

The Challenge of Political Equality

IN THE SPRING OF 2006, New Orleans held its first election to choose a new mayor since Hurricane Katrina devastated the city. Only 38 percent of eligible voters participated. When compared with the 46 percent turnout in the 2002 race and the 38 percent who voted in 1998, this 2006 turnout seems unremarkable. But it *was* remarkable because of the large numbers of hurricane refugees who went to great lengths to participate. Six months after floodwaters inundated the city in late August 2005, more than half of New Orleans's 450,000 residents remained in exile, in particular the poorer, less educated African-American residents. Yet 113,591 of these residents found ways to cast ballots for mayor, many of them overcoming huge barriers in order to participate in the political process.¹

This book unravels the reasons for participation among people like the Katrina refugees by providing insight into the personal commitments that motivate participation among traditionally marginalized people. The book seeks to answer the question, How do people without many educational, financial, and civic resources become engaged to participate in politics? Most research on political participation looks at the whole population and asks, What kinds of people are most likely to participate? Previous researchers have concluded that people who generally care about politics (i.e., are motivated), are able to participate (have resources), and are asked to participate will participate.² But they are not the only ones who do. There are many instances, like the 2006 mayoral election in New Orleans, in which people who lack the resources—such as education, money, free time, civic skills—and the general political interest commonly thought necessary do participate. This book explores why.

In the New Orleans mayoral election, the refugees' strong personal commitments to the outcome motivated their participation—regardless of the resources they possessed. For many displaced voters, the stakes in the

election were particularly high, as much of the city remained “empty and in shambles.” The future of New Orleans seemed to hang in the balance. The final, runoff election came down to a race between an incumbent African-American candidate, Mayor Ray Nagin, and a white candidate, Lieutenant Governor Mitch Landrieu. In the primary election preceding the runoff, Nagin had won easily in the mostly African-American precincts but received less than 10 percent of the white vote. Landrieu, in contrast, had won 30 percent of the white vote and 23 percent of the black vote. Landrieu appeared to be in a better position to woo conservative white voters who had supported other white candidates in the primary.³

Voting in this election was no easy task. Many New Orleans citizens had to register to vote from Texas, Arkansas, Tennessee, or other states where they were now living. Citizens eligible for absentee voting had to remember to request and postmark absentee ballots by the designated date. By Louisiana state law, first-time voters must vote in person—so any first-time voter (as well as any voter who missed the early voting deadlines) had to appear at the polling place on Election Day. Activist groups arranged charter buses to transport voters from neighboring states to New Orleans to cast their ballots, but evacuees still had to figure out where to board the buses and spend an entire day traveling to and from the polling centers. The voters who managed to appear at the polling places faced yet another set of challenges. Poorly labeled polling sites, confusing lines at the mega-polling centers, and missing names on the voter rolls led to substantial confusion.⁴ Formidable hurdles to voting existed in this election, especially for the thousands of voters who remained scattered throughout the southern United States.

Despite the difficulty of participating in the election, turnout in heavily black precincts actually increased from that in previous elections. Nagin won the race, drawing support primarily from African-American areas as well as from some crossover support from whites.⁵ Although numerous voters did not overcome the barriers to voting, many others cared enough about this election to make an extraordinary effort. Dorothy Stukes, chairwoman of the ACORN Katrina Survivors Association, said, “We all want to be a part of the rebuilding and have a voice in selecting someone who wants us back, because there’s a lot of people in New Orleans that’s try-

ing to keep us out.” Similarly, Terry Jackson, a New Orleanian working in Houston to sign up voters, said, “Even though they’re making a new start, they want to get involved because they have families still there. Their mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters are all still there.”⁶

This story defies a common narrative in American politics in which underprivileged people are unlikely to participate. In the New Orleans mayoral race, many voters did not fit the conventional profile of well-heeled participants. Most Katrina refugees were not very wealthy or highly educated and thus lacked the resources that existing models assert are the best predictors of political participation. Yet Katrina refugees overcame formidable barriers to voting because they were highly motivated to have their voices heard. Certainly the civic organizations that mobilized participation mattered. Ultimately, however, mobilization needs motivation to succeed. The refugees participated because they cared passionately about who won the mayoral election, as the winner was likely to have a deep impact on their lives and the lives of loved ones. Without their support, it is unlikely that Nagin would have won. The 2006 mayoral election is one of many instances in which a traditionally marginalized group with few resources possessed sufficient motivation to participate and thereby have an impact on the political system.

