very different story emerges. Because the disadvantaged are so much less active than the advantaged, public officials actually hear less about issues related to basic human needs from the disadvantaged than from the slightly smaller group of advantaged respondents—even though references

13. For discussion of how these data were collected and coded, see Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995, pp. 84–91, 220–25).

14. Both to generate additional cases for analysis and to purge the lowest-income category of a few aberrant cases of very well educated, low-income respondents, we shift our focus from the extremes in family income to a more general definition of socioeconomic advantage and disadvantage. We define the advantaged as those with at least some college education and a family income over $50,000 and the disadvantaged as those with no education beyond high school and family incomes below $20,000. These are groups of roughly equal size representing about one-sixth of the sample each.

Table 12-1. *What Respondents Say: Issue-Based Political Activity*[a]

Percent

Issue	*Proportion of issue-based activity animated by concern about*			
	All	*Advantaged*[b]	*Disadvantaged*[c]	*Received means-tested benefit*
Basic human needs	10	8	21	32
Taxes	6	6	4	8
Economic issues (except taxes)	5	7	1	1
Abortion	8	11	0	4
Social issues (except abortion)	2	1	5	6
Education	12	15	10	18
Environment	9	8	2	2
Crime or drugs	9	6	10	8
Foreign policy	3	3	0	0
Number of respondents[d]	2,517	425	480	228
Number of issue-based acts[d]	1,556	432	123	73

a. This table records only information-rich acts, those in which an explicit message can be sent to policymakers: contacting officials, protesting, doing campaign work or making contributions accompanied by a communication, informal community activity, or voluntary service on a local board. The numbers in the cells represent the proportion of such acts having identifiable issue content for which there was a reference to the particular issue.

b. The advantaged were those with at least some college and a family income of $50,000 or more.

c. The disadvantaged were those with no education beyond high school and family income below $15,000.

d. Numbers shown are the weighted numbers of cases and issue-based acts.

to basic human needs occupy relatively greater space in the bundle of communications emanating from the disadvantaged.

These findings might suggest that, although the disadvantaged are underrepresented with respect to participatory input, their concerns and needs are nonetheless being expressed by others. When the disadvantaged speak for themselves on issues of basic human needs, however, their communications differ fundamentally from those sent by others. First, when the disadvantaged communicated with public officials about basic human needs, they were much more likely than the advantaged to be concerned about problems that affected them personally. Even affluent citizens may need government assistance with meeting basic human needs: they may have health problems or a handicapped child in school, or, if elderly, receive Medicare and Social Security. Still, a much larger proportion of the messages from the disadvantaged about basic human needs involved particularized communications about problems specific to themselves or their families—a question about eligibility for Social Security, a complaint about the conditions in a housing project, and a request by a disabled respondent for special transportation, to cite some actual examples.

Among respondents who mentioned human needs issues as associated with their issue-based activity, 56 percent of the disadvantaged but only 8 percent of the advantaged were animated by such particularized concerns. Even when the human needs issue was framed as a policy issue rather than a particularized concern, the disadvantaged were much more likely to report that the problem affected themselves or their families as well as others in the community. When discussing basic human needs policy issues, 15 percent of the disadvantaged—as opposed to 21 percent of the advantaged—indicated that the issue affected them as well as others. Taken together, of those who communicated to public officials about issues of basic human needs, 71 percent of the disadvantaged but only 29 percent of the advantaged discussed something with an immediate impact upon themselves or their families. It is axiomatic in the literature on lobbying that public officials listen more carefully to self-interested advocates who are affected by the policies they discuss. Presumably, the analogous principle applies to communications from individuals: stories about basic human needs sound different to policymakers when told by those who are themselves in need.

