
UNIT 11 PARTICIPATION AND DISSENT*

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11.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit aims to provide a basic understanding of political participation and political dissent, their features and some important proponents who have emphasized their importance. After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- Comprehend the meaning of political participation;
- Understand what dissent is; and
- Analyze the relationship between participation and dissent.

11.1 INTRODUCTION

Political participation and political equality are the two main ideals of a democracy. In principle, they are both compatible but in practice, due to unequal participation, there is no political equality. This is a major problem in a representative government where accountability can be ensured by popular participation and it also allows the citizens to express their will. Political participation creates democracy from below and increases information of the people about politics of their country. Politically active and aware citizens act as a restraint on the government. A feeling of exclusion can arise even in a well established democracy as participation is not only about the form of political system, but also about how it is facilitated throughout the political cycle. It means that mere voting once in five years during elections is not enough, popular participation should be ensured in the intervening period between two elections as well. In the absence of political participation, a government loses its legitimacy and would require force to extend its rule, for ex. a dictator would not tolerate any opposition to his rule and creates an environment of fear in which there is no popular participation. Political thinkers like *J S Mill* and *Aristotle* believed

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that an individual can attain full human potential only by being an active participant in the political community. *Jean Jacques Rousseau* argued that individuals are more likely to accept a law which has been formulated by their participation and it also encourages community feeling among them. *Amartya Sen* sees freedom to participate as the main key to development. He says, “Participation can be seen to have intrinsic value for the quality of life. Indeed being able to do something through political action for oneself or for others is one of the elementary freedoms that people have reason to value.” Political thinkers from *Aristotle* to *John Dewey* have argued that political participation is vital for a government and guards against tyranny by ensuring governance through collective wisdom. It also promotes order and stability and can secure greatest good for the greatest number by allowing all citizens to express their views. However, given the diversity of any nation in terms of ethnicity, religion, language, region etc, ensuring maximum people’s participation is one of the major challenges in front of contemporary democracies.

11.2 MEANING OF PARTICIPATION

Sidney Verba and *Norman H Nie*, in their book *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality*, have defined political participation as ‘behaviour designed to affect the choice of governmental personnel and/or policies’. *Huntington* and *Nelson* in their book, *No Easy Choice: Political Participation in Developing Countries* define political participation as ‘activity by private citizens designed to influence governmental decision making’. In another definition of political participation, *H McClosky* says it is “the principal means by which consent is granted or withdrawn in a democracy and the rulers are made accountable to the ruled”. In general terms, it can be defined as those activities of citizens which affect politics. Political participation is relevant to all forms of governments, but it is central to a democracy. Verba and Nie have aptly put it — “Where few take part in decisions there is little democracy; the more participation there is in decisions, the more democracy there is”.

According to *Robert H Salisbury*, there are three intellectual usages behind political participation. One, it is regarded as a legitimizing act. As long as the citizens participate in government affairs through voting or other means, they give consent to the decisions and legitimize them. This is the central idea of a democracy. Second, there is the instrumental view of participation which sees it as a necessary means for securing political power which is required to recover losses, increase gains or enhance benefits of life for oneself or the social sector. This view has been underlining force for struggles to expand suffrage and mobilize voters. Third, the general interpretation of participation is associated mainly with *Rousseau* and *J S Mill* who saw it as a solvent of social conflicts. *Rousseau* argued that citizens would share a common understanding of general good by political participation and would be able to agree how resources should be allocated. *Mill* saw participation as a learning process and those who stay outside it will not be able to learn the rules required to reach consensus judgements.

C B Macpherson has given two requirements for the existence of a participatory democracy. First, there should be reduction in social and economic inequality. Second, people should see themselves and act as exerters and enjoyers of development instead of merely being consumers of government policies. *Samuel*

Huntington has argued that excessive demands are being placed on the political system which is eroding government authority. Too much democracy leads to decline in government authority and hence, there should be a fine balance between government authority and limits on it. *Giovanni Sartori* has said that the anti-elitists have neglected the vertical dimension (leadership) of democracy extension as they are focused on horizontal dimension i.e. participation. He supported an informed, active and interested citizenry pitching for participation in real decision making process. The *United Nations Human Development Report* gives importance to formal political participation through electoral systems and political parties. It also makes a case for better governance of political parties, increasing participation of women and minorities and curbing the role of money in politics.

