

# DEMOCRATIC PHOENIX

REINVENTING POLITICAL ACTIVISM



PIPPA NORRIS

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### *Reinventing Political Activism*

Conventional wisdom suggests that citizens in many countries have become disengaged from the traditional channels of political participation. Commentators highlight warning signs that include sagging electoral turnout, rising antiparty sentiment, and the decay of civic organizations. But are these concerns justified?

This book compares systematic evidence for electoral turnout, party membership, and civic activism in countries around the world and suggests good reasons to question assumptions of decline. Not only is the obituary for older forms of political activism premature, but new forms of civic engagement may have emerged in modern societies to supplement traditional modes. Political participation appears to have evolved over the years, in terms of the agencies, the actions used for political expression, and the political actors that participants seek to influence. The process of societal modernization and rising levels of human capital are primarily responsible, although participation is also explained by the structure of the state, the role of agencies, and social inequalities.

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*Harvard University*



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## Preface

It is widely assumed that citizens in many countries have become disengaged from the conventional channels of political participation. This book compares systematic evidence for electoral turnout, party membership, and civic activism in countries around the world and suggests good reasons to question popular assumptions of pervasive decline.

Before proceeding to articulate this argument, so that the wary might be warned before proceeding further, we should note that interpretations of the contemporary state of political participation can and often do fall into multiple potential traps.

One is the danger of mythologizing a romantic Golden Age when all the town hall meetings were packed, all the voting booths were overflowing, and all the citizens were above average.<sup>1</sup> It is all too easy to equate change with decline. Familiar patterns of our parents' and grandparents' generations are regarded nostalgically as the norm, in a misty-eyed Jimmy Stewart small-town-America sort of way. But change can simply mean adaptation to circumstances.

Ethnocentrism is another common danger. The bulk of research on political participation originates in America, and it is sometimes assumed that political fashions are like the export of McDonald's, Nikes, or Levis, so that patterns that first emerge in the United States (or even in California) will probably become evident later among other Western publics. Yet in this regard, as in many others, as Lipset suggests, there may well be American exceptionalism. The individualistic values and particular constitutional structures created at the founding of the United States set a specific cultural milieu, so that civic ills do not necessarily creep north over the Canadian border, let alone spread widely like a virus throughout Western political systems.<sup>2</sup> Particular circumstances, particular historical legacies, and particular institutional structures may block generalized contagions.

Another potential obstacle concerns partial perspectives. Political science has experienced growing fragmentation and intellectual specialization; as

Almond pointed out, like Rattigan's actors, we are increasingly "sitting at separate tables."<sup>3</sup> As a result, research on older mainstream channels of participation, such as elections and political parties, often fails to be integrated into work on new social movements and transnational policy networks. Students of political behavior decry eroding party membership, while elsewhere international relations scholars celebrate the flowering of a cosmopolitan civic society. Psephologists mourn half-empty ballot boxes, while communications scholars herald the rise of internet activism. A wide-ranging voyage drawing upon multiple subareas and many countries is needed to develop a more comprehensive and balanced perspective, even if breadth comes at the inevitable expense of some loss of depth.

Outdated theoretical frameworks are another barrier. We are often imprisoned by the uncritical inheritance of concepts for studying political participation arising from the early classics of the 1960s, but as curiously old-fashioned today as the stump speech, the railway whistle-stop tour, and the "I Like Ike" campaign button. We need to build on the past and honor the intellectual foundations that we inherit. Yet overreliance on traditional frameworks can blind us to modern forms of civic engagement that are symbolized today by events on the streets of Seattle, Gothenberg, and Genoa, and the wide repertoire of activities engaged in by environmentalists, peace protestors, human rights advocates, and women's groups. These dimensions of participation need to be captured, as well as the way that the more conventional activities of parties and elections function, evolve, and adapt in transitional and consolidating democracies such as Russia, Mexico, and South Africa.

Accounts can also exaggerate the value of participation. Viewed through a Schumpeterian lens, democracy involves three core components: the existence of widespread political rights and civil liberties such as freedom of expression and association, party competition in the pursuit of office, and opportunities for citizens to vote at regular intervals to elect their leaders. As such, opportunities for participation by all citizens are a necessary but far from sufficient condition for democracy. Multiple institutions need to be working effectively to channel citizen's voices into representative government, and to ensure that the participation is meaningful rather than merely symbolic. Nor is greater participation by itself necessarily a sign of democratization in the absence of other important safeguards; mass demonstrations on the streets of Iraq, high electoral turnout in Belarus, and plebiscitary rallies in Pakistan have been utilized to legitimize the rule of authoritarian regimes and radical antidemocratic factions.

Data limitations are yet another major barrier. Studies of trends in political participation are restricted by the availability of longitudinal time-series aggregate and cross-national survey data. Until recently, this has produced a systematic bias toward studying postindustrial societies in Western Europe and the United States. Most series of survey data date back no further than

the 1970s or 1960s. The number of confounding factors that can complicate the analysis once we start to compare many different regions and types of states around the world can lead to the familiar difficulty of too many variables and too few cases (nations). The “most similar” research design, which focuses on a few countries sharing similar democratic political systems, cultural histories, and historical legacies, has many well-established advantages. Qualitative case studies provide richness and depth. Yet this approach is also limited, particularly in how far those who know only democracies can ever hope to understand democracies. This is akin to feminist strategies claiming that we can understand gender best by focusing on women, rather than comparing similarities and differences between the sexes. In formal terms, the danger is to bias the inferences that can be drawn. We need to understand the process of democratization, not just for its own sake, but also because understanding the path traveled by transitional and consolidating democracies generates important insights into established democracies. The flowering of the third wave of electoral democracies since the early 1970s, and the wider availability of new sources of cross-national survey data since the 1980s, help to illuminate how far we can generalize from the comparative laboratory of older democracies to patterns evident elsewhere around the world. Recent decades have generated a flourishing range of regional studies on the transition and consolidation of democracies in Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe, Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, which can be integrated and synthesized to help clarify the broad trajectory of world trends. We can start to “turn proper names into variables.”<sup>4</sup> Globalization has gradually transformed world politics, but comparative politics has been relatively slow to adapt to the new reality by becoming more global in its research designs.

Given these multiple difficulties, many wiser heads might have been deterred from proceeding. Nevertheless, the topic appeared too important, and the current systematic evidence too flimsy, to allow the conventional wisdom to occupy center stage unchallenged. My previous books had circled around issues of political participation, but the time seemed ripe for a more direct approach.

This book owes many debts, as ever, to friends and colleagues. The idea for the study originated over lunch with Lew Bateman, whose constant support at Cambridge University Press has proved invaluable. It received early encouragement that I should proceed, despite the difficulties, in conversations with Russ Dalton, Jan Van Deth, Ronald Inglehart, Jane Mansbridge, David Marsh, Ian McAllister, Joseph Nye, Robert Putnam, Ben Reilly, Marian Sawer, Sidney Verba, and Paul Whiteley. The book got under way during a visit to the Research School of the Social Sciences at the Australian National University, and I would like to thank colleagues there, especially Ian McAllister and Marian Sawer, for their generous and congenial hospitality. I am also most grateful to all those who went out of

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# INTRODUCTION





## The Decline and Fall of Political Activism?

The conventional wisdom suggests that in the late twentieth century many postindustrial societies experienced a tidal wave of citizen withdrawal from the traditional channels of political participation. Symptoms of this malady include sagging electoral turnout, rising antiparty sentiment, and the decay of civic organizations. Concern about these issues has been expressed in public speeches, leader columns, and academic studies. These voices are heard most commonly in the United States, but similar echoes resonate in many other democracies. But are these fears justified? This book is the last of a trilogy considering related facets of this phenomenon. The first, *A Virtuous Circle*, developed a critique of the media malaise thesis, demonstrating that attention to the news media was positively, not negatively, linked to political participation. *Digital Divide* explored the potential of the internet for civic engagement, and examined how new opportunities online facilitate a more level playing field for challengers and opposition movements with technical skills and know-how.

Building upon this foundation, this book suggests reasons to question and revise popular assumptions of a contagious plague of citizen apathy. In particular, three core claims are advanced, demonstrated, and defended to show that the obituary for civic activism is premature.

