

Creative Participation and the expansion of political engagement

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To cite this work:

Theocharis, Y., & de Moor, J. (2021, April 26). [Creative participation and the expansion of political engagement](https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1972). In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. Oxford University Press. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1972>

Summary

Creative participation refers to citizens' invention of, and engagement in, new action forms that aim to influence, or take responsibility for, the common good in society. By definition, these action forms are constantly evolving and cannot be listed or summarized. Yet some, like guerrilla gardening, have over time become established in political repertoires, and specific arenas are known to be particularly productive sites for their development. These include in particular the internet, and lifestyles and consumption. The constant changes in how citizens become active represented by creative participation present considerable challenges for scholars of political participation – both in terms of theory and methodology. In particular, such forms test our ability to distinguish political from non-political activities. However, the 'politicalness' of creative participation is often subtle and implicit, and therefore hard to establish. Yet being able to do so is essential for an ongoing assessment of the quality of participatory democracy. With conventional forms of participation declining and creative participation on the rise, scholars must be able to agree on definitions and operationalisations that allow for the comparison of participatory trends. For instance, a key concern has been whether creative forms of participation crowd out more conventional ones, like voting or lobbying politicians. Developments in survey research have been able to show that this is rarely the case and that creative participation may in fact increase conventional participation. In

addition, qualitative research methods like focus groups and ethnography, allow for more open-ended explorations of this elusive research topic. As to who participates, creative participation has enabled traditionally underrepresented groups like women and young people to catch up with, and sometimes overtake, those older men who have long dominated conventional political participation. Still, education remains a key obstacle even to creative participation. The Covid-19 crisis that took hold of the world in 2020 has compromised access to collective action and public space. It has thereby once more put the onus on citizens to engage creatively with ways to influence, and take responsibility for, society. At the same time, the crisis presents a need and opportunity for political participation scholarship to engage more deeply with theoretical debates about what it means to be political or to participate.

Keywords

political behaviour, political participation, creative participation, consumerist politics, lifestyle politics, digitally networked participation, online participation, digital media

Creative participation and the expansion of political engagement

What if putting names on plants could make people look at them in a different way and could consequently promote social change? With this question, Sophie Leguil, a French botanist and campaigner living in London, tried to promote the transformation of London's urban landscape by chalking the names of wild plants growing in the pavements of Hackney (The Guardian, 2020). Following a successful chalk campaign in France, Leguil set up the "More Than Weeds" campaign to change perceptions around urban plants in Britain. She eventually won permission to chalk up Hackney's highways to highlight the forgotten flora. Why bother, someone might ask? Leguil, as well as for other rebel botanists across Europe, aimed to "raise awareness of the presence, knowledge and respect of these wild plants on sidewalks" (The Guardian, 2020). This awareness of urban wild flowers began in 2017, when the French government banned the use of pesticides in parks, streets and other spaces. The rebel botanists chalked up plants' names on pavements. Their photos gathered as many as 127,000 likes and 7 million views on social media. But unless acquiring permission, like Leguil did, chalking plant names in the UK is illegal and a rebel botanist could be fined up to £2,500 for painting any picture, letter, sign, or other mark on a path, highway surface, tree or other structure. Still, a fearless tree name chalker said to *The Guardian* "I'll keep labelling as I go on my daily walks. I think it's really tapped into where people are right now". The rebel botanists follow in the footsteps of guerilla gardeners who are also concerned with making urban landscapes more than concrete jungles. Guerilla gardeners have been engaged in the beautification of cities by gardening without permission on pavements, abandoned sites, and other uncared for areas. According to the rebel botanist, such creative acts can give people a quick connection with nature, thus having a welcomed impact on their mental health: "It's brought me a great amount of joy" (The Guardian, 2020).