Furthermore, when they communicate with public officials about policy matters concerning issues of basic human need, the advantaged and disadvantaged convey quite different messages. The appropriate govern-

mental role in addressing problems related to basic human need is an issue about which there is profound disagreement in American society. Close reading of what people actually said about the issues and problems associated with their participation allowed us to differentiate among messages about public efforts on behalf of the needy. On the one hand were expressions of concern about the "homeless plight" and "the Commission for visually handicapped Blind Association. To increase their benefits." On the other were such identifiably conservative statements as "welfare should be done away with" and "[I] dislike big government, [the] welfare state, and big brothers." Not all the policy statements about basic human needs could be so readily categorized. However, to the extent that the disadvantaged—whether liberal or conservative in their overall opinions as expressed in the interview—made identifiable policy statements about basic human needs in association with political activity, none of their statements urged that public attention to issues of basic human need be reduced. In contrast, the views about basic human need expressed by the advantaged through their activity were quite mixed. Because they are so much more active than the disadvantaged, however, public officials actually receive more messages from the advantaged, suggesting a curtailment of government intervention on behalf of the needy, than messages from the disadvantaged urging the opposite.

Overcoming Participatory Inequality through Mobilization

What can be done to diminish the participation gap that separates the advantaged and the disadvantaged? Social scientists have long paid attention to the processes by which citizens are mobilized into politics.[15] In particular, they have focused on the way that social movements—whether composed of assembly-line workers, civil rights activists, environmentalists, advocates of school prayer, or opponents of higher taxes—bring new issues and therefore new publics into politics.[16] Presumably because they

15. On the effects of close interpersonal networks on participation, see Knoke (1990). Among the few studies of networks and electoral mobilization is Huckfeldt and Sprague (1992). Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) stress the important role of mobilization in explaining activity. Their focus, however, is on the role of strategic elites in mobilizing citizens, not on the more proximate interpersonal networks within which citizens live. For a review of contextual studies, see Huckfeldt and Sprague (1993).

16. A few examples in a vast literature include Oberschall (1973); Boyte (1980); McAdam (1982); Freeman (1983); Luker (1984); Morris (1984); McCarthy and Zald (1987); and Tarrow (1994).

can provide a vehicle for the political activation of those who would otherwise be quiescent, social movements among the disadvantaged have received considerable attention.[17] Nonetheless, dating back at least as far as the abolitionists, there is a well-known tradition of middle-class protest in American politics.

Social movements fascinate precisely because they are not simply political business as usual. Less colorful—and less often studied—are the day-to-day processes of citizen recruitment by which neighbors, workmates, fellow organization members, or strangers who call during dinner make requests for political activity. The request might be to attend a meeting to support a local school bond referendum; to give a campaign donation to the incumbent governor; to volunteer in the campaign of his opponent; to write a legislator about the impact of cuts in National Science Foundation funding on research in the social sciences; or to attend a pro-life demonstration. These solicitations may be, but are not ordinarily, associated with a social movement.

Using an innovative battery of questions contained in the Citizen Participation Study, we have been able to investigate patterns of recruitment across the entire citizenry and thus to understand the workings of the recruitment process more generally.[18] What we found is that those who wish to recruit others to politics—from professional fund-raisers in search of large campaign contributions to community residents concerned about the local crime rate—act as "rational prospectors," seeking to expend their time and effort as efficiently as possible.[19] Rational prospectors seek to maximize the probability that the people they ask to get involved will not

17. See, for example, Piven and Cloward (1977).

18. The survey included batteries of questions designed to probe experiences with requests for activity. We asked respondents whether, over the past twelve months, they had received any requests to take part in a campaign (to work in the campaign or to contribute money, or both); to contact a government official; to take part in a protest, march, or demonstration; or to take some active role in a public or political issue at the local level. If they had, we followed up by inquiring whether they had received more than one such request and whether they said yes to the request. If there had been more than one request for a particular kind of activity, we asked the follow-up information about the most recent one. In addition, we probed the characteristics of people making requests and the nature of their connections to respondents. We should make clear that these data provide information about recruitment attempts and that what we know about the characteristics of recruiters is derived from reports of targets. Thus, to the extent that we make inferences about the intentions of recruiters, we do so—in the best traditions of economists—on the basis of revealed preferences.

19. This discussion draws heavily on the analysis and data in Brady, Schlozman, and Verba (1999).

only respond positively to their entreaties but also be effective as participants.

