

Chapter 2

Theories of Participation and High-Intensity Participation



IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER WE EXAMINED the changes to the British party system in the last fifty years since the APSA report on the responsible party model. We have suggested that these changes have implications for high-intensity participation in political parties. The picture is, however, mixed both at the level of the electorate and in relation to party members. There is some evidence, on the one hand, of partisan dealignment but also, on the other, of party strength, as demonstrated by the outcome of the 2001 general election. In that election the three major parties took 94 percent of the vote in Great Britain (British Election Study website, 2001). It is interesting to note that only one independent MP was elected to the House of Commons in 2001.¹ Similarly, while there is evidence of a postwar decline in the party membership, in the strength of party identification in the electorate, and in the share of the vote of the two major parties, Britain's political system is nonetheless still dominated by parties.

British government continues to be very much party government. Moreover, the two major parties raise and spend more money than ever before, and as we have seen they are both in the process of reviving their grass roots membership and revitalizing their party organization. At the same time there are clear centralizing tendencies within the parties that have served to move the system away from the original responsible party model, even if the new system cannot be accurately described as a cartel party model. Clearly, there are challenges to the parties in Britain, but they still dominate the political landscape. So is the British party system

in decline or merely in transition? And what do these changes mean for high-intensity participation?

To answer these questions we need a coherent theory of political participation. In the absence of such a theory, the meaning of the evidence is ambiguous. If we do not know why people support a party by voting for it, joining it, and in some cases working many hours for it, then we are unlikely to be able to determine what the developments in the party system discussed in chapter 1 mean for high-intensity political participation in the future.

The problem of providing such a theoretical explanation is made all the more acute by the fact that the dominant model of political participation in political science—the civic voluntarism model (see Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995)—predicts that participation in the British party system should be increasing, not declining, over time. This prediction is discussed more fully later in this chapter, but in the light of the fall in turnout in the 2001 general election compared with its predecessor (see fig. 1.2) and the evidence on party activism discussed later, there is clearly a problem with this model.

A similar problem occurs in relation to rational choice accounts of political participation. As is well known, rational choice theory has difficulty explaining why anyone should vote in an election or join and become active in a political party. On the face of it, in this theoretical framework the British party system should not be in decline because it should not have developed in the first place! Obviously, there is an important task of theoretical clarification to be undertaken before the evidence can be weighed and before the question as to what the changes in the party system mean for high-intensity participation can be answered.

This chapter is devoted to examining the alternative theoretical explanations of political participation that exist in the literature. The task is to evaluate their theoretical coherence, the empirical predictions they make about citizen involvement in politics, and their success or otherwise in explaining party support and high-intensity participation. The aim is to examine the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, before estimating them empirically in chapter 3. This chapter prepares the groundwork for an analysis that identifies the best models for explaining high-intensity participation in the Labour and Conservative parties.

There are five theoretical approaches or models of political participa-

tion that have developed in the political science literature. They can be described in abbreviated form as the civic voluntarism model, the rational choice model, the social-psychological model, the mobilization model, and the general incentives model. Each is influenced by a different research tradition, and we examine them in turn.

The Civic Voluntarism Model

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The most well-known and widely applied model of political participation in political science was originally referred to as the resources model and had its origins in the work of Sidney Verba and Norman Nie (1972) in their influential research on participation in the United States. It was subsequently applied by the authors, their collaborators, and others to explain participation in other countries, including Britain (Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978; Barnes and Kaase 1979; Parry, Moyser, and Day 1992; Verba et al. 1993). The central ideas of the civic voluntarism model of participation are captured in the following quote:

We focus on three factors to account for political activity. We suggested earlier that one helpful way to understand the three factors is to invert the usual question and ask instead why people do not become political activists. Three answers come to mind: because they can't; because they don't want to; or because nobody asked. In other words people may be inactive because they lack resources, because they lack psychological engagement with politics, or because they are outside of the recruitment networks that bring people into politics. (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995: 269)

The authors of this quote define the resources aspect of this model in terms of "time, money and civic skills" (271). The psychological engagement aspect is defined principally in terms of the individual's sense of political efficacy (272), and, finally, the recruitment networks aspect is defined as "requests for participation that come to individuals at work, in church, or in organizations—especially those that come from friends, relatives, or acquaintances" (272).

In the earlier versions of this model, the emphasis was on the resources aspect of participation. The authors explained:

According to this model, the social status of an individual—his job, education, and income—determines to a large extent how much he participates. It does this through the intervening effects of a variety of “civic attitudes” conducive to participation: attitudes such as a sense of efficacy, of psychological involvement in politics and a feeling of obligation to participate. (Verba and Nie 1972: 13)

Thus resources were paramount in the original version of the model, although psychological attitudes always played an important role in explaining participation as well. These civic attitudes are rather more important in recent versions of the model, although it is still true to say that resources are the dominant factor in explaining participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995: 270).

