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Democracy, Voting, and Disenfranchisement in the United States: A Social Psychological Perspective

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Autonomy, engagement, and equality are defining features of democracy. Each of these features illuminates the challenge or incompleteness of our democratic aspirations: Autonomy or self-governance is too easily surrendered, disengagement is evident when roughly half of eligible adults choose not to vote, and the inequality of our political voices is manifest in many ways, including a self-perpetuating relationship between socioeconomic status and political participation. In addition to introducing the present collection of articles on the social psychology of voting, I argue that several concepts drawn from psychological measurement may contribute to making elections more fair. A signal detection framework may be used to assess the soundness of election reforms, with fraud and disenfranchisement conceptualized as two forms of error. The replacement of the Electoral College by a single aggregate national popular vote would not only be more democratic but would substantially reduce the likelihood of controversial outcomes in future presidential elections.

In an early SPSSI presidential address, Gordon Allport expressed concern about apathy and nonparticipation in American politics. Writing in a time marked by genocide, facing the specter of totalitarianism, and reflecting a zeitgeist in which political and individual pathologies were seen as intertwined, Allport argued that political participation was beneficial for both individual and society (Allport, 1945). For the person, voting provided a form of meaning in that it exemplified ego-involved participation as opposed to mere task involvement or rote activity. For society, voting signified engagement and constituted the prototypical act of participatory democracy. As disengagement from politics and low electoral turnout suggested a form of cultural pathology, political participation was a

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topic that warranted the attention of SPSSI, whose mandate included the study of “those psychological problems most vitally related to modern social, economic and political policies” (Krech & Cartwright, 1956, p. 471).

The articles in this issue will revisit the social psychology of participatory democracy as it exists in the United States. The scope is necessarily broad, invoking theoretical frameworks as diverse as intergroup relations, game theory, and intergenerational development, constructs such as efficacy, identity, and authoritarianism, and methods ranging from content analysis to Bayesian analysis. Yet each of the articles remains fundamentally concerned with the social psychological meaning or meanings of democracy and political participation.

Democracy at the Level of Government, Society, and Individual

Democracy is more than a system of government. Democratically elected governments can act in undemocratic ways, as in the 1933 vote of the German Reichstag for the Enabling Act, the effect of which was to essentially surrender all governmental power and responsibility to Chancellor Adolf Hitler. Governments with seemingly democratic constitutions may in fact be tyrannical, as in the case of present-day North Korea that despite a constitution that provides safeguards for numerous freedoms and stipulates regular elections is among the least democratic governments on Earth (Post, 2006). What we mean by democracy is captured neither by simple principles of majority rule, nor by a disembodied set of laws or form of government. Instead, for the present purposes, three characteristics of democracy may be identified, each of which is held to be necessary, and each of which describes a distinct level of analysis.

First, at the level of government, democracy is a system in which the laws are essentially made by and govern the same individuals. Notwithstanding the fact that laws may be made indirectly, by elected representatives, it remains that democratic government implies an agentic citizenry, or, in terms first articulated by Kant and brought into psychology by Piaget, autonomous rather than heteronomous control (Post, 2006).

Second, at the level of society, democracy is a system characterized by equality. This is related to the conception of democracy as autonomy or self-governance, for if actors were truly autonomous, each would govern the fate of exactly one individual. Consequently, self-determination implies “equality of democratic agency” (Post, 2006, p. 28). In an ideal democracy, the basic political relationship between individuals is not the asymmetry of subjects and leaders, but the symmetrical respect between persons with ostensibly equal voices in the political process. Piaget maintained that “the essence of democracy [is to] replace the unilateral respect of authority by the mutual respect of autonomous wills” (Piaget, 1965, p. 363).

Third, at the level of the individual, democracy implies both self-efficacy and engagement. With respect to self-efficacy, it is not enough that individuals are in
fact self-governing. We must believe that we are self-governing as well (Gonzalez & Tyler, this issue; Post, 2006). With respect to engagement, citizenship, like all forms of group membership, may be understood as a feature of the self-concept. To the extent that this feature is prominent within the self-concept, the actor may be said to identify with the state. The role of identity in democracy is important in understanding individual differences in political participation, which derive not only from differences in resources and abilities (Dahl, 2006), but also from differences in what Allport described as “ego-involvement.” As an aspect of the self-concept, democracy may be seen as both abstract and concrete, abstract in that its specific meaning and significance will vary from one individual to another, concrete in that its centrality and prominence in the self-concept may be profound.

Each of these characteristic aspects of democracy—autonomy in government, equality in society, and effectiveness and engagement of individuals—is illuminated by a significant body of social psychological research. The importance of autonomy to democracy may perhaps best be seen when self-determination is surrendered, as in the case of participants in the classic work of Milgram (1963) and related studies of obedience (e.g., Kelman & Hamilton, 1989). The issue of equality is addressed in a range of studies of social justice (see Napier & Jost, this issue). The third characteristic, the question of how democratic participation and nonparticipation shape and reflect upon the individual, is to be examined presently. While there remain many variants of democratic political participation (e.g., following the news, applying for citizenship, donating to campaigns, and sending letters to elected officials), the focus will be on voting as the prototype or paradigm case of political participation in a democracy.