First, the study documents mixed trends during the second half of the twentieth century in electoral turnout, party membership, and voluntary associations, not a steady secular erosion. Chapters will demonstrate that voting participation has been stable in established democracies during the postwar era, not in free fall, while by contrast growing literacy, education, and wealth in developing societies have generated rising turnout. Official estimates confirm that party membership has ebbed since the early 1980s in Western Europe, it is true, but at the same time there has been growth in newer democracies such as Slovakia and Hungary. Secularization has shrunk the pool of regular churchgoers in Catholic and Protestant Europe, and modernization undercuts religious faith. Yet despite the rise of

the service economy, trade union membership shows a mixed trend across Europe over the last fifty years, not a consistent slump. Moreover, post-industrial societies, where traditional agencies have become less popular, have seen the rise of alternative avenues through protest politics, reinventing activism. Demonstrations, signing petitions, and consumer boycotts have become far more common since the mid-1970s. Engagement in new social movements, exemplified by environmental activism, has flowered in affluent nations. In sum, indicators point more strongly toward the evolution, transformation, and reinvention of civic engagement than to its premature death. The evidence remains more limited than would be desirable in the best of all possible comparative analyses, but nevertheless it is sufficiently robust and reliable across different independent indicators to debunk some common myths.

Second, the book examines survey evidence available for many countries around the world in the mid-1990s wave of the World Values Study to analyze who votes, who joins parties, and who belongs to civic organizations. Conventional explanations of political participation commonly focus on social inequalities of class, education, age, gender, and ethnicity, as well as on cultural attitudes such as political interest and confidence. Yet these factors are insufficient by themselves to explain the marked contrasts in national levels of political activism. It is also important to take account of the broader context set by societal modernization, institutional design, and mobilizing agencies. In particular, the early stages of the modernization process generate rising levels of human capital (education, literacy, and wealth) that are strongly related to many dimensions of citizen activism, although this is a curvilinear pattern that tapers off after a certain point (thereby solving the so-called puzzle of electoral participation). This broader context shapes and mediates the impact of social structure and cultural attitudes on civic engagement.

Lastly, multiple newer channels of civic engagement, mobilization, and expression are rapidly emerging in postindustrial societies to supplement traditional modes. Political participation is evolving and diversifying in terms of the *who* (the *agencies* or collective organizations), *what* (the *repertoires* of actions commonly used for political expression), and *where* (the *targets* that participants seek to influence).<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, it is difficult to substantiate this argument with the limited evidence available. Nevertheless, this claim seems both important and persuasive. Protest politics did not disappear with afghan bags, patchouli oil, and tie-dyed T-shirts in the sixties; instead, it has moved from margin to mainstream. New social movements, transnational policy networks, and internet activism offer alternative avenues of engagement. The politics of choice appears to be replacing the politics of loyalties. It follows that studies of political participation focusing exclusively on conventional indicators, such as trends in electoral turnout in the United States and party membership in Western Europe, may

seriously misinterpret evidence of an apparent civic slump. Political energies have diversified and flowed through alternative tributaries, rather than simply ebbing away.

Before proceeding to articulate these arguments, we need to summarize the standard textbook case for civic decline, outline the revisionist interpretation presented in this book, and then describe the comparative framework, the main sources of evidence, and the overall plan of the book.

### **The Case for Civic Decline**

There is widespread agreement among varied democratic theorists, ranging from Jean Jacques Rousseau to James Madison, John Stuart Mill, Robert Dahl, Benjamin Barber, David Held, and John Dryzak, that mass participation is the lifeblood of representative democracy, although conceptions differ sharply over how much civic engagement is either necessary or desirable.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, theories of “strong” democracy suggest that citizen activism is intrinsically valuable. Mill argued that by actively participating in the civic life, rather than allowing others to make decisions in their own interest, people learn and grow. In this view, involving the public can make better citizens, better policies, and better governance. On the other hand, Schumpeterian democrats believe that the essential role of citizens should be relatively limited, confined principally to the periodic election of parliamentary representatives, along with the continuous scrutiny of government actions.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, even this minimalist view sees voting participation as one of the essential features of representative government, alongside many other institutional safeguards.

Opportunities for widespread public engagement in public affairs, making all voices count in the policy-making process, are not sufficient in themselves to ensure that representative democracies work effectively. Non-democratic regimes well understand the symbolic power of legitimating events, as demonstrated by pro-government rallies organized by the police and military in Nigeria, plebiscitary elections in one-party predominant states such as Singapore, Algeria, and Belarus, and anti-American protests mobilized by ruling elites in Iraq. In elections during the 1990s in Uzbekistan, Angola, and Equatorial Guinea, all governed by nondemocratic regimes, over 87 percent of voters flocked to the polls.<sup>4</sup> By itself, public participation does not guarantee the workings of representative democracy. Arguably, it is not even the most pressing challenge facing many transitional and consolidating democracies. But at least some minimal opportunity for electoral choice is one of the necessary but not sufficient conditions for Schumpeterian democracies. Widespread disengagement from civic life is problematic if political participation functions as a mechanism to hold elected officials to account, to articulate and express public demands and grievances, and to train and educate future political leaders. There should

be concern if lack of participation undermines confidence in the legitimacy of representative governments, drains the lifeblood from the more fragile democracies, and reinforces social inequality and the disadvantages facing poorer groups, women, and ethnic minority populations already at the margins of power.

The standard view emphasizes a familiar litany of civic ills that are believed to have undermined the democratic channels traditionally linking citizens to the state. Elections are the most common way for people to express their political preferences, and the half-empty ballot box is taken to be the most common symptom of democratic ill health.<sup>5</sup> The idea of representative democracy sans parties is unthinkable, yet studies of party organizations suggest the desertion of grassroots members, at least in Western Europe, during recent decades.<sup>6</sup> An extensive literature on partisan dealignment has established that lifetime loyalties anchoring voters to parties have been eroding in many established democracies, contributing to sliding turnout and producing a more unstable electorate, open to the sway of short-term forces.<sup>7</sup> Political mobilization via traditional agencies and networks of civic society, such as unions and churches, appears to be under threat. Structural accounts emphasize that union membership is hemorrhaging due to the decline of jobs in manufacturing industries, changing class structures, flexible labor markets, and the spread of individualist values.<sup>8</sup> Theories of secularization, deriving originally from Max Weber, suggest that the public in modern societies has been abandoning church pews for shopping malls.<sup>9</sup> The bonds of belonging to the plethora of traditional community associations and voluntary organizations may be becoming more frayed and tattered than in the past.<sup>10</sup> Putnam presents the most extensive battery of evidence documenting anemic civic engagement in America, displayed in activities as diverse as community meetings, social networks, and association membership.<sup>11</sup> Surveys of public opinion suggest that growing public cynicism about government and public affairs has become pervasive in the United States, at least before the events of 9/11, while citizens have become more critical of the institutions of representative government in many other established democracies.<sup>12</sup>

Given the weight of all this accumulating evidence, the conventional perspective suggests that traditional political activities that arose and flourished during the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries peaked during the postwar era and have waned in popularity since. Common activities for our parents and grandparents, such as attending party conferences, union branch meetings, and town hall rallies, may appear as musty, quaint, and outmoded to the internet generation as the world of eighteenth-century Parisian political salons, nineteenth-century Yorkshire rotten boroughs, and early twentieth-century Chicago party machines. The conventional wisdom has set policy alarm bells ringing from Washington, D.C., to Brussels and Tokyo, although prognostications differ about “what is to be done,”

because there is far greater consensus about the diagnosis of the symptoms than about the cure.<sup>13</sup>

Elsewhere, there are obvious grounds for greater optimism. The last quarter of the twentieth century witnessed a dramatic expansion of free elections worldwide. Countries as diverse as the Czech Republic, Mexico, and South Africa celebrated a political renaissance. Since the onset of the “third wave” in 1974, the proportion of states that are at least electoral democracies has more than doubled, and the number of democratic governments in the world has tripled.<sup>14</sup> Many hoped that these developments would deepen and enlarge the opportunities for citizens to become engaged in public affairs and governance. Yet even here, there remain multiple problems in civic life. In many states, the establishment of free and fair elections has not been accompanied by the robust institutionalization of democracy through more effective party competition, freedom of expression and association, respect for justice and the rule of law, guarantees of human rights, and government transparency and accountability. Many newer democracies, such as those in the Andean region, have developed the architecture of competitive electoral institutions but failed to create the supporting foundations of vibrant civic societies, while deep-rooted political mistrust is apparent throughout Latin America, creating the danger of occasional reversions to authoritarian rule.<sup>15</sup>

### **Countervailing Trends and Forces**

Yet despite the conventional wisdom, there are good reasons to question popular assumptions that civic decline has become pandemic throughout the older democracies, and that it has failed to flourish and take root in the stony and uncertain ground of the newer democracies. Not all indicators, by any means, point toward consistent and steady secular deterioration across all dimensions of political activism. Instead, after a few minutes’ thought, even the most casual observer of current events will quickly identify many complex contradictions, crosscurrents, and anomalies. In the U.S. presidential election of 2000, for example, many commentators deplored the fact that only half of the American electorate voted, despite the tightest presidential contest in forty years, the importance of the outcome, and the three billion dollars spent on the campaign. Yet a year later, the dramatic events of the destruction of the World Trade Center generated a coast-to-coast outpouring of patriotic displays, from flags to army volunteers, a flowering of community giving, from an estimated one billion dollars in charitable donations to lines of volunteers at blood banks, and a massive resurgence of the news audience.

