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Publication Date

2001-07-01

Culture, Calculation, and Being a Pretty Good Citizen: Alternative Interpretations of Civil Engagement

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It is a privilege to be here and to deliver the second of the annual lectures in honor of Harry Eckstein. Harry was one of the finest political scientists of the second half of the Twentieth Century. He was also a dear friend and a mentor. I was never formally his student, but he joined the Princeton Politics Department as a new tenured member just as I began my teaching career there. And he was a powerful influence in teaching me how to think about politics. More than thinking about politics, he was one of a handful of people who through conversations and writings taught me how to think like a political scientist.

Harry wrote about many subjects. One of them was culture and its relation to politics. He was one of the most creative thinkers on that subject: on how one defined and studied culture and on the impact of culture on political stability and political change. In his later years, he was also concerned with the relative usefulness of cultural explanations of politics and rational choice explanations. For Harry, to oversimplify, cultural theory saw political behavior as learned behavior, as learned internalized orientations which citizens try to make consistent. His theory of authority patterns depended on this urge to consistency. In contrast, rational actor theories, as Harry saw them, were based on cost and benefit calculations by individuals trying to maximize their utilities. History, habit and socialization were not important in rational actor approaches. Current calculations were. Harry was on the side of culture and felt that the flood of rational choice analyses were hurting the discipline.

I want to pursue this theme tonight by considering the applicability of rational actor theory as well as cultural explanations to citizen engagement with politics. I think this fits Harry's intellectual concerns with modes of explanation, and also some of the substantive focus of his research. One theme of his research was civic incorporation—how new groups, immigrants and the poor, become full participating members of the polity. This also fits in with his concerns as a citizen. Harry was not an activist. He believed in a detached social science; its purpose was to understand, not change, the world. But Harry, like many of his background, was also a person with deep civic commitments—to democracy and to a liberal and humane polity. One component of that polity would be a democratic citizenry.

Citizen participation in politics is a crucial component of democracy, and studies of citizen participation have been a mainstay of political science analyses of democratic politics. Rational actor theory is one of the dominant modes of analysis in contemporary political science. But citizen participation and rational actor theory have had an uneasy relationship with one another. Rational actor theory—in at least one of its main and best known versions—leads to the conclusion that the rational citizen will not be active in politics.

When I started studying citizen engagement with politics in the later 1950's, the question asked was why are citizens apathetic. Why were so many citizens ill informed, politically uncommitted, and not very active? Then along came Anthony Downs and Mancur Olsen¹, and they took the discipline by storm. Downs demonstrated that voting was irrational since the individual voter had no chance to tip an election; it made no sense to spend time gathering information or voting. (We used to tell our students that one vote did not count. I sometimes think we have to rephrase this after 2000 in Florida: that one vote does not count, especially if it is not counted. But even in the face of Florida, the basic Downsian point still holds.) Olsen showed that it made no sense to engage in activities to try to achieve a collective goal—since one could benefit from the provision of that good even if one was not active. It made more sense to free ride on the activity of others. Yet, despite the elegant logic about the calculation of the costs and benefits of participation, the nature of collective goods, and the rationality of free riding that leads to this conclusion, millions of citizens vote and engage in other political activities. The problem now is: why are people active? That needs explanation.

The implication of rational actor theory about political activity is disturbing to students of democracy for it suggests that one of democracy's foundations—voluntary political activity to support parties and candidates or otherwise express their preferences on issues of public policy—is not likely to be pursued by rational citizens. Conversely, the failure of the theory to predict political behavior is disturbing to rational actor theorists; it has been described by John Aldridge as "...the major example of the failure of rational choice theory."²

There is a large literature on why, despite the seeming inconsistency of the theory with the facts, the theory still holds. These range from the classic statement by Riker and Ordeshook essentially arguing that there is a rational reason to vote. They added the famous D term to the cost benefit equation associated with voting.³ Your vote might not be worthwhile if you thought of it as affecting public policy or, even, as affecting who wins the election. But you might get an expressive benefit measured by the D term—and feel good about yourself by carrying out a civic obligation. The explanation makes sense: if it makes you feel good, you ought to do it. (In a more recent approach to the issue of participation, Randall Calvert has interpreted non-instrumental voting—voting to satisfy an expressive need—as rational in that the choice of what is expressively rewarding can be understood in rational terms.⁴) But aside from saving the cost/benefit calculation, it does not seem too useful. There are closeness arguments: you do not need to tip the election, just give your candidate a better margin as winner or loser. There is a minimax regret argument: imagine the worst thing: you do not vote and X (GW Bush, Al Gore, Bill Clinton, Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon, Michael Dukakis—to name some whose election might have driven or did drive some people to distraction) wins by one vote. None is, I think, fully convincing.