When taken as a whole, these processes of rational prospecting through which citizens are asked by others to take part politically do not, by and large, mobilize excluded constituencies to politics. Rather, the overall thrust is to reinforce the tendencies of a participatory process anchored in the individual characteristics that predict political participation. That is, those who are, by dint of their desire and ability, more likely to be politically active are also more likely to be the targets of appeals for activity. In short, when viewed in its entirety, the process of citizen recruitment does not mobilize the marginal and dispossessed. In fact, by recruiting activists on the basis of the same factors that would lead individuals to participate on their own, rational prospectors bring to politics a set of activists whose participatory characteristics are even more pronounced than the characteristics of those who would have taken part spontaneously.

Who Is Recruited?

By searching for targets who are likely to be willing to take part in politics and who will be effective as activists when they do, those who seek to get others involved in politics use as cues the kinds of characteristics that are associated with participation in politics. The single best predictor of political activity is education: those who are well educated are more likely both to be motivated to take part and to be endowed with the resources that facilitate participation.[20] Across various types of activity, the higher the level of education, the more likely an individual will be targeted by recruiters. Thus, beyond the individual endowments that make them likely to be active, the well educated are also exposed to recruitment efforts. The result is that those citizens who come to their activity through recruitment are not only, as expected, better educated than the population as a whole but also better educated than those who come to their activity spontaneously. The difference is substantial: 45 percent of those who undertook at least one participatory act in response to a request have a college degree; only 31 percent of those who undertook at least one act spontaneously have a college degree.[21] Analogous figures about income tell a similar story. We have already seen in Figure 12-1 that political activity rises with income. Table 12-2, which shows the proportion in each income group who undertook at least one political activity spontaneously and the proportion who undertook at least one act in response to a request, indicates that activity undertook spontaneously is much less highly structured by income than is activity undertaken as the result of recruitment. In the lowest income category, respondents were much more likely to have taken part spontaneously than to have been active after being asked. In the top two categories the proportions active in each way are nearly equal.

20. See Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995, chap. 15) for an extended discussion of the multiple ways in which education fosters political activity. On the role of education in participation, see also Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry (1996).

Table 12-2. *Spontaneous and Recruited Political Activity by Family Income*

	Percent of respondents who engaged in at least one political act that was	
Family income	*Spontaneous*[a]	*Recruited*[b]
Less than $15,000	29	9
$15,000–34,999	32	17
$35,000–49,999	36	28
$50,000–74,999	48	33
$75,000–124,999	38	37
$125,000 and over	48	47

a. An act for which there was either no request or a single request that was denied.
b. An act for which there was at least one request that was granted.

The exaggeration of participatory stratification through the process of recruitment is especially pronounced for political contributions. Earlier we noted that political giving is the most stratified of all activities: the well heeled are more likely to contribute, and the more affluent they are, the more they contribute.[22] In making requests, recruiters selectively target those with deep pockets. In our survey, contributors were, as a group, more affluent than noncontributors, whose mean family income was $35,300.

21. We define as spontaneous activists those who either received no requests to become active in that particular way or were asked once and did not say yes. We consider as recruited activists those who were asked to take part at least once and who assented to the most recent solicitation. We omit from the discussion those ambiguous cases in which the respondent reported more than one request for a particular kind of activity but said no to the most recent one. In those cases, we could not ascertain whether there had been assent to a previous request—even though the most recent one was turned down.

22. For elaboration of these themes see Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995, chaps. 7 and 12).

However, among contributors, those who gave in response to a request were especially well heeled: their average family income was $56,400, whereas the average income was $48,000 for those who contributed spontaneously. Considering the size of the donation rather than the size of the pocketbook of the donor demonstrates especially clearly that recruiters look where the money is and find it. Contributions given spontaneously averaged $120—only a fraction of those given in response to a request, which averaged $352.

The process by which contributors are recruited thus reinforces the overrepresentation of the well heeled in participation. Figure 12-5 presents data on the proportion of campaign money contributed by various income groups. In Figure 12-3 we saw that the affluent 9 percent of the population (those with incomes over $75,000) were responsible for fully 55 percent of all campaign money given, while the poorest 19 percent (those with incomes under $15,000) were responsible for only 2 percent. However, if we consider separately donations given spontaneously and donations given in response to a request, we see that the process of recruitment further exaggerates this pattern. Of all funds contributed in response to requests, nearly two-thirds, 64 percent, derives from the most affluent 9 percent of the public and only 1 percent from the least affluent 19 percent of the public. The pattern for donations made spontaneously, while still skewed, is much less pronounced.

