

Citizen Activity: Who Participates? What Do They Say?

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The article “Citizen Activity: Who Participates? What Do They Say?” by Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry Brady, and Norman H. Nie examines two connected questions: which citizens participate in politics, and whether the people who communicate with government express the same priorities as citizens who remain inactive. The original essay correctly recognizes that democratic participation is not distributed equally and that policymakers hear some social groups more frequently than others. The article therefore moves beyond the simple question of how many people vote. It investigates participation through voting, campaign activity, contacting officials, organizational involvement, and other forms of political communication. (Verba et al., 1993)

The central concern is political representation. If active citizens have different resources, experiences, and policy priorities from inactive citizens, government may receive an incomplete picture of public need. Even where attitudes are broadly similar, unequal participation gives officials more direct information about the concerns of advantaged groups. Political equality therefore depends not only on the right to participate but also on whether people possess the time, money, civic skills, information, and organizational support required to use that right.

Research Background

The original essay refers to the survey research associated with Wolfinger and Rosenstone and describes a large-scale attempt to compare voters with nonvoters and activists with non-activists. Research on political participation has repeatedly found that education, income, age, political interest, organizational membership, and party attachment influence whether people become active. Verba and his colleagues extend this work by asking what participants communicate when they act. (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980)

This distinction is important. Two citizens may hold the same opinion, but only one may vote, donate, attend a meeting, contact an official, or work in a campaign. Policymakers are more likely to notice the active citizen because participation transforms a private preference into a public signal. The political system can therefore produce unequal responsiveness even when public opinion itself is not sharply divided by class or demographic group.

Voters and Nonvoters

The original essay states that voters and nonvoters showed few attitudinal differences apart from demographics. This finding should be interpreted carefully. Voters are often more educated, older, wealthier, and more politically interested than nonvoters, but they do not necessarily hold completely different opinions on every issue. If their preferences are similar, unequal turnout may have a smaller effect on the outcome of some elections than expected. However, demographic differences still matter because life circumstances shape which issues become urgent.

A homeowner with stable employment may care about taxes, property values, and retirement policy, while a low-income renter may place greater emphasis on wages, housing costs, public transport, food assistance, or healthcare access. They may agree on broad values but differ in intensity and priorities. Political participation also affects which issues candidates discuss. Campaigns target likely voters, so groups with low turnout may receive less attention even when their preferences are not entirely different.

Activists and Non-Activists

Political activists engage in more demanding activities than voting alone. They may donate money, volunteer in campaigns, contact officials, attend meetings, join organizations, or organize protests. The original essay notes that activists were not always dramatically different in attitude from non-activists, yet their demographic profile was more advantaged. This creates a representational problem because repeated participation gives certain people more access and influence.

Officials often treat contact from constituents as evidence of public concern. A large number of letters, calls, donations, or meeting participants can signal that an issue matters. If activists come disproportionately from groups with greater income, education, flexible time, or organizational connections, their issues may appear more widely important than concerns held by citizens who lack those resources. Political voice is amplified not only by opinion but by the capacity to express it repeatedly.

Who Participates?

The original essay identifies four groups or characteristics associated with participation: citizens with higher socioeconomic status and political awareness; strong party identifiers; people facing financial hardship; and recipients of government benefits. These observations require some refinement because the article's larger argument is that participation is shaped by resources, engagement, and recruitment rather than by one simple list.

People with more education and income often participate more because they possess civic skills,

information, flexible schedules, transportation, and social networks. Education may increase confidence in dealing with institutions and improve the ability to write letters, speak at meetings, or understand policy. Income makes campaign donations and unpaid volunteer time easier. Stable employment and professional organizations can also recruit people into political activity.

Strong party identification can increase participation because citizens feel connected to a political team and receive frequent requests to vote or volunteer. Parties provide information and lower the cost of becoming active. However, strong attachment can also encourage selective information and polarization. Participation is democratic, but the quality of deliberation depends on whether activists remain willing to consider evidence and competing interests.

Financial Hardship and Participation

The original essay suggests that people facing financial hardship may participate because they hope to change the system. Economic need can certainly motivate protest, community organizing, union activity, or contact with government. Yet hardship often reduces participation because people have less free time, less money, unstable housing, transportation problems, caregiving responsibilities, or distrust of institutions. Political motivation does not automatically overcome these barriers.

This tension is central to democratic inequality. Citizens with the greatest need for policy change may possess the fewest resources for sustained participation. When disadvantaged groups do become active, they often rely on organizations such as unions, churches, neighborhood groups, advocacy organizations, or social movements that provide recruitment and civic skills. Collective organization can convert individual hardship into political voice.

Recipients of Government Benefits

The original essay notes that recipients of means-tested benefits such as food assistance or housing subsidies may participate differently from recipients of benefits such as veterans' programs or student loans. Government programs can shape political attitudes because beneficiaries understand that policy decisions affect their daily lives. However, the design of a program also influences participation. Means-tested programs may carry stigma, complex eligibility procedures, or fear of losing assistance. Universal or earned-benefit programs may create stronger political constituencies because recipients view the benefit as a right rather than charity.

Contact with government can encourage participation if agencies treat beneficiaries respectfully and provide clear information. It can discourage participation if citizens experience bureaucracy as humiliating or punitive. The relationship between benefits and activity is therefore not only economic. It is also institutional and psychological.

The Civic Voluntarism Model

Verba, Schlozman, and Brady later summarized participation through three questions: Can people participate? Do they want to participate? Has anyone asked them? These correspond with resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment. The model helps organize the original essay's observations. (Brady et al., 1995; Verba et al., 1995)

Resources include time, money, and civic skills. Engagement includes political interest, information, efficacy, and party attachment. Recruitment occurs when parties, organizations, friends, churches, unions, or community leaders invite someone to act. Many inactive citizens are not completely uninterested. They may never receive a clear request or may not know how to participate effectively.