Before considering the effects of voting on individuals, it is useful to consider the effects of voting on the broader society. If democracy is characterized by an autonomous citizenry in which citizens act as equals, then when significant numbers of citizens abstain or are denied the right to participate, government necessarily becomes less democratic. Consequently, a democratic ideal can be described in which all citizens would exercise the voting franchise. While it is well known that this ideal is far from being achieved in the United States, it is less well known that this has long been the case: In the 1944 presidential election, which led Allport to declare low turnout to be a “blemish on democracy,” only 56% of voting-age Americans went to the polls (Allport, 1945, p. 127). Sixty years later, despite innumerable changes in media, culture, and politics, a nearly identical rate (55%) of eligible-age voters participated in the 2004 presidential contest (United States Election Project, 2005).

Who Can Vote?

The low turnout of eligible-age voters in the United States may underestimate political interest, as some Americans do not vote because they are legally prevented
from doing so. Perhaps the best known example of restricted voting rights is the
case of convicted legal offenders, whose disenfranchisement is more severe in
the United States than in most other democracies (Dhami, 2005). In states such
as Florida, ex-felons who have served their terms, as well as felons who are
presently incarcerated, remain ineligible to vote without a cumbersome appeals
process. But while the argument for disenfranchising felons and ex-felons is
especially punitive, most restrictions of suffrage derive from the position that
certain individuals lack the autonomy or ability to make independent judgments.
If autonomy is a defining feature of democracy, and some individuals cannot act
autonomously, then it follows that they should not share in governance. It is on
this basis that, for example, individuals under the age of 18 years are not allowed
to vote.

Voting rights of individuals suffering from mental illness and incapacity.
Children are not the only citizens who may lack the capacity for autonomous judg-
ment. In most states, individuals under guardianship for emotional and cognitive
impairments may be legally disenfranchised (Schriner, Oehs, & Shields, 2000).
A recent U.S. federal court decision articulated criteria for assessing the capacity
to vote among those suffering from such disabilities (Doe v. Rowe, 2001). Still,
the ethical and practical issues surrounding the voting rights for persons suffering
from mental illness and incapacity remain complex. As the number of elderly
Americans increases, the number of individuals who suffer from dementia may be
expected to increase, and as a consequence the challenge of assessing the capacity
to vote can be expected to become more important in the years to come. A simple
assessment tool could improve measurement and reduce errors (Appelbaum, Bon-
nie, & Karlawish, 2005). But even the best test could not completely eliminate
these errors, and the disenfranchisement of capable citizens by a psychological
test could too easily evoke recollections of the “literacy tests” of an earlier age.
The clumsy application of a standardized measure could be disastrous, not only
for its effects on the disenfranchised, but also for the reputation of psychological
testing in the broader community.

The challenge of arriving at a fair resolution to the problem of voting rights
for the mentally disabled illuminates the Utopian nature of democracy. Because
democracy is grounded in the autonomy of its citizens, and autonomy is a construct
that is neither discrete nor perfectly measurable, democracy is an unachievable
ideal, a fictional final goal toward which we nonetheless strive.

A history of uneven progress. The extension of the voting franchise in Amer-
ica to once-excluded groups has not been without reversals. Black Americans, for
example, were ostensibly granted the right to vote in 1870. But by 1890 poll
taxes and the so-called literacy tests, disproportionately applied in the Amer-
can South, would remain excluded until the mid-1960s. For
women, too, there have been steps backward as well as forward: In the first decades of the nation’s history, property-owning women in New Jersey could vote, but that right was withdrawn in 1807 and would remain withheld until 1920.

Other reversals of the voting franchise have been more dramatic, but smaller in scale. During the nineteenth century, paupers were disenfranchised in a number of states, and remained so until the Great Depression, when poverty would be largely reinterpreted as the product of social rather than personal shortcomings (Keyssar, 2000). And movement away from democracy can be seen today when one ventures beyond American borders, for while the number of free, democratic states has roughly doubled in the last 30 years, progress of late has slowed if not reversed (Kekie, 2007).

The fact that history has seen numerous reversals in the extension of the voting franchise is noteworthy because it serves as a reminder that progress is not inexorable, and that further movement toward democracy is not inevitable. History also provides a context for examining contemporary voting rights, a context whose contemporary salience can be expressed in Lewinian terms. That is, are some present restrictions of the voting franchise the product of the same regressive social forces and institutional facts that have in the past led to historical setbacks? Do these same phenomena continue to contravene and compromise the democratic ideal?

Who Does (Not) Vote?

A continuum of political participation may be described that includes not merely voting, but an array of actions ranging from seeking information about candidates to seeking public office. All forms of political participation are effortful and thus costly to agents (see Gonzalez & Tyler, Krueger & Acevedo, this issue). Despite this, for many analysts, the salient issue remains who does not participate, and why.

The origins of differential political participation, particularly with respect to voting, are not self-evident. A case could be made, for example, that those who suffer most from current policies have the most to gain from change, and should therefore be most likely to vote. Empirically, this does not hold. Rather, those who should be least satisfied with the status quo, such as the poor, the less educated, and the socially marginalized, are less likely to vote than those in positions of wealth and social privilege (Keyssar, 2000). This is a problem that reflects uneasily upon all three of the defining characteristics of democracy noted above. Low turnout indicates a deficit in agency and engagement on the part of potential voters; the fact that actual voters constitute a biased sample of those who are eligible to vote indicates an injury to the conception of democracy as equality as well. The association between turnout and measures of wealth, education, and power is a
threat to the democratic ideal, for an entrenched leadership cannot be expected
to defend the rights and needs of nonparticipants in the political process (e.g.,
Dahl, 2006). A positive association between status and political participation is a
recipe for an acceleration of social inequalities, a positive feedback loop without
an apparent correcting mechanism.