Those who are brought into politics through these processes of selective recruitment differ not only in their demographic characteristics but also in their need for government assistance. Consider the beneficiaries of government programs discussed earlier. Fifty-two percent of the respondents to the survey said they had been asked at least once to become politically active. Medicare recipients, 49 percent of whom received at least one request for activity, were recruited with about the same frequency as members of the general public. In contrast, only 30 percent of those receiving Medicaid—a means-tested health program for the poor—were recruited at least once. The figures for participants in the principal income-maintenance programs are almost identical: 48 percent of Social Security recipients, but only 30 percent of AFDC recipients, indicated having been asked at least once to take part. With respect to housing, a policy area that often generates political conflict, 58 percent of home owners reported at least one request for participation; only 40 percent of those who do not own their own homes reported receiving at least one such request. Only 28 percent of recipients of government housing subsidies, however, received such requests.

Figure 12-5. *From Which Income Groups Do Political Contributions Come?*

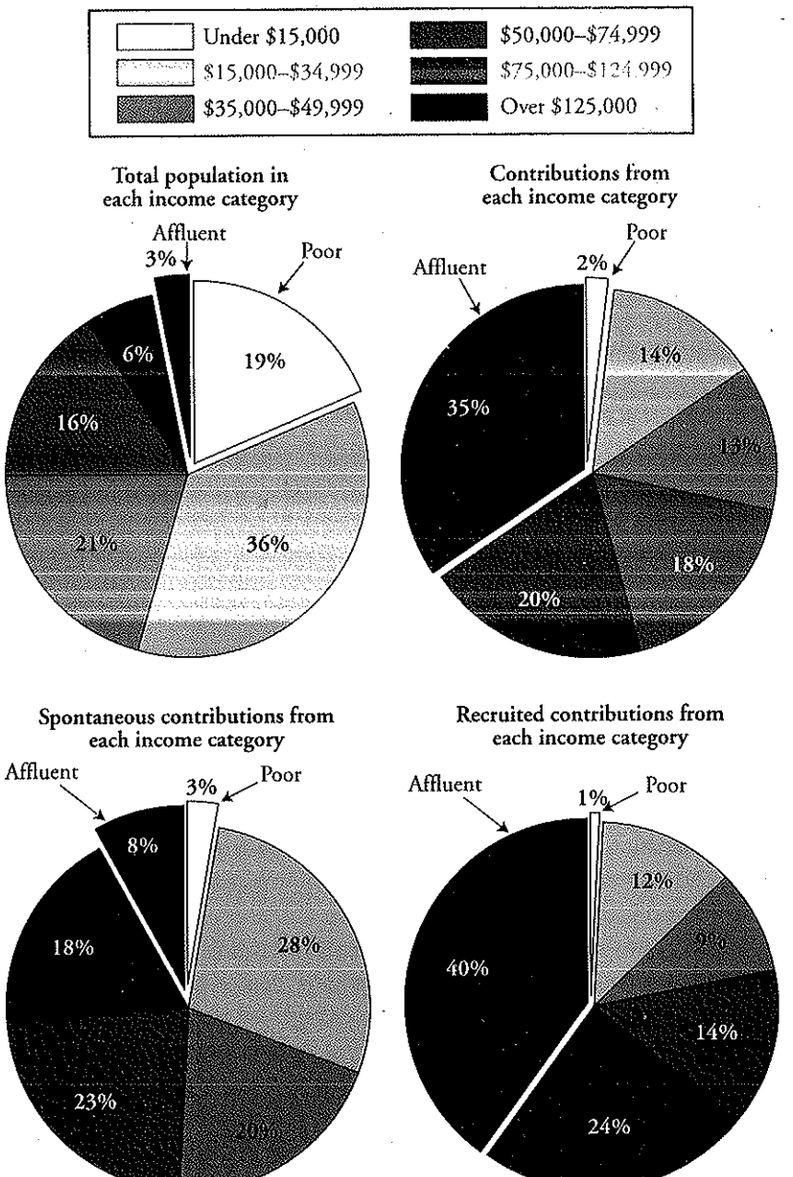
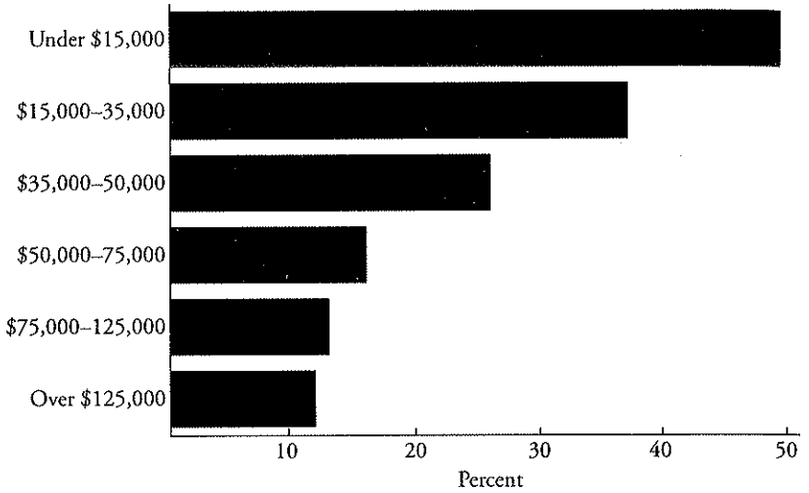


