Rethinking Political Participation

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Rethinking Political Participation offers a new theory to explain why people take part in political action, in particular, why they vote and why they join protests. Much social-science theorizing about collective action underscores how costly it is for individuals to participate. It takes money, time, and cognitive effort to get to the polls, and people who join protests also often face risk of arrest or bodily harm. But by just focusing on the costs of participation, it is hard to make sense of several anomalies. Not infrequently, when the costs of participation rise, people become more likely to be involved, not less. Voter id laws meant to discourage targeted groups from voting, by raising the costs of participation, can also anger them and leave them more easily mobilized. And bystanders who see their fellow citizens beaten by the police are sometimes scared away, but sometimes react by joining in larger numbers.

To make sense of these and other facts about mass participation, we focus not just on costs of participation but also costs of abstention. People feel internal dissonance, moral qualms, and social pressure when they do not take part, especially if they care about the outcome (for instance, which candidate wins and whether protesters achieve their goals). The study makes use of a wealth of survey data, interviews, and experimental results, from the United States and other countries, and explores topics such as the malleability of peoples sense of a civic duty to vote; political leaders use of emotions such as fear and anger to get people involved; and the pitfalls of these strategies.

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Excerpt from Introductory Chapter

This book arises from our dissatisfaction with received theories of political participation – theories about why people turn out to vote and why they become involved in protests and other civic actions. The failures of these theories is well illustrated by the following example. The 2016 presidential primary campaign in the United States featured harsh language aimed at Muslims and many Mexican immigrants. In this period, many Muslim citizens who had not bothered to register to vote did so, and Mexican immigrants who had not become citizens initiated the naturalization process.¹ A natural explanation is that the harsh campaign rhetoric made members of these groups angry and fearful, and they saw the upcoming election as crucially important to them. For decades, “a lot of Muslims didn’t see a lot of difference between the parties,” explained a man at a registration drive in an Oakland, California mosque. A woman who had just picked up six voter-registration forms for herself and family members said, “This is the most important vote in our life.”²

Yet our prevailing social-science theories of political participation would reject this explanation. Fear, anger, and other emotions are often ignored, and the idea that people are driven to the polls by their sense of how much is at stake for them cannot be easily accommodated in prevailing frameworks. Leading theories struggle to make sense of the dynamics so obviously at work in the mosque in Oakland. When people couldn’t see a difference between the leading parties, they were unwilling to vote. They became more willing when they began to see a real difference and to care much more about which candidate won and which lost.

Indeed, from a theoretical standpoint, many social scientists find political participation puzzling, though the puzzlement is less widely shared by lay observers. We

¹As of this writing, in mid-2016, the expectation is that a million legal residents from Mexico may become naturalized, about 200,000 more than usual; New York Times, March 7, 2016.
²“Unsettling U.S. Political Climate Galvanizes Muslims to Vote,” by Carol Pogash, the New York Times June 1, 2016.
often find ourselves in awkward, even comical conversations with our friends, relatives, and students in which we explain to them why it is puzzling that they vote (and take part in other ways in mass politics). You should be puzzled, we patiently explain, by people’s willingness to go to the trouble of taking part, given that their actions won’t change the outcome and given that they will benefit (or suffer) equally, whether or not they bothered to participate. But don’t worry, we hasten to add, we can explain this odd behavior! If you vote, you may be obeying a democratic norm that says it’s a duty to take part (but perhaps images of the national flag do not appear in their mind’s eye each Election Day). Or you are expressing a partisan identification (but expressing it to whom, and what if they don’t like political parties?). Besides, voting is habit-forming; it becomes second nature and you don’t have to think about flags or identities. But what if the interlocutor is among the many who usually participates but doesn’t always? Why do norms or the urge for political self-expression kick in for some elections but not for all of them? And what kind of habit makes us perform a task sometimes but fail to perform it at others? Well, the political scientist responds, maybe some elections just don’t seem important to you. (But wait, the interlocutor counters, why does the importance of the election matter? You just reminded me that my individual actions would not change the results. So I seem to have no concrete reason to take part, even if I care a lot.) Or maybe the costs of participation have risen and that’s what keeps people who sometimes vote at home for some contests. But why, then, do increasing costs sometimes have no effect on levels of participation or even drive them up, not down? An example is when laws aimed at discouraging particular groups from casting ballots seem to energize the intended targets or when police repression of demonstrations doesn’t shut them down but instead sparks mass uprisings.

