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Intersecting Segments of the Participatory Puzzle

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Abstract

An engaged and active citizenry is integral to the American democracy. Normally when political participation is discussed, a heavy emphasis is placed on voting in national elections. While this is an important element of politics, it is but one ingredient. It is important to view participation also at the community level, for localities comprise the fabric of America. The late philosopher and educator, John Dewey, believed that democracy not only began at home, but that its home was in the neighborly community (Putnam, 2000). This exemplifies the American political system in that there exist numerous forms of participation that have long shaped political life and contrast with other democracies. Furthermore, Americans have a rich tradition as joiners, as Tocqueville's classic observations attest (Putnam, 2000). Among these differing forms are volunteering, campaigning, sharing opinions with others, contacting representatives, and being politically active within the community. Not only is it important to understand the different modes of participation, but also who participates as well as the instruments involved in shaping participation. There are numerous influences upon participation such as the media, conflict, problem perceptions, political socialization, a focus on national politics and figureheads, and the rules of political engagement. Participation holds various meanings for different groups; some utilize this to their advantage while others are washed over by the wave of scarce resources.

Political participation largely remains a puzzle. Amidst the abstract models and theories, we do not fully understand why some people participate while others do not. To some extent, these models each hold one piece of truth among gaps of mystery. Although there has been a consistent ebb and flow of participation throughout American history, we are facing the lowest

and longest trend of participation today. As a result of decreased participation, it is charged that our democracy is faltering. Although this has been a consistent worry during various periods of American history, today's predicament is somewhat different; historically, the system of inputs and rewards was not set up for all Americans to participate (Parenti, 2002). Current education levels have never been higher and institutional barriers never been lower. As we strive to understand and explain political participation, we must synonymously ponder the meaning of democracy. There may exist valid arguments that our democracy is facing a perilous time (Elshtain, 1995). Americans are finding less in common with each other today as we become either overwhelmingly disenfranchised from politics or increasingly polarized. Participation lends our political system legitimacy, offering form and substance to the meaning of the rules we abide by. Ultimately we must ask ourselves whether or not this makes a difference.

Introduction

Our institutions provide a common ground for a multitude of voices with different agendas, conflicts, and needs. In the world of politics in which 'who gets what' is the driving force, participation within the system helps to determine the winners and the losers. Participation in politics is an intricate web of players, modes, context and precipitating events. In order to organize the chaos and glorious mess of democracy in action, there are numerous concepts and models that exist. It is important to note that depending on the model used in analysis, citizen participation in politics will appear to exist in differing amounts. Although there are agreed upon standards used in analysis, inconsistencies remain. Ultimately we must attempt to analyze all of the cogs within the political machine in order to better understand the magical workings of a system many of us take for granted.

The Modes of Political Participation

To give a synopsis of political participation, it is inclusive of all activities undertaken by private citizens that attempt to influence governmental activities (Nie & Verba, 1987). In short, it is essentially the democratic ideal as an input of the systems model. "Participation is viewed as necessary to maintain open access to the system" (Conway, 2000, p. 2). Citizen action is deeply intertwined with the modes of participation, demographic characteristics and perceptions of the world around them.

There are numerous ways in which the citizen can work to influence government, and each action contains different meanings even between individuals. Citizen actions can be supportive or seek change within the political system (Conway, 2000). This is exemplified with the process of voting or marching in the streets. Actions can also be passive or active; conventional or unconventional (Conway, 2000). Passive political participation includes

retaining an interest about politics and current issues, watching presidential debates on television, or seeking to influence one's peers (Conway, 2000). Active participation involves being actively engaged with the political process, whether canvassing for a political party or calling a legislator. It could also range upward to actually running for office or becoming a part of a campaign in a staff position. Conventional modes of participation include all behaviors that are socially and institutionally acceptable. Although often absent from traditional political discussions, unconventional participation has a long history of American politics with protest behavior and other social deviations. This would include traditional Civil Rights protests and anti-war demonstrations, up through violence of various forms. Participation can be narrowly focused around one issue or broadly focused around either a common good or platform. And finally, it can be symbolic with voting, deviant with terrorist extremism, an act of repression towards other modes of participation, or even a simple monetary contribution (Conway, 2000). These categories often coalesce and intersect with each other.

It is difficult to measure passive participation and what it means to different individuals. The political participation modes normally studied are considered conventional and active, though they may also be symbolic, narrowly focused or take very little effort. The modes most often studied are status quo oriented, and exist as vehicles for the explicit purpose of participation. Ultimately, they reflect legitimacy upon the system, whether or not the participants believe in the system, by playing by the rules of the game. These modes include voting, involvement in campaign activities, contacting a representative and attending political and organizational meetings (Conway, 2000; Nie & Verba, 1987; Patterson; 2002; Putnam, 2000).

There are no shortages of ways that a citizen may participate in the political process and

there exist thousands of civil servants today (Dukakis & Simon, 2000). Often citizens became involved because of a local issue that garnered their attention and motivated them into action; some eventually ran in elections as a result (Dukakis & Simon, 2000). Other citizen activists volunteer, whether for campaigns, candidates, specific issues or in organizations (Dukakis & Simon, 2000). It is important to note that belonging to a non-political association often increases the chances of members becoming involved in the political process (Dukakis & Simon, 2000; Putnam, 2000). "The United States has more voluntary organizations than any other country of the world, and more are being created every day" (Dukakis & Simon, 2000, p. 60). Whether participation has been categorized as explicitly political or not, all forms of involvement within the community create a reciprocal effect (Dukakis & Simon, 2000; Putnam, 2000). Volunteering and belonging to the associational life become fulfilling experiences, eventually propelling its volunteers into higher involvement (Dukakis & Simon, 2000).

Voting constitutes the majority of political participation, and is considered one of the more important political participatory acts because it is highly influential on government (Conway, 2000; Nie & Verba, 1987; Patterson, 2002). Voting links citizens and government, "enabling leaders to act in the people's names, providing stability...and leaders receive more support when the citizenry chose them" (Asher, 1988, p. 34). It is instant feedback for government to respond to, and an integral part of an active democracy (Putnam, 2000). Voting includes an act of support or disapproval for the system, the candidates or the issues (Conway, 2000). Voting can likewise be an act of simple partisan affiliation or a moral obligation. One can easily express satisfaction or dissatisfaction through voting. Although voting is viewed as active participation, it does not require much thought or effort. The largest segment of those that

participate, however, are relegated to the sphere of voting, and although those that participate in other forms also vote, the majority of those that vote rarely do more (Nie & Verba, 1987). Although not a maxim, a proper assumption is that people who vote are more involved in their communities and politics (Putnam, 2000).

