Personal mobilisation, civic norms and political participation

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ABSTRACT

Previous analyses of the role of context in political participation have tended to focus on voting, and on electoral context (in particular, the closeness of the local campaign and the marginality of the electoral district). However, neither this form of political engagement nor these measures of context capture the range of possible influences. This paper therefore analyses the role of civic norms and personal mobilisation on participation in a range of different forms of political activity. In general, individuals are responsive both to actual mobilisation and to their perceptions of how others in their acquaintance circles and neighbourhoods are likely to act. The more the local environment encourages participation (whether in the form of more frequent invitations to get involved or of stronger perceived norms for participation), the more likely individuals are to get involved. However, contextual influences on participation are stronger for the less politically motivated than for the more motivated.

1. Introduction

Active public political participation is a cornerstone of democracy. High rates of involvement, whether voting in an election, taking part in community politics, or working for a campaign or organisation, are taken as signs of a healthy polity. Low participation rates, meanwhile, are often presented as signs of democratic malaise (although the causes may be disputed: Stoker, 2006; Hay, 2007). As a result, falling rates of electoral participation in many western polities since the 1950s have been the focus of anxious debate (Norris, 2002, 2011; Franklin, 2004). Understanding the factors which explain participation is therefore an important enterprise.

Over the years, considerable effort has been devoted to understanding citizen engagement in politics. We know a substantial amount about who votes, who volunteers, who contacts the authorities, who protests, and the conditions under which they do so. Much of the relevant literature focuses on one of two scales (or occasionally both): the individual or the wider society. Most studies of political behaviour focus almost entirely at the former scale, however, studying the decision-maker in terms of her/his characteristics only with little or no relevance to the varying spatial contexts – household, neighbourhood, workplace, local organisations, etc. – within which the decision on whether to act, and how, is made. Also part of the picture,

however, are influences which might operate at an intermediate level between the individual and the wider society as a whole, in particular the potential impact of those in individuals' social networks and local communities. Citizens' decisions on whether or not to participate may depend not only on their own resources and predilections, but also on their assessments of what others in their communities are likely to do, or (to the extent that internalised social norms operate) what they think others in the community will see as normal and acceptable. Where participation rates in general have declined, however, this contextual effect, if present, may contribute to a negative feedback mechanism: if citizens perceive their peers to be unlikely to participate, this may further discourage them from doing so. In this paper, therefore, we investigate the relative importance of local mobilisation and civic norms as contextual influences on participation. We use the five main theories of citizen engagement, discussed below, as the foundations for political decision-making, but then – using survey data suitable for the task – add in a number of variables that, if our arguments regarding contextual effects are valid (and there is considerable evidence for one form of behaviour – voting – to suggest that they do: Johnston and Pattie, 2006) should extend our appreciation of the influences on who does what, where.

2. Understanding civic norms and mobilisation

The decision to participate in politics is likely to be affected not only by one's own personal circumstances and outlooks, but also

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by what other citizens do, and (not quite the same thing) what one *thinks* others are likely to do. One theoretical manifestation of this is the well-known paradox of voting (Downs, 1957). At its simplest, this suggests that a rational individual should participate if the personal benefits from doing so outweigh the costs. But voting is a communal act, and depends on the mutual participation of many others. In most circumstances, so many individuals vote that the participation of any one individual is very unlikely to be crucial to the outcome of the contest. Our rational voter might be well advised, therefore, to discount the benefits likely to accrue from participation by the probability that their own participation will determine the outcome. As the latter is generally minuscule, the incentives for participation for this hypothetical rational voter should always be far too small to justify taking part: a rational voter who assumes many others will vote should, on the basis of that knowledge, abstain. At the extreme (hence the paradox), if all voters are rational in this way, none should vote, defeating the object of the exercise.

In practice, of course, this hypothetical situation rarely if ever occurs in election voting (though it may be more realistic for other, more demanding forms of political participation). That said, there certainly is evidence that individuals' participation decisions are in part affected by (perceptions of) how others will behave. A near-analogy to the paradox of voting is the tendency for constituency electoral turnout to correlate negatively with the seat's marginality: the closer the competition in a constituency, the higher the turnout there (Denver and Hands, 1985; Denver, 1995; Pattie and Johnston, 2005; Johnston and Pattie, 2006; Johnston et al., 2011). At least some individuals use their knowledge of the state of local party competition to decide whether it is worth their taking part in the election.

