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# Contemporary Political Participation Research: A Critical Assessment

Iasonas Lamprianou

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## 1 Introduction

The issue of political participation has been a substantive area of interest for both sociologists and political scientists, mainly because it pertains to the quintessential act of democratic citizenship – voting at election for the House of Representatives. While elections and voting behaviour attract the attention of many social science researchers, various manifestations and forms associated with political engagement in a broader sense have also received extensive study.

This chapter aims primarily to critically present a selection of contemporary approaches and methodological tools for investigating political participation. Granted that this is already an enormous area of research being conducted, it is unrealistic to expect a fully-fledged examination of all works published so far. For the twofold purpose of this paper it suffices (a) to discuss a wide range as possible of quite different conceptualizations and definitions of political participation, while (b) attempting to show that the typological division between conventional and unconventional political participation is often artificial and elusive.

Discussion about extremist and often aggressive forms of political participationist activism (as they are described in contemporary research), might be contrasted to the perceptions cherished by the ancient Greek democrats as to citizen roles and civil duties within their community, showing that classical Athenian democracy (in theory and practice) did not draw any sharp distinction between diverse or conflicting types of participation. The chapter concludes with a short section whereby the principal findings from this critical assessment are briefly summarized along with some reflections on the foundational role of sociological perspectives on political participation analysis.

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I. Lamprianou (✉)

Department of Social and Political Science, University of Cyprus, P.O. Box 20537,  
1678 Nicosia, Cyprus.

e-mail: [iasonas@ucy.ac.cy](mailto:iasonas@ucy.ac.cy)

## 2 Conceptualizing Political Participation in Contemporary Research

As liberal democratic culture and values have blossomed in Western societies, it increasingly became axiomatic that broad participation in the decision-making processes is a prerequisite for proper democratic governance (Dahl 1971, 1998; Pateman 1970). Political theorists claimed that all individuals ought to have an appropriately equal opportunity to influence decision-making processes (Verba et al. 1978). While electoral turnout and voting, which is the cornerstone of the democratic political process, has been reportedly decreasing over the last decades in almost all European states (O'Toole et al. 2003), academic experts and technocrats have been exploring alternative participationist activities that could influence and shape decision-making processes, within a variety of social and cultural contexts. As a result, political participation have been proven to take incredibly diverse forms such as being a member of a political party or community-based organizations, displaying an active role within a range of cultural or leisure interactions, contacting a politician to express ecological concerns, suggestions or ideas, signing a petition, setting public buildings on fire (!) and even shooting at policemen during demonstrations and riots (Bourne 2010).

Providing a final definition of political participation is not an easy task, especially if one employs both teleological (i.e. focusing on goal-oriented political behaviour; derived from the Greek word *telos*) as well as praxialist arguments or procedural engagement (i.e. focusing on the relevant procedures involved; derived from the Greek work, *praxis*). For example, the world has recently witnessed the riots of young people in the UK in August 2011; would one classify these riots as a form of political participation or it is just suitable to dismiss them as acts of “pure criminality” as the current Prime Minister David Cameron suggested on the 15 of August 2011 in Oxfordshire (Cameron 2011)? A working definition of political or citizen participation is essential before moving on to the next step of the present analysis.

Although there is no universally accepted definition in this particular research area (see Uhlaner 2001), political participation is often being referred to as “political engagement” or “public involvement in decision making”. As Riley et al. (2010) have pointed out, political engagement has traditionally been thought of as “a set of rights and duties that involve formally organized civic and political activities (e.g., voting or joining a political party)”. Diemer (2012) referred to political participation as an “engagement with traditional mechanisms in the . . . political system, such as voting in elections and joining political organizations” (p. na). Munroe (2002) defined political participation in terms of the degree to which citizens are exercising their right to engage in political activities (e.g., to protest, to speak freely, to vote, to influence or to get more energetically involved). Such definitions capitalize on the lawful nature of political praxis, in other words, they clearly establish a frame of reference with the available repertoire of political praxis within the conventional political norms, although these norms are not necessarily uniform across countries or across time.

Alternatively some researchers do not focus on the praxis but only on the telos, primarily by defining political participation as a set of activities aiming to influence political authority. For example, Huntington and Nelson (1976, p.3) defined political participation as an “activity by private citizens designed to influence government decision-making” whereas Verba et al. (1995, p.38) characterized it as an “activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action – either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies.” The praxis does not seem to be important enough in the context of these definitions in as much as they are mainly teleological in nature.

Such definitions, therefore, may imply that the telos is achieved through some form of “pre-specified” praxis which is acceptable and lawful. According to such a definition the Prime Minister, David Cameron, was almost certainly correct when he stated that the recent riots in the UK were sheer criminal acts because the methods used by the rioters were unlawful and went clearly beyond the acceptable boundaries of the political establishment and its institutional norms. On the other hand, the Labour Party (i.e. currently the opposition in the UK) condemned the acts of violence even though he argued that there was an “in-convenient truth”, i.e. a message passed by the riots which had to be addressed by politicians (Miliband 2011). Consequently, the riots can be seen as events charged with a visible form of political engagement and the rioters as conveying a political message, even though they were acting unlawfully. In other words, their political praxis was illegal albeit symbolically effective even though they justifiably drew wide condemnation from many quarters.

Arguably, being able to voice a group’s demands in the public sphere is one of the indications of a sustainable democratic system and may be seen as a desirable form of political participation. Much has been written over the last decades about the rights of individuals and groups to enter the public sphere as actors who are able to legitimately voice their demands. For example, Jasiewicz (2011) examined how ethnic minorities in Poland participate in the political spheres of society by articulating their views through the mass media, speaking their native languages although this “provokes negative reactions of parliamentary representatives and of common Poles” (p. 736). According to Jasiewicz, the opportunity given to ethnic groups to openly express their claims coincided with Poland’s process of democratic consolidation, following the events of 1989 when minority actors “seized on conventional forms of action including public statements, letters, interviews and conferences” and gave up “confrontational forms of action” (p.750). In this case, democratization process co-exists with an explicit commitment to disallow non-institutional (“confrontational”) methods and to comply with more predictably conventional political methods.