Although they remain low, voting rates during national election cycles are higher than other election periods; roughly 50% of registered voters vote in national elections (Patterson, 2002). Primary and off year election cycles are less than half of that. During the 1996 primary election, participation was at a low 13% of registered voters (Patterson, 2002). This is a drop from earlier participation rates; in the 1960's, primary election turnout averaged 50% while the national election of 1960 received a participation rate of 63% (Patterson, 2002). The electorate is shrinking and voting is in decline (Asher, 1988; Conway, 2000; Nie & Verba, 1987; Patterson, 2002; Putnam, 2000). During the close 2000 and 2004 elections, voter interest and involvement did not markedly increase as has been traditionally predicted (Patterson, 2002). This downward trend is further exemplified when we separate southern states from the north, as participation rates overall were boosted from higher involvement in the south (Putnam, 2000).

Voting is not the only mode of participation (Asher, 1988; Avey, 1989; Conway, 2000; Nie & Verba, 1987; Patterson, 2002; Putnam, 2000). It is important to recognize that there are not only different participation activities which the citizen may partake in, but a plethora of political systems (Nie & Verba, 1987). Although a limited number of the American electorate participate in the voting process, and this group is shrinking, an even smaller group participates through other modes of participation (Nie & Verba, 1987). Each of the varying modes of participation require differing amounts of information, political efficacy and pressure (Nie &

Verba, 1987). It is important to note that activity rates fluctuate, respond to different stimuli and are difficult to measure (Nie and Verba, 1987; Conway, 2000). Concerning stringently viewed political participation, "less than 28% of the citizenry have ever attempted in any way to influence the outcome of a governmental decision in their local community" (Nie & Verba, 1987, p. 27). A higher number do participate locally through social organizations, groups and associations: all social capital building activities that ultimately benefit the community (Conway, 2002; Putnam, 2000). To a large extent, however, the majority of individual political activity is "concentrated in the hands of a small activist group" (Nie & Verba, 1987, p. 28). Although it is normally assumed that participation follows a hierarchical pattern, this is only partially true. While political activities are inter-correlated, different groups focus on different modes of participation, and these are not limited to the elite (Nie & Verba, 1987). To give a rough estimate of how much participation is occurring, it is believed that 20% of the citizenry are totally inactive while 20% are limited in the participation realm to only voting (Nie & Verba, 1987). 20% of citizens are specialized in community activity, 11% are considered totally active in all types of activity, 4% are engaged in activities only when they feel governmental activity will severely and negatively impact affect their lives, and 15% are involved in a high degree of campaign activity (Nie & Verba, 1987). Yet 40% of "all Americans claim to be currently involved in a small group that meets regularly and provides support or caring for those who participate in it" (Putnam, 2002, p. 149).

Participatory rates in America are usually lower than the majority of industrialized democracies (Putnam, 2000). Yet in comparison to our own history, we are currently facing the longest down hill participatory trend (Putnam, 2000; Patterson, 2002). Fewer people are

participating at all levels and today's citizenry is less engaged in politics though there are fewer structural barriers than ever before (Patterson, 2002). Americans are increasingly turning away from politics and issues, regardless that there has never been so much information with the advent of growing technology (Patterson, 2002). There is a shift away from partisanship and joining political parties as citizens embrace an independent ideology. It is important to note that when participation through the vote declines, the 'hard-core' activist participants continue to participate. This creates more extremism and ideologically constrained candidates which further serve to alienate middle of the road Americans as the weed of polarization grows (Patterson, 2002).

The Socioeconomic Model of Participation

The standard model used in determining who participates is based on socioeconomic presuppositions and is one of the largest determinants of participation (Asher, 1988; Avey, 1989; Conway, 2000; Nie & Verba, 1987; Parenti, 2002; Patterson, 2002; Putnam, 2000). Those that participate more in the political system are from a higher socioeconomic status, and the social status of an individual will determine how much he or she participates (Asher, 1988; Avey, 1989; Nie & Verba, 1987). It is believed that those that participate at higher rates are invested in the political system, have more political efficacy and resources to participate and understand the issues at stake. Citizens with higher status tend to have elevated levels of political interest, education and are better informed from media sources (Asher, 1988; Nie & Verba, 1987; Patterson, 2002). Those at the upper tiers of the socioeconomic hierarchy are overwhelmingly white, male, educated and Republican. To a large extent, this model is useful and holds an element of truth; "Among the most active citizens, 57% come from the top third of the status

hierarchy" (Nie & Verba, 1987, p. 131). Although civic orientation is strongly related to socioeconomic status, a class-based pattern is revealed (Nie & Verba, 1987).

The socioeconomic model tells us who participates, but not why (Avey, 1989; Conway, 2000). Not well understood is why participation rates have declined, although socioeconomic levels have improved for many (Putnam, 2000). The socioeconomic model also does not explain why 14% of the most active citizens are of low socioeconomic status (Nie and Verba, 1987).We can perhaps predict and explain party choice based on socioeconomic presuppositions, but we can not predict whether or not that individual will vote or become mobilized (Avey, 1989). Although this model has its uses, it reveals an elitist picture of politics. Based on the data that those in the upper socioeconomic tiers participate more, there exist synonymous assumptions of an incapable underclass electorate (Avey, 1989). As a result, class bias in the socioeconomic model is presented as inevitable, when it is not (Avey, 1989). There is current class bias in participation, though exceptions abound, yet the socioeconomic model presents this information as the underlying force and reason behind participation (Avey, 1989). This class bias becomes two fold because lower class non-participants are written off as lacking intelligence and on the assumption that their participation in the system does not matter. "The causes of political participation are explained with reference to the capacities of the educated person rather than the actions of the politicians, parties, or the government" (Avey, 1989, p. 8). It is important to view the structural barriers to participation in addition to demographic characteristics of the electorate (Avey, 1989; Patterson, 2002). Because the majority of participation that exists resides within the sphere of voting, structural realities with regard to voting will be discussed.

Structural Obstacles to Voting

"The extent of a democracy in a nation is often measured by the availability of political rights: the right to vote, to hold office, to speak up and challenge incumbent leadership, to associate freely with one's fellow citizens in a political way" (Nie & Verba, 1987, p. 334). Voting is a central tenet to democracy and there are numerous laws in place to protect the franchise while precariously balancing other issues such as availability, fraud and corruption. American laws have evolved throughout our history, inextricably built from pre-existing laws while responding to existing societal changes and beliefs. Laws concerning the right of franchise are no exception. Originally the right to vote was only given to free white males who owned extensive amounts of property (Parenti, 2002; Patterson, 2002). All others were not deemed as necessary or welcome to the intricate workings of government. The election system with its numerous checks and balances was created to protect the minority, the upper class American elite (Parenti, 2002). The right to vote in America slowly expanded in response to numerous bitter fights and shifting societal views concerning rights (Parenti, 2002). For those that sought the right of franchise, it was a long and difficult battle that many citizens did not see ended in their lifetimes (Parenti, 2002). The rules of the game in which citizens participate by voting today, however, remain largely unquestioned although they alienate segments of the population through dejure and defacto discrimination (Parenti, 2002; Patterson, 2002). It is important to note that current voting obstacles are minimized in comparison to American history (Avey, 1989).