Verba and his colleagues developed the first empirical typology of different modes of participation and classified citizens into six different groups on the basis of the types of activities they undertook (Verba and Nie 1972: 118–19). There are, first, the inactives, who as the name suggests do little or nothing; second, the voting specialists, who vote regularly but do nothing else; third, the parochial participants, who contact officials in relation to specific problems but are otherwise inactive; fourth, the communalists, who intermittently engage in political action on broad social issues but are not highly involved; fifth, campaigners, who are heavily involved in campaigns of various kinds; and, finally, the complete activists, who participate in all kinds of activities.

When the same model was subsequently applied to the task of providing a cross-national explanation of political participation, it allowed the authors to examine differences in participation engendered by different political institutions and cultural settings. The later work stressed the distinction between individual and group resources in promoting participation, arguing that “organization—and we might add ideology—is the weapon of the weak” (Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978: 15). In other words, groups bound together by ideological ties are able to overcome the lack of individual resources of their members, and this promotes the participation of their members in politics. In effect, the authors were arguing that institutions facilitate participation.

This theoretical model has been widely cited and replicated, and it is probably the most important model of political participation in the literature today. However, it does face problems. The first problem relates to the use of socioeconomic status as a predictor of participation and civic

values. It is well established that participants are generally higher-status individuals than are nonparticipants; for example, Verba and his collaborators show that high-status individuals are overrepresented in the category of very active participants and underrepresented in the category of inactives (Verba and Nie 1972: 131–33).

What the model fails to explain, however, is why large numbers of high-status individuals do not participate in politics. In other words, while participation is associated with social status, the latter is nonetheless a relatively weak predictor of participation, because many high-status individuals do not get involved in politics. This problem for the model can be seen in Verba and his collaborators' (1995) most recent work on participation in the United States. In the theory, family income is treated as a good proxy measure of socioeconomic status in the American context, but nonetheless it has a very weak influence on participation.²

This latter point explains the paradox referred to briefly at the start of this chapter. If socioeconomic status is such an important determinant of political participation, then societies that are gradually becoming more middle class and better educated over time should experience increased rates of participation. The increase in white-collar occupations at the expense of blue-collar occupations and the tremendous growth in higher education in many advanced industrial countries are now well documented (see Dalton, Flanagan, and Beck 1984; Abramson and Inglehart 1995). However, there is no evidence of increased political participation in these countries, and in the case of the United States both voting turnout and participation in voluntary organizations have actually declined rather than increased (Brody 1978; Putnam 1995; Miller and Shanks 1996).³

If we apply the model to Britain, there is clearly a problem in explaining why participation in the 2001 British general election was significantly lower than, for example, in the 1979 election, since during the intervening twenty-two years a massive expansion had occurred in higher education.⁴ Again, the model would have to explain the trends in party membership noted in chapter 1, which, with the sole exception of the Labour party between 1994 and 1997, are downward, not upward.

A second problem with the civic voluntarism model is actually identified by Verba and his colleagues themselves. They write:

The SES model is weak in its theoretical underpinnings. It fails to provide a coherent rationale for the connection between the explanatory

socioeconomic variables and participation. Numerous intervening factors are invoked—resources, norms, stake in the outcome, psychological involvement in politics, greater opportunities, favorable legal status, and so forth. But there is no clearly specified mechanism linking social statuses to activity. (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995: 281)

They go on to suggest that a focus on broader resources, such as the amount of spare time the individual has available in the average week and his or her financial resources, helps to deal with this problem. However, it is difficult to see why this should be true, since, if individuals are rich and have plenty of leisure time, there is still no reason why they should spend their money or free time on political activities rather than on vacationing, playing sports, or watching television.⁵

The key problem with the resources model is that it focuses exclusively on the supply side of the equation and neglects the demand side aspects. Thus individuals supply more participation if they have the resources or a psychological sense of efficacy. What is missing is any understanding of why individuals have a demand for participation, of what incentives they have to get involved in politics. Many high-status individuals have no such incentives, which explains why they do not participate. While resources allow one to understand the supply of participation, it is necessary to consider the incentives for participation, or the demand side of the equation, to understand why individuals get involved in politics. We turn to this issue later.

The Rational Choice Model



Rational choice theory has played an important role in the analysis of political participation ever since Downs's seminal work, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957). There is a lively and sometimes rancorous debate between advocates of rational choice approaches (Tsebelis 1990; Aldrich 1993; Jackman 1993) and their opponents, who deny the relevance of rational choice accounts (Hindess 1988, Lowi 1992; Eckstein 1992). The rational choice model is summarized succinctly by Downs in the following terms:

A rational man is one who behaves as follows: (1) he can always make a decision when confronted with a range of alternatives; (2) he ranks all

the alternatives facing him in order of his preferences in such a way that each is either preferred to, indifferent to, or inferior to each other; (3) his preference ranking is transitive; (4) he always chooses from among the possible alternatives that which ranks highest in his preference ordering; and (5) he always makes the same decision each time he is confronted with the same alternatives. (Downs 1957: 6)