Figure 12-6. *The Empty Mailbox: People Who Never Receive Mass Mail, by Family Income*



In contrast to the organizational, neighborhood, and workplace networks of personal ties that figure so importantly in the recruitment of political activists are impersonal processes of direct-mail fund-raising. It seems as if everybody's mailbox is crammed with requests for political contributions. However, as shown in Figure 12-6, political direct mail is not sent out indiscriminately. Half of those in the lowest income category indicated that they never receive political mail. Only a small fraction of those in the highest income categories—who presumably are on other mailing lists and are concentrated in promising zip codes—reported never getting any political mail.

In short, while processes of mobilization may bring new issues and points of view to those who govern, our data demonstrate that they do not—when considered in their totality—bring new kinds of people into politics. Because recruiters act as rational prospectors, they seek out people who would be likely not only to participate but to participate effectively—that is, people with the characteristics already overrepresented among participants. In short, the net result of the recruitment process for political activity in general—and for financial contributions in particular—is to exacerbate participatory stratification.

Can Institutions Make the Difference?

Since the ordinary processes by which individuals are asked to take part in politics—for example, to attend a school board meeting, make a campaign donation, or march for or against abortion—do not ameliorate participatory bias, what about voluntary institutions? Voluntary institutions, even ones that are utterly apolitical, operate in many ways other than advocacy to foster political participation. As Tocqueville noted a century and a half ago, associations act as the schools for democracy. Moreover, activity in institutions that has nothing to do with politics or public issues can foster the development of organizational and communications skills that are relevant for politics and thus can facilitate political activity. Organizing the PTA Book Fair, chairing a large charity benefit, or serving on the search committee for a new minister are not overtly political activities. Yet they foster the development of skills that can be transferred to politics. In addition, voluntary institutions can act as the locus of attempts at political recruitment; members make social contacts and, thus, become part of networks through which requests for participation are mediated.[23] And of course association members are exposed to political cues and messages—in communications from officers and staff, on the agendas of meetings, even in informal conversations with fellow members.

