CHAPTER 7 Participation and Voting

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

* Define the key terms at the end of the chapter.
* Distinguish between conventional and unconventional participation.
* Explain the difference between particularized participation and activities that are geared to influence broad policy.
* Compare U.S. political participation with participation in other democracies.
* Discuss the extension of suffrage to African Americans, women, and eighteen-year-olds.
* Explain the nature of initiatives, referendums, and recalls.
* Account for the low voter turnout in the United States.
* Evaluate the extent to which various forms of political participation enhance freedom, order, or equality.
* Assess the extent to which the various forms of participation fit the pluralist or majoritarian models of democracy.

# Participation, Voting, and the Challenge of Democracy

How do you participate? Most Americans just go vote, yet thousands of Myanmar citizens voiced their political opinions against their government by protesting in the streets in 2007. Over thirty were killed and hundreds were arrested. Participation varies from country to country as does the definition of conventional and unconventional participation. This chapter will also look at voting and the expansion of those rights. Yet the question still remains for each individual and country to decide, how much and what types of political participation are necessary for democratic government?

The majoritarian model assumes that government responds to popular wishes articulated through conventional channels, primarily voting in elections. The majoritarians count each vote equally and hence are biased toward the value of equality in participation. Yet there is a strong bias in our voting system, since more of the higher income and better educated vote. This translates into a government catering to the needs of its wealthy and better-educated voters, even though a majority of people are considered middle or lower class.

The pluralist model emphasizes freedom. Citizens are free to use all their resources to influence government at any of the many access points available to them. Pluralism may seem to favor those with resources, but in contrast to majoritarianism, it allows plenty of room for unconventional political participation. However, when people are forced to rely on unconventional participation to be heard, it is hard to call the system democratic.

Chapter Overview

## Democracy and Political Participation

Voting is central to democracy, but when voting is the only form of participation available, there is no real democracy. In addition to casting votes, citizens must also be able to discuss politics, form interest groups, contact public officials, campaign for competing parties, run for office, or protest government decisions. Currently, Myanmar does not allow its citizens to do this. Most Americans expect this freedom, and most take it for granted.

Political participation—the actions of private citizens that are intended to influence or support government or politics—may be either conventional or unconventional. Terrorism is considered an extreme case of unconventional participation, since the individual or group acting feel they have no hope of influencing the government any other way.

## Unconventional Participation

Although we might consider protests and demonstrations to be acts of conventional participation, most demonstrations and marches, like the March on Selma in 1965, are considered acts of unconventional participation. Unconventional participation is relatively uncommon behavior that challenges the government and is personally stressful to participants and their opponents. These acts can include participation in protests and demonstrations, boycotts, sit-ins, or other mass political activities.

Despite a tradition dating back to the Boston Tea Party, unconventional participation is frowned on by most Americans, especially when it disrupts their daily lives. Yet Americans are more likely to engage in unconventional political participation than are citizens of other democratic states. Researchers find unconventional participation hard to study but suggest that groups resort to unconventional participation precisely because they are powerless and have been denied access to conventional channels of participation. Despite the public’s belief that unconventional participation is generally ineffective, direct political action sometimes works. Unconventional actions such as protests and marches tend to appeal to those who distrust the political system, create a strong sense of political efficacy, and manage to develop a sense of group consciousness.

## Conventional Participation

The comparatively high rate of unconventional political participation presents a dilemma for American democracy, since the whole point of democratic politics is to make political participation conventional. Conventional political behavior includes (1) actions that show support for government, such as participation in patriotic celebrations, and (2) actions that try to change or influence government policies, either to secure personal benefits or to achieve broad policy objectives.

Attempts to achieve broad policy objectives include activities that require little initiative (voting) and those that require high initiative (attending meetings, persuading others to vote in a certain way, attending congressional hearings, or running for office). People also participate by using the court system (for example, by joining in class-action suits). Americans are less likely to vote than citizens in other democracies, but they are more likely to participate in other conventional ways.

## Participation through Voting

In the United States, the right to vote was gradually extended to various disenfranchised groups (African Americans, women, and eighteen-year-olds). For much of the United States’ history, the nation departed considerably from the democratic ideal; yet in comparison with other countries, the United States has a good record of providing equal rights in voting.

