

**POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: SOME
PROBLEMS OF CONCEPTUALIZATION**

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Abstract

This paper identifies the major problems associated with the process of conceptualizing political participation. Two of them are discussed in detail. The first problem is that researchers ascribe political characteristics to any social behaviour, which is unsupported by proper arguments that would relate the proposed concepts to the subject matter of political science. The second one points to the strong presence of normative and crypto-normative elements, especially in studies of democratic societies.

Keywords: conceptualization; political participation; political science; democracy; social sciences and ideology.

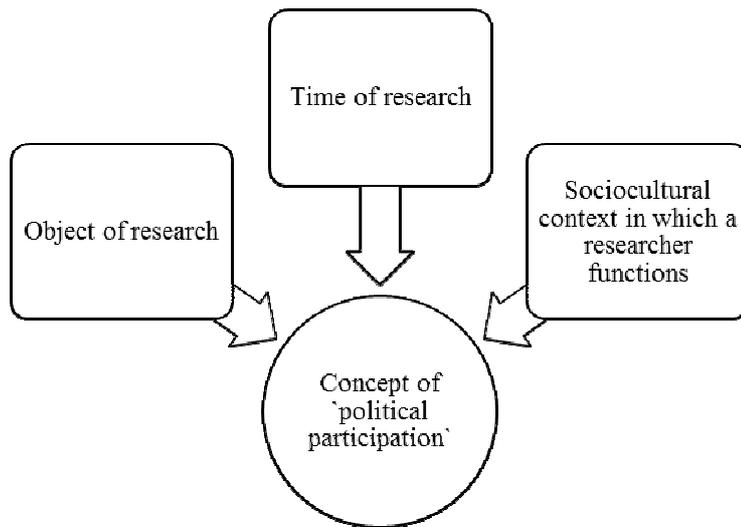
Introduction

Over the past three decades, political participation has become one of the topics that are most often discussed by political scientists, who study this phenomenon within different conceptual frameworks. Why is that so? Among the main factors that determine the differences in conceptualizing political participation are:

- 1) *Object of research* – the theoretical and methodological limitations result from the specific nature of a given type of political system that is being studied. Initially the concept of ‘political participation’ was only used to describe and explain the phenomena that occurred in democratic systems (e.g. Eulau and Schneider, 1956; Milbrath, 1969). Later this concept also started to be employed to study totalitarian societies (e.g. Townsend, 1969; Friedgut, 1979) as well as those that were undergoing modernization (e.g. Huntington and Nelson, 1976; Meyer and Ryszka, 1991).
- 2) *Time of research* – political characteristics are ascribed to ever newer kinds of social behaviours as channels for articulating one’s interests become less formalized and less institutionalized. In the mid-20th century the concept of ‘political participation’ only encompassed voting and taking part in election campaigns (e.g. Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Berelson et al., 1954; Hirsch-Weber and Schütz, 1957). In the next decades, it was expanded to include forms of activity that were typical of political protests (e.g. Barnes and Kaase, 1979). Today this concept also encompasses activities that are characteristic of social engagement (e.g. Norris, 2002; Stolle et al., 2005; Micheletti, 2002; Mider, 2008).

- 3) *Sociocultural context in which a researcher functions* – the system of values and norms that shapes the complex network of interpersonal relationships in the society in which a given researcher was raised has a potential impact on him or her. However, researchers are not always sufficiently aware of this impact (see, e.g. Milbrath, 1969; Verba and Nie, 1972; Parry et al., 1992; Opalek, 1978).

Figure 1: Factors in conceptualizing political participation.



This paper discusses the consequences of the last two factors, which are related to the growing tendency among researchers to ascribe political characteristics to any social behaviours (regardless of the nature of these behaviours) as well as to be guided by moral considerations not only at the stage of selecting the object of study, but also at the stage of justifying a given conception. Selected definitions of political participation are analysed for the purpose of discussing these factors.