11.2.1 Types of Participation

Political participation can be classified in *two* categories – conventional and unconventional. The conventional participation is routine behaviour that uses channels of the government. It can be supportive as it could be a ceremonial act of expressing support for the government or the country. Conversely, it could also try to seek a modification in the government policy. It could involve contacting the party members, politicians and government representatives or activities pertaining to the election process like campaigning and voting. Unconventional participation is relatively *uncommon* behaviour working against government channels or the dominant culture and hence, it is stressful for *both* participants and their opponents. Such type of participation may not structurally be embedded in the political system and that is why, it can be illegal. A number of activities like unlawful demonstrations, boycotts, signing the petitions, political violence etc come under its ambit. It has been successful in a number of occasions in influencing government decisions – like the civil rights movement in the US. There are three features shared by people who participate in unconventional ways:

- Group consciousness
- Sense of political efficacy
- Mistrust of the political system.

Initial studies on political participation focused mainly on activities like campaign and voting. However, in the 1960s, the scope was widened to include unconventional activities like protesting and petitioning. Such activities were also called elite challenging as they posed a new challenge before the ruling elites. With the advent of the internet, online participation is becoming a new form of political participation through which people express their political views.

Michael Rush and *Phillip Althoff Nelson* in their 1971 book, *An Introduction to Political Sociology* listed the following activities as political participation:

- Holding or seeking political/administrative office.
- Active/passive membership in a political organization.
- Active/passive membership in a quasi-political organization (like pressure groups).
- Participation in public meetings, demonstrations etc.
- Participation in informal political discussion.

- General interest in politics.
- Voting for elections.
- Indifference or lack of interest in political activities leading to political apathy.

11.2.2 Levels of Participation

Verba and Nie have given various levels of political participation.

- **Inactives** – These are the people who rarely vote and keep a distance from political organizations as well.
- **Voting Specialists** – Such people vote but apart from that, they do not participate in political activities.
- **Parochial Participants** – They neither vote nor do they participate in election campaigns or civic associations. But, they are not averse to contacting local officials for personal issues.
- **Communalists** – Such people mainly stay engaged in local community politics and their education and income is similar to that of the campaigners.
- **Campaigners** – They not only vote but also like to campaign. Their education level is higher than that of average voters and they are able to take clear cut political positions due to clear party affiliation.
- **Complete Activists** – Such individuals regularly promote a political party and its political ideals.

11.2.3 Factors Impacting Political Participation

There are a number of factors that have an impact on political participation. They are listed below.

- **Psychological Factors** – An individual's psychology plays an important role in his level of political participation. Lonely people like politics as it involves meeting people at various levels. Some people want to be powerful and participate in politics to achieve this aim. Another important aspect is of system trust, which refers to an individual's trust in the political system including the political leaders and parties. If the political system is trusted by people, there is likely to be high political participation. A system that is not trusted may not see high level of political participation from its citizens.
- **Social Factors** – Education level of an individual is critical in deciding his/her inclination for political participation. Better educated people have a good civic sense and confidence to air their political views. Similarly, people with higher incomes participate more than others. Occupation is also a factor here. Teachers, traders and government servants have higher levels of political participation as their occupations are directly impacted by government policies. Sex and age also play a part in participation. Women tend to participate less than men in political activities due to their domestic duties, lack of resources, caste factor and lack of education. India's economic survey of 2017-18 highlights low level of women's participation in politics. It adds that factors like lack of confidence, financial resources and support

from family are some of the factors that do not allow women to participate in political activities. It further adds that in the Parliament, women MP's constitute only 12% of the total membership. *Age* is also factor as middle aged people participate more than youths and older ones. Other factors include residence (rural or city) and religion.

- **Political Factors** – In case the voting rules are simple, there is high political participation. Too much or too low confidence in the government can lower political participation. Political parties also impact participation through their various activities during and after elections like rallies, mobilizing voters, campaigns etc. Grass root democracy at village and city level also plays a part in sensitizing citizens towards political issues. There are a number of mobilizing agencies like the media, associations and civic groups which play an important part in increasing political participation in a country.
- **Social Capital** – The network of relationships among people in a society is called social capital. These relationships can be at individual level or through membership of civil society organisations, religious organisations or interest groups. Generally, high social capital leads to high level of political participation in a society. It helps in maintenance of democracy by impacting quality and quantity of political participation. Civil society organisations and other voluntary organisations have political interests which are fulfilled by mobilising their members leading to increase in political participation. The main dimensions of social capital like political expertise, frequency of political interaction and network size, all of them impact an individual's political participation.