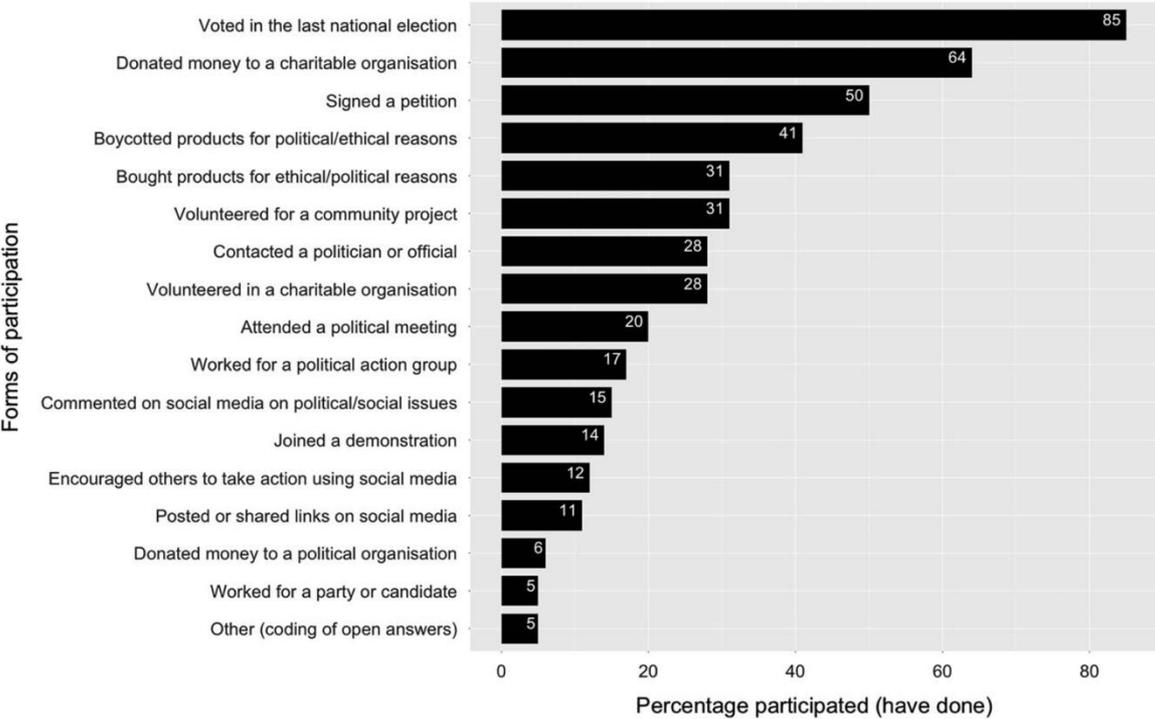
Rebel botanism is just one of the countless ways in which people engage creatively with their community, environment and politics. These acts are many, extremely diverse and can hold great importance to the people involved. They are also very public acts. Many are also illegal, implying that people are motivated enough to take legal risks. Thinking about the motivations, the nature, and the impact of creative participatory acts, the political scientist faces a challenge deciding how to classify them. Is rebel botanism **political** participation? What would be the particular *political* issue here? Which relevant authority are the rebel botanists supposed to be targeting with their acts and what exactly are their demands? What *collective* problem is being resolved? At first glance, it is unclear whether these acts represent a clear political campaign with a goal to promote social change.

However, a deeper look into this case would likely reveal environmentalist motivations about how people relate to nature. One can easily imagine that this campaign is an effort to reconnect people to nature with the aim of addressing issues of environmental destruction. Moreover, going back to the work of Walter Benjamin on the politics of aesthetics, engaging directly in ‘beautifying’ the city could in itself be seen as a political act. These speculations make clear that we need to have considerable background knowledge about motivations and individual understandings of politics to judge the political quality of these campaign.

A further challenge is that while many in number, very few of these acts will grow to become part of the established repertoire of participation, thus rendering political participation forever elusive. As Theocharis & van Deth (2018) found, most such activities remain confined in small circles due to their very specific context-dependent use, carried out by a very small percentage of the population compared to other types of activities (see Figure 1). Still, some will become established forms of participation with force. One example is that of changing one’s profile picture on social media to support a cause. In 2016 Facebook’s design team noticed that users had been changing their profile pictures to support causes. They used the #ProfilesForPeace

campaign to introduce picture frames that enabled people to show support for their favorite causes by embedding a campaign filter (Figure 2). This feature would later become part of the “Facebook Social Good” segment of the service, capitalizing even more on users’ creativity by allowing the custom creation of profile picture frames to “inspire the world around you”. By 2020, this small act had become a well-established method to express political opinions through social media. This considerably complicates the work of political participation scholars who are no longer able to define a priori what counts as political participation and ‘tally’ its occurrence. The diversification of political participation into an endless stream of new ‘creative’ and ‘unconventional’ forms of action thus poses considerable theoretical, conceptual, and methodological challenges for political participation scholars (van Deth, 2010).