Interestingly, the distinction between the teleological and praxial nature of political participation can be very important and intriguing, although this is not always adequately addressed in relevant literature. For example, does occupying or burning public buildings during a demonstration (i.e. the telos being to influence decision-making via demonstrating aggressively or confrontationally), constitute

an acceptable method of political participation? That is, would such acts count as “political participation engagement” even though they are apparently outside the legal frame and the institutional practices a society is accustomed to? Some researchers stick to a hierarchy of political engagement by drawing a sharp distinction between “legal” and “illegal” political participation, and suggesting that evaluating the nature of the praxis determines its qualitative place on the participationist map. This dichotomous distinction between formal and informal (or legal and illegal) political action has an academic prehistory of many decades. Thus the orthodox approach referred to “democratic participation (conventional and unconventional methods of legal political activity in democracies) and aggressive participation (civil disobedience and political violence) . . . [as] analytically distinct types of political behaviour” (Muller 1982, p. 1). Similarly, scientists employed an analogous terminology to capitalize on the differences between democratic and aggressive participation (see Opp et al. 1981), yet newer studies also lay emphasis on the distinction between legal and illegal activities (see Lavrič et al. 2010). So the dilemma remains: Should European democracies proceed to accommodate the political telos of an activity ignoring the potentially violent nature of the praxis? In other words, is the telos sufficiently important to excuse the unpredictability and impulsiveness of any praxis? Let us try to illuminate this issue by referring back to the genesis of democracy.

The ancient Athenians – the people who invented democracy – did not consistently or necessarily distinguish between the praxis and the telos of political participationist actions. In fact, they seemed to have projected the value of the telos behind political engagement over the praxis. It appears that in classical Athens even man-slaughter could be an acceptable form of political participation. For example, Athenian citizens considered it their duty to assassinate those who were planning to take control of the polis without respect for law and democratic institutions. According to Gagarin and Fantham (2010), after the oligarchic revolutions of 411 BC, all Athenians passed a decree initiated by Demophantus to the effect that the killer of any overthrewer of the democracy might not be held liable for any penalty. The decree was publicly inscribed and displayed and an oath was taken by all tribes and the demes swearing to kill any tyrant or overthrewer of democracy – an oath that led many oligarchs to withdraw from the city. In fact, the sons of any man killed in the process of prosecuting potential tyrants would receive benefits such as “proedria” (front-row seats in the theatre), “sitēsis” (free public meals) and “ateleia” (exemption from certain taxes). Several ancient sources (e.g. Thucydides in his “History of the Peloponnesian War” (VI, 56–59) and the Aristotelian “The Constitution of the Athenians” (XVIII)) recount the story of the tyrannicides Harmodius and Aristogeiton, who were killed on the spot while stabbing to death the tyrant Hipparchus. With their action to assassinate the tyrant, Harmodius and Aristogeiton “were increasingly woven into the fabric of Athenian ideology and institutionalized as the very essence of Athen’s democratic polity” (Gagarin and Fantham 2010, p. 130). After the establishment of democracy, Cleisthenes commissioned the sculptor Antenor to produce a bronze statue of the two heroes who were considered the champions and founder spirits of Athenian

democracy. That was the very first statue to be paid for out of public funds, because Harmodius and Areistogeiton were the first Greeks considered by their countrymen worthy of having statues raised to them. Such was the social apotheosis they enjoyed that a special law was issued prohibiting the erection of any other statues around! On their statue, the Athenians inscribed a verse by the poet Simonides: “A marvellous great light shone upon Athens, when Aristogeiton and Harmodius slew Hipparchus.”

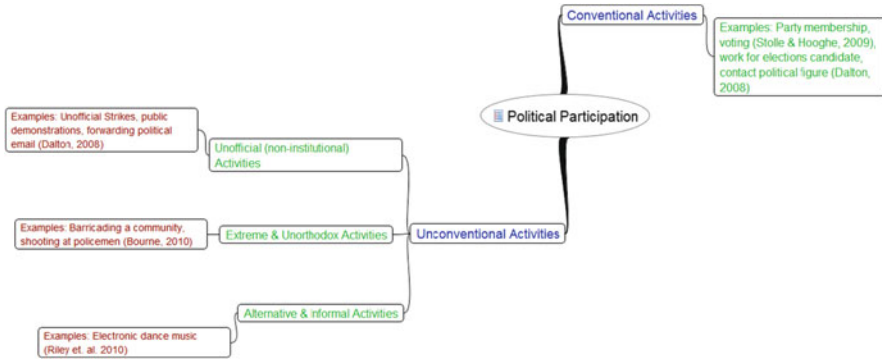
Of course, acts of violence (i.e. praxial activism) cannot be considered as legitimate forms of political participation. Indeed certain activities have been characterised in the literature as unorthodox or extreme forms of political engagement. In the case of Athens, however, one should consider that the ancient Athenians’ fundamental concern was the survival of democracy itself: the whole political system was designed, with many safety-valves introduced, in such a way as to minimize the risk of a new tyrannical power exploiting the people. For example, many officials were not directly elected by the people but chosen by lot, so that the influential and rich would be prohibited from seizing the most important branches of government. The foundational logic of Athenian democracy and the democratic constitution in general was that all citizens should have taken an active part in the decision making and at the same time being eligible to public office. The underlying telos was safeguarding democratic rule and to that end almost any praxis, even manslaughter, could be permissible and even legitimate.