It is well known that rational choice theory applied to the task of explaining political participation faces a key problem, the so-called paradox of participation, first highlighted by Olson (1965). This is the proposition that rational actors will not participate in collective action to achieve common goals because the products of such collective action are public goods. Public goods have two properties: jointness of supply and the impossibility of exclusion (Samuelson 1954). Jointness of supply implies that one person's consumption does not reduce the amount available to anyone else, and the impossibility of exclusion means that an individual cannot be prevented from consuming the good once it is provided, even if he or she did not contribute to its provision in the first place. The classic textbook example of a collective good is national defense—if one person “consumes” national defense this does not reduce the amount available to anyone else, and if that person refuses to pay their taxes to fund defense spending, they cannot be prevented from consuming it.⁶

Olson's insight was to note that the policy goals and programs, which are the “products” of a political party, are public goods, and consequently rational actors have an incentive to free ride on the efforts of others and to let them do the work to provide such goods. Consequently, a voluntary organization like a party would get no assistance from the rational self-interested individual in the absence of other types of incentives to participate (Olson 1965: 9–11). In addition, Olson points out that this problem is much more acute in large groups than it is in small groups. In the case of a small group it may well be rational for a single individual to provide the collective good, since it is possible that the benefits to that individual exceed the costs of providing the good without any assistance from other people (22–24).

There have been four broad approaches to dealing with the paradox of participation within the rational choice framework (Whiteley 1995). The first approach is to appeal to threshold arguments; when the costs of collective action are very small, as they are in the case of voting, then an individual may well ignore them because they are below a threshold of

significance (Barry 1970; Niemi 1976). The difficulty with this approach is that it solves the paradox by abandoning the rational choice framework: if costs and benefits are so trivial that actors do not bother to calculate them, then the theoretical explanation for voting is no longer a rational choice explanation.

The second approach has its origins in game theory and is based on the idea that if no one is expected to vote, then an individual who actually does vote will have a decisive effect on the outcome of an election. In this case it is clearly rational for the individual to participate (Meehl 1977). However, if everyone else participates, then it ceases to be rational, since the individual will no longer be decisive in determining the outcome. From this perspective payoffs depend on the interrelationship between the strategies that the different actors pursue.

More generally, the collective action problem is often modeled as a prisoner's dilemma game, and theorists have developed "folk" theorems that examine the conditions under which collective action is rational in this game. The dilemma arises from the fact that if the game is played only once it is rational for the individual to free ride on others and not participate, regardless of the strategy the opponents pursue. Unfortunately, the result of this course of action is inferior to the outcome that can be achieved if everyone cooperated and worked together to provide the public good.

Theorists have concentrated on establishing the conditions under which it is rational to cooperate and thereby avoid the dilemma (Taylor 1976; Palfrey and Rosenthal 1985; Axelrod 1984). These conditions are various; first, individuals should not discount the future too much since myopia reduces the payoffs of cooperative action; second, they should participate in a repeat game and not just a one-shot game, so that the benefits of cooperation can build up; third, they should be uncertain about when the game ends, since by backward induction certainty restores the noncooperative equilibrium;⁷ finally, they should be able to punish noncooperative behavior on the part of others. If these conditions are met, then cooperation brings higher returns than noncooperation.

Unfortunately, these conditions only apply to two-person games and not to N -person games of the type required to study participation in a large organization like a political party. This is largely because it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify and hence sanction free riding in the N -person game (Axelrod 1997: 41). Since the active members of a political party have no sanctions to induce the inactive members to get involved and share the burden of work, free riding cannot be punished.

Equally, there are few, if any, incentives for individuals to avoid myopia in politics, since their own involvement makes no material difference to the outcome of an election or to the changing of the policy goals of their preferred party. This means that the conditions for cooperation that emerge from this literature generally do not apply to political participation.

The third approach to the collective action problem introduces altruistic concerns into the calculus of participation. Mueller (1989: 362), for example, suggests that voters will take into account the utilities of other voters when deciding whether they should participate in an election. He describes this as a Jekyll-and-Hyde view of human nature, with part of the motivation for participation being altruistic and part being self-interested. Margolis (1982: 82–95) develops a similar argument.

Altruism is quite compatible with rational choice theory (see Elster 1983), but it fails to solve the paradox of participation. Altruism implies that an individual will accept costs without receiving corresponding benefits, but there is still the question of whether the individual's participation will make any difference to these outcomes. It is simply irrational to incur costs if by doing so individuals make no difference to outcomes, regardless of whether they are motivated by altruism or self-interest.

Chong (1991) captures this problem in his analysis of participation in interest groups as an assurance game, in which individuals are altruistic and therefore are not predisposed to free ride on the efforts of others. In this situation, the collective action problem does not go away because participants are still unsure whether enough other people will participate to make such participation effective, although it does mitigate the problem to some extent. However, if altruists believe that there are not enough people to ensure that collective action crosses a threshold of effectiveness, then they will not participate. Again, this implies that, apart from the case of collective action by small groups, political participation generally is not rational.