To understand participation among underprivileged people like the Katrina refugees, I argue that we need a better understanding of how people are motivated. Most political science research assumes that people are motivated through political interest—that is, people must be politicized before they participate, so that they have a general interest in and knowledge about politics. Research shows, however, that the affluent are much more likely to have this interest and knowledge than the disadvantaged.⁷ This book argues for a broader conception of motivation that is rooted in personal goals that move people to action. People act not only because they generally care about politics but also because they care about addressing problems in their own lives or living up to a personal sense of who they are. Because a diverse range of people have personal commitments that connect them to politics, this conception of motivation helps us better understand participation among the Katrina refugees. The book analyzes survey data to show that these personal commitments are particularly

important for predicting participation among underresourced populations and draws on in-depth interviews with political participants to illustrate commonalities in the way people develop such commitments.

PARTICIPATION AND POLITICAL INEQUALITY

Explaining what motivated the Katrina refugees to participate has implications for political equality in America. The ideal of political equality has always been a key feature of American democracy. From Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence to Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech, the notion that "all men are created equal" has been a central part of the American creed. Yet reality has often failed to meet this ideal. Chronic inequality has been an unfortunate reality in American politics for years. Because wealthy individuals participate through campaign donations, for example, they are more likely to gain access to politicians and thereby influence political outcomes. Stories abound of elected officials taking large campaign contributions from wealthy individuals. The media often portray political leaders taking lavish weekend junkets with rich and powerful representatives from corporate America. Scandalous stories of congressional corruption emerge regularly, in which representatives like California Republican Randy "Duke" Cunningham explicitly negotiate with companies to receive bribes in exchange for access to government contracts. Given the plethora of such stories, it is hard not to imagine that wealthy individuals can "buy" influence in government. Indeed, studies of democratic representation have shown that certain people are better represented than others.⁸ People who are wealthy or loyal partisans are better represented than those who are not.⁹ As the American Political Science Association's Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy recently concluded, "Citizens with lower or moderate incomes speak with a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government officials, while the advantaged roar with a clarity and consistency that policymakers readily hear and routinely follow."¹⁰ Wealthy, well-educated citizens have persistently had more voice in the political process than less advantaged individuals—and, according to the Task Force's report, this trend has only been increasing.

Addressing problems of inequality in representation depends first on addressing problems of inequality in participation. Participation is the

mechanism through which certain individuals become better represented than others. In a complex policy-making environment, elected officials are likely to encounter a cacophony of signals about how to act on any given policy issue.¹¹ Citizens who distinguish themselves in this cacophony have an implicit advantage in influencing legislative decision making.¹² Through voting, citizens communicate their preferences for one candidate or another. By devoting time to writing letters and contacting their elected officials, citizens express preferences for certain policy alternatives. By contributing money, they express support for or dissatisfaction with particular candidates, parties, or organized interests. Elected officials are much more likely to heed the concerns of those whose voices they hear. Only by participating in the political process can citizens make their voices heard.¹³

Historically, nonparticipants disproportionately come from marginalized groups, such as the poor and less educated.¹⁴ Figure 1.1 shows the percentages of people at different education levels who participated in presidential elections from 1948 to 2000. While rates of participation among