It is naive to expect the institutions of civil society to be the magic remedy to overcome the class-based participatory deficit, for the proposed cure contains the seeds of the malady. Just as also those who are well educated and well heeled are more likely to be active in politics, they are more likely to be affiliated with voluntary organizations. Data collected in 1967 indicate that those on the highest rung of the income ladder were three times as likely to be active members of organizations as those at the bottom. In 1990 the

23. For an empirical analysis of the ways in which class-based institutions mobilize individuals to politics, see Verba, Nie, and Kim (1978). Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) demonstrate the importance of efforts by strategic elites in parties and organizations in explaining changes over time in rates of citizen participation. Many studies of parties have illustrated their role in getting out the vote or of organized interests in mobilizing grass-roots constituents. A pioneering study of efforts to bring out the vote is Gosnell (1927). See also Eldersveld (1964); Huckfeldt and Sprague (1992); and Wielhouwer and Lockerbie (1994). On the efforts of organized interests to organize latent constituencies and get members involved in politics, see Schlozman and Tierney (1986) and Walker (1991). Among the many case studies that illustrate these processes, see Browne (1988) and Rochenberg (1992). Cohen and Dawson (1993) show that contacting increased campaign contributions and attendance at community meetings in Detroit.

ratio was exactly the same.[24] Thus, the participatory benefits of organizational activity are being reaped by those who are likely to be politically involved already. However, even though affiliation with voluntary organizations, when taken in toto, has a strong socioeconomic bias, particular institutions of civil society might function to overcome that bias.

What about the citizen groups whose growing importance is documented in Jeffrey Berry's contribution to this volume? Certainly a few of the groups—for example, the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People—that received a great deal of television coverage in 1995 act as advocates for, among others, the economically disadvantaged. Nevertheless, Berry indicates that these groups hold values that are "sometimes at odds with the interests of those further down the economic ladder" and concludes by observing that, at the same time that groups espousing postmaterial values have flourished, unions and other traditional liberal interest groups who have pushed for greater economic equality for workers and the poor have weakened. In short, we cannot expect that citizen groups will carry this representational burden.

Where, then, might we find institutions with counter-stratificational effects? Political parties are an obvious answer. Within a democracy an important function of political parties, especially parties of the left, is the mobilization of ordinary citizens—in particular, those who might not otherwise be active. During the nineteenth century strong political parties played a critical role in organizing and mobilizing voters in America. Nonetheless, American political parties are well known for being weak and fragmented, and there are no working-class or peasant parties.

The Citizen Participation Study is deficient in material about the operation of political parties as institutions, but we can use the information about the characteristics of those who ask others to get involved to shed light on the implications of recruitment through partisan networks. Table 12-3 shows, not surprisingly, that Republican identifiers had higher average incomes—and Democratic identifiers had lower average incomes—than the average for the population. It also shows, again not surprisingly, that those recruited to work in campaigns—and, especially, those recruited to contribute to campaigns—had higher than average incomes, higher even than the average for Republican identifiers. When we focus more narrowly on recruitment among fellow partisans, we find more

24. The data for 1967 are reported in Verba and Nie (1972, chap. 11). The 1990 data are from the Citizen Participation Study.

Table 12-3. *Family Income and Recruitment for Campaign Activity: The Partisan Connection*

	Average family income
All respondents	$40,300
All Republican identifiers	45,400
All Democratic identifiers	36,900
All who were asked to work in a campaign	48,800
Republican asked by a Republican	51,700
Democrat asked by a Democrat	49,800
All who were asked to contribute to a campaign	52,900
Republican asked by a Republican	56,700
Democrat asked by a Democrat	54,700

skewing in an upward direction. The intraparty nexus involved recruitment of targets who had, on average, higher-than-average incomes for their respective parties. For contributions, the pattern is especially striking. Those asked by a fellow partisan had, on average, incomes that were quite high. The data make it difficult to argue that the processes of intrapartisan recruitment are in any way expanding participatory representation. When Democrats solicited Democrats and Republicans solicited Republicans, the targets of the requests had family incomes that were substantially higher than the average incomes for their fellow partisans but also higher than the average for all who were asked to contribute. Partisan recruitment to take part in a campaign—and especially to contribute money—seems to increase the stratification of political participation in both parties.

In short, while parties have unambiguously played an important historical role in mobilizing voters who might otherwise not go to the polls and in representing the concerns of broad groups whose views might otherwise not be voiced, with respect to the recruitment of activists, the result is more mixed.When seeking contributions rather than votes or campaign workers, the parties hunt where the ducks are and target the affluent among their supporters.

