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The Study of Political Participation

The study of political participation has undergone some key changes since Barnes and Kaase’s (1979) and Parry et al.’s (1992) seminal studies. In particular, both the traditional distinction between ‘conventional’ and ‘unconventional’ modes of participation (Barnes and Kaase, 1979) and the view of participation as essentially focused on influencing public officials (Parry et al., 1992) have undergone refinement in recent years. According to Norris (2002, pp. 215–216), there has been a diversification in terms of:

- (the) agencies (the collective organizations structuring political activity),
- the repertoires (the actions commonly used for political expression),
- and the targets (the political actors that participants seek to influence).

The notion that the agencies in which people politically participate are evolving and diversifying arises from the contention that, since the 1960s, new forms of collective organisation, such as social movements, have emerged that differ from traditional forms of political organisation, such as trade unions, political parties and pressure groups. Following the emergence of feminist, civil rights, gay rights and environmental movements, we see a more fluid conception of membership of political organisations that grow out of social networks and ‘contentious politics’ (Tarrow, 1998), and which engage in a variety of forms of collective action (from disruption, use of slogans, music or dress or renaming of familiar objects). Indeed, Tarrow debates whether the late 20th century may have produced a ‘movement society’ (1998).

In relation to the changing repertoires of political participation, many point to the development of new forms of action as a consequence of technological innovation, such as Internet activism (Bennett, 2004) or...
text-mobilisation, as witnessed in the demonstrations against Suharto in Indonesia in 1998, alongside the evolution of older forms of action. For instance, whilst there is a long history of economic boycotts with a political purpose (Shapiro, 2000), such actions have in recent years developed into more focused forms of mass political consumerism, such as the No Sweat or Fair Trade campaigns (Micheletti et al., 2004).

Finally, the argument that the targets of political action are changing acknowledges that political power and authority in the contemporary (globalising) world are changing and, hence, also the nature of political campaigning and action. In this scenario, the nation-state is no longer seen as the primary target of action for a host of different groups, for whom supranational agents may have greater significance, such as transnational corporations (exemplified in the boycott Nike campaigns) or international bodies (as witnessed by the anti-G8 protests).

Alongside these transformations in political organisation, action and aims, it is suggested that new citizens are emerging who are much less collectivist than previous generations, more individualistic and issue-oriented and concerned with ‘postmaterialist’ values (Inglehart, 1990). For many, such trends are particularly exemplified in the young.

Much contemporary British political science has been rather slow to address these issues of change, however, and there has been a continued dependency on traditional categories of participation. In part, this reflects a reluctance to lose the longitudinal power of established survey instruments, but, in our view, it also reflects a focus on intentional, rather than structural, explanations of participation. Indeed, it seems to us that a great deal of recent British political science work on political participation has been primarily concerned with the decline of traditional forms of participation, rather than with theorising the significance of changing patterns of governance and participation more broadly conceived. In this chapter we set out our dissatisfaction with much thinking around the crisis of political participation, whilst in the next chapter we pay more attention to broader conceptions of citizenship and how these relate to changing aspects of governance.

1.1 Quantitative survey studies of youth political participation

1.1.1 Pattie et al.’s study of citizenship and participation

We begin by examining the approach and findings of the major study of citizenship and participation in the UK, by Pattie et al. (2004). This