Figure 1: Frequency of forms of participation among the German public



Source: Theocharis & van Deth (2018, p. 149); category “other” represents creative forms of participation inductively collected by the respondents through an open question (see also section “Methods of Research”).

We engage with these challenges by discussing the main research questions being addressed in the field of creative participation research and accompanying methodological challenges. We focus in particular on two areas of activism that have been most prolific in generating new and creative action forms, some of which have become common in the last two decades: online activism and consumerist and lifestyle politics. We conclude by outlining two timely venues that we consider particularly important in understanding how this field moves forward: the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the use of public space and creative political responses to that, and the need to strengthen the theoretical foundations of what we mean by ‘political’ and ‘participation’.

Big questions in the field

Some of the major questions preoccupying scholars of political participation concern (a) the definition and measurement of political participation, (b) the decline of its most traditional manifestations and the rise of some of its most unconventional manifestations and (c) what this all means for participatory inequality. All three questions are strongly connected with creative participation, which has been defined as the ways in which “people from different walks of life in the mature democracies of the Western world develop their politically productive capacities into creative activities to take responsibility for the common good of their immediate community and society at large”, including “surging forms of creative political action [that] are characterized by individuals redefining the meaning of politics and taking politics into their own hands” (Micheletti, 2010, pp. 1–2).

Creative participation as a political act?

It is useful to state from the beginning that political participation is an evolving phenomenon whose definition tends to change along with societal norms. For example, as late as 1965

demonstrations were described by Lester Milbrath as something looked upon by some as “undignified”. Strikes were also described as “behaviour designed to disrupt the normal operation of democratic political process or to dislodge a regime from office by violent means”. For these reasons, these activities did not fit into the description of political involvement in the US (Milbrath, 1965, p. 18). Yet by the late 1970s, protesting was extremely prevalent and accepted in society. Theorising the role of demonstrations, strikes, occupations and even illegal activities had become necessary for understanding the different ways in which people were raising their voice in-between the casting of ballots (Barnes & Kaase, 1979).

Previous work has provided an extensive overview of the evolution of political participation (Theocharis & van Deth, 2018a). It has concluded that the definition of the concept has been changed alongside the expansion of its manifestations. Participation used to refer to acts that relate directly to institutionalized venues for citizens to influence democratic government. One can think of voting, being a party member, and contributing to a political party as typical examples. But during the last two decades the concept has opened up to include sharing political hashtags on social media, working with others in a neighbourhood beautification project, or being politically vegan (de Moor, 2017; Kalte, 2020; Theocharis, 2015).

This expansion of creative acts that resemble very little of what has been traditionally perceived as participation has led scholars to wonder whether continuously stretching the definition risks losing its substance. A related concern is whether such participation is good for democracy (van Deth, 2010). In light of this, scholars have tried to rethink the concept’s definition. Van Deth, for example, argued that a solution for not letting participation be “everything” would be to a priori exclude specific areas (such as family, schools and workplace) and use a more substantive, and problem-oriented research perspective (van Deth, 2001). Further developing this idea, van Deth (2016) and Theocharis (2015) developed a framework aimed at using a rules-based system for defining political participation. The system ensures shared standards for

conceptualizing and measuring different manifestations. A growing number of studies have been subjecting this framework to empirical and theoretical scrutiny (Andersen et al., 2020; de Moor, 2017; Ohme, de Vreese, & Albæk, 2018).

Yet, until such approaches are more widely used in the literature, the risk of considering everything as political participation remains. Why is that a problem? Considering everything as participation makes it very hard to develop a shared understanding and measurement practice for a behaviour that is a strong indicator of democratic quality. A politically active citizenry is the lifeblood of democracy. While who should participate in what ways and how often are questions debated by political philosophers for centuries, it is clear that an informed, responsive and active citizenry is better placed in holding accountable those in power than a non-responsive and inactive one. A complexity, therefore, emerges when “politically active” tends to describe just a few institutionalised activities which, while fundamental, only represent part of how people participate politically.