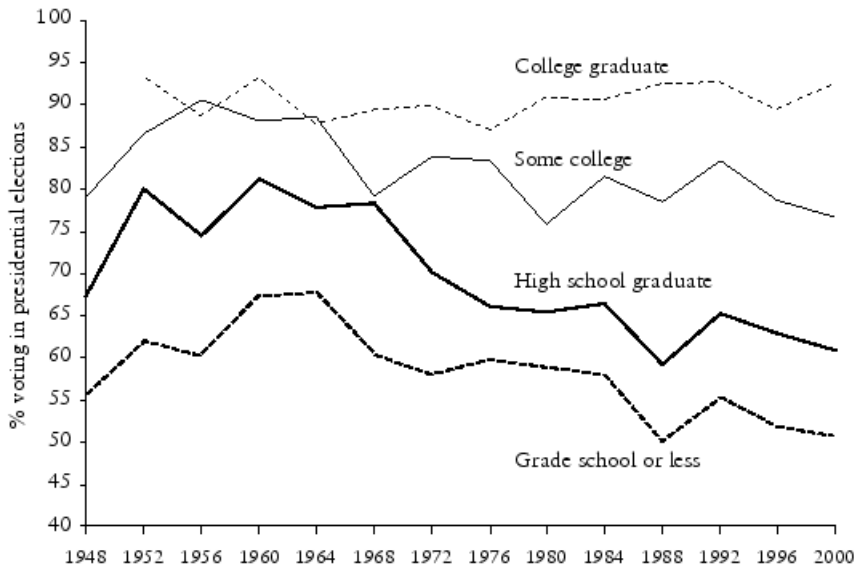


FIGURE 1.1. Rate of voter participation in presidential elections by education level, 1948–2000. SOURCE: Data from the ANES Cumulative Data File.

individuals with at least some college education have remained relatively stable, rates of participation among people with only a grade school or high school education have actually fallen. In 1952 the participation gap between people with a grade school education and people with at least a college degree was about 30 percentage points. By 2000 the participation gap between people with high and low levels of educational resources had increased to more than 40 percentage points. This growing gap poses a central challenge to any effort to remedy inequality in American politics. To ameliorate such inequalities, we need to understand how individuals with few resources become engaged in the political process.

THE NEED FOR A MULTITIERED APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING PARTICIPATION

Creating a political system that involves a broad base of people is central to any democracy and presents an ongoing challenge to American politics. History has shown that people of low education, income, and other resources are the most difficult to engage in politics. Increasing participation among this group depends first on understanding the mechanisms that draw these individuals into politics. A broad, single-tiered research strategy that considers the entire population at once may not be appropriate for examining participation within this group. Instead, a multitiered approach that asks whether certain mechanisms are more effective in engaging certain communities—especially the disadvantaged—may be needed. This book thus focuses on a key question: What are the mechanisms by which traditionally marginalized individuals become involved in politics? In other words, what factors draw underresourced individuals into politics?

A rich tradition of research on political participation reveals that people are more likely to participate in politics when the costs of participation are low and the benefits are high.¹⁵ People will not participate if the time and effort it takes to get involved are too costly. Conventional theories of participation argue that people do not participate because “they can’t, they were not asked, or they do not want to.” Though it oversimplifies the many factors that may enter into a person’s decision whether to participate, political scientists generally explain participation by three main factors: resources, recruitment, and motivation.¹⁶

People who do not participate either cannot (they lack the resources, such as money, time, information, and knowledge about politics), were not asked (they were not recruited), or did not want to participate (they lack motivation).

Most existing empirical research on participation, however, pays minimal attention to the importance of motivation in facilitating participation.¹⁷ In his review of research on participation, Morris Fiorina notes that the dominant, resource-mobilization model of participation focuses primarily on the role of resources and recruitment.¹⁸ In part, this model dominates because many resource-mobilization theorists began by asking why people who have the motivation to participate do not participate. Why do so many people who are politically interested, knowledgeable, and efficacious fail to participate? Taking these motivations as a given, they asked what other factors were important for facilitating participation. Scholars focusing on the civic voluntarism model and its predecessor, the socioeconomic status model, found that individual resources such as education, money, and civic skills help reduce the costs of participation.¹⁹ Mobilization theorists moved beyond individual traits and capacities and focused on the role that recruitment and social interactions play in delivering a contextual supply of information to increase participation.²⁰ Recruitment helps defray the costs of participation by providing individuals with the information and access they need to participate, and it enhances benefits by providing social rewards.²¹ Although these scholars have always acknowledged motivation to be an important factor, they have not theorized much about the way it works. Leading scholars have argued that motivation remains the least understood factor in facilitating participation.²²

