

Analysing low participation as a threat to democracy politics essay



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With a devolution of power within the state, increasingly heterogeneous societies, the formation of trans-national political entities and new modes of expression, the relationship between citizen and state is increasingly precarious. The broader debate on the functioning of democratic practices in emerging democracies has placed a question-mark on the place of political participation in the whirl of democratic processes about what it is, who should take part in it, how it should be done, when it is necessary and when it is detrimental. This essay will evaluate the claim that the more participation there is in decisions, the more democracy there is' by taking a horizontal view on different form of participation and conclusively arguing that within institutional frameworks, low participation is indeed bad for democracy while the same cannot be said for non-conventional, non-institutional routes of civic engagement.[1]

Political participation is a growing issue for established democracies. Though the decline in social engagement has largely been documented in the USA, the phenomenon seems to be preponderant in a number of established democracies[2]. Some may view this lack of communication between the citizens and their state as an indication of declining democratic norms. It comes as no surprise then that political participation is a fiercely debated topic amongst political scientists today, and a more global matter of concern. Questions surrounding the eligibility for institutionalised participation or the extent to which the state should interfere to encourage participation have gained in prominence.[3] On a more elemental level, however, the notion that peaceful participation in established democracies is not only desirable but a minimum prerequisite to meaningful democracy is hardly a contested

one. The contribution of basic citizen involvement including ' set checks and balances in the governance of our societies that help protect our welfare, a right to be engaged in decisions that affect us and the collective experience of attempting to solve problems with our fellow citizens' are far too valuable to be undermined or detracted from by a system of democratic governance. [4]Hence Gerry Stoker concludes ' democracy needs politics'. [5]By agreeing with Moon that the ' major problem from both the political and academic perspectives' is ' the place of political participation in democracy', this essay will investigate the role of different modes of participation and their significance for democracy. [6]

The theories surrounding participation and its relationship to democracy are continually evolving in the study of political science and these findings must be considered in any investigation of the topic. Bentham, James Mill and the more recently Pateman hold common ground in their classical interpretation of democracy which views political participation as a necessary means of preventing the elite from abusing power. [7]Further to this, Robert D. Putnam has argued that even non-political organizations in civil society are vital for democracy. His rationale for this is that they build social capital, trust and shared values, which are transferred into the political sphere and help to hold society together, facilitating an understanding of the interconnectedness of society and interests within it. [8]Schumpeter, Berelson, Dahl and Eckstein held a more elitist view of democracy associated with revisionist theory. They conceptualise democracy in terms of the electoral competition between leadership elites and limit the bounds of equality within the population to the double criteria of universal suffrage and

equality of opportunity, judging that direct democratic participation should play a limited role and citizens should only express their views periodically within the institutionalised framework of the voting system.[9]Hence revisionist theorists consider citizens as controllers of political elites rather than participants in the political decision making process. This institutionalised conception of political participation has some similarities with Harrop and Miller views that seem to devalue non-institutionalised methods of participation and instead point towards the responsibility of the political system, and especially electoral systems, to govern by majority rule whilst 'reassuring' minorities. By this logic, political systems carry the task of 'drawing people in[to]' the political system.[10]Relevant to our research then is this dichotomy in opinions around the relationship of democracy with political participation, between those who emphasise the value of institutionalised participation controlled by the state; and those who value non-institutionalised forms of political participation, which can be rather more initiated by the individual citizen, either alone or, as is more commonly the case, in association with others. Caramani takes a slightly different turn in differentiating according to high-risk and low-risk participation. She includes in high-risk participation unofficial strikes and occupying buildings or factories. Signing a petition, joining in boycotts and attending lawful demonstrations are to her forms of low-risk participation. In the midst of this debate about what constitutes participation and the different types of participation, our concern is with the degree of participation, which Verba and Nie address in asserting that 'the more participation there is in decisions, the more democracy there is'.[11]This essay will empirically assess Verba and Nie's assertion and speculate that the relationship is <https://assignbuster.com/analysing-low-participation-as-a-threat-to-democracy-politics-essay/>