Four explanations for the relationship between socioeconomic status and
political participation. In examining the relationship between status and political
participation, a number of explanations may be considered. The first of these sees
differential participation as grounded in the history of the voting franchise. That
is, groups such as young adults, African Americans, and those who rent rather
own their homes are less likely to vote than their respective complements, and
each of these less-participating constituencies was at one time denied the voting
franchise. It is not merely the empty force of precedent that is salient here, but
the fact that the massive institutions that are American political parties evolve at a
rate that one used to be able to describe as "glacial." On this view, the American
Republican and Democratic parties are institutions that perpetuate the status quo,
primarily serving the voting public of an earlier age (Keyssar, 2000). The greater
turnout among women than men provides counterevidence, but other measures of
political participation provide a somewhat different picture—at the highest levels
of political power women are rare, and remain, at this writing, still absent from
the list of those who have attained this country's highest office.

A related explanation sees differential electoral participation in its cultural as
well as historic context, as but one of many manifestations of inequality in America.
On this argument, political participation requires resources such as wealth, interest,
knowledge, and time. Because these resources are unequally distributed, so too will
be various forms of political participation (Dahl, 2006). There is a tension between
the democratic ideal of equality and the disparities in wealth and resources found
under market capitalism, particularly as it is instantiated in America (Ringen,
2006).

A third class of explanation for the relationship between status and political
participation considers that the costs of political participation, particularly vot-
ing, may be effectively different for different groups. This provides a framework
for interpreting attempts at voter suppression, which may be understood as at-
ttempts to impose a prohibitive cost of voting on some groups. Voter suppression
is not merely of historical interest: In a 2006 campaign, for example, some 14,000
registered voters with Latino surnames were sent letters from the office of a con-
gressional candidate warning them that they could be imprisoned or deported for
voting (Navarrete, 2006). It is a sign of progress toward equal voting rights that
such blatant attempts at voter suppression are now met with bipartisan condem-
nation. But other mechanisms that impose a differential cost of voting continue.
For example, restrictions in voting hours may impose a particularly large cost on
some groups of individuals, such as working single parents and those who rely on public transportation, who may find it particularly difficult to get to the polls in a narrow window of time (but see Gronke & Toffey, this issue). In addition to restricted voting hours, other mechanisms that may lead to a differential probability of voting include bureaucratic obstacles such as registration barriers that disenfranchise the itinerant, and public officials who may only go through the motions of encouraging would-be voters. In addition to disenfranchising some fraction of the voting populace, biases in election administration may cast doubt on the integrity of the entire electoral process (deHaven Smith, 2005).

The fourth category of explanation for differential voting lies in the relative benefits of voting for one candidate over another. Where candidates do not functionally differ, the value of voting will be reduced. This category of explanation is fairly broad. It encompasses the economic argument that the wealthy are more likely than the poor to vote because the difference between candidates is greatest for those potential voters who have the most to lose. This category of explanation also encompasses a social learning account, in which voting and political participation are the product of efficacy beliefs that are associated with socioeconomic status. In other words, the disempowered are least likely to vote because they have learned that voting does not matter (Cohen, Vigoda, & Samorly, 2001). Finally, where candidates are drawn from a single social class, ethnicity, and/or gender, their seeming homogeneity may lead potential voters who are members of outgroups to perceive candidates as essentially interchangeable, and to the conclusion that the act of voting would be a waste of time.

Why Vote?

The belief that one's vote is unlikely to matter is arguably realistic, for in a large election, the probability that a vote will be truly pivotal is almost vanishingly small (Meehl, 1977). Consider the case of a close election in a pivotal state such as Florida, which can expect some eight million votes to be cast in the 2008 presidential race. In the ideal case in which two candidates are expected to receive exactly half the vote, the probability that one's own vote would be pivotal is already small (approximately 1 in 3,500), but as predicted outcomes deviate from 50/50, the value of voting for one candidate over another will drop off dramatically. With a predicted split as narrow as 50.1/49.9, the odds that a single vote will be pivotal balloons to approximately 1 in 31 billion (Beck, 1974). To put these numbers in context, consider that the odds of dying in a car accident on a given day are roughly 1 in 2.4 million—or 13,000 times greater than this (National Safety Council, 2006).

The fact that one is much more likely to die on the way to the polls than to determine the outcome of a large election does not imply that voting is foolish. Rather, the functions of voting cannot be reduced to the slim likelihood of causing a
particular outcome. To the extent that voting is a broadly rational act, other benefits must come into play (cf. Krueger & Acevedo, this issue). Because the consequence of voting for one candidate over another is objectively trivial, the explanation of why people vote hinges in part on the question of why people do or do not become, in Allport's terms, ego-involved in electoral politics. Voting is driven not by simple economics, but by other benefits such as the fulfillment of perceived duties and the patriotic identification of a fragile, existentially transient self with something larger, stronger, and perhaps less mortal. Voting is an expressive and intentional act that both indicates and fosters membership in a community (Gonzalez & Tyler, this issue). We are more likely to vote in presidential than in local elections, despite the fact that these are the elections in which our votes are least likely to be pivotal, for we recognize that the consequences of national elections are greatest—not just for ourselves, but for the well-being of others as well (Edlin, Gelman, & Kaplan, 2007).