The theoretical focus on resources and recruitment at the expense of motivation has particularly limited our understanding of participation among the underprivileged. People without resources for participation must really *want* to participate if they are to overcome the obstacles posed by their lack of education, money, or skills. Is motivation enough, however? Without much research on what motivates participation, we lack a clear sense of the possibilities. As Figure 1.2 shows, we have a clearer sense of how participation works among certain segments of the population than among others. One dimension of the figure distinguishes between people

		Resources	
		Low	High
Motivation	Low	1	2
	High	3 (Katrina refugees)	4 (Most research)

FIGURE 1.2 The focus of existing participation research, as shown in a cross-tabulation of individual traits affecting participation.

who have either few or many of the educational, financial, and civic resources that facilitate participation. The second dimension distinguishes between people who have either low or high levels of motivation. We know that people who have both the resources and the motivation for participation (group 4 in Figure 1.2) are likely to participate. Many Katrina refugees participated, however, even though they were not in that group. Many of them lacked resources for participation but presumably were highly motivated (group 3 in Figure 1.2). Yet existing research does little to explain how motivation pushes people who lack resources to participate.

Our incomplete understanding of how the underprivileged become engaged stems partially from a narrow view of what motivation is. Studies of participation often conceptualize motivation as some combination of general levels of political interest, knowledge, efficacy, and party identification.²³ As Kay Lehman Schlozman writes, people are more likely to participate “if they know and care about politics and if they think that their participation would make a difference.”²⁴ Taken at face value, this idea is relatively unsurprising. People who are more politicized in their interests and orientations are more likely to participate. What this conception of motivation lacks, however, is a sense of what people are trying to achieve through their participation—the specific goals that motivate them to take action.

This generalized conception of motivation probably would not have captured the motivation of Katrina refugees voting in the 2006 mayoral

election. Many of these voters are unlikely to have scored very high on measures of general political knowledge, political efficacy, or even general interest in politics. Those qualities are most likely to be found in people who also have the educational, financial, and civic resources needed for participation. For example, according to the 2004 American National Elections Study (ANES), 54 percent of respondents who had at least a bachelor's degree said they were "very much interested" in politics, but only 36 percent of respondents with a high school education (or less) said they were "very much interested." And while only 6 percent of respondents with a bachelor's degree or more said they were "not much interested" in politics, 23 percent of respondents with a high school degree or less said so. According to these data, there is a 17- to 18-percentage-point difference in how politicized respondents are, based on how educated they are. Under a generalized definition of motivation, people without many resources do not appear to be very motivated. Yet the underprivileged do get involved, as exemplified by the participation of Katrina refugees. These former residents of the poor neighborhoods hardest hit by the hurricane participated even though they did not have the high levels of income and education commonly associated with high levels of participation. In this specific instance, on this specific issue, these individuals were highly interested, informed, and motivated because they cared deeply about the end being sought.

We need a model of participation that includes the goals that drive people to participate in politics. As Henry Brady writes in his review of research on political participation, "Most models of participation emphasize factors affecting the supply of participation (e.g., political interest, money, time, skills, and education). Little attention is given to those factors, typically the political and social context of an individual, that create a demand for political participation."²⁵ It is hard to argue with the notion that people with highly politicized interests and identities are more likely to participate than people with apolitical interests and identities. What we lack is a good understanding of what drives individuals to become active in the political system. Or, as John Aldrich has written, "Having even copious resources, strong psychological engagement in politics, and dense networks soliciting one's activity is not, I believe, sufficient to answer, 'Why did she get involved?' What is missing is a domain-specific