I want to join what has been a long debate among political scientists on this issue because it runs smack into the middle of the issues Harry raised about alternative ways of understanding politics and political actors. Let me begin in a somewhat unusual way for an academic lecture, at

least in political science. Let me tell a story, let me quote some Shakespeare, and let me draw some morals from both.

The story is from the *New York Times* of a few years back. It is about the Independence Day celebration in Boston. As those of you who know Boston are aware, each Fourth of July there is a concert on the Esplanade along the Charles River Basin. It is a gala event. The Boston Pops Orchestra plays, the concert is followed by the firing of all the old cannons around Boston, the ringing of the church bells, and a glorious fireworks display. And each year three to four hundred thousand people come to watch it.

According to the article, John Bonicorso had, for the previous eight to ten years, taken to coming a week or so early, camping out to get a front row seat. Now, the 1812 Overture that the Boston Pops regularly plays is not the B Minor Mass. And the Boston Pops is not the Boston Symphony Orchestra which is out at Tanglewood. But as the economists tell us, there is no accounting for taste, and we cannot say that Mr. Bonicorso was behaving irrationally to be investing so much time and effort to get the front row seat.

In the year in question, the Metropolitan District Commission, the agency that oversees the event, told Mr. Bonicorso that he was such a loyal fan of these concerts that they were going to save him a front row seat, and he could come at the last minute and still have a prime location. According to the newspaper article, Mr. Bonicorso was indignant. “They don’t understand anything”, he is quoted as saying. “It would not be the same without the rain, the mud, the drunks”. And just to make sure that we social scientists do not miss the generalization hidden in this story, he provides it most succinctly in four words: “No price, no value”, he tells us.

The Shakespeare is from Henry V. The scene is the eve of the battle of Agincourt and King Henry is seated, surrounded by his troops, discussing—what else?—social choice theory and the free rider problem. The scene has a remarkably contemporary air. The first speaker is Westmoreland. It is not our General Westmoreland of Vietnam fame; it is the Earl of Westmoreland. But he is saying the same thing: that they are outnumbered by the French, “five to one” and he wants more soldiers. In particular, he would like some of those free riders in England who’ll benefit from a victory but do nothing to contribute to it:

O that we now had here
But one ten thousand of those men in England
That do no work to-day!

King Henry replies that they need no more men. He gives several reasons. The first indicates that he has read William Riker on the theory of coalitions, for he explains why they need no more troops.

If we are mark'd to die, we are enow
To do our country loss; and if to live,
The fewer men, the greater share of honour.

The best short statement of the principle of the minimum winning coalition that I know:
“The fewer men, the greater share of honour.”

He then goes on to say that anyone who does not want to take part in the battle is free to leave.

...he which hath no stomach to this fight,
Let him depart; his passport shall be made
And crowns for convoy put into his purse.

King Henry is allowing people to be free riders and is, in fact, literally offering a free ride back home: “crowns for convoy put into his purse”.

As far as one can tell, no one leaves. In the following speech, the great Saint Crispian's day speech, King Henry refers to many possible reasons. He talks of the fact that those who join the fight will remember the day with pride and with advantages:

He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
Will stand a tip-toe when the day is named,
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.
He that shall live this day, and see old age,
Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours,
And say 'To-morrow is Saint Crispian:'
Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars.
And say 'These wounds I had on Crispin's day.'
Old men forget: yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember with advantages
What feats he did that day

And King Henry ends with that great invocation of solidarity:

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition:

And what about the free riders back in England? They should be the best off, profiting from the collective benefits a victory will bring, having paid no cost. King Henry does not think so:

And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

What does this all tell us about citizen activity, aside from the fact that I have always wanted an excuse to recite Shakespeare to a captive and unsuspecting audience? For one thing, it tells us of the range of benefits that can accrue from engagement. There are clearly material benefits: “he'll remember with advantages”. There are less tangible but no less real benefits: the word “honor” appears in the speech numerous times. There are social benefits—the benefit of solidarity “we band of brothers”, solidarity with the King, no less, which raises one to a higher social plane:

For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition

None of this necessarily challenges the rational actor perspective on participation. It easily fits a cost-benefit calculation where the benefit is selective. The utility that someone may be seeking through participation need not be limited to material “advantages”. The psychic benefit of a sense of honor is real, as real as the sense of civic virtue that forms the famous “D” term of Riker and Ordeshook’s article on voting. It is a selective benefit that allows no free riding. (Perhaps my views on this are somewhat old fashioned. Most of us—including Riker and Ordeshook—seem to believe that civic participation makes one feel proud and good about oneself. But maybe some recent students who have taken Econ. 101 and some course in social choice theory would say with pride that they had the best free riding record around—they managed to get this benefit and that benefit without lifting a finger. Instead of a D term measuring the gratification that comes to the participant from the sense of civic virtue that participation engenders, we might need an IMS term—standing for “I’m no sucker”—that measures the gratification from an effective free ride. Who knows?)

Social benefits motivate us all, quite rationally. We want to please others. Our reputation as responsible citizens, as various theorists and common sense tell us, makes a lot of difference to us. Of course, politics and social engagement can be fun. As one of our respondents said, “It’s a good way to meet girls.” But such an expansion of the selective benefits comes with a cost to the testability of the theory. A wide range of benefits—a definition of utility that goes beyond measurable material gain—makes it hard to test whether reasonable cost-benefit calculations have been made. Such a broad conception offers little in the way of empirical expectations.

But Messrs Bonicorso and Shakespeare tell us also how difficult it is to calculate costs and benefits for certain kinds of activities—activities where part of the benefit is the cost. John Bonicorso makes it clear. “No price, no value”. It is not the same if you do not pay a high cost.

King Henry tells his soldiers that the scars of battle increase the value of the victory. Many activities yield higher returns the more we pay for them. We all know that the view from the top of the mountain is better if we walk up rather than driving to the summit. Finke and Stark in their interesting book on religion in America offer a cost-benefit analysis of the decline of mainstream Protestant churches and their replacement by fundamentalist or pentecostal churches.⁵ They argue that one of the benefits of membership in a “hot” church is that it demands more of you. You get the value because you pay the price in terms of longer services and stricter rules of behavior, Easy religions have less appeal.

Thus, when the benefits derived from political activity include the satisfaction of performing a civic duty or doing one's share to make the community, nation, or world a better place, the greatest reward is not necessarily achieved by paying the least cost. Instead, a goal that has been realized as the result of struggle against hardship gains meaning while a cheap victory sometimes seems trivial or, at least, unearned. Under such circumstances, the more time, money, or effort given, the higher the level of gratification.⁶ If bearing the cost becomes part of the benefit, cost-benefit calculations become difficult if not impossible.⁷

This all makes sense, but it makes it hard to decide whether someone is behaving rationally—that is trying to maximize benefit for minimum cost.

Let me turn to work I have been doing over the past decade or so with my colleagues Henry Brady and Kay Schlozman that tries to understand why some people are active and others are not, some reported in our book *Voice and Equality*,⁸ and some subsequent to that book. In our research, we identify three sets of factors that foster participation. One is being motivated to participate. This can entail a wide range of motivations: you may be generally interested in politics or feel confident that you can be efficacious, or you may have particular actions of the government that you want to influence. Another factor fostering participation is resources: you need resources like time or money or skills to be active in politics. And the last factor is mobilization: one way people become active is that they are asked by others. Let me cite three examples from our research that bear on the rationality issue. Each example focuses attention on the use of rational actor analysis with respect to one of the factors that foster political activity: the gratifications or benefits derived from activity, the resources associated with and needed for participation, and the strategies used by those whose particular goal is getting others to become active.