Although officials and citizens alike often urge people to vote, there exist many instances in which the vote is suppressed through faulty machines, police harassment and registration lists (Parenti, 2002; Patterson, 2002). Registration requirements were originally created to discourage fraud and increase legitimate participation. This had the unintended consequence of hindering

many citizens from voting, such as with Florida in 2000 (Patterson, 2002). The Motor Voter Act of 1993 was also created to ease registration requirements, but this has not resulted in a substantial increase of participation (Patterson, 2002). Registration requirements differ from state to state, but there is usually a one month federal waiting period that must be met (Patterson, 2002). Today it is charged that there are too many elections in America as many governor elections are held in off-years to prevent biased voters that are jaded by approval or disapproval of national politics (Patterson, 2002). This creates voter fatigue, and the structural allowance of multiple elections prevents participation. The primary elections for the national elections are held early into the year, and too far away from the national elections. This exhausts the electorate who are sick of campaigns often lasting over a year (Patterson, 2002). The Electoral College also discourages participation because the focus is on the states as strategic players, and many citizens believe that their vote does not count (Patterson, 2002). National elections are held on a Tuesday when the majority of Americans must work (Parenti, 2002; Patterson, 2002). The hours at polling places are also limited, and this affects citizens who do not have the option of leaving work early (Patterson, 2002).

Politics becomes a vicious cycle when it is responsive to those that participate and ignores those that do not. There are numerous structural solutions to increasing participation, though the likelihood of implementing these changes is improbable. Same day registration would be highly beneficial as many Americans are mobile and move from one area to the next (Patterson, 2002). In states that have implemented same day registration, "voting turnout has increased by 5.1 percent" (Patterson, 2002, p. 179). It is also suggested that if registration were automatic, non-voter turnout would possibly exceed 90 percent of the voting population (Avey,

1989). The change from a winner take all system to one of a plurality representative system would also mobilize voters, who would believe that their vote counted. Participation would also be increased if election day hours were extended or placed on days deemed national holidays. With the prevalent individualistic ideologies, however, it is unlikely that voting will be made easier because those that do not participate are viewed as part of an undeserving population who are not improving their own situations. Furthermore, it is believed that if more non-participants in the process voted, the Democrat Party would win at higher levels. This is not a result that Republican lawmakers are willing to nurture.

While the institutional rules for voting are important, solving structural problems does not wholly explain our current participation problem. Instead the search continues, and it is helpful to next view who participates in the system, who does not, and the generalized differences between them. The majority of data that exist are in direct relation to supporting the socioeconomic model, and while this is problematic in searching for solutions, captivating information does likewise exist. Although not applicable uniformly, individual characteristics can affect turnout, even if the apathetic, disenfranchised or disengaged citizens are not explained.

General Demographic Characteristic Considerations

Age is positively correlated to political participation (Asher, 1988; Conway, 2000; Nie & Verba, 1987; Patterson, 2002; Putnam, 2000). Older citizens participate more than younger citizens. The youthful electorate is more mobile and has not developed a stake in the community, whether through home ownership, extended residence, social networks in the community, property taxes or raising children (Nie & Verba, 1987; Putnam, 2000). Younger citizens are also traditionally in a lower economic bracket than older citizens, as they are attending school or

starting their careers (Nie & Verba, 1987). They face more institutional and time constraints. When one does not have a vested interest in the community, outside constraints are an easy persuasion against participation. In addition, younger people are less involved in organizations and community groups such as churches, neighborhood associations and the like; older people are more likely to belong to such organizations (Putnam, 2000). These activities are directly correlated with increased participation. It was traditionally believed that as the citizen grew older and entered retirement, participation would lessen; this was part of the pattern known as, "the. problem of start up and slow down" (Nie & Verba, 1987, p. 139). The reason for this was largely an education correlation; citizens of the older generation were traditionally less educated than the generations facing middle age (Nie & Verba, 1987). Older citizens were likewise faced with increased financial and physical burdens (Asher, 1988). It is true that today more people are educated than ever before, and it is commonly expected for young people to gain higher education especially with an endlessly demanding job market. Yet volunteers and participants today are overwhelmingly older and not being replenished at the same rates from preceding generations. "People born between 1910 and 1940 constitute a 'long civic generation'- that is, a cohort of men and women who have been more engaged in civic affairs throughout their lives" (Putnam, 2000, p. 132). Those who are retired have been volunteering at higher rates than other citizens, and are overrepresented in participation today. The decline in voting among the younger and more recently, middle aged electorate is attributable to generational change: baby boomers and their children are less likely to vote or participate (Putnam, 2000). Older citizens often show stronger party loyalties, having forged their ties to politics when partisanship was an integral and meaningful part of politics (Asher, 1988). This is important because those with strong

partisanship also participate at higher rates.

Education is also positively associated with participation, and was traditionally viewed as part of the socioeconomic model; obviously those in higher economic positions within society generally have higher education levels. Education has been considered "the most important component of socioeconomic status in influencing political participation in the United States" (Conway, 2000, p. 25). Political participation requires knowledge of the political system, information on the issues and political efficacy: a belief that one can make an impact upon the system (Nie & Verba, 1987). Education is part of a life process, providing the cognitive tools necessary not only to participate, but to recognize that participation is important (Conway, 2000). People who have higher levels of education generally do vote more, participate more and have higher levels of political efficacy (Conway, 2000). As important as education is in increasing participation, a lack of education is likewise directly correlated to a decrease in participation. The uneducated are often in lower status groups, and are busy "obtaining the necessities of life" (Conway, 2000, p. 29). Ultimately, the more costs the voter or participant faces, the lower participation will be (Patterson, 2002).

The puzzle of participation is expounded however, when we view the current decline. Although citizens with a higher education are more likely to participate in comparison to other groups, in all areas and trends, less people are participating, and these declines are highest concerning education (Nie & Verba, 1987; Putnam, 2002). Our educated populace is participating less than ever before in recent history and this runs counter to the socioeconomic model. It should be noted that in traditional American times, the uneducated participated at rates higher than the educated (Avey, 1989). In addition, there are other inconsistencies that remain;

farmers have lower educational levels than any other profession yet are among the highest in turnout groups (Avey, 1989). State and local governmental employees participate in astounding numbers as well, regardless of their education levels (Avey, 1989).