What Does a Vote Mean?

Despite the fact that the manifest probability that a single vote will be pivotal is small, the perception that our voices are of equal consequence remains important. Yet, differences in the significance of votes between states, and between legislative districts within states, are both real and substantial. The different significance of votes across state and district lines provides a challenge to the conception of democracy as equality.

Presidential elections are determined not by popular vote but by an electoral college in which, in all but a few states, electors are effectively assigned on a winner-take-all basis. This leads to three sources of distorted or unfair representation. These include the possibility of different outcomes in the popular and electoral vote, an executive branch that may be primarily beholden to swing states, and a different weighting of votes in different states, with less populous states receiving greater representation. In 2004, there was nearly a fourfold difference in the number of votes per elector in the smallest state, Wyoming, and the largest, California (Lofgren, 2004). An analysis of data from the United States Election Project reveals that these differences in representation are associated with turnout (United States Election Project, 2005). In the 10 states with the highest number of voters per elector, only 52% of eligible-age voters went to the polls; in the 10 with the lowest number (including the District of Columbia), 58% went to the polls. Across all 50 states and the District of Columbia, the correlation between turnout and representation was -.27.

Within states, in congressional and legislative elections, the determination of district boundaries is another potential source of effectively distorted representation. Partisan and self-protective redistricting has led the outcomes of most seats to be largely predetermined: lines are frequently drawn to protect incumbents and/or
to maximize the expected number of seats that the majority party will retain. Where the latter goal predominates, this typically leads to a small number of districts in which the opposition party has an overwhelming advantage, a larger number of districts in which the majority party has a smaller, but still "safe," margin, and few if any districts that are truly competitive. Only when there is substantial dissatisfaction with the majority party, as was the case in the 1994 and 2006 midterm elections, will ostensibly safe districts become competitive, and will voting for a particular candidate become relatively consequential.

*District boundaries and minority voices.* In a homogeneous society governed by majority rule, every individual would have an equal voice in making decisions or laws. But as a society becomes heterogeneous, members of minorities risk becoming consistently marginalized and effectively disenfranchised (Guinier, 1994). Consequently, even without the intention of discrimination, members of minorities are likely to be underrepresented in legislative bodies based on single-member districts.

Since the Voting Rights Act, race-conscious redistricting has attempted to ensure that legislative boundaries are drawn in such a way so as not to dilute the representation of African Americans and Latino Americans. While these efforts have had some effect, they remain controversial and often misunderstood, providing an illustration of the tensions between the idea of majority rule and conceptions of democracy such as agency and equality (Ergun, Deason, Borgida, & Charles, this issue; Pildes & Niemi, 1993).

*Are Elections Fair?*

At the level of the group, outcomes in legislative elections are held to be fair when different groups achieve representation in proportion to their numbers. A second perspective on electoral fairness focuses instead on the level of the individual, holding that elections are fair to the extent that the votes of those who are eligible, and only those who are eligible, are accurately recorded. At the level of the individual, elections are fair to the extent that fraud and disenfranchisement are minimized. Examples of fraud might include voter impersonation, voting against the stated intent of a disabled or infirm voter by an assistant, the act of voting in multiple districts, as well as larger scale concerns such as the theft or loss of absentee or regular ballots and the manipulation of software of electronic voting machines. Sources of disenfranchisement include laws that prevent individuals who have recently moved from voting, short polling hours or long lines, poorly designed or intimidating technology, and the failure by voters to have correct identification where this is required. More abstract sources of disenfranchisement may also be identified, such as cynicism and a lack of efficacy.
Differences in the perceived costs of fraud and disenfranchisement give rise to two competing views of electoral fairness. On the constrained position, it is the responsibility of the individual to follow rules and procedures to vote legally and as intended. On the unconstrained view, the human will may be distorted by institutions, and if the goal is equality, programs must be implemented that allow and encourage participation (McLean, 2006; Sowell, 1988). The constrained view is primarily concerned with minimizing fraud, while the unconstrained view is instead concerned with minimizing disenfranchisement. To return to the infamous “butterfly ballots” of Palm Beach County in 2000, the constrained view could be expressed by the sentiment that people should be able to figure out a ballot in order to vote, while those embracing an unconstrained view would maintain that institutions should not stand in the way of the expression of voters’ intent. More recently, the contrast between constrained and unconstrained views can be seen in the opinions issued in the Supreme Court decision upholding Indiana’s unusually stringent voter identification law (Crawford v. Marion County Election Board, 2008). The majority argued that the risk of fraud was sufficient to outweigh the inconvenience of requiring photo identification. A dissenting opinion maintained that the requirement for photo ID would disenfranchise tens of thousands of individuals, and that these individuals constituted a nonrandom sample of the electorate—typically nondrivers who are disproportionately poor, disabled, and/or elderly. In survey data, the constrained and unconstrained positions are associated with political ideology, with the former associated with conservatism and the latter with liberalism (Rasmussen, 2004).