For years, comparative political science research has focused on voting and party membership as an indicator of democratic health. Scholars have at the same time cautioned about the implication of these trends for democratic health (Blais, Gidengil, & Nevitte, 2004; Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000; van Biezen, Mair, & Poguntke, 2012). But evidence showing the diversification of participation (including creative forms) means that the big question of evaluating democratic health – at least as measured by participatory trends – does not have a straightforward answer. Those who see electoral- and party-oriented activities as the sole measure for democratic health are bound to make more pessimistic predictions about the fate of participation in democracies. This is because a decline of this type of participation has been observed in many advanced democracies (though not in all and not consistently). At the same time, those who recognise a diversification of participation are bound to see a brighter picture. But their analysis is at risk of remaining vague unless they can find ways to distinguish political

from non-political activities. In short, if the definition of participation is not something scholars can agree upon, then they will speak across each other when assessing the health of democracy.

Against this background a third important question follows. What if creative forms such as those described in the first section of this contribution become increasingly more widely used by citizens with profiles that are traditionally excluded from the political arena? Some scholars and pundits have previously expressed scepticism about the utility of expressive and creative participatory forms. Their approaches have focused mostly on their lack of tangible effects in the political process. But such a development could be good news for democracy and participatory inequality, even if engagement through these acts does not conform to the traditional participation paradigm. People who would otherwise remain disengaged can use these expressive and creative acts to explore new ways to engage with politics. Even if crossing that threshold does not necessarily bring them closer to *formal* political institutions, it often allows them to target them or address specific problems within their community. Most importantly, they allow them to see an immediate impact. This is important as it is precisely the lack of perceived impact that turns off many people from the political arena, especially the younger ones (Cammaerts, Bruter, Banaji, Harrison, & Anstead, 2014) .

A politically indifferent citizen who becomes frustrated with the way her neighbourhood looks, may decide to chalk the names of daisies on a pavement, like those she saw doing it the other day. A citizen that becomes outraged after watching a YouTube a video depicting the violent arrest of a black person by a local policeman and decides to tweet #BlackLivesMatter may decide to follow-up with a local protest event. In the example of rebel botanists, photos of chalked up pavements gathered 127.000 likes and 7 million views on social media. Especially at the age of social media, by engaging in these inexpensive, creative acts citizens in both of these cases are likely to see the immediate impact of their actions on the issue they are trying to address (Zuckerman, 2014, p. 156). The variety of these acts is only limited by participants'

creativity. Table 1 displays a few examples of participatory acts that respondents in the surveys by Theocharis and van Deth (2018) and Theocharis et al. (2020) reported as having done to express their political or social views or concerns.

A broader outcome of this type of engagement is that it might present a first step towards what may become a more committed act of engaging with collective problems. Especially in what is often called “hashtag activism”, the act becomes politically important because it is no longer made in a vacuum, but is part of a more organized strategy aimed at influencing public decision-makers – regardless of whether all individuals involved are aware of that (Karpf, 2016).

Table 1: Examples of creative participation

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Planting of streets</i> - <i>Spreading seed bombs across vacant land to beautify an area</i> - <i>Committing to preserve a community garden project</i> - <i>Action to build a memorial against genocide for descendants of the Armenians</i> - <i>Participating in a panel discussion on equality of homosexuals</i> - <i>Taking part in balloon action about lesbian and gay rights</i> - <i>Changing one’s profile picture on social media</i> - <i>Refusing to fly with Rynair</i> - <i>Stopping the burning of wood in the fireplace</i> - <i>Putting stick national flags on dog excrement not picked up from the sidewalks by their owners</i>

Interestingly, conclusions disparaging the political utility of such acts on the basis of being impact-less must also be made with caution. For example, empirical research investigating the role of retweets, which are some of the lowest-threshold participatory acts ever, has shown that they can be catalytic in raising awareness and mobilizing publics (Barberá et al., 2015; Bastos, Mercea, & Charpentier, 2015). This is because they can bring not just issues, but also

countercultural groups from the margins to the middle of political debates and allowing them, in the words of Jackson and colleagues (2020, p. xxxiii), to challenge, redefine, and change the terms of public discourse.