Let us begin with the motivations to take part in politics. We approached this in a straightforward but unusual way: we asked respondents for their reasons for engaging in various kinds of political activities. We also asked about the subject of each of the activities they mentioned. (Can you ask people why they did something? It is a controversial methodological issue, which I cannot go into here, though we discuss it in our publications. We believe that one can do so, if one focuses attention on situations that are clearly enough defined. We asked about many different specific instances of political activity from voting in a particular election to writing a letter to a particular official. We found that citizens had a large variety of reasons for

activity. And we found compelling evidence that people make distinctions that make sense in the reasons they report for activity. The nature of the act, reasons they gave for acting, and the subject matter seem to fit the together quite nicely.)

Narrow versions of rational choice that specify self-interested ends (using any limited notion of self-interest) cannot explain citizen activity among the people we studied. Some citizens, but very few, spoke of particular material selective benefits that would most neatly fit rational actor models—narrowly and precisely construed—of civic activity. If we expand the domain of benefits to include social ones (enjoying working with others, appreciating the respect of others), we find many more who report that as a reason for activity. If we include the benefit of the self-satisfaction that comes from being a good citizen, we find many more expressing that motivation. These motivations can, as I indicated, be subsumed within the framework of rational calculations of costs and benefits (pleasing friends, feeling good about oneself are real payoffs), but they do so at the cost of losing any real bite that rational calculation has to distinguish when and why people are active. Indeed, it is hard to delineate what actions would not be rational. “If it makes you feel good, do it” makes sense as a behavioral rule, but it is not much of an explanation. Why it makes some people feel good and others not might be a more interesting question. Perhaps that takes us back to cultural explanations.

Furthermore, though material gratifications and civic gratifications both fit and confirm rational actor explanations, there is a big difference for politics whether someone is in there for his or her own narrow material benefit or to make society better. Selective gratifications—whether material, social, or civic—might be interchangeable from the perspective of their compatibility with the rational actor interpretation, but it makes a good deal of difference to the civic life of the polity which kind of gratification is, in fact, being sought. Pursuit of a lucrative city contract for the firm or a sense of satisfaction at having helped to make the community a better place to live both provide selective benefits to the participant. Nonetheless, it matters for the political life of the community whether citizens seek self-interested material goals rather than what are, from the point of view of rational actor theory, equally self-interested civic gratifications.

In addition, we found many people who participated for policy reasons, that is, to influence the government in relation to some collective policy. That they did so for such reasons seems fairly clear from our data. For instance, one type of activity about which we asked was letter writing. Those who wrote letters could tell us the subject of their letter. (Note how this differs from asking someone why they voted as they did. You can have many reasons for voting, and may not be sure yourself why you did what you did. But if you sit down to write an official, you usually have a more precise view of the reason.) Policy reasons, acting to influence a collective policy, do not fit rational actor predictions well, yet people do it.

It is interesting, as Morris Fiorina has noted, how the various selective material reasons why individuals might be politically active have diminished over the years with such measures as civil service reform (its harder to use one’s vote to get a good government job), to the

regularization of social benefits.⁹ Perhaps issue voting is one way of filling that vacuum. But it is clearly more than that. People seem to care about issues and to act upon that.

We concluded that activists can and do cite a multitude of benefits, most of which go substantially beyond self-interest narrowly defined. Far from being unable to deliver benefits commensurate with its costs, political participation seems able to provide substantial and significant benefits. Once the range of selective benefits is, as it must be, enlarged to encompass such psychic benefits as the satisfaction attendant to doing one's civic duty, political participation delivers more than enough benefits to satisfy any rational actor. The theory, however, becomes almost unfalsifiable once we enlarge the set of benefits and, thus, loses its analytical bite.

I have sometimes explained the paradox of participation to activist friends. One might expect them to apologize or try to explain why they were being so irrational. Their response, though, is usually a bemused: "That's interesting logic. Tell me, is this what political scientists do?"

Furthermore, even if the expansion of the meaning of benefits to embrace such a wide range is acceptable as a means of making the theory predictive, rational choice approaches fail to predict who will participate. The theory is, for instance, ambiguous about how socio-economic status is related to participation. According to one version of the theory, people of high SES should be less active because they have the education and intellectual sophistication to comprehend the free-rider problem and because their high salaries raise the opportunity cost of participation.¹⁰ However plausible this approach, the strongest empirical regularity for participation is that those with high levels of SES, who are not otherwise known for particular irrationality in the conduct of their lives, are the most likely to be active. Another version of the rational actor approach, dating back at least to Anthony Downs,¹¹ holds that lower information and transaction costs for the well educated imply that it will be easier for them to take part in politics. This approach has the virtue of fitting the facts but seems somewhat post hoc. Little has been done to verify whether the mechanism specified operates in the posited manner.