Similar counterflows are found elsewhere. The UK general election of June 2001 prompted a pervasive mood of campaign apathy, the lowest turnout since the First World War, and hemorrhaging party membership,

generating official government reports on how to improve voter participation.<sup>16</sup> Yet in recent years not all of the British public has been disengaged; instead, there have been multiple demonstrations, blockades, and direct-action protests by disparate groups concerned about animal rights, genetically modified food, road development plans and fuel taxes, the rights of Muslim citizens, and the state of race relations. Across the Channel, France has often seen similar outbreaks exemplified by port blockades by fisherman, farmers dumping manure on the steps of the French parliament, violent anti-globalization protests against McDonald's, and massive anti-Le Pen rallies. U.S. air strikes on Afghanistan triggered daily street protests stretching from Jakarta, Nairobi, and Karachi to Belfast, Berlin, and Boston.

Moreover, protests are not merely symbolic politics; they can have critical consequences. In Belgrade, an estimated half-million opposition supporters took to the streets in a general strike demanding the resignation of President Milosevic, leading to his downfall and eventual trial before an international court in The Hague. In the Philippines, a peaceful uprising of people power on the Manila streets – a melange of lawyers and students, businessmen and middle-class housewives – caused the abrupt ejection of President Estrada from power. Similar manifestations disrupted Argentinian politics following the banking crisis. The young are assumed to be politically lethargic. Yet anticapitalist demonstrations among this generation have rocked summits of world leaders from Seattle to Quebec, Gothenberg, and Genoa, forcing reconsideration of issues of debt repayment by poorer nations.

The major examples of counterbalancing tendencies come from protest politics, but in certain circumstances even traditional electoral channels have proved remarkably popular. In August 2001, for example, East Timor's first free elections since independence from Indonesia and Portugal generated long lines at the polls, and 91 percent of electors voted. In June 1999, 89 percent of South Africans cast a ballot in parliamentary elections. In 1998, despite violence and intimidation during the campaign, the Cambodian general election saw lengthy queues at polling stations, 94 percent turnout, and a strong challenge to the governing party.<sup>17</sup> Voting apathy is not universal.

These phenomena may or may not be related. But taking them together, even the causal observer would acknowledge that the pervasive idea that the public has become disengaged from every form of civic life oversimplifies a far more complex and messy reality. These anecdotal observations suggest that it is time for a more thorough reexamination of the systematic evidence, with a mind open to findings running counter to the conventional view.

To consider these issues, the first aim of this book is to examine the standard claim of a pervasive, long-term erosion of political activism experi-

enced in many countries around the world during the postwar era. Although such a trend is often widely assumed, in fact the evidence of secular decline often remains scattered and patchy; consistent and reliable longitudinal trend data is limited; and most previous systematic research has been restricted to case studies of particular countries, particularly the United States, and comparative evidence among established democracies in Western Europe, making it hard to generalize more widely. Given these limitations, this study aims to update the analysis and to examine the broader picture of trends in recent decades where evidence is available across many nations.

The second major aim of the study is to analyze and explain the variations in levels of electoral turnout, party membership, and civic activism in countries around the world today. There are substantial contrasts among contemporary societies. For example, in national elections held during the 1990s, electoral turnout remained remarkably high (over 85 percent) in democracies as diverse as Iceland, South Africa, and Uruguay, but it fell below 50 percent in the United States, Jamaica, and Switzerland.<sup>18</sup> As subsequent chapters demonstrate, there are similar cross-national divergencies in many other common dimensions of civic life, including the membership of parties, religious organizations, and trade unions, as well as the propensity to protest through demonstrations, strikes, and boycotts. In seeking to explain these national differences, the book focuses on modernization theories, suggesting that long-term processes of societal and human development (including rising levels of literacy, education, and wealth) are driving patterns of political participation. But rather than adopting a monocausal theory, the study also explores how far levels of activism are shaped by political institutions and the structure of the state, mobilizing agencies such as parties, unions, and churches, social inequalities in resources, and cultural attitudes held by groups and individuals.

Lastly, the conclusion aims to reflect more generally on the nature of political participation and on whether the standard indicators used to monitor civic energies are capable of capturing alternative forms of political expression and activism through new social movements, transnational policy networks, and internet channels. If modes are evolving, then political science may be in danger of lagging behind. The heart of this book therefore explores whether many common dimensions of political participation have eroded during the late twentieth century, as many assume, analyzes the reasons for cross-national patterns of civic engagement in many countries, and considers the consequences for democratic governance.

### **Comparative Framework**

This study seeks to understand these issues by comparing countries around the globe, maximizing the advantages of the “most different” comparative



strategy.<sup>19</sup> Much existing research on political participation is based upon the United States, as well as on established Western European and Anglo-American democracies. Yet it is not clear how far we can generalize more widely from these particular countries. Patterns of participation that gradually evolved with the spread of democracies in the mid nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, following the long-term process of industrialization, are unlikely to be the same as those found in Latin American nations that have experienced authoritarian regimes and military rule, or in Central European states that have lived under Communist Party hegemony. If distinctive historical experiences have made their cultural mark on these nations, in a path-dependent pattern, they may continue to influence patterns of political activism today.

Moreover, as the earliest comparative studies have long stressed, political systems offer citizens widely different structures of opportunity to become engaged in their own governance.<sup>20</sup> In pluralist societies such as the United States, for example, voluntary organizations, professional associations, and community groups commonly mobilize people into politics, with the church playing a particularly important role.<sup>21</sup> In Western Europe, by contrast, mass-branch party organizations often play a stronger role. And in many developing societies, such as the Philippines and South Africa, grassroots social movements draw people into protest politics and direct action strategies. In short, patterns of activism in both Western Europe and the United States may prove atypical of the range of transitional and consolidating democracies in Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe, Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>22</sup>

Given these considerations, this study follows the well-known conceptualization of Przeworski and Teune in adopting the “most different systems” research design, seeking to maximize contrasts between a wide range of societies in order to distinguish systematic clusters of characteristics associated with different dimensions of political activism.<sup>23</sup> Clearly, there are some important trade-offs involved in this approach, notably the loss of the richness and depth that can come from case-study comparison of a few similar countries within relatively similar regions. A broader canvas increases the complexity of comparing societies that vary widely in terms of cultural legacies, political systems, and democratic traditions. Yet the strategy of attempting a worldwide comparison, where data is available, has multiple advantages. Most importantly, the global framework allows us to examine whether, as theories of societal modernization claim, patterns of political activism evolve with the shift from traditional rural societies, with largely illiterate and poor populations, through industrial economies based on a manufacturing base, with a growing urban working class, to postindustrial economies based on a large middle-class service sector.

The approach adopted in this study maximizes the comparison of nations at many different levels of societal modernization today, including some of

the most affluent countries in the world (including Sweden, Germany, and the United States), those characterized by middle-level human development and transitional economies (typified by such nations as Taiwan, Brazil, and South Africa), as well as poorer rural societies, such as India and China. Some states under comparison are governed by authoritarian regimes, while others have experienced a rapid consolidation of democracy within the last decade. Today the Czech Republic, Latvia, and Argentina are ranked as being just as “free” as Western European nations with long traditions of democracy, such as Belgium, France, and the Netherlands.<sup>24</sup> The approach adopted here follows in the footsteps of Verba, Nie, and Kim’s seminal seven-nation study published in 1978, which compared participation in Austria, India, Japan, the Netherlands, Nigeria, the United States, and Yugoslavia, although the current research benefits from the easier availability of data and compares many more nations, allowing more reliable cross-national generalizations.