Lifestyle politics and the crowding out of 'real' political participation

Beyond such online activism, one of the most prolific areas for the reinvention of political participation has been the terrain of lifestyles and consumption (Copeland & Boulianne, 2020). Through political consumption, citizens have begun to inform their shopping choices with political, ethical or environmental considerations. This can include what to buy (buycotts), what not to buy (boycotts), how much to buy, and the promotion of political discourses about consumption (discursive political consumerism) (Boström, Micheletti, & Oosterveer, 2019; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). More generally, personal identities are increasingly shaped around lifestyle politics, by which politics come to inform citizens' ways of living, including how they transport themselves, whether they use animal products, how they use or produce their food and energy, and even how they position themselves spiritually in everyday life (de Moor, 2017).

The proliferation of political consumerism and lifestyle politics has often been understood as an example of what Ulrich Beck (1997) called 'subpolitics'. Societies' struggle with global challenges like climate change has introduced an uncertainty about the ability of conventional, institutionalized politics to cope, and has motivated the exploration of new 'do it yourself' forms of activism. These modes of action have often been understood and criticized as an individualization of political participation. Yet they also include important collective dimensions, and have accordingly been defined as 'individualized collective action' (Micheletti, 2003). This collective dimension can take more or less explicit forms. These can range from imagining that one's individual shopping decisions contribute to a global effort to

‘green’ consumption, to the actual organization of alternative consumption and production collectives like alternative food or community energy groups (Forno & Graziano, 2014). As it is stated by a leader of one of the most internationally renowned environmental political lifestyle collectives – Transition Towns – ‘If we wait for governments, it’ll be too late; if we act as individuals, it’ll be too little; but if we act as communities, maybe it’ll be enough’ (quoted in Kenis, 2016).

Individualized collective action has therefore been celebrated as a viable response to the shortcomings of, and disenchantment with, institutional politics. Yet others question whether modes of action like lifestyle politics are in fact viable alternatives. A first concern is that the individualization of collective action puts responsibility in the wrong place. Instead of holding powerful actors like companies and governments to account, lifestyle activists are said to accept and even promote a neoliberal dogma of individual responsibility – whether practised alone or as collectives (Maniates, 2001; Thörn & Svenberg, 2016). This feeds into a concern that these forms of participation present a form of ‘exit’ that undermines citizens’ democratic ‘voice’ and linkage with the political system (Hirschman, 1970).

While these are all valid concerns, empirical evidence contradicts some of their underlying assumptions. That is, collective and individualized action forms should not generally be seen as alternatives to each other, as the ‘crowding out’ hypothesis has implied. Cross-sectional survey research has long shown that individuals engaged in boycotts and buycotts are also more likely to engage in other conventional and unconventional forms of political participation (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013; Willis & Schor, 2012). Qualitative case studies have shown how within social movement organizations, members often practice mixed strategies including lobbying, protesting and lifestyle politics (de Moor, 2020; Dubuisson-Quellier, Lamine, & Le Velly, 2011). A panel study of politically active individuals in the Flemish region of Belgium moreover has provided some first longitudinal evidence that engagement in lifestyle politics

over time increased political concerns and led individuals to become generally more politically active (de Moor & Verhaegen, 2020).

In short, the emergence of lifestyle politics and political consumerism certainly present one of the most ‘creative’ areas for the expansion of political participation repertoires. And even though valid concerns can be raised about their democratic potential, many of those concerns can be at least partially addressed by recognizing the relations between existing and emerging action forms.

Creative participation and inequality

The focus of the discussion has so far been on the ‘what’ of some emerging creative participation forms. But ‘who’ is engaged in these action forms is another fundamental question in assessing their democratic implications. One of the main concerns in political participation research has been the persistence of structural inequalities when it comes to participation (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 2012). Generally speaking, more privileged individuals participate more, and so, to the extent that their actions have some impact, their political power is (further) enhanced (Verba & Nie, 1972). In particular, men, older people, and those with higher education and more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds are typically more involved. Following the ‘civic voluntarism’ model, this can be attributed to their greater access to participatory resources, such as money, time, knowledge, political interest and a strong sense of (political) self-efficacy (Dalton, 2017; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2012). Underprivileged groups in society tend to have less of these resources. By extension, they have a relatively constrained capacity to participate in politics, which can contribute to the reproduction of their position. A topic of broad concern has therefore been whether emerging creative forms of participation demonstrate similar participation biases or can somehow overcome them (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). The answer to this question depends on what dimension of inequality is concerned.