Race and ethnicity also affect participation, though this is not uniformly applied to all individuals and groups. Race is important in shaping perceptions, differences and participation at the local levels more than the national level. African American participation was historically hindered through slavery and continued racist structural and institutional barriers (Parenti, 2002; Patterson, 2002). The 24th amendment, from 1964, holds that states are prohibited from requiring citizens to pay taxes before voting, while the Voting Rights Act of 1965 allowed Federal examiners to supervise registration in the southern states in order to allow those disenfranchised to vote (Parenti, 2002; Patterson, 2002). Although removing the institutional barriers that held disenfranchisement firmly in place initially resulted in a higher vote, today, voting rates between the races are the same: both are in decline (Patterson, 2002). This is known as part of the "turnout controversy: institutional barriers have been weakened substantially yet participation rates have still fallen" (Asher, 1988, p. 57).

African Americans and other minorities, especially Hispanics, are over-represented in non-participant categories (Nie & Verba, 1987). Although there is a tendency for blacks to be under-represented in the complete activist category, if we remove the influences of socioeconomic status, they are somewhat more equally represented (Nie & Verba, 1987). African Americans vote at fairly equal rates to Caucasians today (Nie & Verba, 1987). In addition, minority candidates can increase participation (Conway, 2000). African Americans are less likely to contact their political representatives and when they do make contact, it is usually

concerning a specific and pressing need, whereas whites tend to make more generalized calls (Nie & Verba, 1987). In addition, African Americans rely less on the "mass media for political information than do whites" (Graber, 1997, p. 195). In fact, it is found that African Americans and whites often extract different information from the same media source.

It is important for African Americans to participate because political access and participation can become a vehicle to transcend social and economic deprivations (Nie & Verba, 1987). African Americans overwhelmingly comprise the majority of lower economic positions than whites, and this is highly correlated to participation. If African Americans have developed an awareness of their group's membership, they are more likely to participate at higher rates. "Blacks who do not mention race, participate substantially less than the average white" (Nie & Verba, 1987, p. 158). Therefore those that are aware of a consciousness are able to transcend their socioeconomic disadvantages through the vehicle of political participation (Nie & Verba, 1987). Ultimately, the "political system is more open for blacks than the socio-economic system" (Nie & Verba, 1987, p. 156). Blacks become an exception of the socioeconomic model, because heightened group consciousness raises participation more than their socioeconomic levels would predict (Nie & Verba, 1987). An increase in education also creates a rise in participation; education thus increases an awareness of group consciousness (Nie & Verba, 1987).

Ethnicity can also affect participatory behavior, though this often plays more predominantly in local politics. Hispanics are now the largest minority group in the United States. Latino citizens have lower rates of participation and voting than do black or white citizens (Conway, 2000). Puerto Ricans are less likely to vote on a whole, while Chicanos are more likely to vote (Conway, 2000). Cuban Americans have higher rates of participation, but this is largely a

result of socioeconomic levels, increased education and having lived and established itself as a group longer (Conway, 2000). Chinese Americans are as likely to vote and register as white Americans, and Japanese Americans are more likely to contribute money than whites (Conway, 2000). Hate crime victimization among Asian Americans increases voter participation more than socioeconomic levels or partisanship (Conway, 2000).

Historically, women have faced traditional barriers to participation in the political process in America as well. Women suffrage in 1920 did not initially result in the predicted higher female vote, though women today vote at similar rates as men (Patterson, 2002). Women have become more active in politics at local levels, and gender differences in campaign activity are diminishing (Conway, 2000; Parenti, 2002). Women who are not married are generally less involved in politics, and working women have less time on average than men (Conway, 2000). There is a heavy gender gap in politics with regard to party preference however. The majority of women identify with Democrats while more men identify with Republicans (Asher, 1988; Conway, 2000; Nie & Verba, 1987; Parenti 2002; Patterson, 2002; Putnam, 2000). This gender gap had its genesis in the 1980's; during an economic recession and wide spread fear of affirmative action and social welfare policies, white men flocked to the Republican party. Women traditionally accept and support policy issues that are focused on social welfare and a lack of force, and that government should "work to reduce substantially the income gap between rich and poor" (Asher, 1988, p. 189).While women are increasingly matching men with regard to participation rates, there is a slight tendency for women to be underrepresented among complete activists (Nie & Verba, 1987). That is, women still run for office and are elected to office at rates far below their percentage of the total population.

The Role and Decline of Party Politics

Although political parties were not an initial consideration with the design of the American constitution, they have become an integral part of politics. Historically the party was created with the idea of the less privileged in mind. It was believed that the party "was the means by which those with less hoped to compete successfully against those with more" (Patterson, 2002, p. 44). The political party serves as a vehicle in which people identify with, support and attain mobilization. It is believed that party and partisan attachment helps to maintain our political system and retain stability, helping government to remain immune during severe upheavals in society (Asher, 1988). The role of the party can not be overstated; it creates a point of reference for people to connect with their government. The party "plays an essential role in American politics" (Dukakis & Simon, 2000, p. 37). They educate voters on the issues, help to get people registered and get out the vote as well as providing an avenue for those seeking to make a difference (Dukakis & Simon, 2000). In addition, the party creates an avenue for the government to likewise respond to its citizens and their demands (Dukakis & Simon, 2000).

Party identification is a psychological attachment or feeling of loyalty to a political party, which can develop during childhood and become more intense the longer an individual identifies with that party (Asher, 1988). "Party identification serves as a perceptual screen through which the elements of politics are evaluated" (Asher, 1988, p. 46). People that hold stronger attachments to a party traditionally vote at higher rates (Asher, 1988). Party identification reduces the participation rate gap among the social levels when it comes to voting (Nie & Verba, 1987). African Americans, Jews, Catholics, females and lower or working class citizens tend to be Democrats, while white, male, Protestant and upper class people are usually Republicans

(Asher, 1988; Conway, 2000; Patterson, 2002). Whites are ultimately less likely to be strong Democrats today (Conway, 2000). Weak identifiers of both parties are less active on average and Republicans are more active than Democrats in communal activity participation (Nie & Verba, 1987). This may be a result of socioeconomic levels, for when these are controlled, Democrat participation rates are slightly boosted (Nie & Verba, 1987). Those who are Democrats tend to have stronger party affiliation while Republicans tend to be more active (Nie & Verba, 1987). Although there are more Democrats than Republicans by a very slight margin, an inherent tension exists near election time because mobilization is crucial; Republicans tend to vote consistently but Democrats do not (Asher, 1988; Conway, 2000; Nie & Verba, 1987; Patterson, 2002).