The incomplete and ad hoc quality of our theories of mass political participation have not kept social scientists from collecting data and crafting sophisticated accounts of the kinds of people who take part and those who do not, or from explaining participation, in the sense of making accurate predictions about who will take part in what kind of
action. But like physical scientists observing bodies fall to the ground before the Newtonian revolution, our lack of adequate theories makes a deeper understanding elusive, and leads to questionable interpretations of the observations we make.

A leading but problematic interpretation is that mass participation is well explained by rational choice theory. The problem is on display in two important empirical studies of electoral participation in the United States, published roughly 20 years apart: Steven Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen’s *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America* (1993), and Jan Leighley and Jonathan Nagler’s *Who Votes Now?* (2014). Both try, not entirely successfully in our view, to force their findings into the box of rational choice. Rosentone and Hansen write that “Left to their own devices . . . the public’s involvement in the political process would be defeated by two difficulty problems: the paradoxes of participation and rational ignorance” (2003[1993]:6). They note that people lack individual incentives to vote or to seek out information relevant to politics, burdensome tasks that can be left to others. The obstacles are overcome, they argue, by political parties and campaigns, which rationally make an effort to get people to the polls. But what parties do, and why it works to get voters over the obstacles to collective action is not clear.

Two decades later, Leighley and Nagler espouse “a cost and benefit framework of voter turnout.” An important finding they report is that “an individual will be more likely to vote when candidates take policy positions providing the voter with more distinct choices” (2014:124). But the canonical cost-benefit accounts of voting discount the benefits that a person would enjoy from their favorite candidate prevailing – recall that their vote won’t make a perceptible difference in the outcome and they will benefit whether or not they take part. Therefore Leighley and Nagler have to do some work to press the polarized policy effect into a cost-benefit framework. They turn for support to a seminal theoretical paper by John Aldrich (1993), who points out that the costs of voting are usually very small and campaigns can easily overcome them. And when parties offer sharply different
programs, Leighley and Nagler reason, parties invest more resources in getting people to the polls. But why common people respond to this extra expenditure of resources by parties is unclear; within the tenets of rational choice theory, they should not. The Aldrich-Leighley-Nagler approach, like Rosenstone and Hansen’s, falls back on a framework that emphasizes varying costs of participation, even though their findings point to the benefits people perceive if their favored candidate prevails as a key factor driving them to the polls.

Alongside of important studies of turnout in the United States, other influential ones have appeared, taking a more international perspective. André Blais’s study, To Vote or Not to Vote? (2000), is in critical dialogue with rational choice models of turnout, as its subtitle – The Merits and Limits of Rational Choice Theory – announces. Blais concludes that several features of the rationalist models are confirmed by empirical research, though the theory as a whole is only modestly successful at explaining turnout. Our own book is in the spirit of Blais’s contribution, though we will depart in several important ways from his theory and explanations.3

If received theories fail to make sense of people’s decisions to vote and to protest, what would an satisfactory theory look like? It would do two things. First, it would rely on basic assumptions that make sense, ones that accord with the findings of experts and the intuitions of lay citizens. And second, it would produce accurate predictions, ones that make sense of observed facts about participation – who does and who does not take part and why participation swells under some circumstances and ebbs under others.

We are by no means starting from scratch. Indeed, the allusion to the Newtonian revolution in a previous paragraph is misleading. Much existing theory does not rely on fundamental errors, equivalent to the belief that the universe revolves around the Earth. Instead, in writing this book we draw on a wealth of insightful but incomplete (and, at moments, ill-considered) theorizing. The party-mobilization theory, alluded to a moment

3 See also Mark Franklin, 2004.
ago, is a case in point. No one would deny that parties and campaigns work hard to get out the vote, but we need to look more closely at what they do to achieve that end and why it works. (We will argue in the next chapter that a big part of what these agents of mobilization do is to try to make people care more about their side’s winning, an effort that pure rational choice theories would not anticipate being effective.) So mobilization models are not so much incorrect as incomplete; they place the sun at the center of the galaxy but have not fully fleshed out the nature of the gravitational pull.