Research on political participation since the 1970s has often distinguished conventional and unconventional political actions depending on the qualitative attributes of the praxis. As shown above, a specific praxis can qualify as an act of political participation if it serves the concept of “telos” in the decision-making process or, at least serves the need of publicizing information or views related to an issue of public concern. Conventional forms of participation are far more structured and normally lawful, e.g. being a member of a political party, voting, lobbying, campaigning, attending political meetings, contacting officials, etc. In this context, one refers to forms of participation which are intrinsically embedded in the accepted boundaries of institutional politics. Such activities, in this respect, might be called “formal” (Henn and Foard 2012). Yet, less traditional or non-institutional forms of participation such as participating to a protest march, signing a petition or boycotting products have also received much attention in the past few decades. Recently, Bourne (2010) presented the following list of participation activities as being unconventional: protests, demonstrations, barricading a community, firing at the security forces, blogging and using the social commentaries on talk radio. Marsh (1990) described such activities as “elite-challenging”, probably insinuating confrontational participation, although unconventional practices do not necessarily have to be illegal or unlawful. Opp et al. (1981) and Muller (1982) defined some of those activities as “aggressive”, whereas other scholars simply called activities such as “writing graffiti” and “damaging property at political gatherings” as illegal (Lavrič et al. 2010).

Based on some qualitative characteristics of the praxis and judging from their consequences, some forms of unconventional participation were considered on a

scale of a more or less extremism and thus less acceptable, both socially and legally: for example, Bourne (2010) characterized firing at security forces as “unorthodox” political participation because it goes one step further than simply being unconventional. A distinction is sometimes drawn between unconventional and unorthodox participationist methods with the latter being more extreme or violent in nature. Despite the anachronism, one might assume that the praxis of Harmodius and Aristogeiton to murder the tyrant Hipparchus would most likely be classified as unorthodox or a form of extreme and thus unlawful political engagement. It would most likely be characterised as an “illegal” activity. Understandably, such extreme actions as manslaughter have not found their way into institutional (or conventional) politics in the modern world, although it is not clear how Western democracies would react if they had to face a dilemma between an imaginary democratic decline (because dictators get to power) and assassinating ambitious usurpers to power. The Athenian democrats had had no hesitation: for the sake of democracy, not only the tyrants themselves, but anyone who was related to them could face the death penalty. The orator Aeschines, in a famous speech, written during a court trial against his political opponents (*Against Timarchus*), about 50 years after the trial of Socrates, asked the Jury: “Did you, O men of Athens, execute Socrates the sophist because he was shown to have been the teacher of Critias, one of the Thirty [tyrants] who put down the democracy. . .?” According to Wilson (2007), Aeschines “clearly expected the obvious reply to his rhetorical question to be Yes: Socrates was killed for teaching Critias” (p. 83) assuming that Critias’ mentor should be held accountable because his former student ended up being a tyrant. But there is also a between-the-lines message: arguably, Aeschines would not hesitate to ask the Athenians to pursue the Socratic example and take the life of Demosthenes, his political opponent. No praxis for the citizens of Athens would have appeared unlawful had it served the telos of protecting the vitality of democracy. No sharp distinction was drawn between conventional and unorthodox or illegal political praxis as long as the demos (the assembly of the citizens) believed that it was serving the democratic system.

Today, in addition to the categorization of political activities as conventional and unconventional (including unorthodox, aggressive, extreme, illegal activities, etc.), other forms of participation have been specified and characterized in terms of “alternative participation” because they take an “aloof” stance towards official institutions. For example, Riley et al. (2010) explore electronic dance music culture as an alternative (and certainly unconventional) form of political participation which does not have a social change agenda. Such alternative forms of participation have also been defined as unofficial and informal by other researchers (Gill 2007; Harris 2001). This development, however, introduces a minor complexity in our original definition of political participation because it asserts that operating within the context of changing things does not always have to be the telos of a political activity. Reconsidering this minor complexity should be integral to redefining “political participation” in as much as there is already an accumulated literature regarding unofficial/informal/alternative political participation. Drawing on existing literature and on what has been discussed above, Fig. 1 is a visualization



**Fig. 1** One (out of many possible) conceptualizations of political participation, as it is usually presented by contemporary research

of different conceptualizations and classifications of political participation. Significantly, this is just one out of many different figures one could construct; other researchers might present these classifications of political participation activities in a slightly different way.

The frequent distinction drawn between conventional and unconventional participation is, nevertheless, often contested on pragmatic grounds. As Linssen et al. (2011) comments, the distinction between certain acts as unconventional or conventional remains a controversial issue because some unconventional acts such as petitioning or demonstrating are getting more and more generally accepted and differently conceived in the public sphere as time passes (Dalton 2008; Norris et al. 2005). Thus it would be wrong to classify such acts as participating in demonstrations or signing a petition as modes of unconventional political engagement as they have increasingly become acceptable – and definitely much more widespread across the political spectrum. According to published estimates, around one million people took part in demonstrations and marches against the war in Iraq in London in February 2003 (BBC 2003). Around two million people demonstrated in Spain over a weekend alone against the war, and millions of people demonstrated in other large cities across Europe. Even in the United States where political participation follows a pattern of general decline, one comes across a variety of examples of mass participation in protests, especially of young people (see Gonzales 2008). Of course massive protesting has been a major form of participation even earlier in Europe: according to Van Aelst and Walgrave (1999) from 1990 to 1997, newspapers archives and police announcements and reports referred to more than three million protesters in Belgium out of a population of ten million. Consequently, on the basis of the new trends and forms of political engagement the distinction between conventional and unconventional participation – to the extent it subsists in contemporary research agenda – is probably outdated and needs to be radically redefined.