The fairness of elections at the level of the individual, and the effectiveness or effects of election reform, may be interpreted in a signal detection framework in which elections are considered as measures, and fraud (an ineligible vote that is counted, or false positive) and disenfranchisement (an eligible voter denied, or miss) are two types of errors. Without improvements in measurement, a reduction in one type of error (e.g., fraud), will necessarily lead to an increase in the other (disenfranchisement). But there is evidence that some recently mandated electoral reforms, including centralized databases of voters, provisional ballots, and more reliable voting technology, constitute true improvements in measurement, leading to a reduction in disenfranchisement without an increase in fraud. One concrete example of improved measurement was seen in Montana in 2006, where Election Day registration was implemented for the first time. About 7,500 voters registered on the day of the election, or about 2% of those who voted in Montana; these individuals would presumably have been disenfranchised without the opportunity to register at the polls. Although there were reports of delays at the polls, the reduction in disenfranchisement appears to have been obtained without a parallel increase in fraud (Demos, 2006). Improvements in voting technology reduce another form of potential disenfranchisement in the guise of uncounted ballots. For example, in the Florida presidential race in 2000, 2.9% of ballots were uncounted;
in 2004, this figure declined to .4%. But new voting technologies do not eliminate human factors issues in ballot design and may also increase cynicism and distrust, leading to the potential for a reduction in political engagement.

The Electoral College and the National Popular Vote Compact. While legal advances since the Voting Rights Act have arguably made elections more fair at the level of the group, and recently enacted electoral reforms may reduce both disenfranchisement and fraud at the level of individual voters, a third conception of fairness remains largely untouched. That is, a fair election is one whose outcome reflects the collective will. The Electoral College, used in the selection of American presidents, is a strikingly poor approach to assessing this collective will.

The most evident problem with the Electoral College is that it may lead to the selection of a president who loses the popular vote. A second problem, already noted, is that voters in large states are relatively disenfranchised by the method used to determine the number of electors. But arguably the greatest problem with the Electoral College lies in its violation of the most basic principle of measurement: Because the selection of presidents is based not on a single robust aggregate, but on 51 separate elections, it remains more likely that a small error in a single state could snowball into an electoral crisis which, as occurred in 2000, could threaten the perceived legitimacy of one or more branches of our federal government. The perception of legitimacy is critical for government to function effectively, particularly in times of war and turmoil (Gonzalez & Tyler, this issue).

An ingenious solution to the problems of the Electoral College has been advanced in the form of the National Popular Vote Compact, under which member states would simply assign their states of delegates to the candidate who wins the national popular vote (Koza et al., 2006). At this writing, the National Popular Vote has been voted into law in four states (Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, and New Jersey) and is under active consideration in more than a score of others. The compact would come into effect once it is passed by states with a working majority of the electorate. If and when this happens, the substantial inequalities of the Electoral College would be overcome. No president could again be named without a plurality of American voters. All votes in a presidential election would count the same. Presidential platforms would be addressed to the greatest good for the greatest number, and not merely to citizens in so-called battleground states. Finally, the presidency would be determined on the basis of a single tally rather than 51 separate elections, and the probability of a divisive, contentious outcome would be greatly reduced.

Organization of the Issue

This issue examines the psychology of political participation. It includes three sections. In the first, normative perspectives are considered, which largely
examine the functions of voting. In the second section, differential perspectives are invoked; these articles examine the nature of individual differences in voting and other forms of political participation. In the third, some of the dynamic roots of political behavior are considered.

**Normative Perspectives: The Functions of Political Participation**

Elections do not merely function to select individuals for public office. Gonzalez and Tyler examine some of the interrelated functions of elections for society and for the individual. For society, elections can confer legitimacy upon leaders and the institutions they lead. To the extent that leaders and institutions are seen as legitimate, citizens should be more willing to make sacrifices on behalf of the group. Further, to the extent that groups are legitimate, citizens should be more invested in them, and group membership should play a greater role in the identity of citizens. For individuals, the value of participating in elections stems both from membership in valued community and from the opportunity to give voice. Because elections render governments legitimate, and citizenship in a legitimate government can function to bolster identity, voting is an act that can reciprocally strengthen both the individual and the group. Gonzalez and Tyler remind us that the right to vote is among the most central characteristics of group membership, and that disenfranchisement and the withholding of the right to vote are important forms of social exclusion or stigma (see also Uggen, Behrens, & Manza, 2005).

The act of voting is often considered as a form of decision making between candidates or on behalf of or against referenda. But in countries without compulsory voting, the study of decision making is relevant not merely in understanding how people choose between candidates, but also in that people decide to vote at all. Krueger and Acevedo examine voting from the premise that it is a broadly rational act. This functional premise is important, in part, because it testifies to the intelligence of the individual voter, and consequently to the possibility or promise of democracy. Krueger and Acevedo noted that because turnout is typically greater when elections are anticipated to be closely contested, the functions of voting cannot be reduced to the pure expression of values nor to a felt sense of obligation or duty. Rather, people may vote because of two interrelated concerns: First, they view their actions as diagnostic of the actions of like-minded others, and if like-minded others are more likely to vote, their desired candidates are more likely to prevail. Second, voting may be understood as a cooperative choice in an iterative game or social dilemma.