What is needed, then, is not so much a paradigm shift as a paradigm realignment. As Chapter 2 makes clear, beginning a half century ago, economic approaches to democracy became deeply influential in shaping theories of mass political participation. In some respects these influences sent us, collectively, in the wrong direction, obscuring important insights into the psychological and social bases of collective action. Theorists who tried to press participation into a narrow mold of individual cost-benefit calculations came up empty-handed, failing to make sense of a most basic fact about democracy, viz: that rational individuals do vote in a mass election, just as they do take part in protests, even at risk of bodily injury. Whether economic models of democracy led to a giant waste of scholarly time or were a productive failure is a question best left for intellectual historians. We are predisposed toward the more optimistic, productive-failure view. Economic approaches eventually spawned models which, though still failing to fulfill the criterion of sensible assumptions, came closer to success than previous efforts. And though economic theorists remained insensitive to the emotional substrates of mass action, their insistence that participation imposes costs on those who act, and that these costs, too, must be part of the equation, was an important lesson not to be forgotten. In the next chapter we briefly review theories of electoral participation and sketch our own alternative, which, we submit, employs realistic assumptions and makes sense of observed patterns.

Three general points are worth making about our model in advance:

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4Key texts include Downs 1957, Olson 1964, and Riker and Ordeshook 1968.
(1) **Abstention can be costly.** Received theory, as we have just noted, emphasizes the costs of participation as a factor that, on its own, works against people taking part in voting, protesting, and other forms of collective political action. But this view is one-sided. Just as there are costs of participation, so there are costs of abstention. The former are material and cognitive, the latter psychological and social, but no less real for that.

That abstention can be psychically and socially costly helps explain why people sometimes bear very high costs to be able to participate; and they do so, typically, because they care a lot about the outcome. Referendums that pose basic questions about rights, sovereignty, and identities often see very high rates of participation. The 2016 British referendum on EU membership drew 17 million people to the polls – 72% of the electorate, compared to the 66% who voted in the previous general election in 2015. The 2014 referendum on Scottish independence drew 85% of eligible voters to the polls. This turnout rate was 20 percentage points higher than the average in Scotland in the prior four British national elections.5

Sometimes people bear heavy costs to take part in collective action. Protesters in democracies new and old can face police clubs, tear gas, and worse. Voting is usually not dangerous but it can be costly. Ireland held a referendum on same-sex marriage in 2015. Irish citizens living in the UK traveled by sea and air to vote in a referendum on same-sex marriage. Airline tickets between London and Dublin sold out on the day of the vote.6 Why would people pay so much money and go to so much trouble to cast a ballot? Hannah Little, an Irish woman living in London who flew back to vote, explained,

“With Irish pals, every time we meet up, going home for the referendum has been at the forefront . . . My plan is to go home to settle and have children. If my kids turn out to be gay, I want my voice to be heard now.” 7

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5According to an analysis by Butler and Ranney (1994), on average turnout is lower in referendums than in candidate elections, but the standard deviation is higher – a subset of referendums, like those cited here, drive participation up to unusually higher levels.


7The Independent, May 20, 2015. “Ireland’s same-sex marriage vote: Irish living in UK flock back to
Did Hannah Little not realize that her vote was extremely unlikely to be the decisive one in favor of same-sex marriage in Ireland? Or that if she moved back to Ireland and had gay offspring, they would be able to legally marry same-sex partners whether or not their mother had troubled herself to make the pilgrimage back for the 2015 referendum? We present evidence in the pages to come that the answer to both questions, for her and for many people like her, is likely to be ‘no.’ They take part when they care a lot because not participating would be to enter into a state of dissonance: these are costs of abstention.

We are certainly not the first to notice these latter costs. Rational choice theory dug itself out of the paradox of voting – its prediction of zero turnout in large electorates – in large part by adducing a “duty” to vote. People who feel this duty would forgo the payoffs derived from fulfilling it, were they to abstain. (Though forgoing a payoff and suffering a direct loss from abstention are somewhat different.) But the duty construct does not solve every problem. As conventionally conceptualized as an encouragement to vote, it is static; and it does not help explain why common people take part in collective political action for which there is no generally recognized duty to take part, such as in disorderly street protests. Network and shaming models, where a person runs the risk of being shunned if he or she stays home, also imply that abstention is costly. But these models focus excessively on the role of one’s immediate personal networks in driving political participation. They struggle – as duty models do – to explain why particular kinds of elections predictably spark widespread participation, whereas in others, popular involvement is anemic.

