

The individual actors: The citizens. Electoral behavior and political participation

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6850322>

Published Date: 17-July-2022

1. INTRODUCTION

Citizens: individual political action

The individual political action of the citizens of a community is an essential factor in understanding the quality of democracies and how they work because:

- It conditions the ruler-ruled relationship.
- It affects the type of information that reaches the rulers.
- It marks the type of control that is exercised over political power.
- It serves to express the political preferences of citizens.
- It marks the nature of the type of delegation of power and the very nature of political representation.
- Influences the behavior and strategies of the main actors in the system.
- It conditions the nature of the public debate, its richness and its content.

Political participation: Mechanism and intensity of participation

Not only politicians do politics, all members of the political community do it to a greater or lesser degree: when they engage in political discussions with family and friends, when they vote, when they attend a rally, when they attend a demonstration, or even when they pay attention. even if it is superficial to a policy program. All these and many more are mechanisms of political participation and are available to the citizen to exercise individual political action. Some types of political action may depend more on others than individual initiative or be more or less instrumentalist (for example, trying to be received personally by a political authority), but they share two aspects:

- all of them are aimed at influencing the political decision-making process by political authorities; and as such, they mark the nature and degree of stability of democracies;
- they ultimately depend on individual action, constituting a basic element of the study of politics: Why do citizens participate or stop participating?

To study both aspects there are two main dominant lines:

- Classify the types of participation as they are not all the same. They depend on:
 - Individual cost involved in each of them. The cost of arguing with a political friend or family member is not the same as the cost of going to a rally or demonstration or being an active member of a party. This cost is also conditioned not only by the type of participation per se, but also by the set of existing institutions.

- The individual benefit of the same participatory act. The benefit obtained by voting is not the same as the contact with a politician. This is also called the instrumentality of the participatory act. Some types of participation are clearly instrumental.
- Current legal system and the legitimacy granted to the type of participation.

In this way three large groups of types of participation can be distinguished:

- Conventional:

- those related to the electoral process. Vote, follow the campaign and go to rallies and meetings, support a candidate, contribute financially to it or volunteer work, run as a candidate.
- Those related to opinion creation: finding out about politics through the media, discussing political issues with family or friends, sending letters to newspapers, or phoning radio and television stations.
- Related to contact with institutions and authorities: request interviews with authorities.
- Related to organized political mobilization: joining more traditional parties or organizations such as parties and unions.
- Contribute financially to those organizations.

- Unconventional:

- Related to the creation of opinion: participate in legal demonstrations, participate in strikes, confinements, strikes, obstruction of other people's activities (traffic, sitting, occupation of premises, boycott of public events or commercial activities), graffiti of protest and vindication in places public.
- Related to contact with institutions and authorities: Sign collective petitions addressed to the authorities, resistance to compliance with legal obligations to pay taxes, compulsory military service.
- Related to organized political mobilization: Participate in authorized demonstrations, legal strikes, participate in groups or alternative social movements, sign collective petitions to the authorities to demand public action, confinement, sit-ins and acts of protest and obstruction of outside activities.

c) Violent participation: illegal demonstrations or savage strikes, without observing the requirements set by law, illegal occupation of private property, destruction or deterioration of public property and aggression against persons.

- A second aspect studied are the incentives and explanatory factors of individual political action.

Large groups of factors:

- Individuals: individual social, cultural and economic resources. Political attitudes such as internal and external political effectiveness, the degree of interpersonal trust, interest in politics and in general political disaffection and then age, gender.
- The structure of opportunities in the institutional context. For example, certain electoral laws benefit participation more than others, the same can be said of the party system, of the process of government formation.
- Political situation: proximity of electoral results, proposed candidacies and platforms, economic situation and general policy.

Now not all factors influence all types of participation equally. In fact, a tendency towards participatory specialization in certain areas and types can occur due to all these factors. An important problem that affects all this is the problem of POLITICAL INEQUALITY that participation generates.

2. ELECTORAL BEHAVIOR

When studying electoral behavior (both the option they choose and the analysis of abstentionism) it is more than counting votes or trying to explain why one party wins and another loses or looking for ways to win elections. The type of citizen is being analyzed. What do you mean by this? When trying to find out whether when deciding the vote counts more belonging to a certain social class or evaluating the achievements and promises of the parties is trying to find out the nature of the citizen and the fundamental mechanisms by which the citizen decides when exercising the fundamental right of representative democracies: the vote.

There are four basic models of behavior:

- The sociological model (Columbia and cleavages).
- Psycho-social model (partisan identification and ideological identification).
- Vote for issues and their specialization, the economic vote.
- Rational-spatial model.
- The sociological model:

It is based on the idea that the main explanatory factor of behavior is due to the location of the individual in the social structure, which determines whether he participates or not and in which direction he does so. The idea of the Columbia model is that the referent is the most immediate social group (environment). The European version of cleavage is that there are four major social conflicts that have marked the behavior of individuals.

- Psycho-social model:

Citizens develop psychological ties either with the parties or with certain ideological positions that they acquire through socialization and that decisively influence their political behavior.

- Issue voting model:

Citizens vote and act according to a set of current issues that concern them and the position of the parties with respect to them. A specialization of this type of vote is the economic vote (retrospective, according to who thinks that the economy is going and who is responsible; and prospective, who thinks that it is going to handle the economy better).

- Spatial-rational models (Downs):

There is a space of competition defined by the positions of the citizens with respect to an issue or set of issues defined by the parties themselves and there is a competition between them trying to conquer the position of the average voter.

In the first two models (Social and psycho-social) prevails a more negative view of the citizen characterized by:

- Lack of knowledge and information.
- The existence of a stable mechanism that governs behavior without the intervention of other factors of rationality.
- A poorly rational citizen.
- A defense of the vote not as a control mechanism, but as a mechanism for the expression of primary identities.
- The political world is hardly given importance, as the citizen is immune to it due to lack of information and capacity.

In the last two models (issues and rational-spatial) a more positive view prevails because:

- The citizen is given the ability to have basic information on those matters that really affect and concern him.
- Not so much importance is given to the elements that give stability to the behavior.
- A greater degree of rationality is granted to the citizen.
- A citizenship is conceived that exercises a greater control of the political power without fear to the stability and the supposed ignorance of the citizen.
- The political world is given a prominent role: political parties, leaders, actors, their speech, the format of the competition, etc.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Therefore, when talking about citizenship and voting, it is very important to distinguish the importance given to the stable and unstable elements of voting.

But it is still much more relevant to know how the stable elements have been formed. The presence of stable elements is not something desirable but something rational (it helps to reduce political information and the cost of obtaining it and

making a decision). That is why it is normal for citizens to tend to form stable elements. The question is how they formed them. Two approaches predominate:

- From bottom to top. Traditional conception.
- From top to bottom. Much more rationalist conception and in line with the positive vision of the citizen.

In Europe there are some stable elements of the vote. This is not desirable, but it is logical. The important thing is how it was formed. Central idea: It has formed from top to bottom.

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