Thompson examines some of the problems that surround the question of early voting. He maintains that votes that take place at different times may be based on different information and carry different consequences, and for these reasons may be effectively unequal and hence undemocratic. In the course of his argument, he reminds us that the act of voting at a precinct on Election Day is a ritual that carries
with it an intangible but potentially important benefit of civic participation and civic mindedness. To the extent that voting serves functions such as these, rather than others that are more pragmatic or concrete, early voting may injure electoral participation, if not in its numbers then in its felt consequence.

**Differential Perspectives: Characteristics of the Voter**

The articles in the second section are broadly concerned with individual differences in the propensity to vote. Gronke and Toffey’s article, the first in this section, is related to two of the previous articles. Like Krueger and Acevedo, Gronke and Toffey study voting in the framework of decision making. Like Thompson, Gronke and Toffey examine the issue of early voting, although with a focus on the effects of liberalized early voting laws on the electorate, that is, which individuals are most likely to vote early. They find that the effects of personal characteristics, such as education, on early voting are dependent upon situational parameters such as state laws and the type of election. While early voting may increase turnout, it does not appear that the opportunity to vote early provides particular access to those who would otherwise be disenfranchised. Rather, in comparing early voters with Election-Day voters, the most substantial difference appears to be in age, with older voters typically more likely to make use of early voting opportunities.

Harder and Krosnick provide a close consideration of the diverse mechanisms, costs, and benefits that may lead a single voter or an aggregate to participate or not participate in the political process. In contrast to the received position that voting can be understood in what is essentially a cost-benefit framework (Downs, 1957), Harder and Krosnick examine the propensity to vote as a function of voter ability or expertise, voter motivation, and the institutional ease or difficulty of voting. They also consider the effect on voting of social networks, including peers, neighbors, and spouses.

Borgida and his colleagues examine political participation among the young. They consider beliefs concerning deliberation, and the effects of interventions in deliberative democracy in encouraging civic engagement. They examine a sample of U.S. high school students in a two-wave panel survey, with the focus the effects of participating in Project 540, a national program specifically designed to enhance deliberation about school- or community-based problems. Participation in the program was associated with several measures of civic skills. Further, the endorsement of deliberative norms is associated with subsequent growth in several political outcomes, including intentions to vote and engage in behaviors such as making phone calls on behalf of a cause that needs action. They discuss the implications of these findings for deliberative democracy theory, and, more pragmatically, for whether programs like Project 540 represent potentially effective vehicles for promoting deliberative democracy.
Dynamic Perspectives: The Roots of Political Participation

The third section includes three articles that examine the roots or origins of political behavior. Pacheco and Plutzer analyze the relationship between poverty and political participation and explore some of the mechanisms that may account for the self- and mutual perpetuation of these and other forms of inequality in America. They examine the hypothesis that phenomena as diverse as poor schools, encounters with the law, and early pregnancy may each contribute independently to withdrawal from the political sphere. These various characteristics of economic hardship can both directly and indirectly impact political participation among young adults.

Napier and Jost also consider the relationship between socioeconomic class and political participation: but rather than focusing on the fact of participation, they instead focus on its content or nature. Following Frank (2004), they consider the seeming paradox in which less wealthy Americans are likely to vote for candidates who do not support their economic interests. Napier and Jost embed this hypothesis in the context of classic research in authoritarianism. Using data from 19 countries, they examine a model of authoritarianism that includes four components of conventionalism, moral absolutism, obedience to authority, and cynicism. While all four of these are associated with intolerance, only the first two are associated with economic conservatism, and only the last two are associated with low socioeconomic status.

Finally, Ergun and her colleagues return to the issue of perceptions of legitimacy, focusing on the role of the media in shaping these perceptions, in particular, the manner in which the print media convey information about race-conscious redistricting and the role of party politics in the determination of district boundaries. They anticipate, for example, differences in the discussion of the perceived role and effects of minority concerns in northern and southern states. To the extent that the motivation to vote is a function of its perceived potential consequences, districts that are perceived to be unfairly drawn will reduce turnout and confidence in the fairness of the electoral process.

Following these contributions, Gian V. Caprara provides a perspective on American electoral politics as seen by a political psychologist from abroad. Caprara reflects on the prognosis for democracy and examines the roots of political behavior in terms of personality characteristics including political self-efficacy as well as the congruence between personal values and political ideologies.

Summary

Not all individuals can vote, and there are ethical as well as practical challenges that surround the issue of voting rights for at least some Americans. Not all eligible individuals do vote, with those who are most in need of social change
and social support among the least likely to participate. This relationship between socioeconomic status and political participation is a recipe for continuing inequalities, for when poor citizens do not vote, their interests are less likely to be reflected in progressive economic policies (Pacheco & Plutzer, this issue). Yet withdrawal from the political sphere has consequences for the person as well as for the broader society. If the act of voting fosters a sense of inclusion and the expression of values, then, in not voting, one is deprived of these benefits. If, as an act of civic engagement, voting leads to an increase in interpersonal trust (Brehm & Rahn, 1997), then, in not voting, one is likely to remain at the margins, skeptical of the intentions of those who lead.