In addition to selecting candidates for office, citizens of some states can vote on issues by means of referenda and initiatives, two devices not available on the national level. In 2002, voters in forty states approved 202 initiatives or referenda. The use of these alternatives more closely resembles direct democracy than our representative democracy, and they are not without drawbacks. For one thing, referendums and initiative elections are quite expensive and often increase, rather than decrease, the impact of special-interest groups. Some twenty states also provide for recalls, or special elections to remove an officeholder. The Internet has created new opportunities for citizens to interact, mobilize, and participate in these activities.

Voting for candidates is the most visible form of political participation. It serves democratic government by allowing citizens to choose the candidates they think would make the best public officials and then to hold officials accountable for their actions in government, either by reelecting or removing them. This assumes citizens are knowledgeable about what officials do and participate actively by going to the polls.

The United States holds more elections and has more offices subject to election than do other countries. However, American participation in elections is very low compared with that of other democracies.

## Explaining Political Participation

Not only is voter turnout in the United States comparatively low, but it has also declined over time. However, other forms of participation are high and are on the increase.

Conventional participation is often related to socioeconomic status. The higher a person’s education, income, or occupational status, the more likely he or she is to vote or use other conventional means to influence government. On the other hand, unconventional participation is less clearly related to socioeconomic status. Over the years, race, sex, and marital status have been related to conventional participation in the United States. But the single most influential factor affecting conventional participation is education.

Arguments currently advanced to explain the decline in voter turnout point to the influx of new, young voters enfranchised under the Twenty-Sixth Amendment. Young voters are less likely to vote. Other reasons offered include the growing belief that the government is unresponsive to citizens and the decline in people’s identification with a political party. In addition, U.S. political parties are not as closely linked to specific groups, as are parties in other democracies; such links between parties and groups often help to mobilize voters. More recent studies show that close or competitive elections tend to draw more voters.

Another possible explanation for the low U.S. turnout is that it is more difficult to vote here than in other countries. In the United States, citizens are required to register in advance; this leaves the initiative up to the individual citizen. Registration requirements work to reduce the number of people eligible to vote on election day. The motor voter law makes it easier to register and is expected to increase participation. A final explanation for low turnout is that although the act of voting is relatively simple, learning about candidates takes a great deal of initiative, and many eligible voters may feel inadequate to the task.

## Participation and Freedom, Equality, and Order

Whereas the relationships between participation and freedom and between participation and equality are clear, the relationship between participation and order is more complicated. Groups that resort to unconventional participation may threaten the social order and even the government itself. The passage of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment, which lowered the voting age to eighteen, is an example of a government effort to try to channel unconventional participation (strikes and protests) into conventional participation (voting) and thereby maintain order.

## Participation and the Models of Democracy

In addition to their role in selecting officeholders, elections also serve to (1) socialize political activity, (2) institutionalize access to political power, and (3) bolster the state’s power and authority. Majoritarian participation focuses on elections and emphasizes equality and order. The decentralized American system of government allows for many forms of participation in addition to voting in elections, and this type of pluralism emphasizes freedom of individuals and groups.

Key Terms

political participation

conventional participation

unconventional participation

terrorism

direct action

supportive behavior

influencing behavior

class-action suits

**voter turnout**

suffrage

franchise

progressivism

direct primary

recall

referendum

initiative

standard socioeconomic model

# Research and Resources

For people interested in political parties and elections, *Congressional Quarterly’s Guide to U.S. Elections*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2001), offers a gold mine of information. Among other things, the volume includes popular vote tallies for the following:

* U.S. House of Representatives from 1824 to 2000
* U.S. Senate from 1913 to 2000 (Remember, senators were elected by state legislatures before 1913.)
* Governorships from 1789 to 2000
* Presidential primaries from 1912 to 2000
* Southern primaries (a special focus since in the solid South the real political battle occurs in the primary, not the general election)

Another good source of voting data is the *America Votes* series edited by Richard Scammon and Alice McGillivray (also published by Congressional Quarterly Press). This handbook provides county-by-county election returns for general elections for presidents, senators, representatives, and governors. It also gives election totals of primary contests for these offices.

Both of these works are great for providing actual election results. However, they do not help you much if you want to investigate some of the issues raised about how people evaluate candidates and how they participate in politics outside the voting booth. To find out more about these issues, you might turn to the bibliography given at the end of Chapters 5, 7, or 9, but even if you read every book listed, you might not find the specific answer to the exact question that interests you. You might, for example, want to know if high-school-educated African Americans are as likely as high-school-educated whites to participate in political activities other than voting. You might want to know if women differ from men in their ideological self-placement. Answers to your questions might not be readily available in books, but that does not mean it is impossible to discover the answers. The National Election Study (NES) reports a variety of survey responses on their website <http://www.umich.edu/~nes/nesguide/nesguide.htm>, or you may want to find out if computerized survey data are available on your campus.