Defining political participation

The lack of consensus among researchers about the content and scope of this concept slightly influences the way in which the definitions themselves are formulated. Let us analyse the following definitions of political participation which describe it as:

- ‘[...] behavior which affects or is intended to affect the decisional outcomes of government’ (Milbrath, 1969: 1);
- ‘[...] activity by private citizens designed to influence governmental decision-making’ (Huntington and Nelson, 1976: 4);

- ‘[...] all those activities through which the individual consciously becomes involved in attempts to give a particular direction to the conduct of public affairs, excluding activities of an occupational or compulsory nature’ (Townsend, 1969: 4);
- ‘[...] taking part in the processes of formulation, passage and implementation of public policies’ (Parry et al., 1992: 16);
- ‘[...] legal acts by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions that they take’ (Verba et al., 1978: 1);
- ‘[...] all voluntary activities by individual citizens intended to influence either directly or indirectly political choices at various levels of the political system’ (Kaase and Marsh, 1979: 42);
- ‘[...] any dimensions of activity that are either designed directly to influence government agencies and the policy process, or indirectly to impact civil society, or which attempt to alter systematic patterns of social behavior’ (Norris, 2001: 16);
- ‘[...] being mentally and/or sensuously engaged in politics, i.e. thinking about politics or dealing with it in a way that is noticeable in one’s behaviour’ (Radtke, 1976: 16) [author’s translation];
- ‘[...] all voluntary activities by which individuals or groups want to influence the selection of rulers and representatives and/or the making and outcome of public policies’ (Meyer, 1991: 11);
- ‘[...] activities which are instrumental or expressive, voluntary or mobilized, legal (legitimized) or illegal (non-legitimized) as well as conventional (legitimate) or unconventional (illegitimate) and which are performed in a non-violent way or with the use of violence by an individual who acts as a citizen or exercises political power for either public or particularistic purposes; these activities are directed to state authorities or other entities that exercise political power or have an influence on politics’ (Mider, 2008: 15) [author’s translation].

Those who study political participation most often provide regulatory definitions which consist of similar elements. Among these elements are:

- 1) *Acting subjects* – this element allows one to answer the question as to who undertakes a particular activity and who participates in a given process. There is no consensus among researchers about who participants in politics are. It is usually assumed that

they are individuals, individual citizens or private citizens. Some researchers also mention citizens who are professionally involved in politics.

- 2) *To whom activities are directed* – this element answers the question as to whom specific activities are aimed at. The above-mentioned definientia show that activities that are carried out by participants in politics are usually addressed to authorities. Thus, the question arises as to what kind of authorities these are and what levels they operate at. For some, these will only be central government authorities. Others, however, also include local government authorities as well as supranational and administrative authorities in their definitions of those to whom these activities are directed. They even talk about other states of which a participating individual is not a citizen, other citizens, social groups, civil society, private sector institutions and non-governmental organizations as well as the mass media.
- 3) *Motives behind activities* – this element allows one to learn about the intentions of a subject who is undertaking a particular activity. Even a brief analysis shows that an attempt to influence authorities' political decisions and activities as well as to determine who will come to power is one of the reasons behind participating in politics that are mentioned most often. Certain researchers object to treating the concept of influence as the principal reason for political participation. These authors also include symbolic behaviours as well as the process of absorbing

Table 1: Components of definitions of political participation.

<i>Acting subjects</i>	<i>To whom activities are directed</i>	<i>Motives behind activities</i>	<i>Attributes of activities</i>	<i>Effects of activities</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — individuals; — individual citizens; — private citizens; — individuals who exercise political power. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — central government authorities; — local government authorities; — supranational authorities; — political and economic international institutions; — other states of which a participating individual is not a citizen; — society; — social groups; — private sector institutions and non-governmental organizations; — the mass media. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — exogenous reasons (motives): the desire to influence authorities' decisions ; — endogenous reasons (motives), e.g. the need to have a sense of fulfilment or identity; 	<p>for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — instrumentality; — autotelism; — activeness; — passiveness; — voluntariness; — compulsoriness; — legality; — illegality; — constitutionality; — unconstitutionality; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — intended effects; — unintended effects.

information about politics and discussing political topics among the manifestations of political participation. Therefore, some researchers believe that individuals participate in politics for solely exogenous reasons, while others also note that people may act for endogenous reasons, i.e. for the purpose of satisfying their internal needs, such as a sense of fulfilment, identity or emotional closeness, or in order to channel their dissatisfaction into political activity.