somewhat more complex but that basic institutionalised participation is necessary for democratic governance. In our discussion; the variability in democracy levels will act as our dependent variable and different levels and forms of participation as our independent variables. We will be assessing the variability in democracy against different level of participation in the different forms that it can take. Our case-selection consists of a cross-section comparison between France and the United Kingdom using the Most Similar Systems Design comparative research method. This essay will evaluate Verba and Nie's claim using particularly the institutionalised vs. non-institutionalised differentiation between forms of participation and inspiring ourselves from Harrop and Miller's view, we will hypothesise that that the political system should aim towards including as many citizens as possible in institutionalised forms of participation in order to avoid high rates of high-risk non-institutionalised forms of participation, which are detrimental to democracy. The degree to which low participation is bad for democracy therefore depends very much on the type of participation and its role within respective political systems. Central to our answer is the exploration of these different forms of political activity.

An appropriate conception of political participation is necessary in order to reach comprehensive conclusions. Hague and Harrop define political participation as the ' activity by which individuals formally intend to influence who governs or the decisions taken by those who do so.' [12] If we take democracy's most elemental feature to be the ' consent of the people', political participation immediately imposes itself as the essence of democracy and as a term encompassing various ways in which citizens

consent to, or oppose, government strategies or decisions.[13]These various methods of expressing one's political opinion create a web of political interaction between citizens and state and ensure democratic processes. ' An environmentalist lying in front of workers constructing a new road, a citizen contacting a legislator about a missing social security cheque, a terrorist plotting a suicidal assault on a despised regime'- all are examples of individual participation in politics although they may not be targeting the same level of political outcomes.[14]Whilst some political actions seek the complete breakdown of a regime, others seek to defend what they consider to be pressing issues, and others still limit their participation to standardised actions such as voting in local and national elections. As Verba and Nie assert, ' people specialise in specific modes of political participation' meaning that ' there is no single hierarchy'; but their effects will be somewhat disparate.[15]We cannot then band together all forms of political participation; for their comparability, prominence and relationship to democracy are multifarious. Thus, we will group together institutionalised forms of political participation and non-institutional types. Institutional participation includes voting, being part of an interest group, being a member of parliament and taking part in trade-unions while non-institutionalised forms may include petition-signing, striking, demonstrating or boycotting.[16]In the context of our comparison between two established democracies, it is a given that both France and the UK have a minimum level of political participation in the form of competitive elections, which Katz identifies as ' the defining institution in modern democracy'.[17]One final note can be made on the democratic paradoxes; the first one concerning aggregate and individual interests, and the second being the " free-rider"

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problem. With regards to the former, it seems indeed that it is the responsibility of the state to act in the interest of the majority whilst safeguarding the interests of the minority, a difficult balance to find but one that is essential at the expense of losing democratic credibility and avoiding civil unrest. The second paradox is that of collective action. This concept, introduced by Olson in the 1960s, distinguishes between political “entrepreneurs” who take political initiatives, and “free riders” who consider that the cost of participation is greater than its benefit and therefore do not participate but benefit (or suffer) from the outcomes of entrepreneurial actions. Though Aldrich subsequently came up with the paradox of voting, which contradicted Olson’s theory and empirically proved that millions of people did vote despite the cost of this action being greater than its potential benefit for most individuals; we must take note that political participation outside the election system often only draws in a minority of citizens though the repercussions extend beyond the confinement of the politically active few. A central element of the answer to the question is then, whether low participation is good for democracy if political participation is considered as a choice of last resort to citizens of established democracies to express their discontent. Hence we will look beyond existing vehicles of interest aggregation and at the value of the ‘scaling up’ of social movements for democratic governance.