This framework shifts attention from blaming citizens for inactivity to examining political opportunity. If meetings occur during working hours, forms are difficult to understand, polling places are inaccessible, or organizations recruit only people they already know, unequal participation is partly produced by institutional design.

What Do Participants Say?

The article does not only count participants. It analyzes the messages they send. The original essay argues that advantaged activists may discuss broad concerns that do not represent the basic needs of less fortunate citizens. This point is important but should not suggest that advantaged people never support redistributive or public-interest policies. The problem is statistical and structural: the set of communicated concerns is less representative when some groups speak more frequently.

Highly educated citizens may contact officials about environmental protection, taxation, zoning, professional regulation, or national policy. Low-income citizens may have urgent concerns about housing, wages, transportation, policing, food, healthcare, or public benefits. If the second group participates less, officials receive fewer direct stories and requests about these conditions. Policy can then appear responsive to "the public" while reflecting a socially narrow public.

Demographics and Policymaker Attention

The original essay states that policymakers give significant attention to demographics even when attitudes are similar. Elected officials consider who votes, donates, volunteers, and belongs to organized constituencies. A small but active group may receive more attention than a large but inactive one because political incentives reward visible participation. Officials also need information, and active groups supply it through testimony, reports, meetings, and repeated contact.

This does not mean every politician acts only from self-interest. Officials may seek broad public

benefit, but they operate under limited time and imperfect information. Organized voices are easier to hear. The solution is therefore not only to criticize politicians but to create institutions that gather information from citizens who are less likely to appear voluntarily.

Voluntary Organizations

Organizations are important because they teach civic skills and recruit participants. Churches, unions, neighborhood associations, professional groups, parent organizations, advocacy networks, and social movements can provide meeting experience, public speaking, letter writing, leadership, and collective identity. These skills make political action easier.

Organizational inequality can reproduce political inequality. Higher-income citizens may belong to professional and civic associations with direct access to policymakers, while low-income workers may have fewer organizations representing them. Declining union membership, unstable work, and fragmented communities can weaken the institutions that historically converted economic need into political voice.

Money and Political Voice

Campaign contributions are one form of participation, but they are available unequally. Wealthy citizens and organizations can donate more, support lobbying, hire experts, and maintain long-term relationships with officials. Money does not purchase every political outcome, but it increases access and the ability to keep an issue visible.

The article's representational concern becomes especially serious when monetary participation is combined with unequal voting and contacting. A group that votes, donates, volunteers, and supplies policy expertise has several channels of influence. A group that participates only occasionally may have formal rights but little practical voice.

Digital Participation

Although the original article predates contemporary social media, its questions apply to digital activism. Online petitions, social networks, email campaigns, and virtual meetings reduce some costs of participation. People can share experiences and contact officials without traveling. Digital tools have helped marginalized groups organize rapidly and make ignored issues visible.

Digital participation also contains inequality. Internet access, platform knowledge, language, disability, algorithmic visibility, harassment, and misinformation affect who is heard. Clicking or sharing may not produce sustained influence unless online attention is connected with voting, organization, legal action, fundraising, or institutional change. The civic-voluntarism questions remain

relevant: who has resources, who is engaged, and who is recruited?

Why Disadvantaged Groups Are Underrepresented

The original essay explains that disadvantaged groups often fail to communicate their concerns because of inactivity. Inactivity should be understood as the result of barriers as well as personal choice. Long or unpredictable work hours, childcare, disability, transportation, language, criminal disenfranchisement, registration difficulties, and previous negative experiences with government can reduce participation.

Political institutions may also appear unresponsive, creating a cycle. People participate less because they believe officials will ignore them; officials hear less from them and therefore devote less attention to their concerns. Breaking this cycle requires visible responsiveness and accessible opportunities.

Improving Representation

Several strategies can broaden participation. Registration and voting procedures can be simplified while maintaining security. Meetings can be offered at varied times and in accessible locations, with remote options and language support. Public agencies can conduct outreach rather than waiting for citizens to appear. Schools can teach practical civic skills, and community organizations can train residents to contact officials, testify, and understand policy.

Campaigns and parties can recruit beyond habitual networks. Participatory budgeting, citizens' assemblies, advisory boards, surveys, and community hearings can provide additional forms of voice. These mechanisms should not replace elections, but they can supply information from people who are underrepresented in traditional activism.

Critical Evaluation of the Article

The article's main strength is that it joins participation with content. Counting votes alone cannot reveal whose interests are communicated between elections. By examining who acts and what they say, the authors show how formally democratic systems can produce unequal representation without explicitly excluding anyone.

A limitation is that participation and policy are historically changing. New media, polarization, campaign finance, declining organizations, and changes in voting rules affect contemporary political voice. Surveys also depend on self-report and may not capture informal activism or community work. Nevertheless, the conceptual problem remains highly relevant.

Conclusion

“Citizen Activity: Who Participates? What Do They Say?” demonstrates that political participation is unequal and that inequality affects representation. Voters and nonvoters may share many attitudes, but voters differ demographically and receive greater campaign attention. Activists possess more resources and communicate more frequently, giving their priorities greater visibility. Disadvantaged citizens may have urgent needs but fewer opportunities, skills, or invitations to express them.

The original essay is correct that policymaking can become distorted when the concerns reaching government do not represent the full public. Democratic improvement requires more than encouraging individuals to be active. Institutions must lower barriers, recruit broadly, protect participation, and create channels through which underrepresented communities can communicate effectively. Political equality depends on both the right to speak and a realistic capacity to be heard.

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