Although achieving a consensus on an explicit definition of political participation has proved to be a complex enterprise, this did not prevent researchers from

trying to identify how political participation (in light of a variety of definitions and tools of measurement) relates to other important variables, such as age and gender. In the next section, we will discuss how political participation was investigated in relation to other important variables.

## 2.1 Political Participation and Social Contexts

Political participation is not static; it is a very dynamic and evolving social phenomenon. At various times, people are more likely to be more or less politically active. For example, Riley et al. (2010) suggested that we are currently experiencing a period of alienation from traditional politics. They cited Colman and Gøtze (2001) and Griffin (2005) to suggest that distancing from traditional politics and structures is part of the rapid transformation of the political landscape. Alienation from politics does not seem however to be such a wide-ranging phenomenon: it does not affect uniformly all people and all societies at the same time. A number of factors have been identified as being related to political participation. Vecchione and Caprara (2009) found that gender, education and age are significant factors affecting participation levels. More specifically, they found that more educated people, along with males and older people are more likely to engage into political activities as compared to other groups. Further, they found that income rate was not significantly related to political participation. Stolle and Hooghe (2009) – in agreement to previous research – identified relevant variables like gender, education and age that have an impact on political participation. Also, Verba et al. (1995) suggested that education is a dynamic predictor of political participation whereas Conway (2001) claimed that, although gender gaps in political participation are shrinking, male population is still more actively engaged than females.

Age as a determinant of political involvement has been a very popular theme in participation research. It has been argued that a number of young people may feel isolated and even excluded from a political system which tends to be self-reproduced and often self-serving. Lister (2007) argues that since young people are often considered to be immature and continue to be financially dependent on their parents, they are often not treated as equal members of the planning process and power arrangements. However, marginalisation by adult political structures seems to a certain extent to be enforced on young individuals – they do not distance themselves out of a voluntary choice. It has been argued that existing political systems cannot decode how alienation mechanisms work in relation to young people (see Russell et al. 2002; Power Commission 2006; Youth Citizenship Commission 2009). Along the same lines, Smith et al. (2005) maintain that many young people are led to understand political participation as predominantly the province of adults. There is a steadily increasing corpus of research which suggests that young people are not generally “disengaged” from politics, but instead that they have a critical attitude towards institutional politics (Briggs 2008; Henn et al. 2002, 2005; O’Toole et al. 2003; Phelps 2004, 2005). It has been suggested that “feelings of political efficacy are ineluctably bound in with perceptions of the



responsiveness of political institutions to the presence of citizens as significant actors in the political process” (Coleman et al. 2008, p. 772).

Participation perceptions never exist in a vacuum. There is evidence that young people did not enjoy a high status when affiliated with mainstream political parties as compared with other age groups, e.g. more mature voters (Kimberlee 2002). For example, Mycock and Tonge (2012) mentioned emphatically that:

Political parties . . . have . . . been historically reluctant to engage with young people or represent their interests . . . , instead prioritising older voters. However, the political resonance of issues linked to youth citizenship and democratic engagement has risen recently as political parties have sought to address steep declines in levels of civic and civil activism and the preparedness of young people to vote in elections (p. 138).

One of the complexities related to younger people civic and political engagement actually revolves around the definition of “young” and “youth”. According to Mycock and Tonge (2012), different parties in the UK have different membership criteria for the youth wings of their parties, ranging from a ceiling of 26 years for the Young Labour and Liberal Youth (in the UK) up to a ceiling of 35 years for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). Different criteria apply in other countries as well, even amongst parties with similar or even identical ideological affiliation; for example, the Young Liberals in Australia have an acceptable membership age range of 16–30 (Young Liberals 2012) while in the UK some parties set the lower limit at the age of 18, that is when people get their right to vote. The discussion may become even more complicated if one considers that an individual’s actual maturity and ability to act in politically meaningful ways may not strictly correspond to her or his biological age, as immature and irresponsible individuals could exist at all ages. It is also likely that various societies may have different standards for determining the status of social, economic and emotional independence of young people from their parental families. Even international organizations have not widely agreed upon a definition of “youth”: the United Nations and the World Bank consider individuals under the age range of 15–24 as youths whereas the World Health Organization defines youth in the age range of 15–34.

It appears incontestably that investigating the conceptual parameters and factors determining political participation and civic engagement is a multi-complicated task. In this chapter, I maintain that there is stereotyping due to over-generalization and over-simplification when summarizing results from field research. One cannot, for example, talk about “the young people” as if they were a single-minded biological entity. Young people are not a homogeneous group of people attached to the same behavioural attitudes towards participation in political activities. For example, Geniets (2010) has showed that young women from low socio-economic backgrounds are among the least politically engaged compared to other groups. In-depth interviews with young women of lower socio-economic status in the UK showed that the political disengagement of those women cannot be explained away as a condition of apathy but must be viewed in a wider context of techno-social and cultural change. Geniets (2010) concluded that “it has been established that traditional political media do not reach young women from low socioeconomic status

backgrounds” (p. 409). Rossi (2009) gives a good account of different perspectives on who may be considered as “young” and cites Alexandra Vidanovic, a youth specialist of the Balkan Children and Youth Foundation in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM): “. . . young people have been turned into young-old people . . . having grown up and matured too soon” [because of the war turbulence in the Balkans] (p. 472). Age or gender alone cannot apparently help us predict a person’s mode of reasoning or growth of social habits, unless we know many more details about his or her contextual background, such as the environment in which he or she has grown up.

The following two sections elaborate on the premise that theories of political engagement should not mainly focus on specific variables such as age or gender, unless these are studied within a wider sociological context. Although one cannot expect to generate “a grand theory of political participation”, I will try to show that existing research has been defragmented (and on certain occasions lacking theoretical grounding) and may need to capitalize more frequently on comprehensive social theories.