A key move we make, then, is to posit costs of abstention: straight-up disutility from not taking part, the magnitude of which depends on how much a person sees as at stake in the outcome.

(2) Many people think about the strategic setting of elections and protests from a supra-individual vantage point. To unlock the mysteries of political participation, just as important than the particular factors that influence whether a person will take part

make referendum,” Karl Macdonald.
is the vantage point from which people approach the decision. Prior theorists, for understandable reasons of parsimony and elegance, have stuck to one level at once, usually that of the individual, who is seen as thinking about the costs and benefits of action entirely as they influence him or her, individually. Others have posited that people think about what to do from the vantage point of a social planner or party leader; citizens are thought to consider both benefits and costs at this macro level. Our theory, developed in Chapter 2, posits that people in effect jump between levels. They consider the costs of participation from the vantage point of their own time and effort. They consider the strategic context – the probabilities of the movement succeeding, the favored candidate winning – from a vantage point above the individual, typically of a candidate or party or movement leader. Regarding the benefits of alternative outcomes, they regard these at both individual and higher levels. What our vertiginous theory gives up on parsimony and elegance it gains in sensibility and accuracy of predictions.

That people think through the strategic context of their turnout decisions by adopting the perspective of their favored party leader or candidate, or that they are influenced by the way perfect strangers are treated by governments (as we shall see is the case in certain patterns of protest participation) defies some social-scientific orthodoxies. But to begin with assumptions that human beings are capable of thinking about problems from the vantage point of others should not be controversial. Not to mention the substantial scholarly evidence in favor of this assumption, adults who are incapable of empathy or of seeing a problem from another’s point of view are generally considered to suffer from severe cognitive deficiencies or psychological disorders. The relentless self-maximizer who populates some economic models appears to suffer from a psychopathology. People do look for their own advantage, but not exclusively. They are also prone to anger (which can encourage them to act and desensitize them to risk) and fear (which can make them work harder to glean information from their environment but also make them withdraw from social interaction) and euphoria and moral outrage.
Complicating things even more, they are often subject to mixed emotional responses; and their emotions (like their perceptions) are tempered by our political commitments and identities.

(3) **To understand political participation, we need less economics, more psychology.** Political scientists are well aware of the ways in which cognitive distortions and biases influence the perceptions and choices of citizens (and of political elites).

[examples] We are becoming increasingly aware that emotions also influence our political perceptions and actions. A new appreciation has emerged in the social sciences of emotions and cognition not in tension with one another but as symbiotic, as working in concert. The recent psychological turn, advanced in no small measure by behavioral economists, has nurtured the field of political psychology, and in some measure we will be advocating a return to social-psychological ideas about participation which many scholars set aside with the rise of rational choice.

Yet, as much as a look backwards, what is needed are several steps forward. We know relatively little, still, about the emotional and psychological impacts of party or campaign mobilization on people’s decisions whether to vote. When people suffer setbacks, such as being the victim of crime or losing their jobs, sometimes they get more involved and sometimes less. Why is that? The efforts of elites – party leaders, movement organizers – to get people involved (or to keep them at home) sometimes generate mixed emotions: fear, anger, enthusiasm. Which emotions prevail, on which kind of people, and what are the consequences in shaping their willingness to join collective actions?

Political psychologists have shed a powerful light on these questions.\(^8\) They have demonstrated, for instance, the mobilizing effects of anger, an effect that extends well beyond electoral participation to protest participation as well, as we demonstrate in Chapter 4. Yet they tend to shy away from placing these psychological impacts in a broader theoretical framework that encompasses other factors known to matter in people’s

\(^8\)Markus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000; Brader 2006; Valentino et al. 2011.
behavior, such as the material costs of participation or the strategic context of action – placing one’s own action in the context of other people’s choices. The model we develop in Chapter 2 attempts just such a synthesis.