It is argued that the parties are in decline today or perhaps undergoing realignment. Elections are candidate centered instead of party centered and there is a growing independent affiliated electorate (Patterson, 2002). Politics have become more candidate centered as a result of the primary system, the emergence of the media and the decline of the party machine (Patterson, 2002). Furthermore, candidates today offer ambiguous messages focused on the present instead of party platforms that address long term and meaningful ideals. Parties are seen as being more responsive to special interests and vocally extremist groups, while neglecting the average citizen (Patterson, 2002). Although the parties have become more professionalized with increased money, staff, strategies, polls, and get out the vote tactics, they are still alive (Putnam, 2000). The parties today "are more cohesive ideologically than a generation ago" (Dukakis & Simon, 2000, p. 38). Their strength at the grassroots level has somewhat dwindled, however (Dukakis & Simon, 2000). It is also doubtful that realignment, a durable change in the party

structure, is occurring (Asher, 1988). A realignment did occur as a result of race issues in the 1960's in which the traditionally Democratic South turned to the Republican party (Patterson, 2002). What may be occurring instead of realignment is a "dealignment to a point where the party in government and the party in the electorate become increasingly weak and fragmented" (Asher, 1988, p. 352).The Democrat party is having an especially difficult time because they represent a diverse electorate and a plethora of conflicting issues, yet this is nothing new or shocking as the Democrat party has traditionally been the 'everybody party' (Asher, 1988). It can be argued that the Republican party is also alienating Republicans as it embraces the religious right (Asher, 1988). Much of the electorate is turning away from both parties as they embrace the independent ideology.

The growing independent electorate is an important issue; 40% of the electorate in the 2000 election identified themselves as independents (Patterson, 2002). There is a myth of the independent voter: that they focus on the issues and not the rhetoric, therefore existing as more knowledgeable and participatory creatures (Patterson, 2002). We often hear others reflecting this view, that they focus on the issues over the party. This is generally not true. Strong partisans participate at higher rates, and independents often do not have a lot of information about the campaign, nor participate on Election Day (Patterson, 2002). When independents do participate through the voting process, they are easily swayed by 'politics of the moment', whether scandals, symbolic language or the feelings that each candidate exudes. Politics ultimately becomes a battleground when elections are decided by independent voters whose opinions swing from the ambiguity, rhetoric, symbolistic language and negative campaigning that ultimately drives others from politics (Asher, 1988; Patterson, 2002). Independent voters thus become little better than

apathy in action. It must be recognized that not all independent voters are uninformed about the issues, for there does exist an informed independent electorate, though they are a minority amongst a sea of uninformed souls (Asher, 1988; Patterson, 2002). This becomes problematic when our democracy is decided by easily swayed voters, while others are completely disenchanted from the process. Party identification is not the only perceptual cue in which the citizen can frame their decision; many other cues exist, such as race, conflict, social diversity, and issue orientation.

Participation at the Community Level

There does not exist the same information concerning participation and the community as there does at the national level. It is increasingly difficult to give a generalized account of community politics in America, yet it is important to attempt this endeavor in an attempt to explain voting behavior, though this often becomes limited to snapshots. Civic traditions of an area are one way to attempt to explain political behavior. In general, the South is known as having a traditionalistic culture in which the elites dominate politics and are resistant to innovation (Putnam, 2000). The Mid-Atlantic states are run by strong parties and professional politicians whom focus on economic growth while the North-East is known as 'moralistic' in which "good government, issue based campaigning and social innovation are prized" (Putnam, 2000, p. 346). These traditions can explain behavior such as why there is less African American participation in the South or more protections for gay marriage in Vermont. These explanations are somewhat generalized however and we should also recognize that each community has its own political culture and civic traditions.

We can also look at community politics and participation in relation to the size of the

community and its degree of isolation (Nie & Verba, 1987). Rural areas and isolated villages and towns have higher participation rates while larger suburbs have lower rates (Nie & Verba, 1987). It should be noted that this is not consistent with the standard socioeconomic model of participation. Campaign activity is low in rural areas where voting is high, but likewise high in areas where voting is low (Nie & Verba, 1987). Bounded communities, however, are ultimately more important than size (Putnam, 2000). Ultimately, it is believed and supported by the data that participation will decline as the community grows and loses its clear boundaries because the citizen loses a well defined political unit (Nie & Verba, 1987).

Local governments protect and enhance the immediate quality of life for its residents, whether providing necessary services, mediating conflict or allocating resources (Kaufman, 2004). The community is highly important for participation. There is greater candidate diversity at the local level, and more of an opportunity for lesser represented groups to have a voice in politics (Kaufman, 2004). There are also a large range of issues that appear in local elections, and partisanship and party identification hold little importance on these issues (Kaufman, 2004). Only 20% of the nation's largest cities hold partisan local elections (Kaufman, 2004). Although because there is no political party in which to create a base of support and mobilization, participation with voting in particular at the local level is much lower than national averages. Candidates and the issues they address are not always associated around partisan divisions and party politics. Instead, "the essential questions that dominate many local elections revolve around the allocation of goods and services" (Kaufman, 2004, p. 10). In addition, "the majority of local political decisions are less policy driven then they are allocational in nature" (Kaufman, 2004, p. 18). This can obviously provide for a conflictual environment.

There are issues at the community level that can drive participation up. Strong mayoral city council systems affect participation positively because the spoils are often larger and there is a figurehead to focus upon. An extreme but fitting example is New York City, whose mayoral position is one of the most powerful in the country (Kaufman, 2004). It is important to note that in the presence of conflict, participation numbers rise markedly (Kaufman, 2004). When intergroup competitiveness is low, however, residents can fall back on partisan affiliations but it is important to note that there are other numerous affiliations with which the voter can identify with, such as race, ethnicity, conflict and perceived problems (Kaufman, 2004). Strong partisans however are not as easily swayed by 'other' identities. The "challenge for local candidates is to focus campaign issues in such a way as to maximize their appeal to potential winning coalitions" (Kaufman, 2004, p. 52).