### Classification of Nations

Countries were classified for analysis according to levels of human development. The Human Development Index produced annually by the UNDP provides the standard measure of societal modernization, combining levels of literacy and education, health, and per capita income. This measure is widely used, and it has the advantage of providing a broader indicator of the well-being of a society than simple levels of economic income or financial wealth. The only alteration made here to the standard UNDP classification is that nations ranking highest in human development were subdivided into “*postindustrial societies*” (the most affluent states around the world, ranking 1–28, the highest HDI scores in the UNDP index, and mean per capita GNP of \$23,691) and “*other highly developed societies*” (ranked 29–46 by the UNDP, with mean per capita GNP of \$9,006). This subdivision was selected as more precise and consistent than the conventional use of OECD member states to define industrialization, since a few OECD member states such as Mexico and Turkey have low development, although in practice most countries overlap.<sup>25</sup>

Over the years there have been many attempts to gauge levels of democracy, and the Gastil index measured annually by Freedom House has become widely accepted as one of the standard measures of democratization. Freedom House provides an annual classification of political rights and civil liberties around the world. For this study, the history of democracy in each nation-state worldwide is classified based on the annual ratings produced from 1972 to 2000.<sup>26</sup> An important distinction is drawn between thirty-nine *older democracies*, defined as those with at least twenty years’ continuous experience of democracy (1980–2000) and a current Freedom House rating of 2.0 or less, and forty-three *newer democracies*, with less than twenty years’ experience of democracy and a current Freedom House

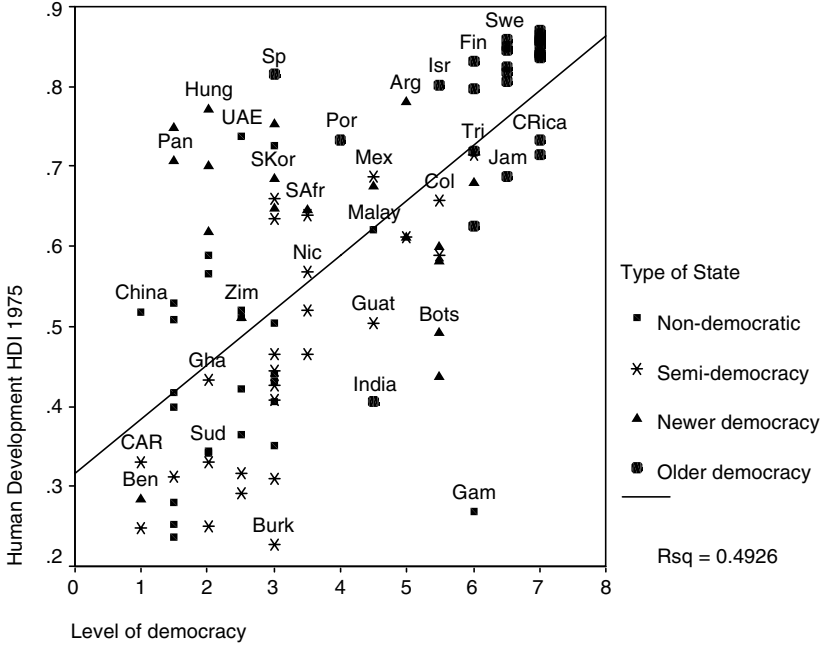


FIGURE 1.1. Democracy and human development, 1975.

rating of 2.5 or less. Following the Freedom House rankings, other countries were classified based on the most recent ratings (1999–2000) into *semi-democracies* (which are often referred to as “partly free,” “transitional,” or “consolidating” democracies) and *non-democracies* (which includes a wide variety of regimes lacking political rights and civil liberties, including military-backed dictatorships, authoritarian states, elitist oligarchies, and ruling monarchies). The Appendix lists the classifications of countries used throughout the book, based on these measures.

In practice, it remains difficult to disentangle the complex relationships between human and political development. In the early literature, many researchers argued that the modernization process was closely related to the spread of democratization.<sup>27</sup> Figure 1.1 illustrates the strength of this association in the mid-1970s, and the strong correlation ( $R = .49$ ) during this era shows that most countries clustered in a predictable pattern around the regression line. Even so, there were a few outliers with relatively high levels of human development and yet restricted political rights and civil liberties, such as the communist governments in Romania and Hungary and the dictatorial regimes in Spain and Chile, as well as some poorer countries with democratic governments, such as India, Papua New Guinea, and

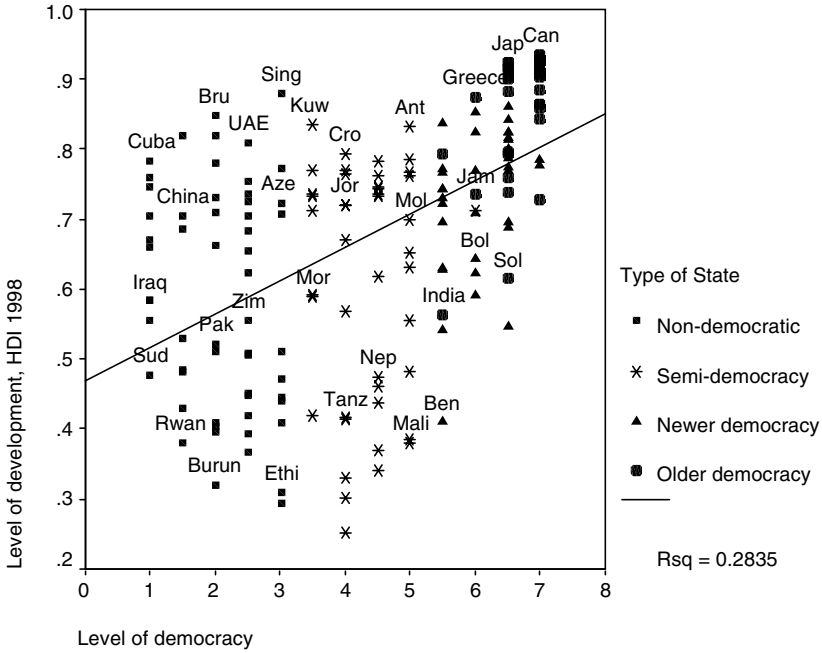


FIGURE 1.2. Democracy and human development, 1998–9.

Botswana. Yet this general relationship between democracy and development altered significantly in later decades, following the “third wave” revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Figure 1.2 illustrates the nature of this association across all of the nations under comparison in the late 1990s. The figure shows a greater scatter around the line, especially among semi-democracies and non-democracies. This association has important implications for attempts to disentangle the relationship of human and democratic development, and for the classifications used in the analysis. All of the older democracies except India are relatively affluent and modern societies, and almost all of the newer democracies are also moderately developed societies. Nevertheless, there is a wide distribution of semi-democracies and non-democracies by level of human development, as shown by the stark contrasts between affluent Bahrain, Brunei Darussalam, and Singapore, on the one hand, and the poorer societies of Rwanda, Burundi, and Sudan, on the other. As discussed in the next chapter, the modernization process brings greater education, literacy, and affluence, which are associated with mass participation in democracy, but outliers such as India and Singapore illustrate that there can be important exceptions to this pattern.

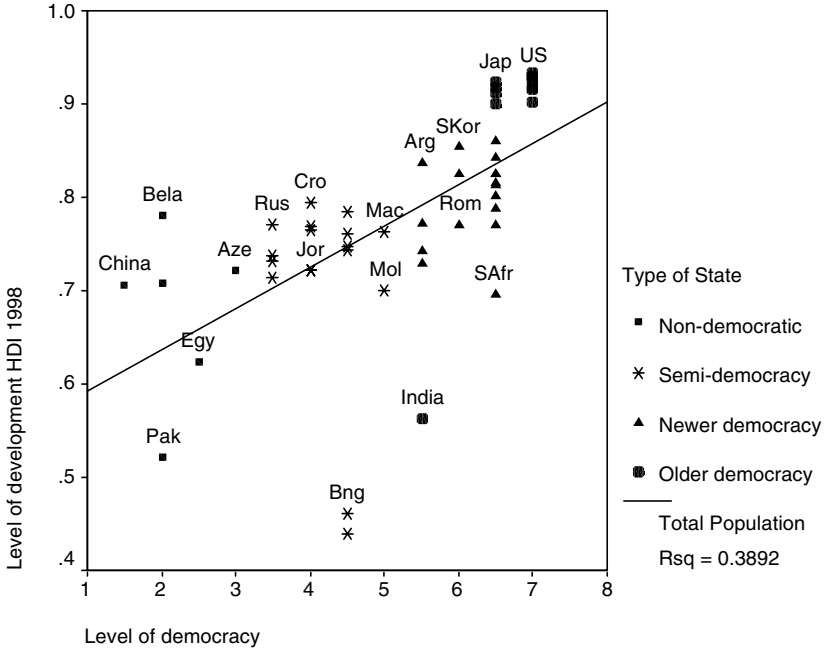


FIGURE 1.3. Democracy and human development, WVS nations, 1998–9. *Note:* Positions of the societies as compared in the World Values Study, mid-1990s.