Finally, the fourth approach to the collective action problem is the one used by Olson, an appeal to selective incentives as the explanation of collective action. These are private incentives unrelated to the collective goods produced by the group. This approach has been used to explain the paradox of participation applied to voting. For example, Riker and Ordeshook (1973: 63) list a series of selective incentives that individuals have for voting, including "The satisfaction of complying with the ethic of voting," "The satisfaction of affirming allegiance to the political system," and "The satisfaction of affirming a partisan preference." Since

individuals who do not vote do not receive these benefits, they are selective incentives.

Green and Shapiro (1994) in their critique of rational choice applications in political science are scathing about this particular approach. They write:

Aside from being a post hoc explanation (and an empirically slippery conjecture in any event), the notion that civic duty shapes voter participation raises more empirical problems than it solves. For one, it is unclear why civic duty should fluctuate from one sort of election to another within the same region, producing sharply different turnouts for Presidential elections, national off year elections, statewide elections, and local elections. (52)

In Olson's account, selective incentives for joining a trade union involve things such as subsidized insurance, free legal advice for members, and discounts on various purchases. These seem to provide plausible incentives for joining such organizations for some individuals, and therefore the selective incentives idea has validity. However, it is not clear that it can be applied to explaining away the paradox of participation, particularly when applied to voting, where such incentives are largely absent. On the other hand, as we shall argue later, this idea is quite important for understanding high-intensity participation.

Overall, while rational choice accounts of participation have value, the various attempts to explain away the paradox of participation all face difficulties. One author has suggested that the problem of explaining turnout is the "paradox that ate rational choice" (Grofman 1995). Rational choice accounts of participation orientate research onto the demand side of the political participation equation. Individuals are motivated by considerations of self-interest when they get involved in politics. Moreover, the absence of any serious discussion of incentives is a major flaw of the civic voluntarism model of participation. However, it is also clear that a purely rational choice account provides an incomplete explanation of political action.

The Social Psychological Model



The third broad theoretical approach to the analysis of political participation comes from the social psychological literature and has been partic-

ularly important in understanding unorthodox forms of participation, such as protest behavior and rebellious collective action (Muller 1979; Finkel, Muller, and Opp 1989; Muller, Dietz, and Finkel 1991; Finkel and Opp 1991). There are several variants of the social psychological model, but we will focus on the expectations-values-norms theory discussed by Muller (1979: 23–31), which is based on the work of Fishbein and his collaborators (Fishbein 1967; Azjen and Fishbein 1969).

The underlying theory is concerned with explaining the relationship between attitudes and behavior. Fishbein's work started from the point that traditional social psychological theories, which aimed to explain behavior from attitudes, did not appear to work very well, since the relationships appeared to be very weak (Azjen and Fishbein 1969: 14–27). His solution to this problem was to focus closely on measuring the individual's attitudes toward the behavior rather than toward the objectives of that behavior. Applied to the task of modeling the link between attitudes and political participation, this meant that citizens should be asked about their attitudes toward various types of protest behavior rather than about their attitudes to unjust laws or political events that might have triggered this behavior. Fishbein believed that such attitudes, together with other factors, make it possible to predict behavior fairly accurately. He explained that "the theory identifies three kinds of variables that function as the basic determinants of behavior: (1) attitudes toward the behavior; (2) normative beliefs (both personal and social); and (3) motivation to comply with the norms" (Fishbein 1967: 490).

Thus the expectations-values-norms theory explains behavior in terms of two broad classes of factors: expected benefits and social norms. On the one hand individuals are seen as utilitarians who calculate the benefits of different courses of action, although in this model no distinctions are made between the private and collective benefits of political action. On the other hand they are seen as actors embedded in networks of social norms and beliefs, which provide internal and external motivations to behave in certain ways.

Muller operationalized the theory using a series of indicators related to the question of modeling aggressive political participation (1979: 69–100). He writes:

Attitudes about behavior are defined as the individual's beliefs about the consequences of his behavior multiplied by their subjective value or utility to him. Normative beliefs refer to an individual's own belief in the

justifiability of his behavior as well as to his perception of significant others' (parents, peers) expectations about it. Motivation to comply with the norms reflects such factors as an individual's personality and his perception of the reasonableness of expectations of others. (25)

As far as the cognitive aspects of participation are concerned, the expected benefits of participation are weighted by the individual's sense of political efficacy. In other words individuals will participate if they believe that this will bring them benefits, providing that they also believe that participation is effective. Thus even if an individual expects high rewards from participation, he or she may not get involved if their sense of political efficacy is rather low.

With regard to social norms, these are two types: internal or private norms and external or public norms. Private norms are the internalized values that the individual brings to the act of participation, such that a person will participate if he or she feels that political action is normatively justified. For example, if a person feels a law to be unjust, this will stimulate him or her to participate in protest activity designed to change the law. Such private norms are largely a product of socialization that operates over a longtime scale and are influenced by the early experiences of the individual.