Social identity and group interests can heavily affect local electoral choice and participation (Kaufman, 2004). Individuals have multiple identities and depending on the issue, different identities will guide the individual in their issue orientation and vote choice (Nie & Verba, 1987; Kaufman, 2004). The data gleamed from city politics in New York City and Los Angeles dovetails well with this concept (Kaufman, 2004). White voters that live in cities with small African American populations are generally more receptive to minority candidates (Kaufman, 2004). The least amount of tolerance exists in highly homogeneous areas (Kaufman, 2004). As the black population increases however, there can be heightened perceptions of racial threat, more negativity and polarization (Kaufman, 2004). Ultimately the more segregated an area is, the likelihood of heightened stereotypes and perceptions of conflict will increase. Minority groups in general vote more with group interests in mind while white populations are

less inclined to do so. Latino groups remain fragmented along economic lines and do not hold the same shared identity that African American groups do (Kaufman, 2004). When Latino minorities do coalesce around issues, their demands tend to be more "particular and less institutional than are the desires of urban blacks...such as greater economic and educational opportunities" (Kaufman, 2004, p. 156). As a result, when Latinos are able to group together, their needs are easier to address than blacks who usually seek "a redress of social injustice or a systemic overhaul" (Kaufman, 2004, p. 156). Conflict can still remain, however. "Working class whites are the least receptive to black candidates; the more supportive among non blacks were higher income and better educated voters, ideological liberals and Jews" (Kaufman, 2004, p. 25). As a result, minority candidates will often attempt to minimize race or ethnicity as an issue because they do not want to alienate segments of the population (Kaufman, 2004). Yet minority and ethnic groups will strive to maximize their agenda. This can create intra and intergroup tension (Kaufman, 2004).

Urban politics are the politics of change and American cities are becoming incredibly diverse. "Only 7 out of 25 major cities have a non-Latino white majority and 4 have black majorities; 12 cities have no majority while Asian populations are growing" (Kaufman, 2004, p. 196). While changing demographics in an area may lead to conflict, this is not always the case. Competition over scarce resources does create a natural conflict between groups, but local politics and cities "are excellent laboratories for the study of social processes" (Kaufman, 2004, p. 14). We tend to focus on conflict as the drive for politics and this often garners our attention. The media is an ample source for feeding this perception. It should be noted that in general, politics is just as much about compromising, coalition-building, and solving problems as it is

about conflict. For as many conflicts that exist, there are also multiple solutions. Robert Putnam, in seeking community connections across America, found many examples of diverse solutions towards multiple problems in the community while simultaneously building social capital (Feldstein & Putnam, 2003).

Putnam gives us an example of this with the Near North Branch Library of Chicago. This library is situated between Cabrini Green, a run down neighborhood and the Gold Coast, a higher socioeconomic status neighborhood (Feldstein & Putnam, 2003). The idea, supported by Mayor Daley, was to bring diverse neighborhoods and people together that had traditionally never even communicated (Feldstein & Putnam, 2003). Chicago does hold a rich history of ethnic and racial diversity, however these groups have traditionally been segregated from each other. The library created various workshops that would speak to both communities, along with book discussions and a 'no questions asked' open door policy (Feldstein & Putnam, 2003). Instead of focusing on differences and gridlock, the library fostered and celebrated the commonalities that communities, families and readers shared (Feldstein & Putnam, 2003). Chicago also implemented a 'One Book, One Chicago' plan, under the Mayor's leadership, in which a particular book would be read all over the city, and endorsed by the libraries (Feldstein & Putnam, 2003). Those involved in the program were encouraged to wear buttons, and often during train rides or other random incidents, people who had never talked to each other had meaningful conversations about the book they had read (Feldstein & Putnam, 2003). Ultimately, the Near North Branch Library has become a community center, bridging different networks of people, creating social capital and minimizing conflict through daily interaction. This example shows that benefits can be shared and when social connections are created between diverse groups, participation in civic life is

increased (Feldstein & Putnam, 2003).

The belief that our communities are failing however, is a growing contention that will not lose steam in the near future (Putnam, 2000). Political participation rates, social connections, belonging to informal associations and reported feelings of safety have consistently dwindled since the 1960's (Putnam, 2000). According to Roper Polls, "the frequency of community involvement has declined significantly on all levels" (Putnam, 2000, p. 41). From the PTA to bowling leagues, civic participation and membership has declined (Putnam, 2000). Although America is one of the most religiously observant countries today, church attendance and membership has dropped, with the exception of the more fundamentalist groups (Putnam, 2000). Social capital, the social connections within a community that creates healthy individuals and diverse, yet active communities, has fallen (Feldstein & Putnam, 2003). Trust in government, between individuals and within communities has dropped while litigation, crime and even violent aggressive driving are on the rise (Putnam, 2000). This is exemplified with the explosion of lawyer populations and how Americans increasingly require preventative lawyering practices (Putnam, 2000). Americans are working less than in previous generations, own more cars, clean their houses less and are more educated, but they are finding less in common with each other today in addition to not having the time to spend on important social capital community building activities (Putnam, 2000). This is a hugely important issue and correlated with political participation. In addition, many of these community decline developments can be attributed to the media, and television in particular (Putnam, 2000).

Participation and the Media

The media are highly important and instrumental to political participation. Beyond the

role of government watchdog, the media informs us of events and places these events into a context. The media creates a shared political experience (Graber, 1997). They create cultural values and shared social norms, pulling us together as we experience the news and the world enters our homes (Graber, 1997). The media socializes us and gives us a lens with which to view the world (Graber, 1997; Patterson, 2002; Putnam, 2002). Ultimately what we believe is happening in the world has been shaped by the media (Graber, 1997).

Obviously the media has many positive effects. "In times of crisis the media, particularly radio and...television, become vital arms of government" (Graber, 1997, p. 135). The media not only tells us what is going on in the world around us, but these events are presented in a coherent matter, informing all viewers (Graber, 1997). This is highly crucial in times of a crisis, such as the September 11 attacks in which multitudes of Americans remained attentive to media sources for days on end. The media socializes us as community and political animals, educating us and creating common beliefs that we share (Graber, 1997). Information can become a bond between people, help us keep in touch with our communities and counter feelings of loneliness and isolation (Graber, 1997). Furthermore, the media informs the public and blows the whistle on governmental scandals, such as Watergate and issues during the Vietnam War (Graber, 1997; Patterson, 2002). Thus, "the news is the day to day instrument of democracy" (Patterson, 2002, p. 97).

On the other side of the coin, the media also has many negative attributes. Journalists have become players "in the game of politics, rather than acting in their traditional role as chroniclers of information" (Graber, 1997, p. 12). We also have few cues or avenues to take when the media is inaccurate or false (Graber, 1997). The media focuses on info-tainment, a

stress on either "novel or entertaining events or conflict, strife and violence (Graber, 1997, p. 118). The real world becomes distorted through the media as a focus on sensationalism, crime and conflict abound. Yet important contextual information of news events is usually missing (Graber, 1997). Pseudo crises such as the Clarence Thomas hearings exaggerate the real events and crowd other issues from the fray (Graber, 1997). The media tends to focus on one topic at a time, and the coverage of this screams with pack journalism. Often the true issues are overlooked as are other important news stories (Graber, 1997). Average people do not master knowledge on specific events or topics covered by the media and it has been found that viewers can often not tell the difference between documentaries and docudramas (Graber, 1997).