### Sources of Evidence

The study adopts a multimethod research design, drawing upon aggregate data for 193 independent nation-states derived from many sources, such as levels of electoral turnout monitored from 1945 to 2000 by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), information on membership in trade unions collected by the International Labour Organization, data on secularization from the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, and so on. Much of the analysis is based on survey data from the three-wave World Values Study (WVS) of public opinion conducted in almost seventy societies during the early 1980s, the early 1990s, and the mid-1990s. Figure 1.3 displays the distribution of the societies that can be compared using just the third wave of the World Values Study, conducted in the mid-1990s, including fifty-three countries from different global regions at all levels of human and democratic development. This source provides the broadest cross-national survey data currently available, including measures of voting participation, political discussion and interest, social trust, membership in voluntary organizations and political parties, willingness to

engage in political protest, and a wide range of values, attitudes, and standard background variables. Where appropriate, the book also draws on many other sources of public opinion surveys for time-series and cross-national data, such as the 1973–6 Political Action survey, the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) conducted in the mid-1990s, and the fifteen-nation Eurobarometer (1970–2000).

## Plan of the Book

### *Analytical Framework*

Chapter 2 outlines the analytical and conceptual framework for explaining patterns of political participation, and considers why the process of societal modernization may have transformed many key dimensions of civic engagement. The discussion is grounded within broader theories of political participation drawn from classic landmarks in the literature from Almond and Verba (1963) onward, especially the typology of multidimensional participation developed by Verba and Nie (1972) and by Verba, Nie, and Kim (1978), the research on protest potential developed by Barnes and Kaase (1979), work on social movements by Tarrow (1992) and others, studies of transnational advocacy networks by Keck and Dinneen (1998), and theories of social capital following Putnam (2000). The core model outlined in this chapter combines five factors that can help explain patterns of participation: the *level of societal modernization* in each country, the *structure of the state*, the role of *mobilizing agencies*, the *resources* that individuals bring to the process, and the *motivation* that draws citizens into civic affairs.

### *Electoral Turnout*

The book then turns to examine electoral turnout as the most common form of conventional participation, though also one of the least demanding. Chapter 3 maps national patterns of electoral turnout as a proportion of the voting-age population (Vote/VAP) worldwide, and compares trends during the last fifty years, based on the analysis of national election results from International IDEA. Patterns are compared across traditional, industrialized, and postindustrial societies as well as across different types of political system, including older and newer democracies, semi-democracies, and authoritarian regimes. Based on modernization theories, the chapter explores whether broadly similar trends in turnout are found among nations at roughly similar levels of human development. The study confirms that electoral participation dropped in the United States from 1945 to 2000, but it also shows that, contrary to much popular speculation, there was a significant fall in turnout during the same period in only ten other post-industrial societies (including Australia, Canada, Austria, New Zealand, Switzerland, and France). Most Western nations show a pattern of

stability or trendless fluctuation during the second half of the twentieth century, while a few, such as Sweden, Greece, and Israel, have seen rising electoral participation during this era. A modest dip in turnout was experienced during the 1990s across Western Europe, but this returned levels to the status quo ante found during the postwar decade. A broader comparison of worldwide trends during the second half of the twentieth century reveals that almost twice as many countries have seen rising as opposed to falling turnout, with steady gains in many developing societies in Latin American, such as Mexico, Brazil, and Chile, as well as among smaller states in the Pacific and Caribbean regions.

Yet even among relatively similar types of society, such as Switzerland and Sweden, or the United States and the United Kingdom, there remain substantial contrasts in how many citizens vote. Chapter 4 examines institutional explanations for these differences. Structural variables can affect the costs of participation, such as the time and effort required to cast a ballot, and the anticipated benefits of participating, including the symbolic and instrumental rewards of voting. Based on a soft version of rational choice theory, the study assumes that, *ceteris paribus*, people will be more likely to vote where costs are low and the benefits are high – for example, in close parliamentary contests in majoritarian electoral systems, where even a few votes can determine which party enters government. The chapter analyzes the role of the direct institutional factors, such as the use of compulsory voting and the facilities for casting a ballot, and indirect institutional variables, including the type of electoral system. The chapter concludes that, after controlling for levels of human and democratic development, political institutions and rules still matter. Voting participation is maximized in elections using proportional representation, with compact electoral districts, regular but relatively infrequent national contests, competitive party systems, and presidential contests. Legal rules also count, such as the year when woman were first enfranchised and the use of literacy requirements. Moreover, institutions and rules matter more for turnout than do specific voting facilities, such as the registration process.

Chapter 5 goes on to analyze motivational and resource-based explanations of electoral participation, drawing upon the International Social Survey Program data in twenty-two nations, to see how far cross-national patterns of turnout can be accounted for by the role of structure, culture, and agency. Structure involves the impact of patterns of inequality, including the major social cleavages of gender, class, race/ethnicity, and generation. Culture includes a variety of attitudes, such as support for democracy, satisfaction with government performance, political interest, efficacy, and trust, and the strength of partisan loyalties, as well as broader traditions determined by religious, colonial, and communist legacies. Agency concerns the way in which social networks such as unions,

churches, and community associations draw citizens into public life. The study confirms the importance of all these factors in predicting turnout, even after controlling for human development and the broader institutional context.

### *Political Parties*

Part II turns to consider cross-national differences in support for the institution of political parties, and whether there has been a widespread erosion of membership and activism. Parties traditionally represent one of the central organizations linking citizens and the state, and in established democracies any partisan decline may have significant consequences for how far citizens can influence governments. Party organizations are compared in the light of debates about the erosion or transformation of party support.<sup>28</sup> Chapter 6 sets out Duverger's ideal type of mass-branch parties, where parliamentary leaders rely on a broad base of active members in local areas, and an even wider circle of loyal voters in the electorate. The study then examines trends from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, along with cross-national patterns of party membership and activism, using the World Values Study. This survey data is compared against estimates of party membership derived from official party records in Western democracies. The results show that patterns of party membership vary considerably cross-nationally, even within similar types of society and global regions. Rather than a consistent slump in membership, the evidence suggests a more complex pattern, with party support growing in some newer democracies, even if there has been a slump in many Western democracies.

Chapter 7 explains reasons for the cross-national differences in party membership, establishing that modernization processes, in particular the spread of electronic media, are important factors driving this process. Party membership is usually greatest in societies with low diffusion of the broadcasting media. This suggests that parties make the most effort to mobilize and retain grassroots activists where traditional face-to-face campaigning predominates, but that parties face lesser incentives to recruit members where alternative channels of mass communication allowing them to connect directly with voters are easily available. Moreover, organizational networks and political interest are stronger predictors of individual party membership than the standard social factors such as gender, age, class, and education.

### *Social Capital and Civic Society*

Part III focuses on debates about the role of civic society, generated by the work of Putnam and others.<sup>29</sup> Chapter 8 considers theories of social capital. Putnam's definition has two components: associational activism and social trust. The study compares alternative measures of belonging to many



common types of voluntary associations, social clubs, and civic organizations. The study concludes that social trust, but not associational activism, is strongly related to levels of human and democratic development.

Chapter 9 examines whether traditional agencies of mobilization, such as trade unions and religious organizations, have weakened over the years because of long-term secular and structural trends, and considers how far these agencies boost levels of political participation. The chapter concludes that, far from showing a uniform secular trend, union density has varied substantially in Western Europe during the postwar period, with some nations experiencing falling membership but others remaining stable, and yet others managing to recruit new members and boost their rolls. By contrast, secularization does receive confirmation from the available data on church attendance in Western Europe, with a fall found during the last thirty years in most countries, although from varying levels.

Chapter 10 analyzes new social movements and protest politics, building upon work on “unconventional” participation by Barnes and Kaase and others.<sup>30</sup> The study examines where protest activism is most prevalent, comparing societies by levels of human and political development, and whether the social background of the protest population has “normalized” in terms of gender, class, generation, and race/ethnicity. New social movements are exemplified by environmentalism, so countries are compared to see whether environmental activists are particularly inclined toward protest politics. The chapter discusses the role of the internet in facilitating transnational advocacy networks – concerning such issues as human rights, conflict resolution, women’s equality, environmental protection, and trade/debt – that transcend national borders. The concluding chapter draws together the major findings of the book and considers their implications for changing patterns of civic activism, for broader normative theories of democracy, and for understanding the voice of citizens in the democratization process worldwide.

## Theories of Political Activism

The first task is to see whether there has been a systematic weakening of the channels of electoral, party, and civic activism. The second is to examine the most plausible explanations to account both for differences among nations and for trends over time. The most common explanation for long-term developments in political participation comes from *modernization theories* advanced by Daniel Bell, Ronald Inglehart, and Russell Dalton, among others, suggesting that common social trends – such as rising standards of living, the growth of the service sector, and expanding educational opportunities – have swept through postindustrial societies, contributing to a new style of citizen politics in Western democracies.<sup>1</sup> This process is believed to have increased demands for more active public participation in the policy-making process through direct action, new social movements, and protest groups, while weakening deferential loyalties and support for traditional hierarchical organizations and authorities such as churches, parties, and traditional interest groups.