As we have previously stated, in our empirical measurements, the level of democracy qualifies as the dependent variable to levels and forms of political participation. It is necessary then for us to define democracy in appropriate terms that allow for variations in levels of democracy, as any

dependent variable must allow for variable measurements. Accounting for and interpreting democracy's many facets and the interaction between them is an on-going challenge to modern political scientists who may come to different conclusions depending on which aspect of democracy they find to be the most instructive for any political entity's ' democratic score'. In assessing levels of democracy in established democracies, Dorenspleet's minimal conception of democracy as requiring competitiveness and universal suffrage is not sufficient.[18]On the other end of the spectrum, Bollen's measurement criteria for democracy as listing eight hundred variables is too extensive to be rigorously applied to cross-national comparison.[19]More applicable then, is Dahl's measurement of the extent of democracy, which encompasses percentage voting, the competitiveness of the party system, absence of electoral irregularity and freedom of press, which are all variable in degrees.[20]Given that both France and the UK are established democracies and score highly in democracy rankings, we assume that they at least fill all of these criteria to a minimum level. Our efforts will be concentrated in calculating the extent to which participation is a decisive factor for the level of democratic performance. It seems that the percentage voting levels is a minimalistic calculation of political activity of a country's citizens. We will therefore not limit ourselves to comparing election turnout but include other forms of participation, allowing us to undertake an assessment on broader dimensions. Perry, Moyser and Day argue that ' without it [participation], there would be no democracy'.[21]If we take political participation to be a minimum requirement for democracy then, our question is whether it requires only a minimum level, or whether levels of

participation are proportionally contingent to levels of democracy as Verba and Nie claim.

Both the UK and France follow the so-called “ Westminster” model of majoritarian executive power concentrated in a single-party majority in the French case and minimum winning coalition in the UK case. In the French system however, the executive dominates the legislative as opposed to a balance of power relations in the UK. Both have Two-party systems and function on a disproportional electoral system (first-past-the-post in Britain and majoritarian in France). The interest group system in the UK follows the pluralist model whereas France has general been attributed a Neo-corporatist model.[22]On the whole, democracy has been stable in both the United Kingdom and France and both may confidently be qualified as ‘ established’ democracies. To qualify for inclusion in this bracket, we understand that both countries have the necessary institutions in place for democracy to thrive and, at a basic level, they both comprise the set of paradigms that we are familiar with in established European democracies. In Dahl’s words, ‘ control over government decisions about policy is constitutionally vested in elected officials, elected officials are chosen in frequent and fairly conducted elections in which coercion is comparatively uncommon.’[23]By this criteria of similar political design, Kenneth Newton and Heiko Giebler place France and the UK in the same country ‘ family’, justifying our Most Similar Systems Design comparative technique.[24]

The extent to which the political systems of France and the UK allow for various forms of political participation and the extent to which this feature is contingent with their score on democracy is not clear-cut. Though both

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political systems provide a competitive arena in which both the government is generally elected democratically, their respective electoral systems may not result in the same level of fairness in terms of representation. In the UK, plurality is sufficient, whereas in France, majority is necessary. Hence with British the first-past-the-post system, a party may only win seats in the legislature if the vote is heavily concentrated in certain areas, meaning that the votes are not equally weighted, which affects the outcome, somewhat undermining the representativeness of results. This is evidenced in recent legislative elections carried out in the UK, the results of which were archived by Carr's election archive.[25] In the 2001 election, 32 per cent of the votes went to the conservatives but got transformed into 25 per cent of the seats in the House of Commons, as opposed to 41 per cent of the votes going to Labour which when transformed into seats, represented 62 per cent of them. [26] In 2005 this unfairness was starker still with 35 per cent of the votes going to Labour corresponding to 54 per cent of the seats and 32 per cent for Conservatives going to just 30 per cent of the seats. In 2010 the paradox was not so marked; but this is rather per chance of the particular equilibrium of votes between the districts rather than the strength of the voting system. In a plurality system such as that of the UK, it is possible for a situation where a higher number of votes for a particular party compared to another results in a lower proportion of seats in parliament, which would occur if the high number of votes are cast within a smaller number of districts. In such a scenario where the political system does not ensure a fair election system, the democratic act of casting a vote is significantly undermined. Whether an individual's vote will have any weight in the process of transforming votes into seats will depend largely on the location he/ she finds himself/herself; <https://assignbuster.com/analysing-low-participation-as-a-threat-to-democracy-politics-essay/>