Networks have cut their political programming down and interpretive journalism is Embraced; soundbites are on average ten seconds long and the news is, in general, softer than its predecessors (Patterson, 2002). The media becomes a feeding frenzy for mudslinging, attack journalism and inaccurate reporting (Graber, 1997; Patterson, 2002). It is exceedingly difficult for the common viewer to make sense of the distorted information they are fed. Often the viewer is exposed to harrowing tales in place of newsworthy events. As a result, perceptions that crime is a serious issue grow along with fears of school shootings, child abductions and other sensationalized horrific news stories. The reality is that these events are not the norm, but they are more interesting. The angle that the media chooses to present a story can affect the audience through the agenda building process. "The media set the public agenda when news stories rivet attention on a problem and make it seem important to many people" (Graber, 1997, p. 168). The news thus creates its own reality instead of reporting it.

The media has attributed greatly to the creation of candidate centered politics, becoming

the vehicle for informing the electorate on the issues and people instead of the traditional party (Graber, 1997; Patterson, 2002). It has been charged that the media is biased with liberal or conservative views in regard to news presentation. Although newspaper editorials are conservatively biased, the news in general represents a middle of the road view, exemplified by the mainstreaming effect of heavy viewers (Graber, 1997). Extremist viewpoint sources do exist yet the audiences for extremist news usually share these opinions and will seek the news sources that confirm their beliefs. According to numerous studies, news reporting does contain a bias, but this has little to do with partisan leanings. Instead, media hold a penchant for negative reporting (Graber, 1997; Patterson, 2002). Coverage of the news has become so negative that viewers consistently believe that every politician is a crook and should not be trusted (Patterson, 2002). The media can be important in shaping our perceptions of the candidates and issues, but the effects today are usually negative. This is not only true concerning election candidate coverage. "Studies have revealed that the media shows a negative tendency towards not only candidates" (Patterson, 2002, p. 64). The system of politics is shown in terms of division, gridlock and manipulation. The result of negative reporting is an electorate that feels alienated and frustrated by their political surroundings. As negativity grows from media sources, the electorate becomes more distrustful towards the media, and they punish the messenger (Graber, 1997; Patterson, 2002). Ultimately, media lose their legitimacy as the watchdog of democracy. Certain segments of the population have reported feelings that the media especially alienates them, to include Polish Americans, Italian Americans, the police and union members (Graber, 1997). When a group feels alienated, it is difficult for them to be politically socialized or learn about the issues. People are increasingly turning away from the news as they seek more gratifying sources of

entertainment (Patterson, 2002). In response, the media gives them what they want in order to keep their audience, and the vicious cycle continues.

It is important to realize that media is neither a monolith nor limited to one form and the positive and negative attributes are not totally applicable in general. It is likewise difficult to measure all the effects of the media, for they are highly complex and not easy to pinpoint (Graber, 1997). There exist many forms of media, whether print, radio, television and internet. In addition, there exist varying degrees of informational value for political, cultural and social content in each of these mediums. It is true, however that the news is largely homogenous because journalists "agree on the nature of the news and elements of good reporting" (Graber, 1997, p. 44). Central news reporting views are propelled as newspapers, radios and television stations are increasingly owned by a few elite conglomerates (Graber, 1997; Parenti, 2002). There exist factors that influence journalistic decisions in what stories are newsworthy, and how these stories should be presented. These factors vary, but are highly dependent upon social backgrounds, education, race and gender: all segments of the identity that help to define outlook, interest and ultimately certain stories over others (Graber, 1997). The majority of newspeople are white, male, Protestant and college graduates (Graber, 1997). It is no small coincidence that these are the same characteristics of the politically mobile.

People in the upper socioeconomic tiers rely on print media more and television less than the rest of the population (Graber, 1997). Print media offers more attention to detail, focuses on the issues and is more comprehensive in its coverage. This segment of media in turn, caters to its subscribers, the upper income groups, while ignoring the "needs and concerns of the poor" (Graber, 1997, p. 196). The average American watches more television than any other country in

the world (Putnam, 2000). Americans in general spend over 4 hours a day watching television, yet news stories are crammed with information and can not be absorbed with their average time constraint of three minutes (Graber, 1997). Print media are a more comprehensive source of politics and world events, yet "23 million American adults are functionally illiterate and therefore almost entirely beyond the reach of print media" (Graber, 1997, p. 190). The number of people who read a daily newspaper continues to decline.

Ultimately the news media provide spotty coverage of the political world, leaving "the political landscape obscured" (Graber, 1997, p. 306). On the national level, coverage of court activities is flawed, while the President and Congress are covered in terms of gridlock and negativity (Graber, 1997). Media coverage of state and local politics is not much better. Local "television news is watched by 67 percent of the adult population, although it is far fluffier than national news" (Graber, 1997, p. 327). At the local level, newspapers have shrunk and most cities are served "by a single newspaper while many communities no longer have papers of their own" (Graber, 1997, p. 313). Local stations do not have the economic resources for quality coverage and often allow political elites to set the agenda (Graber, 1997). There is thus less information concerning local problems as newspapers focus on general problems that are inclusive to the larger readership region; this includes sensationalistic news (Graber, 1997). Average people do not master knowledge on specific events or topics covered by the media (Graber, 1997). This becomes an important issue because ultimately, "if political socialization fails to provide citizens with sufficient knowledge, elections may become a sham at best" (Graber, 1997, p. 192).

Beyond failing to inform and engage the populace, the emergence of media with

television in particular, negatively impacts civic engagement. Ultimately our daily community life suffers. The "dependence on television for entertainment is the single greatest predictor of civic disengagement (Putnam, 2000, p. 231). Those that depend on television for entertainment work on fewer community projects, spend less time with friends, picnic less, give blood less, give fewer greeting cards, and express more road rage: all aspects of social communication is lessened (Putnam, 2000). Television viewing is also correlated with poverty, a low education and having fewer friends (Putnam, 2000). On average, for each additional hour of television watched per day means a ten percent reduction in all forms of civic activism (Putnam, 2000). Television ultimately leads to less socializing outside of the home, and a more passive electorate. "It is habit forming and addictive" (Putnam, 2000, p. 241). Television makes us feel as though we are engaged with others, when we are instead engaged in a parallel reality (Putnam, 2000). "Television and its cousins are most likely the ringleaders in the unraveling of societies fabric" (Putnam, 2000, p. 246). If media are not only failing to inform us, but creates distorted realities and alienates us from our communities; in lieu of declining participation rates, what does this mean for our democracy?