By contrast, *institutional accounts* emphasize the way in which the structure of the state sets opportunities for participation, exemplified in arguments by Powell and by Jackman that electoral laws, party systems, and constitutional frameworks help explain differences in voting turnout among nations.<sup>2</sup> Trends in participation can also be accounted for by changes in the rules of the game, such as the expansion of the franchise and reforms in campaign spending laws. *Agency theories*, exemplified by Rosenstone and Hansen,<sup>3</sup> focus on the role of traditional mobilizing organizations in civic society, notably the ways in which political parties, trade unions, and religious groups recruit, organize, and engage activists. Putnam's account, emphasizing the role of social capital, also falls into this category.<sup>4</sup> Lastly, the civic voluntarism model, developed by Verba and his colleagues, emphasizes the role of social inequalities in *resources* such as educational skills and socioeconomic status, and *motivational* factors such as political interest, information, and confidence, in explaining who participates.<sup>5</sup>

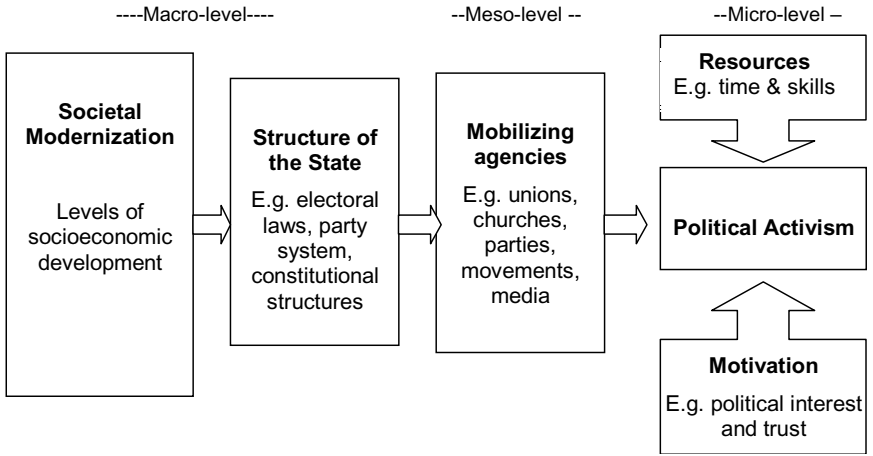


FIGURE 2.1. Theoretical framework.

In the light of these theories, the challenge is to try to sort out the relative importance of each of these factors. Figure 2.1 illustrates the core analytic model used in the book.

**Societal Modernization**

The central claim, and indeed the seductive appeal, of modernization theories is that economic, cultural, and political changes go together in predictable ways, so that there are broadly similar trajectories, which form coherent patterns, even if particular circumstances mean that what occurs in any given society cannot be predicted exactly. Modernization theories are rooted in the sociological classics of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. These accounts became increasingly popular during the late 1950s and early 1960s in much of the literature on socioeconomic development and democratization, popularized in the work of Seymour Martin Lipset, Daniel Lerner, W. W. Rostow, Karl Deutsch, and Daniel Bell, among others.<sup>6</sup> Lipset’s core thesis was that growing wealth, education, urbanization, and industrialization were the social foundations for democracy and for mass participation in the political system.<sup>7</sup> This theory subsequently became unfashionable, in part because democracy failed to take root in many Asian and Latin American nations that had experienced rapid economic development during the 1960s and 1970s, such as Brazil, Chile, the Republic of Korea, and Taiwan. Critics lambasted the ethnocentric assumptions of linear “progress” toward a Western model of democracy, as well as the economic determinism inherent in early, cruder versions of the thesis.<sup>8</sup> It appeared that many of the central tenants of modernization theory – such as the automatic link assumed between progress toward scientific rational-

ity and the decline of religiosity – turned out to be rather simplistic, with counter-secularization trends and religious revivals occurring among conservative, orthodox, and traditionalist movements in some postindustrial societies as diverse as the United States, Israel, and Japan.<sup>9</sup>

In recent decades, the emergence of “third-wave” democracies has spurred fresh interest in reexamining the association between socioeconomic development and the process of democratic transition and consolidation. Nonlinear theories of cultural modernization have experienced a revival in political science, fuelled largely by the work of Ronald Inglehart,<sup>10</sup> while Alex Inkeles and Anthony Giddens have offered alternative interpretations about the consequences of modernity in affluent nations.<sup>11</sup> “Modernization” refers to a multitude of systemic-level trends – social, economic, demographic, and technological – transforming the structure of societies from rural to industrialized, and from industrialized to postindustrial. In turn, these developments are believed to exert a decisive influence upon the process of democratization, including the political attitudes and participatory behavior of citizens.

Modernization theories in the work of Daniel Bell run along the following lines.<sup>12</sup> Traditional societies are characterized by subsistence livelihoods largely based on farming, fishing, extraction, and unskilled work, with low levels of literacy and education, predominately rural populations, minimum standards of living, and restricted social and geographic mobility. Citizens in rural societies are strongly rooted to local communities through ties of “blood and belonging,” including those of kinship, family, ethnicity, and religion, as well as long-standing cultural bonds. The shift from traditional to industrialized society concerns the move from agricultural production to heavy manufacturing, from farms to factories, and from peasants to workers. This phase occurred in Britain during the mid to late eighteenth century, then spread during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries throughout the Western world. The familiar litany of social changes that accompanied these economic developments includes:

- The population shift from rural villages to metropolitan conurbations;
- Growing levels of education, literacy, and numeracy with the spread of basic schooling;
- Occupational specialization and the expansion of working-class employment based on heavy industry, manufacturing, and processing;
- The rise of the urban bourgeoisie and the decline of landed interests;
- Rising standards of living, increased longevity, and expanding leisure time;
- The greater availability of the print media, and growing access to movies, radio, and television;
- The growth of Weberian bureaucratization and reliance on legal-rational authority in government;
- The development of the early foundations of the welfare state;

- The shift from extended to nuclear families and the entry of more women into the paid workforce.<sup>13</sup>

The early studies suggested that the key stage involved the move from agricultural processing to industrial production, but the subsequent literature emphasized that a further distinct stage can be distinguished, as a nonlinear process, in the rise of advanced industrialized or postindustrial societies. For Daniel Bell, the critical tipping point was reached when the majority of workers had moved from manufacturing into the service sector, producing a far more educated, skilled, and specialized workforce employed in sectors such as finance and banking, trade, insurance, and leisure, as well as in science and technology.<sup>14</sup> This development is conventionally understood to have started in the most affluent parts of the Western world after the Second World War, a process that continues to spread and expand. This stage is fuelled by multiple developments, and the ones most commonly highlighted include:

- The rise of the professional and managerial occupations in the private and public sectors;
- Rapid technological and scientific innovation;
- The process of globalization breaking down the barriers of the nation-state;
- Economic growth generating an expanded middle class, rising standards of living, and growing leisure time;
- Increased levels of human capital and cognitive skills generated by wider access to university education;
- Growing equality of sex roles in the home, family, and workplace, and the rise of women in the paid labor force;
- The shift in the mass media from broadcasting toward more specialized narrowcasting in the digital age;
- The growth of immigration across national borders and the rise of multiculturalism;
- The move from ascribed occupational and social roles given at birth toward achieved roles derived from formal educational qualifications and careers;
- Greater social and geographic mobility;
- The diffusion from urban areas to suburban neighborhoods;
- The weakening of the bonds connecting the extended family, and changing patterns of marriage and divorce;
- The process of secularization weakening religious ties.