Some early research warned that the expansion and individualization of political participation increased inequality because it represented the hollowing out of political organizations that traditionally facilitated the political engagement of the underprivileged (Skocpol, 2004). Yet, survey researchers have concluded that when it comes to creative participation, some patterns of inequality have in fact been reduced or even reversed. Stolle and Hooghe (2011) concluded that while participatory inequality had persisted for traditional forms of participation since the 1970s, it had been diminished for the emerging action forms, including political consumerism. Specifically, young people had become less underrepresented, and the underrepresentation of women had even been reversed in the online realm (Bode, 2017). However, other dimensions of inequality have proven more persistent. In particular, all forms of participation predominantly remain the terrain of the highly educated and higher classes (Dalton, 2017), with a meta-analysis confirming that those politically interested are in a better position to reap the participatory benefits brought by digital media (Oser & Boulianne, 2020). Another meta-analysis shows that education, and to a lesser degree income, predict political consumerism (Copeland & Boulianne, 2020).

However, a problem is that most studies have used a fairly restricted operationalization of political participation and at best include one or two items that are relevant for discussions of creative participation (typically a measure of boycotting is included and is occasionally complemented with buycotting). As research has shown, such measures tend to give a highly limited and sometimes unreliable picture (de Moor & Balsiger, 2019). Acknowledging these concerns, studies trying to incorporate a broader measure of political participation are therefore a useful addition, yet they too present a similar picture regarding inequality. Theocharis and van Deth (Theocharis & van Deth, 2018b) found, based on a German survey, that ‘creative’ forms of participation cluster together with protest activities and therefore relate positively to the same antecedents, including education. Political consumerism and ‘digitally networked

participation' (DNP) presented similar participatory inequalities. In fact, they found the latter two to be among the three modes of participation most strongly determined by levels of education. In a study conducted in Belgium (Theocharis, de Moor, & van Deth, 2019), it was found that even when looking only at the politically active population, political consumerism (though not lifestyle politics) was significantly more prevalent among the highly educated. DNP, by contrast, was found to be negatively related to income, suggesting that at least some 'digital divides' (Norris, 2001) might be closing.

It can thus be concluded that creative participation again presents itself as a double-edged sword for democracy: while it helps to increase participatory equality in some ways, it (re-)produces inequality in others.

Methods of research

Because political participation can be such an elusive topic, it has been a field of constant methodological innovation. Particularly the terrain of creative participation, where citizens are constantly reinventing political action, researchers have had to come up with new ways to capture phenomena they were previously unaware of. Among the emerging methodologies ones finds, for instance, methods like focus groups, as used by Vromen and colleagues (Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2015). They found that talking about politics in an explorative way in group discussions revealed elements of political engagement in groups that previously were held – or held themselves – to be apolitical. While certainly not new to the social sciences, the use of focus groups in participation research is thus an important innovation that will allow researchers to tap into unexpected notions of participation and politics. Another innovative method is the use of diaries, as introduced by Witterhold (2018). Here, research participants are invited to keep a diary of anything they associate with politics in what they do throughout their everyday lives, which then informs a post-diary interview about their everyday and creative participation.

In the study by Witterhold, the method was used to explore the link between political consumerism and online participation, showing the embeddedness of various creative modes of participation. Dennis (2019) used similar diary-based methods to analyse online participation. In the remainder of this section, the focus lies on two research methods that have been used most extensively to contribute to this field of study: innovative survey designs and political ethnography.

Surveys in the study of creative participation

Surveys have been the standard data collection tool for studying political participation since the late 1940s (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948). Verba and Nie (1972) surveyed American citizens in the early 1970s using items which they later grouped around four “modes”: voting, campaign activity, citizen-initiated contacts, and cooperative participation. Clearly, this list reflected their still more restricted, institutional definition of participation. Yet soon after, Barnes and colleagues’ expanded this in a survey of protest-related repertoires by citizens in five democracies (Barnes et al., 1979). With further expansions to include items related to political consumerism and civic engagement (Verba et al., 2012; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006), most of those items are routinely used in research on participation.