In contrast to political participation, one can also see political apathy in a country which is characterized by a feeling of indifference towards politics. It can be witnessed in the decline in voter turnout in a country. Political apathy could breed corruption and moral decline among leaders as they do not face public scrutiny. Youths and minorities are generally seen as sections that do not have interest in politics. Some people may be content with the political system and hence, do not feel any need to participate. Others may feel that there is no scope for change since every political party behaves in a similar fashion which leads to political apathy. Some may not be sure of their own political leanings while others may not have time and energy for politics.

11.2.4 Globalisation and Online Participation

The internet has become an important medium for political participation. People sign petitions online while they also express political support or protest through social media these days. This has prompted the political parties to maintain active social media cells which try to influence public opinion and generate favourable political participation. Online participation can give voice to the marginalised sections like women and help in their empowerment as well. Some *critics* believe that online participation does not reflect the reality of offline world and these opinions can be artificially manufactured using technology as a tool. Globalisation is blurring the political boundaries at the global level leading to what some experts call Global Citizenship. This is evident from increasing concerns over human rights violations and efforts to address climate change. These issues generate political participation beyond borders as global survival

is at stake. In this context, globalisation seems to have transformed the meaning of citizenship and political participation. Global outcry can put pressure on a government to address concerns of its citizens. However, internet can also play its part in downfall of a government as was the case during the *Arab Spring* in West Asia. This can prompt the state to crackdown on online participation to ensure its own stability.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What is the concept of political participation? Elaborate.

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2) What are the determining factors of political participation?

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11.3 DISSENT

Democracies are based on consent by the people that they are ready to be governed by their elected representatives. However, there may be people who hold other views and have difference of opinion with government policies. Dissent is defined as “an unwillingness to cooperate with an established source of authority, which can be social, cultural, or governmental.” As already explained, dissent is unconventional type of political participation and it may not be embedded in the political system; that is why, it can be seen as illegal by the state. Activities like protests, marches, boycotts, self-immolations and civil disobedience are seen as acts of dissent. In its extreme form, dissent can turn violent and see a revolution (overthrow of the present government) as its aim and would invite retaliation from the government of the day. Dissent can be collective or individual and organized or spontaneous. A certain type of political dissent is found in all democracies in form of moral criticism of the system and emphasising systemic problems. This is basically public scrutiny of government policies. It does not aim to achieve political power (unlike revolutionaries) and resorts to critical evaluation of political system and culture. By using violence, political dissidents would lose higher moral ground of defending people’s interests and would be treated as extremists who want to achieve political power.

Dissent is both feared and appreciated. If it happened in the glorious, unthreatening past or takes place in distant lands, then dissent is appreciated. Some famous dissenters include *Martin Luther*, *Socrates*, *M K Gandhi* and *Galileo*. If they are successful, dissenters are appreciated and can be targeted if unsuccessful. However, dissent would look unattractive to those whose power is threatened by it.

In his book, *A theory of Justice*, John Rawls has argued that civil disobedience helps in maintaining just institutions. Along with free and regular elections and an independent judiciary, civil disobedience used with restraint and judgement can strengthen just institutions. *Marxists* believe that communist societies are free of political disobedience as everyone will do as per his capacity and get as per his need. Also, people identify themselves with community well being instead of individual interests in a communist society. Social contract theorist, *Thomas Hobbes* in his book, *Leviathan*, has argued that individuals consent to obey the state in return for being protected against violence and threats of violence. If the state cannot provide protection, citizens have the right to disobey its rules. Another social contract theorist, *John Locke* in his book, *Second Treatise*, has argued that a state is legitimate because it enjoys consent of its citizens. The purpose of the state is to enforce the law of nature and in case it is unable to do so, the citizens no longer are obliged to obey the government. *J S Mill* has further said, "If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind". Dissent is associated with critical thinking which seeks to question accepted notions of authority, truth and meaning. *Immanuel Kant* called it 'leading an examined life'. *Michel Foucault*, one of the main critics of liberalism and the *Frankfurt School* regarded dissent as positive and it's near absence in the 19th- and 20th-century democracies created problems in these states. Contemporary democracies are believed to encourage self-censorship, ideals of normality, or intellectually restricted forms of culture. Such a democracy would hinder critical thinking; minimize dissent and public deliberation.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Discuss John Rawl's and Thomas Hobbes's views on dissent.