There is a broad consensus that common socioeconomic developments have been sweeping across many societies, although alternative interpretations continue to dispute the exact timing and the appropriate weight to be given to different components. There remains considerable controversy,

however, surrounding the *political* consequences of these changes, in particular the impact of human development on democratization and civic engagement. One difficulty is that the abstract concept of “societal modernization” encompasses so many different dimensions of social change that it can be a kind of Rorschach test, where different theorists see whatever they want to see. Social change contains crosscutting developments, some of which could possibly depress activism, while others seem likely to encourage civic engagement. As Brody points out, there is a puzzle at the heart of claims about the political impact of human development, since many of the factors most closely associated with societal modernization should push electoral turnout upward – rising levels of literacy, education, leisure, and affluence, the expansion of the professional middle class, and the movement of women from the home into the paid workforce.<sup>15</sup> Growing levels of human capital, in particular, should plausibly serve to buttress and strengthen citizen participation: Studies have long established that education, and the cognitive skills that it provides, is one of the factors that most strongly predict individual political activism.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, certain other social trends associated with postindustrial societies may tug in the contrary direction – such as individualism, secularization, and suburbanization. In particular, modernization theories suggest that long-standing and stable orientations rooted in traditional habits and affective loyalties are likely to be replaced by more instrumental motivations, weakening stable links to traditional institutions such as parties, unions, and churches. The population shift from rural areas and cities toward more anonymous and atomistic suburbs may have contributed to the dilution of traditional community associations. Industrialization generated the trade union movement that organized and mobilized the manual working class, but economic shifts toward the service sector have shrunk manufacturing and processing industries in the rust belt – the Detroit auto production lines, the Ruhr steel mills, the Glasgow shipyards – depleting the number of blue-collar workers, eviscerating working communities, and possibly diluting union membership. Theories of partisan dealignment argue that, compared to the 1950s and 1960s, contemporary citizens in postindustrial societies have become less strongly anchored to political parties, and there is considerable evidence that the bonds of social class exert a weaker impact on voting choices.<sup>17</sup>

The claim that secular trends in postindustrial society may have caused public engagement in civic affairs to flow through alternative channels remains controversial. Some indicators point in this direction: For example, the most comprehensive recent survey of political participation in the United States, by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, reported that the modest drop in voting turnout since the 1960s has not been accompanied by a general decrease in political activism; instead, Americans have become *more* engaged in contributing money to campaigns and in contacting officials.<sup>18</sup>

Time devoted to voluntary activities such as attending campaign and party meetings had been replaced by checkbook contributions to candidates and causes. Secular social trends can be expected to produce citizens with improved cognitive and political skills, and with the financial resources and time that facilitate political engagement. Education and socioeconomic status, in particular, have long been regarded as among the most significant determinants of civic engagement. Verba, Nie, and Kim suggest that these long-term developments in society generate the motivation and resources for mass political engagement, as citizens become more aware of the wider world of politics, as they acquire norms of civic engagement, and as they develop the cognitive and organizational skills needed for political activity.<sup>19</sup>

Along similar lines, Richard Topf presented one of the most thorough recent examinations of participation in Western Europe from 1959 to 1990, and he found that, while electoral turnout had remained stable, forms of political participation beyond voting had been rising dramatically, especially among the younger generation of well-educated citizens.<sup>20</sup> Topf concluded that alternative forms of public participation in Western Europe might have been altering, not simply eroding. Bernhard Wessels compared sixteen industrialized nations, based on the 1990 WVS, and found a positive relationship between membership in social and political organizations and indicators of modernity, such as growing levels of urbanization, education, and the size of the service sector.<sup>21</sup> Russell Dalton has also suggested that participation in citizen-initiated and policy-oriented forms of political participation – including citizen action groups, communal participation, and direct democracy methods – is increasing, producing new challenges for the traditional institutions of representative democracy.<sup>22</sup> Sidney Tarrow argues that modern societies have seen a rise in volunteerism and networks of social activists who often vigorously challenge power holders and political authorities, a development that has proved healthy for democratic states: “Social activism is not dead: it has evolved into a wider variety of forms.”<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, Ronald Inglehart has developed the strongest case that social trends in postindustrial societies have fuelled a revolution in cultural values, especially among the younger generation of well-education citizens, who have less interest in the old left-right issues of the economy and greater concern about the postmaterialist agenda of quality of life issues such as the environment, gender equality, and human rights. Inglehart suggests that support for traditional hierarchical and bureaucratic organizations such as parties and churches has declined, but that the younger generation in affluent societies has become increasingly active in politics via new social movements and transnational advocacy networks, with a rise during the 1980s in political interest and discussion, petition signing, and willingness to demonstrate and engage in boycotts: “As we shall see, though voter turnout

has stagnated (largely because of weakening political party loyalties), Western publics have *not* become apathetic: quite the contrary, in the last two decades, they have become markedly more likely to engage in elite-challenging forms of political participation."<sup>24</sup> Yet despite the range of voices expressing the view that dimensions of public activism are evolving in postindustrial societies, the evidence supporting the transformationist case remains far from watertight, and the declinist thesis continues to hold sway as the conventional wisdom. If the modernization process has altered patterns and modes of political participation, then we should find parallel trends evident during the postwar period among similar types of Western societies. Moreover, if the process of societal modernization has gradually transformed electoral turnout, party membership, and civic activism, then this should be evident today in significant contrasts among the traditional, industrialized, and postindustrial societies compared in this study.

### The State Structure

The socioeconomic context, like an inevitable tide sweeping across the globe, represents one plausible determinant of the dimensions of political participation, but much comparative research also highlights the importance of political institutions. The structure of opportunities for civic engagement within each society may be shaped and influenced by the state and the constitutional rules of the game, such as the type of majoritarian or proportional electoral system, the levels of competition and fragmentation in the party system, and the degree of pluralism or corporatism in the interest-group system, as well as by overall levels of democratization and by the existence of political rights and civil liberties. The role of the state is likely to prove particularly important in explaining differences in patterns of participation among societies at similar levels of development – for example, levels of party membership and electoral turnout in Australia, Britain, and the United States.

The role of the state structure is perhaps most easily illustrated in accounting for cross-national differences in electoral turnout. Direct factors most proximate to the act of casting a ballot include the legal regulations and administrative arrangements within each country, the qualifications for citizenship and the franchise, the efficiency of registration and balloting procedures, the use of compulsory voting laws, the ease of obtaining absentee and postal ballots, the frequency of electoral contests, the number of electoral offices and referendum issues on the ballot, whether voting day is a national holiday, and so on.<sup>25</sup> For example, Wolfinger and Rosenstone concluded that if U.S. registration laws were similar to those common in Europe, then turnout in American presidential elections would increase by about 9 percent.<sup>26</sup> To these must be added the impact of *indirect* structural factors, including many broader constitutional arrangements setting the



rules of the game. These include factors such as whether the electoral system is proportional, mixed, or majoritarian; whether the election is presidential or parliamentary; the type of party system (in terms of the number of electoral and parliamentary parties and their ideological distribution); and the levels of electoral competition.<sup>27</sup> If institutional theories are correct, then we should find that the structure of the political system plays an important role in shaping dimensions of mass participation, such as cross-national levels of turnout, as well as patterns of party activism and association membership.

The stability of political institutions appears to make this account less plausible as an explanation of change over time, yet alterations in the performance of political institutions can offer important insights here. For example, if party systems gradually become less competitive, because incumbents build safer majorities in electoral constituencies, then this provides less incentive for citizens to cast a vote. Minor innovations such as the adoption of “motor voter” registration in the United States,<sup>28</sup> and the occasional introduction of major constitutional reforms, such as the switch between majoritarian and proportional electoral systems in the early 1990s in New Zealand, Japan, and Italy, also provide case studies or natural “pre- post” experiments monitoring the impact of changes in the rules of the game on levels of electoral turnout, holding the culture and societal structure relatively constant.<sup>29</sup>

### **Mobilizing Agencies**

By contrast, organizational theories give greater weight to the role of agencies and social networks engaged in activating citizens, including parties, unions, churches, voluntary associations, and the news media.<sup>30</sup> Even within relatively similar groups of countries, such as Anglo-American majoritarian democracies and consociational political systems in the smaller European welfare states, there can be very different levels of group mobilization produced by civic organizations. Rosenstone and Hansen exemplify this approach in the United States: “We trace patterns of political participation – who participates and when they participate – to the strategic choices of politicians, political parties, interest groups, and activists. People participate in politics not so much because of who they are but because of the political choices and incentives they are offered.”<sup>31</sup>

Traditional accounts of representative democracy regard political parties as the main channels linking citizens’ demands to the state,<sup>32</sup> and political scientists such as E. E. Schattschneider have concluded that “modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of political parties.”<sup>33</sup> Parties can serve multiple functions at the mass level: simplifying electoral choices, educating citizens, and mobilizing people to vote, as well as articulating and aggregating political interests, coordinating activists, recruiting political

candidates and leaders, organizing parliaments, and allocating government offices.<sup>34</sup> Political parties have long played a vital role in organizing and mobilizing supporters, encouraging peripheral groups of citizens to turn out on polling day via “get out the vote” drives, generating volunteers for campaign work such as canvassing and leafleting, providing organizational skills for members and activists, and facilitating an important channel of recruitment into elected office.<sup>35</sup> Kitschelt argues that this process is likely to prove particularly important where mass-branch labor and social democratic parties employ electoral strategies and engage in party activities designed to encourage working-class participation.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, agency-based explanations may provide important insights into short-term changes in participation, such as changes in levels of electoral turnout affecting established democracies. If the linkage mechanisms have weakened, so that agencies are no longer so capable of mobilizing voters, then this could be expected to lead to greater electoral disengagement. Dalton and Wattenberg present clear systematic evidence for the widespread erosion of partisan identification across postindustrial societies during the postwar era.<sup>37</sup> Weakened long-standing loyalties connecting supporters and parties have been widely regarded as contributing to a wearing down of electoral participation. Wattenberg’s comparison of nineteen OECD states demonstrates a 10 percent average fall in turnout from the 1950s to the 1990s, a pattern that he attributes to weakening party membership and declining partisan loyalties among the general public in established democracies.<sup>38</sup> Gray and Caul suggest that the strong historic links between trade unions and the Social Democratic, Labour, and Communist Parties have been particularly important in encouraging working-class voters to turn out, and that this process has weakened over the years in postindustrial societies due to the shrinkage of the manufacturing base, the decline in union membership, as well as weaker links between unions and parties of the center-left.<sup>39</sup> Along similar lines, the long-term process of growing secularization and emptying churches may have shrunk the mass basis of support for Christian Democratic parties in Western Europe.<sup>40</sup>