We then considered rational choice models that focus on costs of participation and the resources needed to meet the costs. Here we found a better fit to the theory and more ability to explain behavioral choices. For one thing, we found that resources—like civic skills, or free time, and especially money—were relatively easy to measure, compared to benefits, since they are based upon objective standards that are interpersonally comparable. Furthermore, we were able to bypass the difficulty in specifying the benefits from activity because resources can be used for many different benefits. As in a market, it is very difficult to know what people might want to buy—the benefits they seek from going shopping—but we do know that if they do not have the money they can not buy very much.

Thus, because preferences are by their very nature subjective and therefore difficult to measure, it is much easier and more productive to base an explanation of political participation on differences in resources. By moving beyond an exclusive focus on benefits and paying

serious attention to the costs in the participation calculus, resource explanation of participation makes rational actor theory more predictive of the amount and source of participation.

When you add to that the fact that political activities vary in their resource requirements and that individuals vary in their resource endowments, variation across both acts and individuals provides opportunities for exploring who participates in what ways. By considering civic skills, we are able to understand why transaction and information costs might be lower for those of higher socioeconomic status. Incorporating income and free time as well helps to explain why participants might choose modes of activity that require inputs of time as opposed to inputs of money. Thus, by focusing on costs rather than benefits, a resource approach retains the assumption of rational choice but provides a more complete explanation of political activity. In this way, we do not contradict the calculus of rational choice; instead we build upon its basic logic to gain additional empirical insights.

Finally we considered recruitment to participation, focusing on decision-making by recruiters. Here we found rational cost-benefit calculation to be most useful in explaining what individuals did. When we looked at how these recruiters went about their business, we found they made careful cost-benefit calculations as to whom it was best to contact. They looked for those who had the resources to participate effectively and whose profile made it likely that they would acquiesce to a request to give a contribution to a campaign or come out and work for it. They deployed information for the purpose of locating potentially recruitable participants. They also used connections to these people to get them to acquiesce to the request. Thus, we found that recruiters have an obvious and straightforward purpose: to activate others to take part in politics. To achieve this goal, they develop a simple model of political participation based upon observable characteristics of potential recruits. Because beliefs about who might participate vary in a way that is measurable and useable for prediction, rational choice theories are very illuminating in this context.

These three examples provide us with some very helpful guidelines about when rational choice theory will be useful for explaining mass political behavior. The first lesson is that we must be clear about the rational choice theory that we are using. An approach that focuses on costs and resources rather than motivations, though not a complete theory, provides more explanation of the empirical world of activity. In addition, how useful the theory is depends on the activity one is trying to explain. Here the example of recruitment is particularly telling. Note that we do not seek to explain why recruiters might solicit others. Their reasons for asking others to take part are presumably as varied as the reasons that activists participate: to further their careers; to run for office at some point in the future; to be with people they enjoy; to gain recognition; to make the community or nation a better place to live; to influence government policy; and so on. In some cases, the selective material benefit is clear: they are paid for what they do. Whatever their reasons, however, having decided to look for others to target they do so as efficiently as possible. Our data suggest that, once in the business of finding others, recruiters use the kinds of cost/benefit calculations intrinsic to the rational choice approach. Where we can

specify the preference or benefit sought, we can test predictions derived from rational actor theory as to how resources will be deployed to achieve the goal.