## 2.2 Theorizing Political Participation

Let us first examine significant demographic variables in the research field of political participation, such as age. Hitherto published research has not always provided conclusive results on the relationship between political participation and other demographic variables. For example, although Vecchione and Caprara (2009) found that older people may exhibit increased political participation, previous studies (e.g., Jennings and Markus 1988) had discovered that older people tend to be less politically active (with reference to specific forms of participation). Therefore, it is plausible that not all variables affect political participation activities in the same way, so one would naturally expect to come across changing patterns and levels in political engagement, which appear to be closely correlated with specific contexts and social backgrounds.

A theory proposed to describe the relationship between political participation and age is that of “political disengagement” (Cumming and Henry 1961). This theory asserts that the elderly tend to maintain lower involvement with the “outside world” (and this includes involvement across the political spectrum as well). Disengagement, of course, may be self-initiated or may be imposed on people through a mixture of societal factors; this is a controversial issue but, in broad terms, political disengagement theory suggests that there is a direct relationship between the elderly and “political atrophy”. It is not certain, however, that there is a causal relation between the two. Such causal associations can be oversimplified and thus deceptive, especially if other variables are not included into the analysis.

This leads us to a challenging and more general theory, namely that of “selective withdrawal” in an age-appropriate participation (Streib and Schneider 1971). In agreement with the self-initiated political disengagement mentioned above, this theory suggests that as people get older they progressively adjust the level and

nature of their political activity on the basis not only of personal but also of contextual-situational factors (e.g., social pressure, health condition, leisure time, etc.). This theory seems to be more flexible than disengagement theory because it implies that some people (depending on personal and situational factors) may choose to strengthen rather than reduce their political participation (when they have enough free time, for example).

Jennings and Markus (1988) focus on the relationship between socio-demographic variables (such as age, marital status and gender) and levels of political participation from an equally interesting perspective. Their approach is defined as the “cohort composition theory”, emphasizing the importance of cohort deprivation. The general idea is that lower participation rates found among older age groups compared to younger people (for example on on-line political participation) may be a consequence of the fact that older people generally become less well equipped, less educated and less prepared to participate (as time advances and the means of participation are changing). According to some researchers (e.g., Verba and Ni 1972), education is conceived as an integral component of the patterns of political participation. This approach is constructively flexible since it can explicate how certain social groups are inclined towards more intense (or diversified) political engagement compared to other groups, especially with regard to specific participatory activities and in light of their differential attitudes (rooted in their educational backgrounds) towards politics.

Let us discuss the three theories just mentioned in the context of the riots that occurred in the summer of 2011 in the UK. It has been a widespread speculation that the social media, such as Twitter and text messaging, have played a significant role in the riots (Baker 2012). Although social media, such as Twitter, have been blamed for sparking and coordinating the unrest, recent research has shown that “there is little overt evidence that Twitter was used to promote illegal activities at the time, though it was useful for spreading word about subsequent events” (Tonkin et al. 2012). Indeed, social networking services such as Twitter are disproportionately used by specific population groups, such as young people. Getting real-time information through Twitter about upcoming events (not related to illegal activities such as looting) and getting actively involved at very short notice, demands that a person can actually use technology effectively, has the physical strength to join the others in the streets and has no other serious commitments (such as having to be at the office, having to look after small children or dependent’s health, etc.). Arguably, participation in subsequent events during the riots must have been easier for some younger or unemployed people and students, simply because they could afford to be there. The fact that older people were not as visible as younger people during the riots cannot be simply explained in light of the “political atrophy” concept expounded by the political disengagement theory. According to the age-appropriate participation theory, older people might choose to participate in the riots using other methods which might have suited them more, for example by voicing their views in the press or by contacting local politicians. Cohort composition theory postulates that it was easier for younger people to follow the Tweets because they make use of technology media more frequently, whereas older generations cannot benefit from contemporary technological developments.

In effect, all three of the theories presume that people make a decision at some point in their life (or a decision is forced upon them by other determining factors) about re-adjusting their activities and political participation. When that occurs, it is not unnatural or alarming however. Apprehensions about the effects of a progressively declining political participation is not a new phenomenon – actually it is as old as the democratic system itself. For example, the ancient Athenians took measures to encourage their fellow citizens to attend as participating members the workings of the “*ekklesia tou demou*” because various contingencies could be an impediment to an equal chance to participate. According to Aristotle, in ancient Athens “all the citizens actually take part in ... [the democratic procedures, elections, etc.] and exercise their citizenship, because even the poor are enabled to be at leisure by receiving pay” (Aristotle, *Politeia*, 1293a). Only the tyrants and the oligarchically-minded elites favoured popular apathy and the ordinary people’s alienation from politics. Political participation in classical Athens, along with transparency and accountability, were the cornerstones of democracy. It is worth mentioning that in the fourth century BC, when Timocrates (an Athenian politician) had proposed that the Athenians loosen enforcement of penalties against those who owed debts to the polis, the orator Demosthenes asserted that such a decision would deprive the treasury of funds and consequently the state could not reimburse the citizens for attendance at the Assembly. Demosthenes went on to equate such an outcome (i.e. limited participation in the Assembly), with the end of democracy (Demosthenes, “*Against Timocrates*”, 24.99).