Your government or political science department may have acquired election surveys provided by the American Political Science Association as part of its SETUPS series. Each SETUPS comes with a student guide that shows how to manipulate data.

# Using Your Knowledge

1. Using the *Guide to U.S. Elections*, find the election returns for your county for the last three presidential election years. Compare the returns in the presidential races with those in the contests for the House of Representatives. What differences do you notice? Next, compare the House votes in presidential years with those in the intervening, off years. How do the turnout totals compare?

2. Interview a person who has engaged in unconventional participation. Find out what form this unconventional participation took, what the participant’s motivation was, and whether he or she felt the activity was successful. What led your interviewee to choose unconventional participation rather than conventional participation?

# Getting Involved

## Voting

The most basic way to participate in U.S. politics is to vote, but as the chapter points out, in order to vote, you must first be registered. Motor voter legislation made the task easier by allowing people to register by simply mailing in a card; in addition, there are some Internet sites available that help citizens obtain and fill out the forms needed for registration and also apply for an absentee ballot. Try Rock the Vote at <http://www.rockthevote.org>. Rock the Vote also offers opportunities for volunteers.

Students who study abroad can still vote. The Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP), located within the Office of the Secretary of Defense, administers the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) which requires that the states and territories allow U.S. citizens to register and vote absentee in elections for federal office. The FVAP also provides nonpartisan voter information. Find them on the Web at <http://www.fvap.gov>.

## Internships

Project Vote Smart, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, grassroots effort, offers internships during the summer and throughout the school year. Interns cover every member of Congress, governor, and the president; they put out national surveys, compile performance evaluations and campaign finance information, work with journalists, and operate a database that supplies voter information. Contact the National Internship Coordinator, PVS National Internship Program, 129 NW 4 Street, Suite 204, Corvallis, OR 97330. Telephone: 541-754-2746 or 541-737-3760. Extensive information on these internships is available online at <http://www.vote-smart.org>.

Sample Exam Questions

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. Which of the following is the *best* definition of political participation?

a. activities of people to influence or support government and policies

b. actions to protect and defend our way of life

c. people who do their civic duty and vote in every election

d. activities necessary to ensure the survival of our form of government

e. actions of governmental officials to compel the electoral activities of its citizens

2. Which of the following would *least* likely be considered conventional political participation in the United States?

a. persuading people to sign a petition to put a candidate on the ballot

b. demonstrating to change environmental policies

c. attending a city council meeting

d. casting a ballot

e. writing a letter to a public official

3. Why do we know more about conventional participation than about unconventional participation?

a. Unconventional participation is very difficult to study and rarely occurs.

b. Unconventional participation is usually violent and thus very dangerous to study.

c. Unconventional participation is usually studied by foreign political scientists.

d. Unconventional participation is hard to study, and political scientists prefer not to study it.

e. Unconventional participation is illegal, and thus, the research is illegal too.

4. What name was given to March 7, 1965, when six hundred marchers were beaten and tear-gassed by Alabama State Troopers as they marched from Selma to Montgomery?

a. Trooper Tuesday

b. Monstrous Monday

c. Wicked Wednesday

d. Thumper Thursday

e. Bloody Sunday

5. Which of the following applies *most* to those who prefer direct political action?

a. They distrust the political system.

b. They have a sense of political efficacy.

c. They have access to a network of organized groups.

d. They identify strongly with members of a group.

e. All of the above.

6. Which of the following was one of the earliest instances of unconventional participation in America?

a. American Revolution

b. Boston Tea Party

c. Election of 1800

d. War of 1812

e. Women’s Rights Convention

7. Which of the following bestdescribes political participation of U.S. citizens in comparison with activities of citizens in other democracies?

a. Americans are more likely to vote and participate in lower-initiative activities.

b. Americans are more likely to participate in all forms of activities.

c. Americans are just as likely to participate in all forms of activities.

d. Americans are less likely to participate in all forms of activities.

e. Americans are less likely to vote and participate in lower-initiative activities.