The fact that rational actor models seem to work better in some contexts rather than in others is consistent with how we believe the theory fits into the study of participation. Narrow versions of rational choice are not, as is sometimes claimed, universally applicable. The trick is to specify the domains of human endeavor to which they apply. Brennan and Lomasky argue that "...actors have two personae: one for markets and a different one for the ballot box (and analogous collective activities)."¹² Our position is similar to theirs but focuses on different domains. We maintain that different decisional criteria are relevant for separate stages of the participatory process within the political domain. When it comes to the decision to become politically active (or in our example of the rational recruiter, to solicit others to take part politically) narrow versions of rational choice are much less helpful in understanding the ends that recruiters hope to achieve than in understanding the strategies they use to find attractive prospects once they decide to take political action. Thus, our analysis of resources shows how rational actor calculations work when there is a clear constraint based on something measurable; that is, when there is a resource constraint. The recruitment example also shows how cost-benefit calculations are valuable as explanations of action when there is a clearly defined task and when the motivations that led to the task performance have been taken as a given. For whatever reasons recruiters turn to recruiting, once they choose to do so, they calculate carefully.

Where does this leave motivations and preferences? We were less successful in harmonizing a rational choice perspective with an explanation of political activity that relies principally on preferences. Any attempt to base a rational actor explanation of political activity on motivations by expanding the range of types of allowable preferences results in tautology. Although our empirical finding that people appear to act for civic reasons is descriptively important, it has little explanatory bite accounting for participation. If taking part makes activists feel good about themselves, they do it—not much of an explanation.

If rational actor theory gives only partial help, what about culture? Certainly, there is a long tradition in America of concern over the relationship between culture and activism. In Eckstein's formulation, one of the most distinctive features of a cultural approach is that it assumes the strong and fairly persistent effect of early socialization. A problem has always existed in testing such expectations of lifetime effects—it takes a lifetime, and most scholars do not have that much stick-to-itiveness. One who does is Kent Jennings, whose panel study of youth and their parents and now offspring has gone on for thirty-five years. His data show clear evidence that participation early on predicts participation for many years afterward. If participation were the result of more contemporaneous calculations based on issues and opportunities of the day, that would be less likely to be the case.¹³ Recent work by Alan Gerber and Don Green suggests that participation is habit forming.¹⁴ If you are induced once to vote, you are likely to do it again.

Let me mention some recent work that Nancy Burns, Kay Schlozman and I have done on gender and political participation—in a book that will come out in the fall.¹⁵ We deal with the gap in political activity between women and men. It is a long complicated argument which I cannot cover here, nor even try to summarize. But let me say a few words. In preparing for this lecture and finishing this book at the same time, I asked myself the question: is our analysis of this difference in activity a rational choice analysis or a cultural analysis? The answer was not completely clear; we had not posed the question that way and it was hard to say.

Part of our explanation of the gender gap in participation fits neatly into a resource-based rational-actor explanation: women have fewer of the necessary resources to meet the requirements of effective political activity. They are less likely to be in the work force which is where many of the resources needed, such as money and civic skills, are acquired. Therefore, in a cost benefit calculation, they might calculate that they could not meet the cost. But if one probes more deeply, their lower level of work force participation seems to have cultural roots—in the simple but obvious fact that women do the disproportionate amount of child care and housework and do not take as much part in the work force.

Consider children as an example. Having children leads men to work more, women to work less. This might be considered the result of economically rational calculations. Someone needs to stay home, and someone work. Thus, this makes sense for the husband to work—but only if the husband earns more. But the best predictor of the time spent on housework in a two career family in which both spouses work full time is not, as economic theory might predict, the relatively wage rates of each spouse but gender. This was described in an economics journal article as a counter-intuitive finding. This led one of my collaborators to comment that the fact that gender, not relative earnings, best predicts the amount of housework is counter intuitive to only one kind of person in the world: a male economist. Indeed, there is evidence that when children come along, the husband increases his work hours and she decreases hers—even if she earns more. The result is, of course, that with over time he comes to earn more. Now, I can imagine a rational actor explanation of this—but it seems to have at least some deep cultural roots.

Or take another example. One important part of the explanation of the male advantage in political activity is that women are simply, on average, less interested in politics. That can easily fit a rational actor model: women have less taste for politics and, since tastes are given, that settles it. But tastes can also be thought of as cultural phenomena; they have social and cultural roots. When we looked more closely, we found that a lot had to do with socialization; the lesson women learn that politics is a man's game—a lesson taught by simple observation of the political domain. We found that when there are a significant number of salient political figures in office—as in California with its two U.S. senators—women are as interested as men.