This and similar effects are liable to rest on a range of mechanisms. Direct mobilisation is clearly important. There is substantial evidence that individuals who are specifically asked to participate in a range of political actions are much more likely to do so, *ceteris paribus*, than are individuals who are not personally invited (Brady et al., 1995; Verba et al., 1995; Pattie et al., 2004). Some invitations to get involved come from friends, family, acquaintances and so on. Many others come from organised political groups. For instance, party canvassing activity affects electoral participation. The more actively political parties campaign in particular electoral districts, and the more voters they contact there, the greater the political rewards for them and the higher the local turnout (Jacobson, 1978, 1990; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995; Pattie et al., 1995; Denver and Hands, 1997; Pattie and Johnston, 2009, 2010; Johnston et al., 2012). As parties tend to focus their local campaign and canvass efforts in the most marginal constituencies, this helps create the correlation noted above between the closeness of the contest and the turnout. Similarly, experimental studies show that 'get-out-the-vote' interventions are effective: those contacted are more likely to take part than those who are not (e.g. Green and Gerber, 2004; Gerber et al., 2008; Nickerson, 2008; John and Brannan, 2008). Furthermore, the effect of direct mobilisation by parties and political groups might be cumulative: individuals who are contacted by party campaigns are more likely than those who are not contacted to go on and try and persuade their friends and acquaintances to vote as well (McClurg, 2004). We therefore expect that direct mobilisation in the form of specific invitations to participate from organised political groups and also from friends, families and relatively casual contacts will tend to encourage a range of forms of political engagement.

The influence of others on individuals' propensity to participate is not restricted to direct mobilisation, however. Most people want to fit in with their peer groups and communities, and

will behave accordingly. Peer pressure is an important factor in the political socialisation of young adults (Langton, 1967; Langton and Karns, 1969; Tedin, 1980; Boehnke et al., 1998; Pancer et al., 2007; McDevitt and Kiousis, 2007). Perceptions of civic norms regarding participation also matter. The more individuals feel that voting is a civic duty, widely valued by other citizens, the more likely they are themselves to participate (Clarke et al., 2004, 2009). To some extent, these perceptions of civic norms reflect widespread social beliefs and ideologies. But they also rest on more immediate assessments of what individuals' peer groups might think. This latter can be affected by conversations and contacts between friends and family (on the political impact of contextual effects in political participation generally, see e.g. Cox, 1969; Agnew, 1987, 1996; Books and Prysby, 1991; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995; Zuckerman, 2005; Zuckerman et al., 2007; Mutz, 2006; Johnston and Pattie, 2006; Pattie and Johnston, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2008). Thanks to population mobility and the relative ease of long-distance communications, many of these discussions take place over geographically highly dispersed networks. But even in modern societies, a very substantial part of most people's social networks remains quite local (Johnston and Pattie, 2011). In a study of conversation partnerships in a US city, Baybeck and Huckfeldt (2002, 265) found that 33% of discussion partners live less than a kilometre apart, and three-quarters live within 10 km of each other. Other studies report similar levels of proximity between discussion partners: for instance, Eagles et al. (2004) found that discussants in their study lived on average 2.8 miles apart. Many conversations between citizens therefore reinforce local as well as society-wide norms and expectations. Furthermore, most individuals are surprisingly knowledgeable about their local political environments, and relevant information on them is garnered not only from conversations with other local residents but also from more diffuse observations (general knowledge, the local media, local party campaign posters and leaflets, local election results, casual encounters with relative strangers in the community, and so on: Burbank, 1995; Baybeck and McClurg, 2005; Mutz, 1998; Cho and Rudolph, 2008). This matters as many political activities, from voting in a constituency to joining a local pressure group or campaign, depend for their effectiveness on specifically local participation. If one is thinking about whether to join a campaign opposing the closure of a local school, for instance, one might reasonably want to have some idea of how many others locally would be likely to join too before one made the final decision to participate, and this is likely to be more important in that particular instance than a sense of whether people in the country as a whole valued political participation.

The literature on get-out-the-vote experiments sheds some interesting light here too, suggesting that individuals are responsive to whether others in their local communities are likely to take part in politics, and to what they think others locally might think of them if they decide not to get involved. Experimental results suggest that get-out-the-vote messages which also contain information on local participation rates are more effective than those which simply stress the importance of participation: individuals are more likely to take note if they are told that others locally are likely to participate too. Even more effective were messages which pointed out that individual voting was a matter of public record, hence allowing others in the locality to check on an individual's compliance. But most effective of all were messages which encouraged voting but also threatened to name in the local press those individuals who did not vote: individuals exposed to such material were the most likely to participate, and the effect was relatively long-lasting (Gerber et al., 2008; Davenport et al., 2010).