Understanding the costs and benefits of political participation

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Overview

Democracy is a human invention, a “design” that serves certain functions. My hypothesis is that citizens do not understand its functions very well, theoretically, and, as a result, they often fail collectively to take full advantage of what it can do. Of primary interest is citizens’ understanding how political participation is ineffective in advancing self-interest or the parochial interest of a small group but is effective in advancing the common good. If citizens around the world understood this argument, they would still disagree on what constitutes the common good, but surely some of the current malfunctions of democracy could be mitigated.

A secondary interest is citizens’ understanding of the idea of government as a means of solving social dilemmas, by using the power of sanctions to force cooperation. A social dilemma, in this technical sense of the term, is a situation in which people are faced with the same choice of acting in their self-interest (defecting, e.g., stealing property, over-using common resources such as water or fish, or polluting them) or acting for the general good (cooperating, e.g., respecting property, paying taxes that provide social insurance, showing up for jury duty). Defection is often subject to legal punishment. Support for such government sanctions, e.g., laws against pollution, through political action is also a form of cooperation (so long as the sanctions are needed). It is usually
easier and cheaper to provide political support than to voluntarily give up the benefits of defection in the absence of sanctions. The idea that government is a design to provide for the common good in this way is not widely understood; many people seem to think that government sanctions are never justified (except perhaps for military defense and property protection).

These two kinds of understanding should not be so difficult to understand, compared, say, to beginning algebra. Thus, failures of understanding can be attributed to failures of education. The proposed research will not include full-scale educational interventions but will include exploratory studies of the effectiveness of short educational interventions (explanations with study questions), as tests of the difficulty of understanding the concepts of interest.

The project will consist of questionnaire studies (including the interventions) done on the World Wide Web. Subjects will be adolescents and adults, in the U.S. and other countries, much in the spirit of the work of Adelson (1971). Most of the work will be done with college students, because it will be easy to recruit them in several different countries.

**Background in prior research, and conceptual framework**

The current project grows out of my interest in parochialism, which I define (following others) as decisions in which people support their in-group even when the consequences are worse for them individually and worse for everyone on the whole (Baron, 2001; Baron, Altman & Kroll, 2005). The immediate precursors of this proposal are three recent papers (in order of completion, Baron, 2012a; Baron, Ritov & Greene, 2013; Baron, 2012b), which had two main results. One was that people not only showed parochialism in hypothetical voting decisions but also believed that this was their moral duty. We showed this, among other ways, in a study of Jewish and Palestinian students in Israel.

The second result grew out of an incidental observation. Many subjects thought that their moral
duty was to vote for their individual self-interest, regardless of their in-group or the world. The 2012b paper confirmed this finding and found that, among Americans, those who held this view were opposed to taxation and to government spending that did not seem to benefit them personally.

I argued that both parochialism and self-interest voting are supported by a naïve theory of democracy, which is that it is means of self-defense, either through defense of an in-group or of oneself. This is a misunderstanding, because democracy is extremely inefficient at achieving this goal, and there are much better ways to achieve it. It is inefficient because of the small effect of any individual action on the final outcome, hence the small effect on anyone’s narrow self-interest (Downs, 1957). The usual demonstration of this inefficiency involves calculation of the expected self-interested utility of voting, with the assumption that voting has no effect unless the vote is pivotal, in which case the probability of an effect is roughly proportional to $1/N$, where $N$ is the number of voters. But the line of reasoning is essentially the same if vote share matters too. The effect of a vote is diluted by a factor of $N$.

But, if people have altruistic goals, concern about the good of others, democratic voting provides a counterweight to this minuscule effect on self-interest, namely, the large number of people affected by the outcome (Edlin, Gelman & Kaplan, 2007, 2008). In a utilitarian calculation, the effect must be multiplied by $N$, assuming that only voters are affected by the outcome. This multiplication totally cancels the dilution caused by being one voter among $N$. And the total benefit can be orders of magnitude larger if we think in terms of effects on those who do not vote, such as children, foreigners, and future people who do not exist. The larger the circle we consider, the more the effect of a vote is magnified. Thus, voting, and political participation in general, is most efficient as a way of realizing our altruistic concerns for humanity, just as it is least efficient as a means of self-defense.