So who wins the contest between these types of theory? One of Harry Eckstein's concerns was to develop quasi-experimental ways of testing cultural versus rational theories.¹⁶ In some writings he argued that one could explain rational actor theories and their prevalence in cultural terms. He argued that the “applicability of the rational-choice framework, although

intended as the basis of a highly general theory, is in fact exceedingly limited by time and culture; it is even sub-culturally bound in societies where it might serve relatively well.” That rational calculation works sometimes and not others, and that it works in some culturally defined settings and not others is supported by some of the work on the way in which people respond to the framing of an issue. One of my favorites examples is an experimental prisoners’ dilemma study in which the likelihood of cooperative behavior in the exact same game was affected by whether the game was named Community or Wall Street. Call it Community, players are more likely to cooperate; call it Wall Street and they are more selfish.¹⁷

This brings me back to the Riker and Ordeshook D term—the civic gratification one gets from taking part in political life. In a regression equation it is a powerful variable, explaining a good part of the variance in political activity. In rational actor theory it is a way of saying that selective benefits play a major role, but that is a not very enlightening fact. The D term is really of interest as a cultural phenomenon. The interesting point is not that people are active if they feel a sense of civic obligation, but why do some people feel that way and why do others not? This takes us into culture and socialization.

An example would be Harry’s work on civic inclusion and the authority culture of the poor; it represents a carefully nuanced description of the ways in which poverty limits the development of beliefs about human relations conducive to democratic participation; beliefs that foster hierarchy, arbitrary power rather than accepted authority, rigidity rather than compromise. Harry’s ideas on this subject were big and powerful, and disturbing. The poor make bad citizens and it was embedded in the culture and manifested in attitudes towards authority that poverty and scarcity create.

Let me hasten to add that this somewhat pessimistic view was not an anti-democratic view, nor an elitist anti-poor view—though some critics accused Harry of this. Rather he saw this as an instance of facing uncomfortable facts—so that they could be addressed. If poverty led to a culture that was not supportive of democracy, this was not blaming the poor but blaming poverty. Harry was unclear about the extent to which these patterns of belief, once established, could be changed. I think they can be perhaps more than might be expected. The ideas need—as Harry recognized—closer and more systematic study than was possible in his evocative essay on the subject.

Rational choice does not always work, but it is powerful when it does; and we may be able to specify the domain where it works. Furthermore, because it is precise (or at least often precise when practitioners avoid the temptation to make anything into a benefit) it is illuminating even when it does not work. Cultural theory is a more amorphous entity. My rational actor friends might admit the limitations of their approach, but might argue that you can not beat something with nothing. As Ken Shepsle has put it in his “wing-walking” advice: Don’t let go of something solid before you’ve got something better to hold on to.

So all of this suggests that we need what Harry called for in much of his writing: more systematic research. Socialization studies disappeared for a time, but they may be coming back. Many other things need to be done. As Harry said about his Theory of Stable Democracy “Almost everything needed to establish the theory still needs doing”.¹⁸ I was early in my career associated with cultural theories of politics. Over the years, I have become more skeptical and have focussed more on structural constraints and how they affect individual political actors; I was not so much skeptical of the importance of culture and cultural variations, but skeptical of our ability to measure culture and estimate its causal effects. But I believe that we need a multiple attack on these problems: studies of the nature of choices in which calculations take place within the framework of long term orientations (and of the ways those orientations are formed) and within the resource constraints that have their origins in social institutions. This is big task, but it will keep us busy. We do not yet have the answers, but the quest for them is exhilarating.

Rational actor perspectives and cultural perspectives will continue to face each other. The notion that rational actor theory is out to conquer all—and that it should or should not win the battle—is often found in our discipline. When we have presented our research on rational choice and its relation to participation paper at conferences evaluating the rational perspective in politics, its central contention—that rational actor theory is sometimes useful and that the conditions under which it is most useful can be specified—has elicited considerable criticism. The grenades were lobbed from both directions: from rational-choice fundamentalists who argue that we should alter our formulation to read “always useful”; and sometimes from equally committed antagonists to the rational choice perspective who urge that we substitute “rarely or never” for “sometimes.”