Various other theories have been developed (in addition to those discussed above) to analyse the determinants of political behaviour and engagement and consequently enable predictions about civic participation levels. For example, granted that individuals are rational thinkers, Riker and Ordeshook (1968) elaborated on the work of Downs (1957) in order to develop a decision-theoretical framework for explaining why people vote (or don’t vote). This theory has been presented in a calculus form as “ $U = P \times B - C$ ” where  $U$  is the utility of voting,  $B$  is the expected benefit when the preferred candidate or party wins,  $P$  is the probability that the vote cast will decide the outcome of the election and finally  $C$  is the costs of voting. It is therefore claimed that an individual is more likely to vote when  $P \times B > C$ . Indeed there is a rich literature related to this theory, e.g. for group membership see Moe (1980), for rebellions see Muller and Opp (1986), for party activity see Whiteley (1995) and for political participation in general see Nagel (1987). Even very recent studies continue to elaborate on this theory which seems to be enduring (e.g. see Back et al. 2011). However, many sociologists would be rather sceptical about the idea that a simple formula can explain such a complex mechanism as human behaviour, let alone the concept that humans are really rational thinkers!

Interestingly, political participation has been thought to refer to a paradoxical phenomenon by the proponents of rational or positivistic theories of human behaviour. Why people do bother to vote if the effect of their vote is eventually negligible in a large country among millions of registered voters? Or, why should an individual undertake costs of participating in a democratic process

(i.e. participation requires time and energy, plus it may incur some financial or other expenses) if the outcome will eventually benefit everyone, even those who did not bother to participate? Indeed, more research has been done along the lines of the rationalist theory of human behaviour (an action being the product of rational calculation) in order to expand a more realistic analysis model (for more information, see Back et al. 2011). However, any enterprise along these lines cannot overcome the philosophical dispute over the rationality or irrationality of human thinking and acting – thus from the sociological perspective one would be reluctant to accept such a deterministic view of human behaviour.

The main assumption of the present critical assessment is that providing explanatory patterns for such a complex phenomenon as political participation we are in need of a more versatile theory based on sociological foundations. That political participation has many layers of complexity has been well demonstrated by the typology of engagement offered by Snell (2010). Political engagement typology indicates that young people approach politics with more or less information, more or less trust in politicians and the political parties, more or less sense of efficacy and more or less sense of civic duty. It appears from this analysis that a lack of any one of these characteristics may cause a growing adult to remain politically inactive, thereby tipping the scale toward a majority who are disengaged and a minority who have enough of each of the characteristics to be semi- to fully politically engaged.

But as young people are growing up in specific contexts, they naturally become active agents within their cultural settings and experience. In the next two sections, I will discuss political participation through sociological theories which are embedded in the research sub-field of the “theory of practice”. More specifically, I will apply Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus” to suggest that political engagement may be the manifestation of a habitus within the field of political and social life of “evolving adults”. Further, I will introduce ideas deriving from the post-modernist school of thought and analyse the nature and the limitations of contemporary research in the field of political participation.

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### **3 Theorizing Political Participation: Bourdieu’s Concept of “Habitus”**

Pierre Bourdieu coined the notion of “habitus” in order to describe “the permanent internalisation of the social order in the human body” (Eriksen and Nielsen 2001, p. 130), while observing that individuals have a capacity for invention and improvisation (Bourdieu 1990). According to Bourdieu’s theory of action, the world is surrounded by structural constraints which form “permanent dispositions” representing various schemes of perception which are very generic and often originate from conventional categories, like male/female or young/old. However, these internalized dispositions also regulate the way an individual behaves or takes decisions (Bourdieu 1977, p. 15). Social life may be perceived as an on-going effort on the part of the individual to find equilibrium in a world full of formidable social constraints, drawing on his or her cultural resources in order to survive. The concept

of “balancing” implies a non-deterministic view on the formation of the facets of social life (thus the space available for generating new forms of action, invention and improvisation).

In the same context, Bourdieu also coined the notion of “fields” which are related to specialist domains like the medical profession or politics. Each field has its own logic and rules and consists of a distinctive combination of different types of capital, such as financial (monetary) capital, symbolic capital (such as prestige) or social capital (e.g. social network). Individuals may be motivated by any or by a combination of these capital forms. According to Bourdieu, the habitus is the mechanism by which an individual

... produces strategies which, even if they are not produced by consciously aiming ... turn out to be objectively adjusted to the situation. Action guided by a “feel for the game” has all the appearances of the rational action that an impartial observer ... would deduce. And yet it is not based on reason. You need only think of the impulsive decision made by the tennis player who runs up to the net, to understand that it has nothing to do with the learned construction that the coach, after analysis, draws up ... The conditions of rational calculation are practically never given in practice: time is limited, information is restricted. ... (Bourdieu 1990, p. 11)

Following this line of reasoning, the idea of humans as rational beings, i.e. calculating, balancing and rebalancing costs and benefits, appears highly disputable. However, the toolbox of the Bourdieun theory is even richer: derived from the Hellenic term “doxa”, Bourdieu defined term to represent deeply internalised societal or field-specific presuppositions that are taken for granted and are not up for negotiation (Bourdieu 1998, 66–7). In other words, these are things which “go without saying”, i.e. they are accepted by default by agents who act in a specific field of social activity. For Bourdieu, practice is constructed on the dispositions which are inherent in habitus and unfolds as “strategic improvisations – goals and interests pursued as strategies – against a background of doxa that ultimately limits them” (Parkin 1997, p. 376).<sup>1</sup>

Having said that, habitus should neither be considered as a result of free will nor determined fully by other external forces and constraints, but is shaped by a kind of negotiation and moderation over time. The key-word here is the term “over time” which implies that a habitus takes time to negotiate and crystallize. This is in agreement with Snell (2010) who suggests that “social scientific explorations of political engagement among emerging adults need to take into account the levels of materialism or individualism, trust or distrust, hope or pessimism, and moral convictions and capabilities for principled thinking” (p. 266). These are individual character traits which appear in childhood and mature in adulthood. In many cases, society would expect these “traits” to be affected and steered by education, although an individual’s character is also affected by his or her immediate environment. Consequently, a habitus pertaining to political participation is gradually being constructed, within the constraints of actuality. Once the “political

<sup>1</sup> For more information, the interested reader is redirected to Postill (2010).

participation habitus” is built, it may be considered as crystallized, although it can change over long periods of time depending on external stimuli (e.g., a long period of unemployment and poverty).