What about Unions? What about Churches?

Aside from parties of the left, what other institutions might serve as the vehicle for the political activation of the less privileged? A student of

comparative politics might immediately suggest that we consider unions; a student of American society might propose that we look at churches.

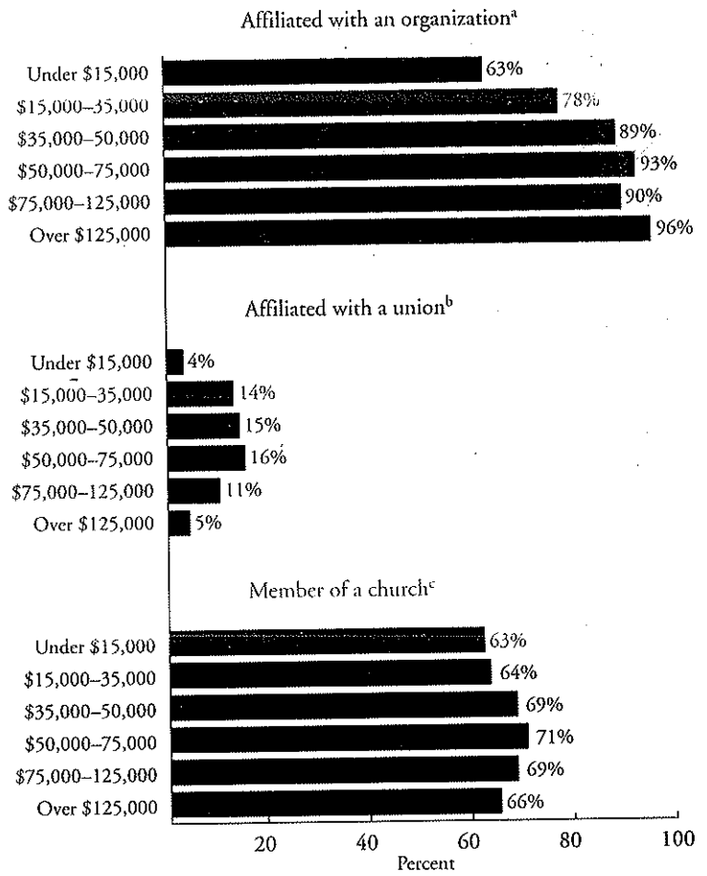
Among the ways in which American politics is alleged to be exceptional among the world's democracies is the weakness of the institutions that, in other nations, bring disadvantaged groups to full participation in political life. We have already mentioned that the Democratic Party plays only very imperfectly the role adopted elsewhere by social democratic and labor parties in mobilizing those who might otherwise not take part politically. In many other democracies, politically engaged trade unions serve as partners of parties of the left in organizing the less affluent. However, in contrast to their counterparts abroad, American labor unions have traditionally been relatively weak and enroll a relatively small—and diminishing—proportion of the work force.

An aspect of American exceptionalism that receives less attention in discussions of politics is the depth of religious commitment of American citizens and the relative frequency of their religious attendance. As Robert Wuthnow's chapter in this volume demonstrates, participation in religious institutions is the least class-biased form of voluntary activity. In fostering participation, American churches function in a manner similar to voluntary associations: they nurture politically relevant skills, generate requests for political participation, and expose members to explicitly political messages. Thus, religious institutions in America might partially compensate for the weakness of unions and the absence of a labor or social democratic party by bringing into politics those who might not otherwise be involved.

Figure 12-7 presents data for various income groups about these involvements. As anticipated, organizational involvement is structured by income and is almost universal in the higher-income groups. Church membership, in contrast, varies very little among income groups. Among those with the lowest incomes, the same proportion, 63 percent, were organizational and church members. At the top of the income hierarchy, however, fully 96 percent were affiliated with an organization, but only 66 percent were church members. In contrast to organizational affiliation, union affiliation does not seem to rise with income. Instead, the pattern is curvilinear, with those in the highest and lowest income groups having the lowest levels of union affiliation. Thus, it would seem that engagement with unions and religious institutions presents the possibility of, if not overcoming, at least not exacerbating participatory stratification.