Public norms are determined by the attitudes of other people whose opinions they value. Hence if other people whose views are important to them are supportive of participation, this will further motivate them to be active. Thus a key feature of such public norms is that they are enforced by other people, who express approval or disapproval of the behavior of the individual concerned (see Elster 1989: 97-151). Thus party members motivated by social norms respond to the perceived opinions of significant others, or individuals whose opinions they respect and value. This again is a social psychological variable.

Muller and his associates have introduced the idea of a "unity principle," that is, a norm that all members of the group should contribute to collective action if the collective good is to be provided (Muller and Opp 1986, 1987; Finkel, Muller, and Opp 1989). They describe this norm as "calculating Kantianism." When faced with the possibility of free riding on the efforts of others, group members ask themselves, "What if everyone did that?" Since the answer is that the collective good would not be provided if everyone tried to free ride, they choose to participate. In this way group norms influence participation.

Measurement issues play a prominent role in the social psychological model of participation. The models arising from this approach have been used with some success to account for unorthodox types of participation in various democratic systems (see Marsh 1977; Barnes and Kaase 1979). But in common with the other theoretical approaches, this does face problems. In a sense, the weaknesses of the rational choice model are the strengths of the social psychological model and vice versa.

The first problem is that the notion of utility is not very well defined theoretically in the social psychological model. It is interesting that a distinction is made between private and public norms in this model, but there is no equivalent distinction drawn between private and public utilities or the benefits that derive from political action. As we saw earlier, this is a crucial distinction in rational actor models of participation. In the social psychological model, equal weight is given to actions that benefit society as to actions that benefit the individual. It is implicitly assumed that individuals will participate to oppose a social injustice of some kind, even if it is not clear that they will benefit personally from this course of action. The paradox of participation highlights the problems of treating collective benefits in the same way as individual benefits and shows how these variables can be antagonistic to one another in some situations. This is a valuable insight that the social psychological models ignore.

There is another problem with this social psychological approach, which again is highlighted by rational choice theory. As we have seen, political efficacy plays an important role in these theories, but it is subjective efficacy, not objective efficacy of the type found in rational choice accounts. The problem is that there appears to be evidence of a big gap between subjective and objective political efficacy. For example, we know that the objective probability of an individual making a difference to the outcome of an election or to changing national policy goals is effectively zero, and yet the evidence suggests that many people think they can change these things and consequently have high levels of subjective political efficacy.

When asked to respond to the following statement in the 1992 American National Election Study survey—"People like me don't have any say about what the government does"—some 57 percent of electors disagreed with the statement (ICPSR 1992), even though it is objectively true for all but a handful of individuals. In Britain some 31 percent of respondents to the 1992 British Election Study survey disagreed with the same state-

ment (ESRC 1992). This result shows that, although Britain is smaller than the United States, many of its citizens have a feeling of political efficacy.

The hiatus between subjective and objective efficacy might, on the face of it, be explained by the fact that voters think collectively, not necessarily individually, when responding to this question. Thus they are answering the question in terms of their perceptions of the influence of people like themselves, not merely in terms of themselves as individuals. This is an interesting idea, and is explored more fully later, but it cannot be the sole basis for making decisions about participation. This is because the individual has no control over such collective or group influence; they can speak for themselves but not for the group. Given this point, it is irrational for them to feel a sense of personal efficacy solely because they believe that the electorate as a whole is politically effective. In other words, political efficacy must be grounded in an objective measure of their own political influence, even if it is affected by identifications with a group. If it is not grounded in this reality, then the disturbing implication follows that citizens participate in politics because they are deluded into thinking that they can make a difference in outcomes.

Thus a key problem with social psychological models is that they pay no attention to the rationality of decision making. We made the point earlier that rational choice models provide an incomplete account of political participation, but a similar point can be made about social psychological models. Their lack of attention to the objective basis of political influence is a serious omission that needs to be rectified if they are to provide an adequate account of participation. Perceptions of group influence may matter, but so must perceptions of individual influence, and the latter must be based on an objective reality, not on subjective perceptions alone.

The Mobilization Model



The mobilization model asserts that individuals participate in response to the political opportunities in their environment and to stimuli from other people. Put simply, some people participate because the opportunities for them to do so are greater than for other people and also because they are persuaded to get involved by other people. The model can be linked to the resources model, as Verba, Schlozman, and Brady point out in the ear-

lier quote illustrating the reasons why most people do not become political activists.⁸

The opportunities for participation are obviously linked to the resources model since individuals with high socioeconomic status are more likely to have access to political parties, interest groups, or campaign organizations than are low-status individuals, because those kinds of institutions are more commonly found in the communities in which high-status individuals live (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995: 337–43). Since the opportunities for participation are not uniform across the population, an interaction between resources and opportunities mobilizes some individuals to get involved. Social pressures to participate are linked to resources too, since, if high-status individuals are more likely to participate, this promotes a norm of participation among such people that is not found among low-status individuals.