The psychological rewards of voting are not at the margins of democracy, but at its core. Where citizenship is part of identity, the right to vote is fundamental and its implications far ranging for the individual as well as for the society. Although the democratic ideal of universal suffrage by an autonomous, informed and engaged electorate is formally unattainable, democracy remains a functional goal, an Adlerian fictional finalism toward which we must strive. The present collection, inspired by the promise of democracy, illuminates many of the obstacles that remain before us.

References

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The Psychology of Enfranchisement: Engaging and Fostering Inclusion of Members through Voting and Decision-Making Procedures

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Democratic systems have many advantages. They elicit perceptions of appropriateness and legitimacy, they engage the psychological investment and commitment of those participating in the system and invite the voluntary cooperation of these persons. We argue that these advantages are conferred in large part through two features of democratic institutions and societies: the participative nature of procedures used to elect leaders, and the fairness of decision-making procedures used by these leaders once in power. In particular, we emphasize the capacity of these procedures to engage community members and foster their inclusion, because they convey that members' concerns are taken seriously and that they are valued by the group that developed and employed those procedures, as well as by the leaders that utilize them. Implications for creating a sense of social inclusion in members of the population, and for encouraging public confidence among those who feel marginalized, in climates of distrust, and during times of crisis are discussed.

The classic research of Lewin nicely frames one perspective on the advantages and disadvantages of democracy. His studies show that democratic leadership builds voluntary cooperation. In groups that are democratically managed, people act in socially desirable ways irrespective of whether the leader is present. Group members do so, according to Lewin, because their internal motivations are engaged

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by democratic processes and, as a result, they are motivated to act on behalf of the group (Gold, 1999).

In Lewin’s studies, leaders sought to encourage or discourage behaviors using a variety of styles of motivation, including authoritarian and democratic leadership. A critical experimental distinction introduced in the Lewinian research approach is between behavior exhibited while the leader is present and behavior when the leader is absent and cannot either reward or punish behavior. It is found that, when an autocratic leader leaves the room, the behavior of the group members changes (work drops from occupying 52% to occupying only 16% of their time). When the leader is democratic, this change does not occur (i.e., work time only drops from 50% to 46%). Lewin argues that democratic leadership, which is participatory, engages the internal motivations of the boys in his study, so their behavior is no longer linked to the presence of the external forces represented by the leader.

This work clearly identifies and distinguishes between two sources of motivation. The first is external and reflects the contingencies in the environment by recognizing that behavioral choices can be shaped by altering the costs and benefits associated with various types of behavior. The second type of behavior is internally driven and is shaped by the traits, values, and attitudes of the person. These are the motivational forces developing from sources within the person and reflecting their own desires. When external contingencies are strong, individual differences in behavior do not emerge. Conversely, in the absence of strong external pressures, behavior reflects people’s attitudes and values. Thus, the engagement of internal, or social, motivations is especially key when the behaviors of interest are those that will occur outside of the surveillance of authorities. Such behavior is “voluntary” in the sense that it is not a reflection of the contingencies of the external environment.

This advantage of democracy—that it engages the willing involvement of its members—is widely argued to be linked to the stability and effectiveness of democratic groups. As an example, the willingness of members to make sacrifices for the group is an advantage of democracies in times of war (Levi, 1997; Reiter & Stam, 2002). While democracies are generally less likely to go to war, and are particularly unlikely to start wars, once involved, they are likely to prevail, due in particular to the morale of their publics. But, more broadly, the success of democratic government is traditionally viewed as lying in its ability to capture the loyalty of the populace.

What is the potential disadvantage of democracy? To achieve the advantages noted above, leaders must be constantly sensitive to the views of group members. They need to have legitimacy and cannot simply rule via the use of power (Tyler, 2006a). When they do, they lose the willing engagement of their followers who have the expectation that leaders will be chosen democratically and will use their authority appropriately.
Research shows that societies that are ruled through legitimacy are more efficient and effective. But what does it mean to be ruled through legitimacy? Psychologists French and Raven (1959) refer to legitimacy as social influence induced by feelings of obligation through appeals to an “internalized norm or value,” while Suchman (1995) argues that: “Legitimacy is a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions (p. 574).” Legitimacy serves as an additional form of power because people are influenced by the belief that the decisions made and rules enacted by others are in some way “right” or “proper” and ought to be followed, and as a result leaders and authorities are enabled to shape the behavior of others, without having to resort to efforts to control their incentives or sanctions (French & Raven, 1959). As Skogan and Frydl (2003) suggest, “legitimacy is a property that a rule or an authority has when others feel obligated to voluntarily defer to that rule or authority. In other words, a legitimate authority is one that is regarded by people as entitled to have its decisions and rules accepted and followed by others” (p. 297). The importance of legitimacy shows that subordinates “relate to the powerful as moral agents as well as self-interested actors; they are cooperative and obedient on grounds of legitimacy as well as reasons of prudence and advantage” (Beetham, 1991, p. 27).

This raises a critical issue: what actions can be taken in democratic societies or institutions to ensure that they are viewed as legitimate? In this piece, we focus on the joint roles of (a) voting in elections on the willingness of group members to view government as legitimate and to defer to their leaders in a democracy, and of (b) the exercise of fair decision-making procedures on the part of these leaders once in power for engaging the commitment of the population they seek to govern, as channels through which perceptions of legitimacy are established and sustained. In doing so, we consider what constitutes a “fair” or an “unfair” procedure. Furthermore, we also examine how the quality of both electoral processes and decision-making procedures can help to cultivate or to hinder a sense of inclusion among members of the population.