and voter turnout matters little to the final outcome. It seems understandable that in this situation, the motivation to voting is diminished. Additionally, the voters do not elect the members of the Upper House of parliament, the House of Lords, which again devalues the parliament's democratic fervour. In France the Sénat is elected by 150 000 "representative" voters who act on behalf of the citizens. The electorate is formed of local representatives, ministers and regional and municipal councillors. Furthermore, the French majority system ensures equal weighting of all the votes that are cast and ensures that the chief of the executive is voted by a majority of citizens by having two voting rounds, the second one with the top two candidates competing against each other. The legislative has perpetually had lower voter turnout in France than the presidential elections, around 60 per cent turnout since the 1980s whereas the presidential elections of 2007 counted 83.7 per cent turnout.[27] The fact that legislative and presidential elections occur at different times perhaps accounts for this, but more importantly, the strong executive power in the hands of the president and his lower accountability to parliament compared to the UK also devalues parliamentary elections and encourages citizens to invest themselves instead in voting at the presidential elections where much of their democratic power lies. Indeed, the French President may hold national referenda on some issues, take on full legislative and executive powers in time of emergency and he 'is guardian and arbiter of the basic law'.[28]

The French majority system means that the President acts towards all citizens alike as if they were part of the majority once he/ she is voted in

office. This is reflected in the fact that he has the responsibility to choose the Prime Minister but he does this from the majority party in parliament, which may not be the party he belongs to, in which case there is a “co-habitation” and the power of the President is in fact severely limited by the power-sharing arrangements. In any case, though minority interests can be said to be accounted for in parliament, the real decision-making power is vested in the executive branch of parliament. Citizens in France therefore have much interest in mobilizing support to gain a majority vote for their party, as this will determine the approach and manifesto of the government. Indeed between the presidential elections of 2002 and 2007, there was an increase in voter turnout of approximately 5 per cent following the success of Jean-Marie Le Pen in getting through to the second round in 2002. The two-round majority system in France in this sense allows for “protest” voting, whereby voters will vote at extremes to voice their discontent with present politics on a policy such as immigration, for example. It is highly unlikely that these parties will ever actually win an election though, for they will generally compete against either a centre-right or centre-left political party that will gain an overwhelming majority, which was the case in 2002. We see then how the type of political system in any one country is decisive over how much one’s vote may have an impact on the outcome, and the extent to which high participation is essential to democracy. In a plurality system such as the United Kingdom’s; the rate of turnout is not as important as the concentration of votes in different localities. In a majority system such as that of France it is essential that the voter turnout is as closely representative of the true majority as possible; as it is precisely the number of votes divided between candidates which determines the outcome of the

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election. The UK's legislative election is the equivalent of the French presidential election in that both are vested with the power to run the country. However French elections are more representative than the UK elections, and their outcome may be dependent on the amount of voter turnout, which is not the case in the UK. In the most 'democratic' voting system of the two, the French system, low participation is bad for democracy. Therefore, we may say that the more 'democratic' the voting system (and by this we mean the more the voting system is representative of citizens' interests), the more low participation is bad for democracy. Indeed, if we take what is largely considered to be the most 'democratic' system of Proportional Representation, the more voters there are, the greater the outcome will be a true representation of the citizens' wishes.