All theories of political engagement described in previous sections draw on the assumption that, at some point in life, people start making a decision (or a decision is forced upon them) to adjust their political participation activities (or habits). Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, however, has the advantage of flexibility allowing us to consider individuals as agents who, within the field of civil polity, can dynamically shape their behaviour in light of their “capital” and within specific constraints (see the discussion about “class” in the next section). The leading idea of habituated forms of conduct in the terrain of political participation acknowledges that individuals act as innovative agents within the same field and may well share predispositions and constraints. Habitus (to put simply, a system of dispositions) is dynamic, never crystallizing fully – thus the occasional changes across the lifespan of individuals, in as long as habitus “is not fixed or permanent, and can be changed under unexpected situations or over a long historical period” (Navarro 2006, p. 16).

The role of “doxa” in structuring an associated habitus of political participation is significant in the sense that individuals often explain their political behaviour as a reflection of shared predispositions within their social environment. Collective predispositions can generate strong feelings which in turn shape individuals’ behaviour: Sloam (2007) presents interesting responses from individuals during interviews; “I couldn’t trust any politician” and “. . .they are known for lying [the politicians]” (p. 556). The response “they are known for lying” means that, everybody knows that, we do not even need to discuss it. One can well imagine the individual who gave the above responses asking: “Why should we trust the politicians if we know that they are lying?” Bourdieu’s theory does not imply that all individuals will develop the same life-strategy even if they share the same doxa, since all draw on their various forms of capital which can differ significantly (the concept of class, under cover). Young members of a renowned and powerful political family, for example, may choose to become politicians and engage full-time in politics because they have sufficient capital to do so, even if they know that politicians are not trustworthy (see the Bush dynasty or any other political dynasty, for example). Other people with much less social or cultural capital may choose to disengage from politics because they cannot see how this could help them improve their life or affect change; see another extract from an interview from Sloam (2007): “It’s very hard to do [to affect change] unless you’re persistent. . . It’s a full-time job” (p. 560).

Studying the irregularity displayed in people’s enthusiasm for political participation is of vital importance as it directly relates to the question of a well-functioning democracy. I have so far suggested that political participation is a form of social engagement or activity and cannot be investigated outside this contextual parameter. However, sociological practice theories are not frequently analysing political participationist behaviours, although some interesting work does exist within the field of political sociology (see for example, Dobratz et al. 2002). The work of Quintelier and Hooge (2011) is an interesting example of a very

well-written published research, investigating the relationship between trust and participation (among other things). Indeed, it might be challenging to explore “the relationship” between trust and participation as if there was one single and specific relationship between the two. Quintelier and Hooge (2011) found that “apparently, political trust is not related to individual participation, at least not among [a specific] age group” (p. 73) and that “the relationship between collective political participation and trust is rather disappointing” (p. 73). But why one can expect to get different results? One could suggest that lack of trust might lead a group of people to apathy, but might lead another group of people to political engagement in order to affect change. The reverse may also hold true: political trust may motivate a group of people to actively participate, but may induce another group to disengage from politics because they may feel that everything is fine and their involvement is unnecessary. As a result, the overall effect of trust on participation may be negligible and a researcher may find a minor causal link between the two variables.

Thus revisionist approaches within the standard theoretical literature on political participation would be profoundly useful. However, because of lack of space, I would like to draw the attention of the interested reader to some additional work by Pierre Bourdieu, “The Logic of Practice”. Bourdieu’s work has not been widely applied in the context of political participation research. I have tried to remedy this omission, even though it is obviously only one amongst many constructive theories that can be employed to re-contextualize and re-interpret political participation and participation mechanisms. Last section is designed to present a few theories for explaining political participation, and to this effect references will be drawn to some recent key concepts which have been introduced during the past decade.

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#### **4 Theorizing Political Participation: Class, Post-Modernism and Socialization Theories**

Formal theories of sociology are very important for understanding political engagement behaviour because they provide tools for exploring determinants of participation. For example, Cainzos and Voces (2010) used data from 20 countries from the first round of the European Social Survey to demonstrate the causal relationship between social class and political participation. Hence empirical evidence seems to contest modern theories which predict the decline of social class and the generation of post-modern societies where class becomes progressively less relevant in determining political behaviour. Cainzos and Voces (2010) is thus a very important study as it employs vigorous quantitative evidence derived from an almost pan-European study, showing that the study of political participation, guided by sociological approaches, can yield fruitful and instructive results. Apparently, both the constraints and the various forms of capital at the disposal of different classes of people can constitute influential determinants of their potential participation habitus. According to Cainzos and Voces (2010),



The main lesson that can be drawn ... is quite straightforward: in the field of political participation, class still matters. A significant and substantively meaningful association between class and political action can be observed in most European countries ... the evidence offered in this article seems most compatible with the idea of a continuing political relevance of class, contrary to the prophecies of class decomposition and in keeping with the findings of research both on class voting and on the relationship between class and political preferences which have questioned the “new orthodoxy” of the declining political significance of class ... (p. 407).