- 4) *Attributes of activities* – this element shows which activities can be referred to as political participation. What attributes are these? Researchers are also divided on this issue. Some of them primarily emphasize the instrumental dimension of political participation as well as activeness, voluntariness, legality and constitutionality. Others, however, also point to autotelic, passive, mobilized, illegal and unconstitutional behaviour.
- 5) *Effects of activities* – this element makes it possible to differentiate between the subjective category of projected (i.e. intended) effects and the objective effects of activities (these are often unintended and unnoticed consequences). This division is usually disregarded by researchers who study political participation (they are often unaware of its existence).

The above-mentioned components of the definitions of this concept allow one to formulate problems that are associated with conceptualization and that researchers have to confront. Although it is impossible to discuss all of these issues in a paper that is limited in length, one should focus on two such problems that are of crucial importance (they are briefly described in the introduction). These problems are important not only for research on political participation, but also for political science, when understood as an academic discipline. The first problem is related to the consequences of the lack of distinction between what is political and what is social.¹ Discussions on this issue are part of a broader discourse on the subject matter of political science, and therefore also on the place and role of this discipline among the social sciences. The second problem indicates that the proposed concepts of ‘political participation’ contain evaluative judgements.²

¹ Weber (1922: 28–30) raised this issue as early as a hundred years ago.

² The social sciences in particular face this problem, which was discussed by Andreski (1972).

Is everything political?

As non-standard channels for articulating one's interests developed in response to the needs of new social movements, some researchers began demanding that the scope of the concept of 'political characteristics' behind the analysed behaviours be expanded. Norris (2002: 192) asserts that the old definitions of political participation are inadequate and incommensurate with the contemporary world, which is multidimensional and complex. She proposes a definition that takes into account the relevance of activities that have an impact on civil society and are aimed to modify the established patterns of social behaviour. This researcher notes, however, that such activities as raising funds for local hospitals, helping battered women or protesting against conducting medical experiments on animals are not part of the political sphere *per se*, but their social and economic consequences are not insignificant as far as the political process is concerned.

The German researcher Radtke (1976: 16) went even further and proposed a very blurred and imprecise definition. As a result, this author is able to classify manifestations of human activity that are often radically different from one another as forms of political participation, for example, voting and running for the position of staff representative in the facility in which one is employed. Mider's (2008: 70) conception of political participation also involves a broad understanding of this concept; more specifically, the group of non-government entities to which political activities can be directed is very diverse. In his opinion, these are: 1) other states of which an individual is not a citizen; 2) political and economic international institutions; 3) non-governmental organizations; 4) private sector institutions; 5) society as a whole, groups that make up society, and other citizens; 6) the mass media. Micheletti's (2002; 2005) idea of political consumerism also entails a blurred division between what is political and what is social. This political scientist from the Stockholm University notes that socially responsible consumer behaviour influences multinational corporations' policy, and ultimately also the decisions of sovereign states. The tendency to consider a lifestyle of health and sustainability to be one of the forms of political participation is an extreme example of this trend (Aue, 2008).

The authors who are cited above seem to treat the concepts of 'political participation' and 'social participation' as synonymous, if not entirely, then at least in part. If we regard these concepts as entirely synonymous, the sets of signifieds of both these phrases are identical. Symbolically, this can be represented as:

$$A = B \Leftrightarrow \forall x (x \in A \Leftrightarrow x \in B)$$

However, if we consider these concepts to be only partially synonymous, then only some of the signifieds of the former will also belong to the sets of signifieds of the latter, and the other way round:

$$A \cap B = \{x: x \in A \wedge x \in B\}$$

This practice, which is of dubious cognitive value, makes political behaviours lose their specificity, or in a much broader context, causes the understanding of political phenomena as such to become vague. Therefore, the need to distinguish between what is political and what is social is justified if we do not want to drift into the *theory of everything* which does not explain much (van Deth, 2001a). In order to draw such a distinction, one must first identify political participation and social participation so as to obtain two disjoint sets of signifieds:

$$A \cap B = \emptyset$$

In other words, these concepts may not intersect. Thus, one can define social participation, for example, by quoting van Deth's (2001b: 208) words, as 'any activities that citizens undertake voluntarily by participating in social organizations' [author's translation]. However, as Gabriel and Völkl (2005: 529) rightly point out, this approach puts emphasis on the most important form of social engagement, i.e. participation in social organizations, and at the same time ignores participation in informal groups, such as groups of friends or neighbours, and being active on Internet forums. Therefore, these researchers propose the following definition: 'Social participation is any voluntary activity which one carries out individually or together with others, which is not done as part of one's paid employment and which is aimed at providing material or non-material goods, such as money, care, comfort, maintenance or social contacts, free of charge to oneself or others' [author's translation].