The bulk of the evidence to support the mobilization model comes from research on the relationship between campaigning and turnout in elections. Much of this research is based in the United States, and one of the earliest papers on the subject, involving a study of electoral turnout in Gary, Indiana, set out the methodological framework within which subsequent work has been done. In this paper Cutright (1963) pointed out that the key problem was to identify the effects of mobilization separately from other factors in explaining electoral participation. Their research showed that campaigning by Democratic and Republican precinct committeemen made an important difference to the vote, controlling for a variety of other variables, such as voters' socioeconomic status. Thus these effects worked independently of resources (see also Cutright 1963; Wolfinger 1963; Crotty 1971).

The first study to use the American National Election Study data by Kramer (1970) showed that canvassing at the precinct level had a significant effect on turnout in national elections over the period 1952 to 1964. The most recent work in the United States that looks at the impact of party organization on the vote at the county level for presidential and congressional elections in the 1980s showed, not surprisingly, that a party able to contest seats at all levels did much better than a party unable to do this (Frendreis, Gibson, and Vertz 1990; see also Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992; Wielhouwer and Lockerbie 1994). This finding reinforces the dual character of mobilization, which is most effective when it combines persuading people to participate with providing them an opportunity to do so. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) have the most comprehensive mobi-

lization model and in particular focus on the role of voluntary organizations in mobilizing participation in the United States, using data on group membership in the American National Election Studies.

Research on electoral mobilization in Britain reinforces these findings. Research that uses campaign spending as a surrogate measure of campaign activity shows that the latter has a significant influence on voting behavior over time (Johnston 1987; Johnston, Pattie, and Johnston 1989; Johnston and Pattie 1995; Pattie, Johnston, and Fieldhouse 1995). Survey-based research using Labour party members (Seyd and Whiteley 1992; Whiteley and Seyd 1992, 1994) or surveys of constituency agents from all the main parties (Denver and Hands 1985, 1997) also find significant relationships. Finally, in an ingenious field experiment Bochel and Denver (1972) found that campaigning had a significant influence on voting turnout in local elections in Scotland. All these findings support the mobilization model.

The mobilization model does, however, cause problems for the other three theoretical models of participation. In the case of the resources model, it distorts the estimates of the relationships between socioeconomic status and participation, because it implies that participation to a significant extent causes itself. Leighley explains, "the standard socioeconomic model assumes that positive civic orientations are causally prior to acts of participation. Yet we know that certain types of participation enhance numerous political attitudes, including political efficacy and sophistication" (1995: 186). This implies that the model linking resources and attitudes to participation in a recursive chain of causation is misspecified and may well exaggerate the influence of the former on the latter (see also Finkel and Muller 1998). A specification that allows for a two-way interaction between civic attitudes and participation is required, and this is commonly neglected in the standard analysis of participation.

Mobilization is also quite problematic for rational choice accounts of participation, since these assume that individuals have already acquired enough information to decide whether they are going to participate. In this situation, mobilization would only move the rational actor to get involved if it provided new information relevant to the cost-benefit calculus of choice. It is not clear why canvassing, for example, which provides highly biased information from strangers and should be heavily discounted for that reason, should induce individuals to participate.

The mobilization model also causes difficulties for social psychological accounts of participation. As we have seen social norms are an important

mechanism for influencing behavior, but they are activated by significant others, or people who the individual knows and respects. Again, it is not clear why citizens should be persuaded to participate by a stranger who knocks on their door or calls them on the telephone.

The mobilization model clearly highlights aspects of political participation neglected by the other models. But it is in some ways the least well developed of the theoretical models of political participation, and it leaves many unanswered questions, most particularly, that of why people should change their behavior in response to the efforts of others to persuade them to do so. The point that the social environment in which some people live is more favorable to participation than it is for others is well taken. But overall the mobilization model cannot provide a complete theory of participation.

Up to this point the review of these theoretical perspectives has highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of their distinctive approaches. But we have concluded that none of them can provide a comprehensive account of political participation. In the next section we examine the general incentives model, which is a synthesis of these accounts and as such aims to provide such an account.

The General Incentives Model



The general incentives model of participation was introduced specifically to explain the incidence of high-intensity types of participation, such as canvassing, attending meetings, and running for office, activities that are the focus of our concerns (see Seyd and Whiteley 1992; Whiteley, Seyd, and Richardson 1994; Whiteley et al. 1994; Whiteley and Seyd 1998). As mentioned, the theory derives from a synthesis of rational choice and social psychological accounts of participation.

The essence of the theory is that actors need incentives to ensure that they participate in politics but that we need to consider a wider array of incentives than narrowly defined individual incentives that appear in rational choice models. Thus the Olson model, while plausible and insightful, is too narrow to give an adequate account of why people should join or be active in a political party. However, this point does not ignore the central insight of Olson's theory, which is the idea that individuals become politically active in response to incentives of various kinds.