Other important agencies believed capable of encouraging political engagement include community groups, voluntary associations, and social networks, all of which can help draw neighbors, friends, and workers into the political process.<sup>41</sup> Most recently, Robert Putnam’s account of the role of voluntary associations, in studies of both the United States and Italy, has proved widely influential.<sup>42</sup> According to Putnam’s theory of social capital, all sorts of voluntary associations, community groups, and private organizations providing face-to-face meetings contribute to a rich and dense civic network, strengthening community bonds and social trust. Some organizations may be explicitly directed toward politics, while others are recreational clubs, ethnic or religious groups, neighborhood organizations, work-related associations such as professional, business, cooperative, and

union groups, and so on. The core claim is that the denser the linkages promoted by these heterogeneous organizations, the more “bridging” social trust will be generated that facilitates cooperative actions in matters of common concern, acting as a public good that affects even those who do not participate directly in the networks. Putnam’s work has stimulated a growing debate about how far the theory of social capital can be applied to comparable societies beyond the United States, and the evidence from case studies seems to suggest the existence of varied patterns in Britain, Japan, Germany, and Spain.<sup>43</sup>

Pluralist theories give an equally important role to intermediary groups, with the competition between groups seen as vital to providing checks and balances in a democracy. Such groups include trade union, business, and professional associations, welfare and charity organizations, civic and community groups, and educational, art, and cultural social clubs.<sup>44</sup> The term “interest group” conventionally refers to more formal organizations that are either focused on particular social groups and economic sectors – such as trade unions and business and professional associations (the NAACP, the American Medical Association) – or on more specific issues such as abortion, gun control, and the environment. Often traditional interest groups have well-established organizational structures and formal membership rules, and their primary orientation is toward influencing government and the policy process and providing direct services for members – for example, trade union negotiations over pay levels in industry, or the provision of informational networks for professional associations. Some develop an extensive mass membership base, while others are essentially lobbying organizations focusing on insider strategies, with little need to maintain a larger constituency.<sup>45</sup> By contrast, new social movements, exemplified by the civil rights and antinuclear movements of the 1950s, and the counter-culture environmental and women’s movements of the 1970s, tend to have more fluid and decentralized organizational structures, more open membership criteria, and to focus on influencing lifestyles and achieving social change through direct action and community building as much as by formal decision-making processes.<sup>46</sup> Transnational advocacy networks bring together loose coalitions of these organizations under a common umbrella organization that crosses national borders. If organizational theories are correct, and these claims can be generalized across different societies, then we should be able to establish a significant relationship between the strength of party, church, unions, and voluntary associations, indicated by levels of mass membership and/or activism, and levels of electoral turnout, as well as other indicators of campaign work and civic participation.

The news media may also play an important role as a mobilizing agency. During the last decade, a rising tide of voices on both sides of the Atlantic has blamed the news media for growing public disengagement, ignorance of civic affairs, and mistrust of government. Many, such as Cappella and

Jamieson, believe that negative news and cynical coverage of campaigns and policy issues on television has turned American voters away from the electoral process.<sup>47</sup> Yet, as argued elsewhere, extensive evidence from a battery of surveys in Europe and the United States casts strong doubt upon these claims.<sup>48</sup> Instead, contrary to the media malaise hypothesis, use of the news media has been found to be positively associated with multiple indicators of political mobilization. People who watch more TV news, read more newspapers, surf the net, and pay attention to campaigns have consistently been found to be more knowledgeable, trusting of government, and participatory. Far from being yet another case of American “exceptionalism,” this pattern is found in Western Europe *and* the United States.<sup>49</sup>

### Social Resources and Cultural Motivation

Even within particular contexts, some individuals are more actively engaged in public life than others. At the individual level, studies focus upon patterns of resources that facilitate political action and are at the heart of the civic voluntarism model.<sup>50</sup> It is well established that education is one of the best predictors of participation, furnishing cognitive skills and civic awareness that allow citizens to make sense of the political world.<sup>51</sup> The central claim of the widely accepted socioeconomic model is that people with higher education, higher income, and higher-status jobs are more active in politics. The resources of time, money, and civic skills, derived from family, occupation, and association membership, make it easier for individuals who are predisposed to take part to do so. “At home, in school, on the job, and in voluntary associations and religious institutions, individuals acquire resources, receive requests for activity, and develop the political orientations that foster participation.”<sup>52</sup> Moreover, since resources are unevenly distributed throughout societies, these factors help to explain differences in political participation related to gender, race/ethnicity, age, and social class.

As well as the skills and resources that facilitate civic engagement, participation also requires the motivation to become active in public affairs. Motivational attitudes may be affective, meaning related to the emotional sense of civic engagement – for example, if people vote out of a sense of duty or patriotism – or instrumental, driven more by the anticipated benefits of the activity. Many cultural attitudes and values may shape activism, including the sense that the citizen can affect the policy process (internal political efficacy) and political interest, as well as a general orientation of support for the political system, including belief in democracy as an ideal, confidence in the core institutions of representative democracy, such as parliaments and the courts, and satisfaction with the performance of the government. Ever since *The Civic Culture*, political cynicism has been regarded as one plausible reason for declining activism. Since many Americans lost

faith in government at roughly the same time that the fall in turnout occurred, these factors were commonly linked by contemporary commentators, who believed that a “crisis of democracy” occurred in Western nations during the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>53</sup> In postindustrial nations elsewhere, declining trust and confidence in government has also fuelled widespread concern. As Putnam, Pharr, and Dalton summarized the contemporary scene, while seeing no grounds to believe in a fundamental crisis of democracy: “There is substantial evidence of mounting public unhappiness with government and the institutions of representative democracy throughout the trilateral world.”<sup>54</sup>

Many are concerned that widespread mistrust of government authorities in the mainstream culture may foster a public climate that facilitates the growth of antistate movements and, at the most extreme, the breakdown of the rule of law and sporadic outbreaks of domestic terrorism by radical dissidents – whether the bombing of abortion clinics in America, threats of biological terrorism in Japan, the assassination of elected officials in the Basque region, violent racist incidents in France and Germany, heated ethnic/religious conflict in Sri Lanka, or splinter terrorist groups sabotaging the peace process in Northern Ireland and the Middle East. Imported terrorism, exemplified by the destruction of the World Trade Center, can be attributed to other causes. Although many suspect that there is a significant connection between mistrust of authorities and radical challenges to the legitimacy of the state, it is hard to establish the conditions that foster the beliefs and values of extreme antistate groups, since insulated minority subcultures such as neo-Fascist and anti-Semitic groups can flourish even in the most tolerant and deeply rooted democratic societies. In terms of conventional politics, systematic empirical analysis has often failed to establish a strong connection at the individual level between general feelings of political trust and conventional forms of participation, such as levels of electoral turnout in the United States, Britain, Germany, and France.<sup>55</sup> Much commentary assumes that if people have little confidence in the core institutions of representative democracy, such as parliaments and the legal system, they will be reluctant to participate in the democratic process, producing apathy. But it is equally plausible to assume that political alienation could mobilize citizens, if people were stimulated to express their disaffection, throw out office-holders, and seek institutional redress.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusions

Many theories in the literature can help explain cross-national differences in how and why citizens get involved in public affairs. Rather than relying on an oversimple monocausal explanation, the challenge is to understand the relative importance of each of these factors and the interactions among them. The underlying social and economic forces are entered first in sub-

sequent models, such as macro levels of human development, measured by rates of literacy, education, and income (per capita GNP). Aggregate levels of political rights and civil liberties, and the institutions associated with the structure of the state, are subsequently analyzed. The strength of mobilizing organizations is entered next, followed by individual resources and motivation. Based on this approach, we can start by examining postwar trends in voting turnout to see whether there is convincing evidence of a long-term secular slide in electoral participation in industrialized societies, as many claim, and to monitor patterns of turnout in developing nations around the globe.