First, we focus on the manner in which leaders obtain their positions. One of the key features of democracy is the appropriateness of the manner in which leaders are chosen—typically by election, a procedure that legitimizes the leader’s right to make decisions on behalf of the groups (Tyler, 2006a). We will argue that voting is important symbolically because people want to have the opportunity to express their views about decisions that influence their lives. Furthermore, drawing upon research on procedural fairness, we argue that this is because being allowed to vote is an affirmation of one’s good standing in the group; it signals that one is entitled to the rights and status associated with membership (i.e., citizenship) in a group.

Second, we will extend the procedural justice argument to an examination of the relationship between perceptions of leaders’ procedural fairness and
perceptions of legitimacy, voluntary cooperation, and the level of social inclusion or exclusion experienced by those affected by those procedures. In social groups, ranging from small interacting groups, to large-scale membership in social collectives, members of those groups care deeply about their level of inclusion or exclusion (Abrams, Hogg, & Marques, 2005; Levine & Kerr, 2007; Williams, Forgas, & von Hippel, 2005), and readily read into treatment from authorities messages about their place within the social bodies that these leaders represent: the receipt of procedural fairness or unfairness contributes to one's sense of social inclusion or exclusion. As a result, group members' levels of commitment to, and cooperation with, the group are affected by the experience of fair and unfair procedures.

Building on this, we discuss the bidirectional relationship between perceptions of fairness and social inclusion and exclusion and explore the possibility that some segments of the population are more sensitive to elements of procedural fairness than are others. Finally, the power of fair and participative procedures to foster perceived legitimacy and community engagement, in general, and with greater impact in some segments of the population than in others, are considered in depth.

*Elements of Fair Procedures*

From a governmental perspective, procedural justice judgments are most useful to leaders if those within the community identify and distinguish them from outcome judgments and rely on distinct procedural justice assessments when evaluating the actions of government. Based upon research in organizational settings, it is expected that views about the fairness of procedures will, in fact, be dependent on distinct elements of these procedures that are not linked to the favorability or fairness of the outcomes that these procedures produce (Tyler & Blader, 2000). They are noninstrumental and nonmaterial in nature. A number of features such as whether the procedures allow input into evaluations, whether they require that objective information be used, whether they try to control the influence of bias, and so on, consistently contribute to perceptions of fair procedures (Leventhal, 1980; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Lind, 1992).

People's reactions to procedures are affected by two distinct aspects of the procedures: the quality of decision-making procedures and the quality of the treatment experienced by the individual. Consideration of the quality of decision-making procedures links to the elements of legal procedures and emphasizes issues of decision maker neutrality, the objectivity and factuality of decision making, and the consistency of rule application (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Lind, 1992). Quality of interpersonal treatment issues constitutes the second aspect of organizational processes. The quality of interpersonal treatment reflects the degree to which people were treated with politeness and dignity, concern for people's
right was expressed, and also includes other aspects of procedures that are not
directly linked to the decisions being made through the procedure.

Interestingly, each of these two aspects of procedures (quality of decision
making and quality of treatment) can potentially be linked to two sources of
procedures. That is, these two aspects can be identified within both the for-
mal procedures of groups, organizations, institutions, and societies, as well as
in the ways that authorities operate in interactions with them (see Blader & Tyler,
2003a,b). This four-component model examines the antecedents of overall pro-
cedural justice judgments by crossing the source of information about fairness-
related issues (from the formal organization, or from the individual authority
figure) and the type of fairness information they receive (quality of procedures
and quality of treatment). This model argues that each of the four components
defined by these two dimensions has an important role in the definition of the
fairness of procedures and provides a guideline for the types of evaluations that
compose overall evaluations of an organization’s procedural justice.

Elections and the Opportunity to Give Voice

The pioneering research of Thibaut and Walker (1975) established the em-
pirical validity of the procedural justice hypothesis; these authors showed that
disputants are more satisfied with, and willing to voluntarily accept, decisions
arrived at in fair ways. The focus of these authors was not upon the legitimation of
the decision maker, who was presented to the participants as a given, but upon the
fairness of the trial procedure through which that decision maker made a decision.
Despite this difference, the arguments made by Thibaut and Walker (1975) flow
directly from the earlier arguments of Lewin, in that the focus of these authors is on
how to obtain willing, voluntary acceptance of the decisions made by authorities.
In the case of Lewin the concern was with the willingness of group members to
continue working on group tasks when the leader is not present, while in the work
of Thibaut and Walker the issue was the willingness of disputants to adhere to a
legal agreement once they were out of court.

Thibaut and Walker (1975) present a model of control through which they
explain why people react positively to adversarial procedures for resolving dis-
putes. Their argument is that people focus upon the fairness of a procedure—that
is, procedural justice. This argument has been widely developed into a large body
of literature on procedural justice, and that literature has shown that people’s re-
actions to processes of government are heavily shaped by their views about the
fairness of different ways of making decisions and resolving disputes (Lind &
Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 2000).

The particular model of procedural justice developed by Thibaut and Walker
emphasizes people’s desire for voice or process control. They suggest that people
want to be able to present arguments to authorities before those authorities make