We referred to selective incentives earlier, and these may be important

for understanding why some people join and become active in a party. Selective incentives are of three types: process, outcome, and ideological.

Process incentives refer to motives for participating that derive from the process of participation itself. Various authors have referred to a number of different motives that might be counted under this heading. Tullock (1971) has written of the entertainment value of being involved in revolution; Opp (1990) writes about the catharsis value of involvement in political protest. For some people, the political process is interesting and stimulating in itself, regardless of the outcomes or goals. High-intensity participation is a way of meeting like-minded and interesting people, and for some this is motive enough for getting involved. Selective outcome incentives refer to motives concerned with achieving certain goals in the political process, but goals that are private rather than collective. A potential high-intensity participant might harbor ambitions to become a local councillor, for example, or the local mayor or even to be elected to the House of Commons. Others might want nomination from their party to become a school governor or a local magistrate. Yet others might be interested in business connections that party membership can bring, particularly in areas where the party is strong in local government. It has long been recognized that political leaders or entrepreneurs can be exempt from the paradox of participation because they have incentives, such as interesting, well-paid jobs and elective office (Salisbury 1969).

One of the distinctive features of political parties is that they are vehicles for achieving elected office, something that is not generally true of protest groups or lobbying organizations. Thus elected representatives have to serve an apprenticeship within their party organization before they can be chosen for elective office. From this perspective activism can be regarded as an investment that must be made if the individual has ambitions to develop a future career in politics. Thus outcome incentives measure the private returns from participation associated with developing a political career as an elected representative of the party. This is clearly an important selective incentive for activism.

A third type of process motivation is ideology, the explanation for this being rooted in the so-called law of curvilinear disparity (see May 1973; Kitschelt 1989). This is the proposition that rank-and-file members of a political party are likely to be more radical than the party leadership or the voters. Thus there is a curvilinear relationship between ideological radicalism and the position of the individual within the organizational hierarchy of a party. In the case of the Labour party this would mean that

the members were to the left of both the voters and the party leadership, and in the case of the Conservative party it would mean that they were to the right of them.

This is an interesting idea, but it has not been very well grounded theoretically. In the context of the present model, we would explain it in terms of process motives for involvement. Thus ideological radicalism should motivate individuals to join a party because it allows them to interact with like-minded people and give expression to deeply held beliefs. Their involvement is prompted by similar motives of the active churchgoer—membership of the church allows religious people to give expression to their beliefs as well as to become part of the congregation.

It can be seen that a number of incentives exist to promote political participation, which are independent of the collective incentives that create the paradox of participation. However, these selective incentives are really only applicable to a potential high-intensity participant. For those people who regard their party membership as a private matter, not to be discussed or shared with other people, it is difficult to see how they can be motivated to join by selective incentives.

Collective incentives are based on the provision of collective goods, the policy goals of a political party. Thus individuals motivated by collective incentives may believe that their party will reduce unemployment, improve health service, defend the nation, promote the interests of people like themselves, and generally implement policies that they favor. Whether they join the party depends on whether they see it collectively as a vehicle for achieving those goals. Collective incentives to join or be active in a political party are of two kinds: positive and negative. Individuals will participate not only because they want to promote particular policy goals but also because they oppose the policy goals of other parties. On the one hand Labour party members may be motivated to get involved because they support some aspect of Labour party policy; alternatively they may participate because they oppose Conservative policies. Thus positive incentives involve promoting collective goods, whereas negative incentives involve opposing collective “bads.”

Clearly, such motives are subject to the free-rider problem in that individuals might be tempted to let other people do the work to advance such policy goals. In a purely individualistic world in which people do not think in solidaristic terms, this would restrict participation greatly, as we pointed out earlier. But if people think in solidaristic terms, then they will participate because they feel they want to contribute to a collective effort.

Thus the group consciousness of the type discussed earlier in connection with social psychological models of participation is recognized as an important component of this model.

We conjecture that individuals think of the group welfare, as well as their own welfare, when making a decision to participate. The most obvious example of such group thinking occurs in the family, where the relevant question is very often not, What is best for me? but rather, What is best for all of us? If this idea is applied to the task of explaining party membership and party activism, then it implies that one reason some individuals join is because they believe that their party collectively can make a difference to outcomes. They still undertake a calculus of costs and benefits, but it is focused at the level of the party as a whole and not just at the level of the individual. If they reach the conclusion that their party can make an important difference in the lives of people with whom they identify, then they will join and may become active. The corollary of this is that, if they decide the party cannot make a difference, then they will not join or become active.

However, as mentioned earlier, individual efficacy matters also, and there has to be an objective basis to such feelings. Thus it is important to examine the question of whether an individual makes a difference to outcomes in relation to these collective goods and bads. If an individual party member makes no difference to outcomes, then he or she is deluded into participating, no matter how much that individual desires the collective goal.