8. What term do we use to describe a legal action brought by a person or group on behalf of a large number of people in a similar circumstance?

a. class-action lawsuit

b. nolo contendre

c. eminent domain

d. habeus corpus petition

e. bill of attainder

9. Which of the following groups did the Nineteenth Amendment enfranchise?

a. minority males

b. immigrant males

c. eighteen-year-olds

d. senior citizens

e. none of the above

10. What power were California voters exercising when they ousted Governor Gray Davis?

a. unconventional participation

b. initiative

c. recall

d. referendum

e. direct primary

11. Which social scientist believes that we need regular, free, and fair elections in order to call ourselves an electoral democracy?

a. Larry Diamond

b. Joseph Leno

c. Matthew Daily

d. Paula Colter

e. none of the above

12. What term do we use to describe the percentage of eligible voters who actually voted in a given election?

a. direct primary

b. voter turnout

c. class-action numbers

d. supportive behavior

e. franchise percentage

13. Which of the following are factors that can contribute to conventional political participation in U.S. politics?

a. education

b. race

c. age

d. gender

e. all of these

14. If voters are to hold public officials accountable through the electoral process, then which of the following assumptions must hold true?

a. Officeholders must be motivated to respond to public opinion by the threat of defeat.

b. Citizens must know the candidates for office.

c. Citizens must know the record of the person holding office.

d. Citizens must participate in the electoral process.

e. All of the above.

15. What organization was created in the 1990s to help mobilize young voters and increase their turnout?

a. Teen Turnout

b. Pop Politics

c. Rock the Vote

d. Inside Voter

e. Young Politicians

16. Which of the following would be described as supportive political behavior?

a. casting a vote

b. flying the flag

c. participating in a demonstration

d. collecting signatures on a petition

e. working for a candidate

17. Majoritarian democracy encourages what type of participation by citizens?

a. conventional

b. unconventional

c. direct action

d. violent action

e. boycotts

18. Which of the following would the standard socioeconomic model predict?

a. People with low incomes are most likely to vote.

b. White-collar professionals are not likely to participate in politics.

c. Women are most likely to resort to unconventional participation.

d. People with high levels of education are more likely to vote.

e. People over the age of sixty-five are more likely to vote.

19. What term do we use to describe the political philosophy of reform that trusts the goodness and wisdom of individuals and distrusts political institutions and special interests?

a. referendum

b. direct primary

c. initiative

d. progressivism

e. none of these

20. Which of the following do elections help?

a. bringing communities closer together

b. bolstering the state’s power and authority

c. the judiciary to do a better job

d. all of these

e. none of these.

21. Which of the following democratic values can be enhanced by increasing opportunities for participation?

a. freedom

b. order

c. equality

d. all of the above

e. none of the above

22. Which of the following was *not* a reform of the Progressive Movement?

a. universal suffrage

b. recall elections

c. direct primaries

d. referendums

e. initiatives

23. Direct primaries were intended to shift political power to

a. broadcast media.

b. political parties.

c. ordinary citizens.

d. organized interests.

e. business and corporate interests.

24. Which of the following was a key strategy Martin Luther King Jr. used in the civil rights movement?

a. organizing mass letter-writing campaigns to legislators

b. direct action to challenge specific cases of discrimination

c. holding legislators accountable at the ballot box

d. lobbying southern legislators

e. campaigning for elected office

25. The Twenty-sixth Amendment was passed in 1971. What did it do?

a. allowed women the right to vote

b. limited presidents to two terms in office

c. gave the president the authority to grant pardons

d. lowered the voting age to eighteen-years-old

e. prohibited Congress from giving itself a raise

Essay Questions

1. What are the primary forms of political participation encouraged by the majoritarian model and the pluralist model of democracy? Does the observed behavior of citizens in the United States suggest that either model accurately describes U.S. politics? Why or why not?

2. Discuss the legacy of the civil rights movement and how the Supreme Court case of *Brown* v*. Board of Education* and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 changed things.

3. Explain why people resort to unconventional political participation. Is it ever effective? Give examples to illustrate your answer.

4. Are Americans politically apathetic? What makes you think so, or can you prove that they are not. In either case, what can we do to increase voter turnout?

5. Explain how a person’s socioeconomic status, age, education and gender affect her or his political participation.

Answers to Multiple-Choice QuestionS

1. a

2. b

3. d

4. e

5. e

6. b

7. c

8. a

9. e

10. c

11. a

12. b

13. e

14. e

15. c

16. b

17. a

18. d

19. d

20. b

21. d

22. a

23. c

24. b

25. d