Some scholars have attempted to capture the growing diversity of political participation by complementing survey items with a more inductive approach. Theocharis, van Deth, and de Moor (Theocharis et al., 2019; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018b), in their studies of citizens’ and activist’s participation in Germany and Belgium respectively, used a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions. Following a list of well-established participation items, they added an open question that provided examples of creative and expressive participation acts and asked the respondents whether they had engaged in similar actions in the last 12 months. This gave respondents the opportunity to write down up to three acts. This yielded high numbers of

activities that participants felt described their participatory repertoire (see Table 1 for some examples). Notably, many of those acts were completely exotic when compared to even expanded definitions of political participation. Such methods confirm that that people's understanding of what it means to participate politically may be increasingly diverging from narrow understandings of participation.

Survey methods thus continue to provide efficient tools to analysing the nature, spread and antecedents of the ever-growing creative participation repertoire. Yet they are limited in their ability to approach an understanding of these participation forms' embeddedness, motivations, experiences and consequences. Here, qualitative methods – which are often based in social movement studies' analyses of political collectives – come in with valuable contributions.

Political ethnography in the study of creative participation

With roots in anthropology, ethnography has increasingly been recognized as a key method in political science. Political ethnography allows to discover and explore politics in unexpected places and to understand the meaning political subjects attribute to concepts like participation (Schatz, 2009). The spread of creative political participation has made it increasingly difficult to predict where politics will happen, how, and by who. Political ethnography has proven to be a valuable tool for identifying, explaining and understanding this complexity (Lichterman, 2002).

The work of Nina Eliasoph has been particularly influential here. Eliasoph's book *Avoiding Politics* (Eliasoph, 1998) is a classic example of the way in which ethnography can help us understand how citizens engage in politics in everyday life. While trying to understand how citizens create and deal with political apathy in the American public sphere, Eliasoph recorded how the same people are deeply involved in shaping their societies in 'creative' ways (see also Bang & Sørensen, 2001). Eliasoph criticizes the way in which such engagement tends to

foreclose outspoken and public political debate. Yet the study shows that even individuals who want to ‘avoid politics’ remain active in shaping and improving their societies. It thereby nuances more pessimistic accounts of political apathy. Eliasoph found that the less public the space, the more outspoken people’s politics became, thus underlining the importance of the ‘arena of everyday life’ (Micheletti, 2003) for understanding unconventional political participation.

Ever since, ethnography has continued to play an important role in analysing emerging forms of participation, including in the fields of online and lifestyle-based participation. Examples of ethnographic studies of online participation include, for instance, the work of Gabriella Coleman (2014) on the hacker collective Anonymous. The use of ethnography allowed Coleman to navigate the complexity of a clandestine activist group and explore in an open-ended way how new political tactics were developed in the emerging political arena of the World Wide Web. In another example, Dennis (2019) conducted an ethnographic study of a social movement organization engaged in digital campaigning to get an understanding of the collective environment in which his previously mentioned diary-based observations of individual political acts were embedded. In both cases, ethnography thus contributed to a contextualized understanding of new modes of political participation.

The field of political consumerism and lifestyle politics has also made extensive use of ethnographic methods to engage with the more collective side of these action forms. While lifestyle politics are often understood as highly individualized action forms, a large body of ethnographic studies shows that, for instance, alternative shopping practices are often based in grassroots collectives like community-supported agriculture. These studies furthermore show how within organizations or movements, they are linked to other, more ‘collective’ or ‘conventional’ action forms (see above). For instance, in many of our own ethnographic studies of lifestyle politics (de Moor, 2020; de Moor, Marien, & Hooghe, 2017), we found that within

lifestyle movement organizations participants often become involved in more protest- or lobby-oriented campaigns as well (Dubuisson-Quellier et al., 2011; Graziano & Forno, 2012).

Conclusion and questions for the future

Participation in a post-coronavirus world

This contribution is written amidst the COVID-19 crisis, a global epidemic which humanity currently still struggles to overcome. The coronavirus epidemic has led national governments to take unprecedented measures to tackle the virus, making this crisis an external global shock that is unlike anything the world has seen since the Second World War. The consequences of this crisis on human behaviour will be the subject of research in the years to come.