Nevertheless, the other obvious lesson provided by the data in Figure 12-7 is the extent to which church membership overshadows union affiliation. At every income level, the proportion who are church members simply dwarfs the proportion in unions. If they were merely nominal, these memberships would mean little in terms of exposure to institutional political stimuli. However, in this respect as well, churches appear to have the advantage. Church members are more likely actually to attend services than are union members to attend union meetings. Of union members, 52

Figure 12-7. *Civic Involvement, by Family Income*



a. Member or contributor.
b. Member.
c. Member or regular attender of services at a local church.

percent indicated having gone to at least one union meeting within the past year; 94 percent of church members reported having attended services within the past year.

Participatory Equality and the Structure of Civil Society in America

The unusual institutional configuration characteristic of American society has important consequences for the outcomes with which we are concerned. Since churches and organizations, including unions, function similarly in fostering political activity, we might argue that the strength of religious institutions would counterbalance the weakness of labor unions. A blue-collar worker is more likely to have politicizing experiences that develop civic skills in church than in a union—not because American unions are particularly deficient in building civic skills and providing exposure to political messages and requests for political activity, but because so few American blue-collar workers are union members and so many are church members. Hence, because churches can pinch hit for unions in encouraging participation, we might conclude that the weakness of American unions has no implications for the representation of the needs and preferences of the less well off in American politics.

Nonetheless, these institutions are not interchangeable when it comes to reducing participatory inequality. Churches and unions are not simply politically neutral sites that encourage political participation as a by-product of other purposes; they are institutions with political concerns of their own. It has long been a part of the union mission to represent the less advantaged in the halls of government. Although religious institutions sometimes take on this function—the Catholic Church, for example, often acts as an advocate for the poor—the economic needs of the less well off rarely top their lists of political priorities. Thus, when a church makes institutionally based attempts to mobilize the flock for political action, or when it gets involved directly in politics, the policy matter at stake is relatively unlikely to be an economic agenda focused on the less advantaged. Over the years, churches in America have embraced many issues ranging from temperance to civil rights. At this juncture religious institutions are active on behalf of a wide range of issues and diverse points of view. However, the center of gravity of the religious agenda in politics is a conservative concern with social issues, with a particular focus on advocacy of pro-life views on abortion. Though the issue priorities of American religious institutions are likely to continue to evolve, there is no reason to expect them to act as a substitute for unions or other organizations representing the less well off in bringing to the attention of public officials the economic needs and preferences of the disadvantaged.

In comparison with other democracies, political conflict in America has traditionally been less deeply imbued with the rhetoric of class. In recent years, however, references to class seem to have become less common in our political vocabulary than at any time since the New Deal, a circumstance that we could, speculatively, attribute to a number of developments over the past decade or two: the success of the Republican Party in defining itself as the party of the common folk; the focus by the Democratic Party on the needs of the middle class rather than the poor as the object of government attention; the erosion of the membership and power of labor unions; the emphasis on multiculturalism; the fall of communism in Russia and Eastern Europe and the declining appeal of Marxist social analysis as an intellectual tool; and changing occupational structures and the concomitant reduction in manufacturing employment. Nevertheless, it is clear that, in spite of the absence of references to class in our political discourse, when it comes to political participation, class matters profoundly for American politics.

At present, the decline of civic engagement is a matter of contention. The inequality of civic engagement is unambiguous. Moreover, analysis of a new and rich data set, the Roper Trends in American Political Participation, suggests that participatory inequality is a consistent attribute of civic life. In spite of minor fluctuations, there is no clear secular trend between 1974 and 1994: participatory inequality rose somewhat in the late 1970s, fell during the early 1980s, and ended the two-decade period almost exactly where it started.[25] Extrapolating from these findings, we can expect that, as long as inequalities in education and income persist—and income inequality in America has become more pronounced of late—as long as jobs continue to distribute opportunities to practice civic skills in a stratified manner, and as long as citizens increasingly donate money rather than time to politics, the voices heard through the medium of citizen participation might be loud and clear, but they will be far from equal.

25. Analysis of the Roper data is contained in Brady, Schlozman, Verba, and Elms (1998).

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