Democracy in Peril

It is ironic that there exist disagreements as to what a vibrant democracy entails, for this is democracy in action (Putnam, 2000). Democracies have multiple faces and exist in different forms for different localities, cultures and countries: there is no one democracy and there is no one form of democracy (Elshtain, 1995). "Democracy is precisely an institutional, cultural, habitual way of acknowledging the pervasiveness of conflict and the fact that our loyalties are not one; our wills are not single; our opinions are not uniform; our ideals are not cut from the

same cloth" (Elshtain, 1995, p. 113). Thus participation is essentially at the heart of democratic theory. "It has a crucial relationship to social and political goals and goals that are set in society will match the needs and represent the populace" (Nie & Verba, 1987, p. 4). Although no matter the outcome of current trends, our democracy will stand for years to come. Yet the democratic dispositions, participation and civil society, both which are required for the blood of democracy to hum, is in serious disarray (Elshtain, 1995).

Participation, passionate discussions, opinions and communal interests are all important aspects of a democracy, though certain ingredients of legitimacy must exist for democracy, such as the vote (Elshtain, 1995, Nie & Verba, 1987; Putnam, 2000). Participation creates more positive effects and attitudes, whether concerning the self or others (Conway, 2002). The political system is responsive to participation, but as participation dwindles, it becomes difficult for our elected officials to know what their electorate wants or needs (Conway, 2002). When "state electorates are disproportionately representative of citizens of higher socioeconomic status, state policies are more likely to favor their economic interests" (Conway, 2002, p. 198). Whether a leader believes he or she is a delegate or trustee, leaders do respond more to those that participate more than those who do not (Nie & Verba, 1987). When involvement is skewed, participation helps those that are already better off (Nie & Verba, 1987). Ultimately politics is about who gets what, and "when one group gets ahead at the expense of another, politics becomes 'frayed'" (Kaufman, 2004, p. 207). Fewer and fewer people are participating in politics while extremist individuals and groups are growing, becoming more vocal and further alienating the moderate status quo Americans (Elshtain, 1995; Patterson, 2002; Putnam, 2001). As participants dwindle, politics becomes more shrill (Putnam, 2000). Those that do participate are

those with more education, money and status while the already disenfranchised electorate becomes more so (Putnam, 2000). We are increasingly turning away from politics, and those that aren't, are increasingly polarized (Elshtain, 1995; Patterson, 2002; Putnam, 2000). As a result, there is less common ground in which democracy may stand. Although it is sometimes thought that when participation rates are lower, this is a reflection of a satisfied electorate, this is largely not true and a classist assumption.

Also important to a democracy is the civil society (Elshtain, 1995; Putnam, 2000). The American democracy is chock full of "living, breathing and socially embodied traditions" (Elshtain, 1995, p. 137). Having a vibrant civil society is integral to a vibrant democracy for the old adage 'politics is local' speaks true (Elshtain, 1995). In a sense, all politics is local and the community is the place for the 'we' to transcend the 'I' (Elshtain, 1995). No matter our personal beliefs with their varying rituals and values, understanding that we belong to the same civil world is important (Elshtain, 1995). While some may view democracy as simply a set of procedures to follow such as constitutions and laws, democracy is more than that, it is an "ethos, a spirit, a way of responding, and a way of conducting oneself" (Elshtain, 1995). Yet beyond participation, our civil societies are declining as we embrace "exhaustion, cynicism, opportunism and despair" (Elshtain, 1995, p. 1). Citizens must not only be animated, but motivated by an air of responsibility for each other; one can not capture the essence of a democracy without simultaneously defining the community. Civil society fuels participation and helps to keep our government in check (Putnam, 2000). Yet more and more citizens are turning away from not only politics but each other, as they embrace the mind sucking drone of their television sets. Our society is becoming more and more fragmented in politics today as we embrace stalemate,

gridlock and cynicism (Elshtain, 1995). As consumerism grows, this is even more problematic. Politics no longer represents everybody and we enter a world of displacement in which negativity, scandal and proclaiming the 'ugly truth' about others becomes a common event (Elshtain, 1995). America has the longest running democracy in the world, yet there are American ideologies that run counter to democratic ideals such as individualism. As collectivism decreases, individualism increases, and ultimately this erodes our freedom and our ability to work with others is lessened (Elshtain, 1995). The less we interact with our political institutions and each other, the more confused we become "to any social obligations we should be making" (Elshtain, 1995, p. 12). The community as we know it, is entering a state of decline. As our communities falter, so does our democracy. Although we may intimate that we live in a democratic civil society, the less involved we are, the less tolerant we become, until we ultimately embrace a totalitarianism ideology (Elshtain, 1995).

Conclusion

Just as there is no clear cut path for explaining or understanding participation, there is no one solution for increasing the current downward trends. It is important to understand that participation intersects with multiple issues and should not be limited to the sphere of the standard socioeconomic model. While a serious cleavage of class bias exists in political participation, it is but one piece of the puzzle; instead it exposes a reality of American life that few in the realm of academia are want to discuss. This is not a topic that we must dwell increasingly upon, but it must be admitted, noted and further explored. We must synonymously explore historic trends of participation, institutional barriers, the role of the media, and politics at the community level. Identity and conflict are also instrumental aspects in determining and

explaining participatory behavior in addition to demographic considerations. The growth of television as a medium and the affect of its content on viewers is highly problematic.

Understanding the participatory puzzle becomes a race against time as participation continues to decline and our civil societies crumble around us. Ultimately we need to realize that these two necessary components of a vibrant democracy, participation and civil society, are intricately intertwined with each other. As we ponder the reasons behind current declines and challenge existing assumptions, we must rigorously seek solutions. There exist obvious solutions concerning institutional and structural barriers to voting, and while implementation realities of these solutions remain low, we must not give up. We must synonymously look beyond the structural realities of participation, and question the meanings that our political systems hold to the populace. We can no longer write off the non-participants as uncaring, apathetic or unintelligent. When we do so, we pass an undemocratic judgment upon this segment of the population that reflects classist values while remaining highly inaccurate. Historically, poor and uneducated Americans participated at very high rates, and this occurs throughout the world today. In India, for example, the untouchable caste vote at higher rates than the more prominent castes (Avey, 1989).

Somewhere along the way, politics in America has lost its meaning and importance to a large percentage of the populace. As we delve into these questions, we must view the media with a critical eye. The media are failing in their important task of informing and educating the electorate. The loss of social capital is also a serious contention that requires further inquiry. Although it is easy to view these current downward trends of participation and civic engagement with negativity, there also exists much to be positive about. Participation and our civil societies

matter, perhaps more than many of us are willing to admit. American history is rich with the ebb and flow of political trends. Politics has consistently shifted in response to various generations and periods in time. It is also important to remember that Americans have always been innovative problem solvers. We have always been successful in seeking the solutions that existed outside of 'the box'. This is a positive thought, for it will take much creativity, patience and diversity in order to address these problems.

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