It can be rational for an individual to join a party in pursuit of collective goals of the type that involves the paradox of participation. The key to this is the relationship between the costs and benefits of party membership. Rational individuals may perceive that their own contribution to the collective good is small, but collective action will still be rational for them if they also see the costs as being very small as well. In other words it is the perceived difference between costs and benefits that matter, not some exogenously defined measure of the benefits alone. In this situation, becoming a member without receiving selective incentives makes sense, providing that the individual believes he or she is making a nonzero contribution to the collective good.

Earlier discussion made the point that the individual's ability to influence national party policies is effectively zero, but this is not true of local party politics. Within a branch party or a local constituency party, one individual can make a difference to policy outcomes, even though

that difference might be rather small. Parties in Britain are organized on a decentralized constituency basis, and local parties still retain important powers over the recruitment of candidates for local and parliamentary seats, and in relation to local policy-making, which makes participation rational. This point carries the important implication that, if parties weaken the powers of their local branches or if the political system itself is too overcentralized, this will diminish the incentives for participation.

Our surveys of Labour and Conservative party members revealed that an average of forty-six individuals in the former party and forty-five individuals in the latter devoted ten or more hours to party activity in the average month in each of the 634 constituencies in Britain (Seyd and Whiteley 1992: 228; Whiteley, Seyd, and Richardson 1994: 249). Among this relatively small group of highly active people, a single individual can clearly make a difference to outcomes, such that there is an objective basis to the individual's feelings of efficacy. Of course for these people costs are also high, but it is conceivable that their individual contributions to the collective good exceed those costs, making participation rational. Thus individual political efficacy at the local level provides the objective basis for subjective efficacy, which will then carry over to the national political level.

In addition to personal efficacy, a sense of group efficacy can also motivate participation. This is an aspect of "civic culture" in which parties are seen as key institutions in motivating participation by voters as well as by party members (see Almond and Verba 1963: 105; Muller and Opp 1986, 1987). Such group incentives for participation are not compatible with a rational actor model of participation, since as we mentioned earlier the individual is not in a position to influence the political effectiveness of a national organization such as a political party. For this reason, it is not rational for them to evaluate their own participation in relation to the performance of the group as a whole (see Whiteley 1995). However, from a social psychological perspective, the group solidarity engendered by success does provide an incentive to participate, independently of other factors.

Another set of factors that explain participation within the general incentives framework are motives based on emotional or affective attachments to a party. These motives also lie outside the standard cost-benefit model of decision making, with its emphasis on cognitive calculations, and are rooted very much in the social psychological research tradition. Such motives have long been discussed in the literature on party

identification, since the early theorists saw partisanship as an affective orientation toward a significant social or political group in the individual's environment (Campbell et al. 1960); they have also been discussed in relation to economic voting (Conover and Feldman 1986) and in the American literature on residential voting (Marcus 1988). Even a formal theory of expressive voting has been developed postulating that voters are motivated by a desire to express support for one candidate or policy outcome over another, independently of whether their vote influences outcomes (Brennan and Buchanan 1984; Carter and Guerette 1992). Similarly, Frank (1988) has developed what he terms a "commitment" model in which actor's emotional predispositions override their short-run calculations of self-interest and allow them to cooperate with each other to solve collective action problems.

Accordingly, we reason that some people will be motivated to join by an expressive attachment to their party, which has little to do with the benefits they might receive from membership, either at the individual or collective levels. Such motives for joining are grounded in a sense of loyalty and affection for the party, which is unrelated to cognitive calculations of the costs and benefits of membership.

Overall, the general incentives theory of political participation postulates that a number of distinct factors are at work in explaining why people join a political party or become active once they have joined. These are selective and collective incentives, group motivations, and affective or expressive motives. Some of these factors are grounded in rational choice theory, but the theory goes beyond a narrow rational choice conception of participation to examine broader motives for involvement, derived from the social psychological theoretical tradition.

This model deals with the shortcomings of the other theoretical approaches to participation discussed earlier. Unlike the resources model the general incentives model focuses on the demand side of the equation and the incentives for participation. While the resources model is both theoretically obscure and rather weak at predicting participation, particularly high-intensity participation, the general incentives model is theoretically well grounded and has a superior ability to predict high-cost types of participation, such as party activism (Whiteley 1995).

The general incentives model incorporates the theoretical concerns of the rational choice approach, with its focus on the costs and benefits of decision making, but without the narrow perspective and the blindness to more general social psychological processes that influence participation.

Finally, while it includes key social psychological variables, the general incentives model addresses the weaknesses of the other models in their neglect of the question of individual rationality. A theory that relies exclusively on behavior that is not rational in the conventional sense is a weak vehicle for explaining party membership and high-intensity participation.

Having outlined the rival theoretical models of political participation, in the next chapter we go on to examine which of these models appears to be empirically optimal for explaining participation in British political parties. It is possible that one of the models is best or that a hybrid that incorporates elements of more than one model is most suited to explaining participation in this context.