

Political Participation The Citizen's Dilemma

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When we think of a democracy, we generally assume that it is made up of an interested citizenry that keeps informed and participates in its community's political issues. Without citizens' involvement in the political process, democracy loses meaning and legitimacy.

The vote is without a doubt the most common measure of political participation in liberal democracies, perhaps because it is a relatively simple activity requiring little effort or cooperation with others. This is probably why

this kind of political participation has been the most studied. However, many types of non-electoral political participation also exist, ranging from supporting electoral campaigns, community activities or contact with government authorities to taking part in strikes, demonstrations or blocking streets. Each differs in the amounts of time and effort required to do them. Clearly, it is much more complex and takes longer for a citizen to write and publish a letter to the editor in a newspaper, collect signatures for a cause or go to a demonstration than to go vote.

Even though electoral participation is the simplest, in Mexico it has tended to decline in recent years. Comparatively, abstentionism in

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Mexico (36 percent in the 2000 presidential elections and 53 percent in the 2003 mid-term elections) is not very far from that of the United States (49 percent and 39 percent for the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, respectively). However, it is much higher than abstentionism in countries like Spain (24.34 percent in the 2004 general elections), France (27.2 percent in the 2002 balloting for the National Assembly), Germany (20.88 percent in the 2004 legislative elections) and Italy (19.5 percent in the 2001 elections for the Chamber of Deputies).

Non-participation in elections can have important consequences since it can be a reflection of and can generate different phenomena like feelings of dissatisfaction with policies, actors or specific institutions which generally lead to an aversion for and mistrust of the political system. Another phenomenon is the strengthening of groups that constantly question the functioning of an increasingly exclusionary democracy and the progressive use of means of direct or non-conventional action that can turn into political violence.

We know that in Mexico, electoral participation has declined but, what has happened with other kinds of political activities like signature campaigns or demonstrations? As can be seen in the table, the World Survey on Values reflects Mexicans' preference for certain types of non-conventional political participation and the fact that interest in politics and public matters has increased since 1980.

The figures for 1980 show low levels of non-electoral participation in a system that could still be catalogued as authoritarian. The figures for all types of non-conventional political activity

included in the survey increased substantially from 1980 to 1990, as the second half of that decade witnessed intense social mobilizations. 1990 was a year of widespread mobilizations in Mexico, including those of the Cardenist movement and grassroots organizations formed after the 1985 earthquake (for example, the Earthquake Victims Union). It is illustrative to see how this increase in non-electoral participation could also be observed in the expansion of civic organizations in that same period: human rights organizations increased 50-fold, for example, going from four in 1984 to 200 in 1993, while women's organizations went from 10 in 1980 to 97 in 1994.

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By 1997, most kinds of participation dropped *vis-à-vis* their 1990 levels, and although by 2001 they had increased once more, in no case did they reach 1990 levels again. The data suggests that the kinds of participation that involve a confrontation with the political system have been decreasing while other, more institutional forms (collecting signatures, demonstrations) have been increasing.

Now, it is clear that faced with an unresponsive political system which the citizenry trusts very little or not at all (such as the Mexican case, in which only 21 percent of citizens say they always or almost always trust the federal government),¹ the threat of law-breaking is permanent. This is particularly the case when the government

sends out the signal that whoever breaks the law is listened to more quickly and given priority, putting his/her issue on the government's agenda immediately.

The paradox lies in the fact that a participatory and democratic civil society requires a democratic state; in the same fashion, a strong civil society requires a strong, responsive state. In a state made up of authoritarian institutions that do not respond to citizens' demands, the kinds and characteristics of collective action will be completely different from those of a strong democratic system. In an authoritarian system, citizens will always see their organizational efforts to achieve their interests frustrated, sometimes because

of repression, others because of governmental indifference. As a result, increasing numbers of citizens will opt for active political participation against the state or for apathy and alienation from the political system.

If we assume that the fundamental objective of democratic societies is to expand public participation in the political process and increase social control over political elites, then increased participation, even if it takes the form of protest, should in principle be welcomed.

However, as some authors argue, because they question the *status quo*, protests can overwhelm the political system. They would say that politics cannot be done in the streets, but requires a deliberative process in which political elites function as mediators.

CHANGES IN NON-ELECTORAL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN MEXICO 1980-2001				
	1980	1990	1997	2001
	%	%	%	%
Very interested in politics	4.1	8.2	9.5	10.9
Signed a petition	9.5	34.7	28.3	31.4
Participated in a boycott	1.3	6.9	8.6	N.A.
Participated in a demonstration	8.9	22.0	9.6	14.5
Participated in a strike	1.9	7.4	5.6	5.3
Participated in the occupation of a public building	1.6	5.2	4.2	2.4

Sources: World Values Survey 1980, 1990, 1995-1997. The 2001 figures come from the *National Survey of Political Culture and Citizens' Practices* (ENCUP), 2001, which can be consulted at the Ministry of the Interior's website, www.gobernacion.gob.mx

On the other hand, others maintain that the very idea of talking about the danger of an excess of political participation, whether conventional or not, is anti-democratic. According to these authors, those who dare to participate in unorthodox political activities are really trying to pressure the political elites to open up the process and respond to their new interests.

What is clear is that the changes in forms of political participation are posing new problems for modern democracies. The growing complexity of public problems increasingly requires a certain level of political sophistication. Consequently, participation in this context can be increasingly dependent on the individual's resources and abilities, that is on their social status. While the more sophisticated expand their capability of influence through direct participation, the less politically sophisticated find it more difficult to compete on this terrain.

In that sense, as Dalton points out, greater levels of participation could

be covering up an unequal process in which only those with resources (the capacity to mobilize and organize) or "those who shout the loudest" can have an influence on politics.² In fact, according to Fiorina, extremists always tend to be over-represented in politics because they are the ones who participate most in activities that disrupt the *status quo* and therefore, their demands are attended to most quickly.³ The fact that in Mexico political sophistication and educational levels serve to predict the levels of protest activities points in that direction.

Clearly, non-conventional participation can become a problem when an increasing number of individuals see it as the best or only way to channel their demands, that is, when it replaces and not only supplements conventional participation.

In other countries, electoral participation and other types of political activity are not related at all or have a positive correlation.⁴ In Mexico, the

opposite is true: some people who stop voting do not absent themselves completely from politics, but rather, they get involved in other political activities, some of them even illegal ones.

By nature, protests or non-conventional political activity disrupts the *status quo*, and when concentrated among certain groups with extreme causes, when, as Mancur Olson says, the unorganized majorities become victims of mobilized minorities, non-institutionalized participation can become a problem.⁵ Thus, these forms of participation used by new action groups can rival established political parties and interest groups and, therefore, challenge young democratic institutions. **MM**

NOTES

¹ In the United States, 56 percent say they trust their government. Parametría, S.A. de C.V., February 2005.

² Russell Dalton, *Citizen Politics in Western Democracies* (Chatham, New Jersey: Chatham House, 1988).

³ Morris Fiorina, "A Dark Side of Civic Engagement," Theda Skocpol and Morris Fiorina, eds., *Civic Engagement in American Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings/Russell Sage Foundation, 1999).

⁴ This refers to a positive statistical correlation, that is that those who participate most in non-electoral activities also vote the most.

⁵ Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982).