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Levels and Styles of Political Involvement

The study of political activism, in France in particular, has benefited over the years from multiple, competing angles of analysis. Researchers have observed and recorded cases of political participation focusing on different actors and preferences of involvement. Whereas all the findings delivered have been very compelling, the lenses of analysis employed have indirectly affected a possible reconciliation among the different conclusions. The first section in this chapter tries to provide a coherent organization of the research approaches used and of their overall findings in the study of political activism and group participation in France. The second part of the chapter provides instead a discussion on the operationalization of the most important variables in the study of political action, leading to the operationalization choices in this book.

Views on French political participation: Angles of analysis

The delay in the study of citizens' participation in the French tradition has had a long-term effect on later stages of research. Even authors who were able to “catch up” with the more advanced American tradition have always had to refer to the American findings as a way to achieve scholarly legitimation. Jean Ranger expresses his frustration by saying that:

The subject of depoliticization periodically crops up on the French scene. It seems to me to have long expressed anxiety, almost an inferiority complex, with regard to the Anglo-Saxon model of citizen participation that started to permeate Western European intellectual circles in the 1950s. (Ranger, 1993, p. 109)
The origins of French research on political engagement lie in the already mentioned 1962 Vedel volume on the French Political Science Association roundtable. Although the approach and the depth of analysis were different from the voting studies of the North-American tradition of the same period, French scholars started to deal, in a different manner, with the participation phenomenon. They retained a strong normative approach to the subject of research: the focus was on “dépolitisisation” more than on participation. The 1960 issue of the *Revue Internationale des Sciences Sociales* had already confirmed the concerns about the inactivity of the political domain. The findings of both works tried mostly to reassure the political scientist that the depolitization phenomenon was either a temporary one (a short-term view vs. a long-term one) or a possible beginning of new forms of action. In any way today's scholar would like to read those conclusions, after the initial individual focus the approach to the topic moved to the context in which the phenomenon was taking place. As it seemed logical in France, the State and the administrative system of a class-based society are always the usual suspects.

Following the French tradition, the study of participation took consequently an elitist approach. The idea that the political and social systems could be held responsible for the degree of citizen participation in the political domain (Memmi, 1985, p. 321) justified the new wave of research on professional political engagement. Bourdieu (1989), for instance, in his several publications, highlighted the dominating position of the French elites, whose bureaucratic power guaranteed them the exclusivity of effective political participation. The social structure worked as a form of constraint towards all those individuals who would have liked to have a say in the political system.

The discriminating factor in the French context was the rigidity of all the organizations regulating political access: political parties, trade unions, bureaucratic elites. The findings on the political system agreed on the presence of professional and exclusive participation elite (Mayer and Perrineau, 1992a, pp. 7–8). This group of active social agents (Gaxie, 1978) maintained the monopoly of the participation phenomenon, directing societal interest according to their own priorities.

On the same subject, the scholarship on weak political participation confirms, for the French case, the discrimination problem: some groups in society do participate more than others, because they can participate more and better than others. The foundations of discrimination are, however, different from the ones presented in the American literature.