Researchers exploring the socialization aspect of political participation have elaborated on how individuals are influenced by other people so as to get politically engaged. The socialization perspective capitalizes on the significance of face-to-face interaction and it assumes that interactive experience with other like-minded actors affects motivation and attitudes (Eder and Nenga 2003; Verba 1961). This theory/conception is usually being considered along with a dichotomous classification of political participation activities to (a) collective (involving interaction with others) and (b) individual (where there is no interaction with others). Such a classification is of questionable validity. For example, the concept of “checkbook activists” (i.e. people who donate money to a cause, but do nothing else to help) has been used as a primary example of individual participation because “checkbook activists write their checks at home, not in the company of other like-minded participants” (Quintelier and Hooghe 2011, p.64), but also see Smith et al. (2002) and Stolle et al. (2005) for more information. Yet one might ask “why are the checkbook activists signing the checks?” Some of them may do so because of ideological reasons and they may never want their action to be publicized. But surely, others sign the check aiming to make a statement or to increase the odds to affect some change or simply because they want to be praised for doing so. Their aim may be to increase their symbolic capital (e.g. prestige), to increase their social capital (e.g. their social network) or to increase some amount of profit by increasing their financial capital. In this case, the interesting question is why somebody is signing a cheque, and clearly this is not a strictly individualist issue because it usually has an intended audience. Bourdieu suggests that agents within specific fields are not merely motivated or influenced by others, but invent and improvise under certain constraints. Agents possessing large symbolic or social capital can develop strategies to motivate or lead others and they may consequently increase further their capital within their field; see for example Tonkin et al. (2012) on how Tweets that were posted by popular or newsworthy people (people with large symbolic or social capital) were more frequently re-tweeted during the UK riots in the summer of 2011.

At this point, a brief reference to the action-based dissonance theory might be useful. The action-based dissonance theory suggests that once actors are involved in a form of behaviour or activity (e.g. if they are inclined to increase their level of political participation), they will have a tendency to develop similar attitudes in order to be consistent with themselves (e.g. they will develop *positive* attitudes towards political participation). Harmon-Jones and Harmon-Jones (2002), suggested a conceptualization of an action-based model of cognitive dissonance by which the actors are inclined to reduce the forms of cognitive dissonance, therefore demonstrating

more harmony between what they do and how they feel. Such a theory is not in disagreement with Bourdieu's theory of the gradual, over time, crystallization of a habitus of political participation whereby the individuals develop strategies based on their resources, within the frame of doxa which represents their beliefs and attitudes.

Trust is one of the traits or dispositions people develop and crystallize as they would growing up from childhood to being teenagers and adults, thus obtaining a "feel for the game", according to Bourdieu. I have already referred to Snell (2010), Sloam (2007) and Quintelier and Hooghe (2011) who have studied social and political trust. On trust, one should draw a reference to the wide-ranging work by Francis Fukuyama, "Trust: the social virtues and the creation of prosperity". Fukuyama (1995) capitalizes on the moral bonds of social trust – the bonds that promote a cohesive society in which "collective action" is justified and the individual creativity is empowered. Although the work of Fukuyama is rather more "economy-oriented", it should be admitted that conceptualizing trust as a form of social capital is valuable. Rothstein (2005) has also investigated the lack of social capital in societies where trust collapsed, even if cooperation would eventually benefit all. Famously, Bo Rothstein maintained that people will cooperate only if they believe that others will also cooperate and suggested that trustworthy political institutions and public policies tend to build trust and thus greater social capital. Characteristically, Rothstein concluded his book by stating that trust is generated through the capacity for dialogue and effective participation.

One could go on exploring and analysing many theories and previous published work of great importance (e.g. the work by Robert Putnam and Stephen Ball) which were developed to explain, predict or describe trust and political participation. This chapter does not defend a specific theory or conceptualization of political participation, not even the work of Bourdieu on which many references have been drawn. The main thesis put forward is that relevant studies should lay more emphasis on empirical research based on solid theoretical patterns designed to explicate political participation as part of the individuals' social life. The view of a habitus of political participation is a ground-breaking analytical tool as is founded on solid sociological thinking, although post-modernist theories of diffused power and the discussion over the decline of social class have been in the march recently.

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### Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to critically explore aspects of contemporary research on political participation. To this end, I have

- (a) Discussed different conceptualizations and definitions of political participation as they are presented in contemporary research;
- (b) Investigated the validity of the distinction between conventional and unconventional participation and suggested that it might be redundant or in need of drastic revision;
- (c) Referred to how the ancient Athenians, the inventors of democracy, conceptualized political participation and presented some evidence to the effect that they did not distinguish between extreme and conventional political participation;

- (d) Reviewed available research and outlined perspectives on political participation and argued that currently relevant research suffers from fragmented typological or exegetical outlooks and, to this effect, sociological theories can help reflect on and understand better the processes and forms of political participation.

In conclusion, existing research on political participation could benefit by relying more on solid sociological theorizing. Political participation is a meaningful manifestation of social life, and as such it cannot be investigated in isolation from other aspects of life. However, the research community is by no means bound to follow the dream of Isaac Asimov, by seeking the formulation of The Grand Theory of Psychohistory.<sup>2</sup> There is no theory that could possibly explain or predict perfectly human behaviour. In fact, this was the distorting mirror in relevant studies during the last decades. Although Asimov was a science fiction author, many academics were inspired by his work and tried to apply the principles of Nash's Game Theory in Social Sciences. Siegfried (2006) provides a very informative and interesting account on this attempt, which he describes as "the modern quest of a code of nature".<sup>3</sup> One could only hope that, in the future, researchers will maintain the ideal balance between large-scale quantitative research and more theoretical research in the lively field of political participation.

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<sup>2</sup> For the readers who are not familiar with the work of Isaac Asimov, it is useful to say that he was an inspired author who published science fiction novels in the 1950s with the name Foundation Trilogy. In those books, Asimov foresaw the evolution of the science of psychohistory, a science which could forecast political, economic and social events. Asimov himself explained that psychohistory was "the science of human behavior reduced to mathematical equations" (Asimov 1983, p. xi).

<sup>3</sup> We have already visited, in this chapter, theories of political behaviour with foundations on concepts familiar from Game Theory such as the decision-theoretic framework.

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