The above definitions have several drawbacks, for example, the assumption that the activities one undertakes must be voluntary. What is important, however, they do not refer to exerting political influence on authorities, on their decisions, or on who will come to power, which is characteristic of political participation. These definitions attach the greatest importance to activities which are implemented (Holtkamp et al., 2006: 13) and which are

undertaken by participants in social organizations or other informal groups. According to van Deth (2001b: 217), when understood in this way, social participation is a ‘school of democracy’.

Definitions of political participation should not encompass behaviours that are not political in nature, such as responsible consumer choices, which are one of the forms of social or economic participation.

Ideologization of research

Before going on to the second problem, let us note that there are serious doubts as to whether the scope of the concept of ‘political participation’ should be limited only to legal activities. This is because such practices can be interpreted as an attempt at adopting a normative approach to studying political systems (and it often takes on a crypto-normative form), which means that a given system is treated as the best and most desirable one, i.e. as the target system, and not as one of the many systems that might have possibly emerged in the course of social evolution. This is what, for example, Milbrath (1969: 18, 27–28) does – he excludes forms that are typical of political protests from the list of the analysed manifestations of political participation. He argues that political protests contradict democratic ideals. Verba et al. (1972: 3; 1978: 1–2) treat this form of political activity in a similar way. Even though these authors recognize the importance of forms that are against the spirit of democracy, they leave them out and treat them as a topic that should be dealt with separately.

Mobilized activities are also excluded as being beyond the scope of the concept of ‘political participation’. This approach is taken, for example, by Townsend (1969: 4), Kaase and Marsh (1979: 42) as well as Meyer (1991: 11). However, doubts arise as to whether this concept should be linked with a specific system of values. There are also methodological doubts about the reasonableness of this approach because it is impossible to assess the role that persuasion, manipulation and material incentives play in both democratic and non-democratic systems. Additionally, it is extremely difficult to notice when autonomous participation turns into mobilized participation in politics, and the other way round. Huntington and Nelson (1976: 7–8) provide an example of a worker from Mexico City who might have taken part in a demonstration which was sponsored by the PRI not because he was motivated by inner convictions or coerced to do so, but because he was afraid of his colleagues’ reaction. In 19th-century America, immigrants distributed political campaign materials and voted not because they themselves believed it was right, but because they had

been explicitly told to do so by their employers. Unlike those American voters who were guided by loyalty to a given party for utilitarian reasons, a voter in the Soviet Union might have been motivated by inner convictions which resulted from his pride in and love for his country and the party.

The above-mentioned difficulties in conceptualizing political participation are also due to the fact that there are other forms of political activity on the scale between voluntary and mobilized participation that are neither coerced by authorities nor fully autonomous. In this regard, Garlicki (2005: 115–116) points to activities that are determined by cultural standards and that result from organizational or associative entanglements. For example, on the one hand, there is ritualized participation in different kinds of national celebrations and mandatory voting on pain of legal sanctions, and on the other hand, there are strong family and community ties that influence individuals' participation in political parties.³

The Polish lawyer Opalek (1978) pointed to the ideological entanglement of the concept of 'political participation' at the end of the 1970s. During the Cold War, political scientists in the West used this concept in order to demonstrate the superiority of participation in politics in capitalist societies over engagement in politics in socialist societies. This trend was part of a much more extensive ideological struggle against Eastern bloc countries (the social sciences which were treated instrumentally played an important role in this fight [see Solovey and Cravens, 2012; Solovey, 2013]). However, a similar process occurred on the other side of the fence. For example, Opalek himself committed the sin that he wrote about. He attempted to demonstrate the superiority of participation in socialist politics over participation in bourgeois politics in twenty pages of his article.⁴

³ Certain researchers are aware of these difficulties. For example, van Deth (2014: 345) points to the problems with assessing the extent to which an individual is governed by his or her own will when undertaking a specific activity. This is why he proposes to exclude only those activities that are observable coercion from the scope of the concept of 'political participation'. Here, operationalist assumptions allow this author to partially overcome only the methodological difficulties. Importantly, he is not at all interested in the issue of the ideologization of research.