A revisionist theoriser would consider the act of voting whereby citizens act as 'controllers' rather than 'participants' as sufficient for democracy's success. However if this were so, democracy in the United Kingdom would not achieve a higher score than that of France and would not be ranked above France by the Global Democracy Ranking (the UK is ranked tenth and France seventeenth[29]). The classical interpretation instead takes the view that a higher score on democracy requires extended participation, for which the UK's political system provides more opportunities than France's. We would be somewhat limited in insight if we considered voting to be the sole civic variable influencing a democratic index between countries; as once the majority votes for a government, minorities have limited prospects to have their interests protected, however much freedom there is in the press to express them. In France, the higher frequency of social movements is an

indication that citizens are unsatisfied with their lack of institutional pathways to participate in the decision-making process. Newton and Giebler found that 18 per cent of respondents from face-to-face survey research had participated in a lawful demonstration as opposed to 4 per cent in the UK^[30] and the Baromètre Politique Français in 2006 measured that 69 per cent of respondents to their survey admitted that they trusted neither right nor left-wing parties. As Sabine Saurugger notes however, these social movements 'disturb the established institutions' for they are conducted 'outside the established context, and therefore threaten traditional ways of thinking about governing'.^[31] Demonstrations have historically been far more preponderant in France compared to the UK shown by a study that illustrates that from the 1980s as much as two times more French respondents said they had participated in a demonstration compared to English respondents.^[32] In the bracket between 1999 and 2001, 38 per cent of French responded positively as opposed to 13 per cent British. The global trend over time also shows that the propensity for the French to demonstrate has increased by 12 respondents from since the 1980s (to the most recent decade) and only 3 respondents in the United Kingdom. Saurugger notes then that 'the only link between groups and the state [in France] is head-to-head confrontation'.^[33]

It seems that apart from basic accountability ensured by a majority vote, France's political system provides little opportunity for trade unions and associations to influence decisions, which has led Schmidt to point out the 'misfit' between the EU's position on democracy and the French position and notes that the French government 'does not talk to the citizen on the

street'.[34]In high-risk participation, France comes fourth out of the countries included in the World Value Survey, with 45 per cent of respondents answering that they had participated in an unofficial strike or had occupied buildings or factories.[35]In the same set of results, the UK scores 28 per cent. Thomassen in an 8-Nation political action study found that there was no relation between protest potential and a feeling of external efficacy or responsiveness of the political system.[36]The evidence however tells us otherwise. As we have seen, France's political system is devoted to majority rule and the executive is comparatively un-accountable to the legislative. The French system is then an example where ' only those groups that already participate in the general interest that the French administration is thought to represent can be granted access to the policy-making processes'.[37]In Saurugger's words, ' the troublemakers' are in France excluded from participation. The evidence shows us that high-risk participation occurs as a result of the lack of conventional democratic processes provided for by the state and more often than not shows that minority interests, incapable of legitimising their demands through established political channels, must adopt alternative, non-conventional methods to have their voice heard. Though Barthélémy argues that it would be ' harmful' to distinguish between citizens by ' authorizing the establishment of private societies and... political corporation'; we cannot ignore the fact that societies are increasingly heterogeneous and that the majority vote is simply insufficient to represent and satisfy such a wide array of interests ' democratically', hence the need for high-participation in associative organisations and trade unionship.[38]

Freedom House calculates that 'trade union organizations are weak' in France, and membership to them 'has declined'.^[39] Barthélémy supports this view by celebrating the 'Anglo-Saxon vibrant community' as opposed to France's 'civic desert'.^[40] Newton and Giebler indeed calculate a much higher percentage of participants in voluntary associations in the UK compared to France: 17 per cent of respondents affirmed they were members of trade unions as opposed to eleven in France, 21 per cent part of a social club and 14 per cent in France, 33 per cent in consumer associations whilst only 6 per cent of French respondents responded positively and finally 17 per cent had joined environmental associations in contrast with 10 per cent in France.^[41] In the UK, trade unions in particular have traditionally played 'a leading role' in constraining both the executive and legislative branches of government and have a key role in the maintenance of the UK's high democratic score. Polity IV has indeed given France a score of six for executive constraints compared to seven for the UK.^[42] If at the top of political decision-making hierarchy, there is reduced accountability of the executive branches of government, and if institutionalisation or professionalisation of contentious claims is not instrumentalised in the realm of conventional politics in the form of interest groups, associations or trade unions, the opportunity for citizens at the bottom of the hierarchy to influence political decisions is reduced, which is not attuned to democratic ideals. Associative participation is essential