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11.3.1 Democracy and Dissent

The relationship between the state and dissent has been a *complex* one where the state usually sees dissent as a threat and tries to regulate it. Historically, authoritarian governments have never given space to opposition in their political

sphere. From *Hitler, Stalin to Mao*, all dictators have systematically eliminated any political dissent which could have otherwise threatened their authority. Hitler used means like civil service purges, concentration camps and unfair trials to settle score with his opponents while Mao attacked intellectuals, removed party officials and also limited organized opposition. Similar repressive policies were also adopted by Joseph Stalin to keep his authority supreme in the former Soviet Union. In such political systems (which are also described as state terror by some experts), deference and conformity run high due to the fear of persecution. However, in democracies, there is always room for expressing one's views which may be opposed to the government of the day. Some of the rights that deal with expressing dissent in a democracy include:

- The Freedom of Speech and Expression – French philosopher *Voltaire* had famously said, “I may not agree with what you have to say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” In a democratic country, right to freely express views forms the backbone of freedom. There should be no external interference in an individual's practice of this right. However, one also has to take into account the fact that this right needs to be cautiously used as feelings of others also should be kept in mind.
- Freedom of Association and Assembly – Positively, it would mean that an individual has a right to be associated with the groups or organizations of his choice. Negatively, it means that a person can avoid association with organizations where his interests do not match. Both these aspects of this right should be protected by law of the land. A person has the freedom of assembly, but it is not the freedom to assemble at *any* given place, since properties of others cannot be violated.
- Political Participation – In a democracy, political participation can be seen as protecting one's right to dissent. By exercising this right, an individual can vote against a government whose policies are contrary to his/her interests.
- Due Process of Law – This right protects one's other rights concerning dissent. Due process makes sure that an impartial procedure exists by which any act of dissent can be examined.

However, it could be erroneous to assume that the right to dissent is fully protected in democracies. If a government feels insecure and threatened during internal unrest, it is likely to use force against dissent depending on the medium of protest as well. The level of threat perceived by the government from an act of dissent would also determine its response. Academics believe that a democracy is less likely to see dissent as a threat as ‘democracies are generally more legitimate forms of government as well as more tolerant of dissident behaviour’. Democratic systems also provide ‘institutionalised and legitimate channels’ through which citizens and political opponents can express their dissent. This benefits the government as well as the dissenters as the opposition groups are *less* inclined to use violence to voice their discontent. Hence, their actions are not perceived as threats by the government which in turn, remains less inclined to use repression against dissenters. It means that there is no place for violence as a tool to be used in a democracy for expressing dissent. In a democracy, right to dissent protects one's most basic civil liberties against the government's emphasis on

security. It allows a public debate between liberty and security through public institutions that safeguard free speech and debate, the media, judiciary and ultimately, through general elections. If a society has to be truly democratic, free and critical thinking will form an essential part of it. It was only due to critical thinking that *Galileo* and *Copernicus* were able to prove that the Sun is at the centre of the solar system. There are many other instances to show that dissent has been successful – it was dissent that ended apartheid in South Africa. It can help in the achievement of a less unjust society.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Which rights protect a person’s right to dissent in a democracy?

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11.4 LET US SUM UP

Political participation and dissent are two important virtues of any democracy. Participation ensures that the government remains accountable to the people. Conventional participation adds legitimacy to government policies while unconventional participation (dissent) like protests and boycotts challenge the government. It is a challenge for modern day democracies as to how to increase political participation and decrease dissent at the same time. In democracies, non-violent dissent can be expressed through rights like – freedom of speech and expression, freedom of association and assembly and due process of law. Even political participation also allows an individual to express dissent as one can vote against a government whose policies a person does not like. But, use of violence for dissent would invite repression from the state as it is perceived as a threat to democracy. For a society to be democratic in spirit, critical thinking has to be a vital part of it.

11.5 REFERENCES

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11.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Your answer should include views of Sidney Verba and Norman H Nie, Huntington, Nelson and H McClosky.
- 2) Highlight psychological, social and political factors apart from social capital.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) John Rawls argued that dissent helps in maintaining just institutions; Thomas Hobbes highlighted the social contract between the individual and the state.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Your answer should include rights like freedom of speech and expression, freedom of association and assembly, political participation and due process of law.

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