⁴ Nowak (2008: 25) rightly observes that social science concepts are entangled in ideologies and perform various functions: 'Researchers' entanglements in ideologies and the values they hold do not always have to disturb cognitive processes and consequently decrease the methodological validity and substantive value of research studies. However, ideological entanglements can have such consequences if a researcher is influenced by some ideology or pressurized by a certain group to obtain results which are not true, but which are to serve the interests of this group, for example, when these interests are justified by propaganda considerations, even at the expense of presenting false or at least unclear results [...] Then particular researchers may succumb to these

Today, serious objections are raised to such practices which, surprisingly, are sometimes still followed by subsequent generations of researchers. On the one hand, such methods tarnish political scientists' reputation among representatives of other disciplines, while on the other hand, they reduce the role of political science itself to that of social engineering. In order to avoid pseudoscientific methods, especially at the early stages of the research process, one should realize the following:

- People have been participating in politics since political phenomena appeared, i.e. for as many as 6,000 years.
- 'Political participation' is a concept that helps describe and explain complex human behaviour in all possible forms of political systems that have emerged in the course of social evolution with regard to *Homo sapiens*.
- 'Political participation' is not (and it cannot be) a phrase that promotes the values of a specific ideology.
- The concept of 'political participation' encompasses legal and illegal as well as voluntary and mobilized or coerced activities.

Conclusions

Generally speaking, the phrase 'political participation' is used to denote a certain kind of mental and physical activity which is undertaken by specific subjects who pursue their goals, which is directed to particular entities and which has certain features that make it different from other kinds of human activity as well as more or less tangible effects. Obviously, there is no consensus among researchers about the content and scope of this concept. Anyway, one can hardly expect that they will agree on this matter since the studies they conduct are based on different assumptions and objectives. Problems arise only when a certain element of this concept's definitions is not precise enough or when the content or scope of the concept itself has not been sufficiently determined. Then it becomes a catch-all term for everything that comes to a researcher's mind at a given moment. Radtke's (1976: 16) definition of this concept is a perfect example of this trend. The definition provided by Norris (2001: 16) entails a slightly smaller number of possible interpretations.

As a result, the problem arises that this phrase is used to describe activities which are hardly political in nature. Many researchers treat the distinction between the concept of

pressures to a greater or lesser extent and more or less consciously, which will distort research methods or directly compromise the validity of results' [author's translation].

‘political participation’ and that of ‘social participation’ quite loosely and use them as synonyms. It is impossible to say to what extent this results from being unaware of the differences between these concepts and to what extent this is a consequence of copying the patterns that are used in the scientific community in a poorly thought out or automatic manner. This, in turn, blurs the distinction between what is political and what is social, and ultimately may lead political scientists to lose their discipline-based identity.

The tendency among researchers to be guided by moral considerations not only when choosing particular aspects of certain phenomena for analysis, but also when providing explanations is no less controversial. This tendency is visible, for example in Milbrath’s (1969) and Verba et al.’s (1972; 1978) books. However it is most clearly seen in the quote from Parry, Moyser and Day (1992: 3): ‘Any book about political participation is also a book about democracy’. Thus, these authors used this concept for ideological and propagandist purposes. This trend may be caused by the following factors: the influence of particular systems of values and the interests of different social groups; the desire to gain benefits, for example, to get research grants or foreign scholarships and later also promotion; the inability to differentiate between scientific knowledge and doctrinal knowledge; the lack of systematic reflection on the origins of the analysed phenomena; and copying solutions that were proposed by other researchers, especially by those who are regarded as authorities in a given community.

Any changes will probably meet with resistance, primarily in the form of human habits.

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