This is not pie-in-the-sky idealism. Many people already think this way. I and others have found large individual differences in whether people think of political participation as primarily
a means of self-defense or as a way of promoting their concept of the common good, often at a world level (Buchan et al., 2009, 2011).

**Research to be done**

The research will extend earlier questionnaire studies (Baron, 2012a,b; Baron et al., 2013) in two ways. One is to design simpler forms of some of the questions, which were unnecessarily complex, especially for adolescents. One basic format will be to present a scenario with a simple conflict (like that used in these studies) between voting for self-interest or for the interests of all. Examples will be realistic, such as people who are in the oil business who also believe that carbon emissions need to be reduced. Their self-interest conflicts with the interests of all, in their own view. The main question will be how such people should vote.

Additional follow-up questions will ask explicitly about whether voting for self-interest is worthwhile in terms of self-interest alone, and whether voting for the general good is worthwhile, in terms of both self-interest and altruism. Other questions will ask explicitly about what subjects were taught in school that would bear on the items at issue — with “nothing” as a possible answer — and how they think their family and friends would answer the questions. Finally, I will ask about past political participation (in any form), future expectations, and the participation of family and friends. I do not expect understanding of the principles of interest to correlate in any consistent direction with these influences, but greater participation, and expectation of participation based on social norms, might affect the extremity and consistency of answers.

I will also design new questions in which scenarios systematically manipulate the benefit to self of a policy option and the number of others who benefit from a different option. In all studies, addition to examining the conflict between self and the general good, I shall include parallel items concerning the conflict between in-groups and the general good.
Previous studies examined differences between groups (Israeli and Palestinian students) or people with different political ideologies. The research will examine national differences, and additional questions will be added to examine national differences in civics education, as recalled by the subjects. The nations examined will be chosen largely out of convenience, but I believe that I can get roughly equivalent samples of college students in the U.S., Canada, the U.K., India, Ghana, Singapore, New Zealand, Germany, and Israel. I have contacts in all these places who can help, and Indians may be easy to recruit through Mturk. Germany and Israel may require translations. India and Ghana of particular interest because they are poorer than all the others, and Ghana is a relatively new democracy. All the countries differ in which political issues are salient. Examples will be chosen based on issues in all nations. All of these nations, to varying degrees, have issues involving conflict between majority and minority ethnic groups. Citizens are often conflicted about their identities as citizens of a nation or members of an ethnic group. So it will be possible to examine the role of ethnic loyalty in parochialism.

I plan to study development in two ways. One is to compare college freshmen and seniors, also looking the effects of college major (to look at specific education effects). If time allows, I will examine change over one year as a function of courses taken. I will also recruit a sample of high-school students from both public and private schools, again with a view to comparing freshmen and seniors.

A final component of the research, done after the others (except the one-year longitudinal study), is to develop brief training modules and examine their effect on questionnaires, both immediately and after a delay. I shall also examine the effects of direct instruction in arguments based on the probability/altruism argument described earlier. (This may be a challenge, but suitable visual materials might help meet it.)
Relevance to Spencer Foundation priorities

The Foundation is interested in the determinants of civic engagement. I think it is important to distinguish engagement in the service of promoting good policies from engagement on behalf of self-interest or parochial interest. Promotion of the former sort of engagement may benefit from understanding of the theoretical nature of political participation, the idea that, by design, it works best for those who think of its effect on large numbers of people, and the purpose of government itself as an efficient means of preventing defection and encouraging cooperation. Although I do not propose to study motivation itself (the origins of altruistic concern for others, for example), I should note that motivation may itself arise from understanding. Political activism of the most useful sort may arise from an understanding of why it is worthwhile, especially among people who already have some concern for humanity but do not believe that they can make a difference (if only because they do not realize that the number of people affected can compensate for the small effect that any individual can have).

If successful, this proposal could lead to the development of new educational approaches for teaching citizenship. A better understanding of this sort of democratic theory could improve the functioning of governments around the world. Such improvements in understanding could be low-hanging fruit in the effort to improve the world situation.

I will do all the work myself.

References

Baron, J. (2001). Confusion of group-interest and self-interest in parochial cooperation on behalf