But perhaps there may be more accommodation rather than victory and defeat. More and more works combine in interesting ways rational actor with what may be called more culturalist perspectives to the benefit of each. It is to the credit, I believe, of political science as a discipline that it managed to debate new approaches—from rational actor to post-modernism (whatever that is)—but keep them in the political science family. Having looked at other disciplines—history, sociology, most of the humanities—one can see the difference. They have divided into warring camps. We have remained a social science family—lots of bickering as in most families—but we have kept the connections. I am not sure why but it may be our subject matter. As students of politics and government, we know the difficulty of making collective decisions when there are different and strongly held preferences—and the importance of compromise for that. Why do we accommodate alternative views? Obviously for two kinds of reasons. It is instrumentally rational so to do: it lowers transaction costs in academic departments if they are not constantly feuding, deans give more support to harmonious than dissonant departments, and so forth. And it is clearly part of the culture of our discipline.

Endnotes

1. Anthony Downs, An Economic Theory of Democracy (New York: Harper, 1957); Mancur Olson, The Logic of Collective Action (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).
2. John H. Aldrich, "Rational Choice and Turnout," American Journal of Political Science 37 (1993): 247.
3. William Riker and Peter C. Ordeshook, "A Theory of the Calculus of Voting," American Political Science Review 62 (March 1968): 25-42.
4. Randall Calvert, "Rationality, Identity and Expression", Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington D.C., 2000.
5. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p. 238.
6. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark's analysis of an analogous domain of activity, religious involvement, illustrates this point well. They ask why the more demanding, fundamentalist and evangelical denominations have been growing in membership while mainline denominations have been declining. They find the answer in the very demands that the former put on their members. "...[Religious organizations are stronger to the degree that they impose significant costs...on their members....People tend to value religion on the basis of how costly it is to belong -- the more one must sacrifice in order to be in good standing, the more valuable is the religion." Finke and Stark, The Churching of America, 1776-1990, p. 238.
7. Albert O. Hirschman makes this point with characteristic elegance: "Once this essential characteristic of participation in collective action for the public good is understood, the severe limitations of the 'economic' view about such participation, and about the obstacles to it, come immediately into view. The implication of the confusion between the striving and attaining is that the neat distinction between costs and benefits of action in the public interest vanishes, since striving, which should be entered on the cost side, turns out to be part of the benefit." Albert O. Hirschman, Shifting Involvements: Private Interests and Public Action (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 85-86. Edward N. Muller and Karl-Dieter Opp ("Rational Choice and Rebellious Collective Action," 485) provide a suggestive example in their analysis of rebellious collective action. They found that those who "believe that rebellious behavior is likely to be costly show a somewhat greater tendency to participate than those who believe that it is unlikely to be costly." Geoffrey Brennan and Loren Lomasky (Democracy and Decision, New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 97) point out that the call to sacrifice is common in politics, the reward of political action deriving, at least in part, from having borne heavy burdens.
8. Sidney Verba, Kay L. Schlozman and Henry E. Brady, Voice and Equality (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), chapter 4.

9. Morris P. Fiorina, "Parties, Participation and Representation in America: Old Theories Face New Realities," Paper presented at the 2000 Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C.
10. See W. Mark Crain and Thomas H. Deaton, "A Note on Political Participation as Consumption Behavior", Public Choice XXXII (Winter 1977), pp. 131-135.
11. Downs, An Economic Theory of Democracy, chap. 14.
12. Downs, An Economic Theory of Democracy, p. 2.
13. M. Kent Jennings, "Participation as Viewed Through the Lens of the Political Socialization Project" Paper Prepared for a Conference on "Political Participation: Building a Research Agenda", Princeton University, October, 2000.
14. Alan S. Berber and Donald P. Green, "The Effects of Canvassing, telephone calls, and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout," American Political Science Review 94 (September 2000): 653-663.
15. Nancy Burns, Kay L. Schlozman, and Sidney Verba, The Private Roots of Public Action (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, forthcoming, 2001).
16. Harry Eckstein, Regarding Politics (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
17. Lee Ross and Andrew Ward, "The Power of Situational Effects in the Prisoners' Dilemma Game", (Unpublished manuscript, 1993), cited in Cass Sunstein, "Social Norms and Social Roles," Columbia Law Review 903 (1996), pp. 903-968.
18. Harry Eckstein, Regarding Politics (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992) p. 223.

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