While it is much too early to draw conclusions about the political implications of this crisis for citizens' attitudes and behaviours seven months after the outbreak, social scientists are already observing changes in some longstanding public opinion trends. Political and democratic institutions that are known to enjoy notoriously low levels of trust among citizens, such as governments and traditional media, have seen a resurgence of trust in many countries (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2020). Writing at this point provides an opportunity to reflect on the spaces that current global uncertainty may open for creative forms of participation to take centre stage.

Government-encouraged isolation, especially by those belonging to vulnerable groups, and self-distancing rules have meant that a large number of people became extremely limited in their capacity to engage in day-to-day activities aimed at self-sustenance, such as going to the super market to purchase food. Under these conditions, numerous citizens engaged in unprecedented acts of civic solidarity. Many of these seemed to follow the innovative logics of creative participation. In the UK, more than 500.000 people signed up to help the NHS. In

Germany, in acts reminiscent of initiatives popular in Greece and Spain during the Eurozone crisis (Theocharis, Vitoratou, & Sajuria, 2017), young people left notes in the doors of elderly people's houses with their phone number offering to help with grocery shopping. In Naples, Italy, solidarity baskets were hung from balconies with notes reading 'Who can may put, who cannot may take'. An opera singer sang an aria from her balcony accompanied by a lone violinist on another, aiming to up the morale of an entire neighbourhood in Rome.

The list goes on and it is clear that these creative acts do not fit traditional definitions of political participation. Yet it is also clear that their ethos and character resembles those creative acts that have been discussed in this contribution. Neither rebel botanism nor delivering an aria under lockdown has a well-defined political message. Yet it is precisely these activities that not only were meaningful and impactful as acts of civic duty for those carrying them out, but also affected their social environment.

Further study may also show – as has often been the case – that such seemingly apolitical acts of solidarity can have blurry boundaries with more clearly political activities (e.g. Zamponi & Bosi, 2018). Relatedly, many social movements who are used to take the streets are exploring new creative action forms. For instance, the young climate activists of Fridays For Futures have transformed their most emblematic tactic – the 'school strike' – into a digital one. Many such efforts are being provisionally recorded in collaborative research efforts (e.g. Chenoweth, Choi-Fitzpatrick, Pressman, Santos, & Ulfelder, 2020).

Given the current flux, more in depth research will once more be needed to keep up the advancement of our understanding with the ever-expanding nature of political participation. In doing so, conceptual and theoretical discussions will remain crucial. As discussed throughout this chapter, the broadening of the political participation repertoire has posited a continuous challenge to the definition of political participation. Until now, this challenge has been addressed through a definition of what is 'political' that is based on common sense notions,

such as ‘related to political institutions’ like elections, parties or parliaments, or alternatively, as focused on ‘changing society’. However, linking creative participation debates to more sophisticated discussions of what counts as ‘political’ and what it means to ‘participate’ may shed new light on the evolution of participation.

For instance, there has only been limited engagement with broader discussions of what ‘the political’ may be, such as those by authors who seek to distinguish ‘the political’ from ‘politics’. According to scholars like Mouffe (2005) and Žižek (2000), the political can be distinguished from politics. Whereas the latter represents the business as usual operation of a political system, the former presents a fundamental challenge of that system and its principles. Likewise, political and apolitical participation can be distinguished on the basis of their disruptive qualities and approaches to social conflict and change (de Moor, 2020; Kenis, 2016). If acknowledged in research on political participation, and in particular on the expansion of creative participation, scholars can move beyond discussions of who participates, how and how much, and link these analyses to normative discussions of the meaning of these developments for various notions of democracy.

Likewise, literature on public consultation and participation has developed a much more critical understanding of participation. Harking back to Arnstein’s (1969) ‘ladder of participation’, scholars have categorized participation in public consultation procedures ranging from ‘manipulation’ to ‘citizen control’ (e.g. Few, Brown, & Tompkins, 2007). Based on such distinctions, some have argued that in spite – or even because – of the expansion of political participation, society has become increasingly depoliticized (Swyngedouw, 2005). While some opportunities to participate offer genuine moments of citizen control, many are considered to be merely tokenistic exercises intended to legitimize predetermined political outcomes.

Considering such critiques, it is clear that political participation research – which has remained focused on the behaviour of individuals with more or less attention to organizational contexts

– could benefit from a more contextualized understanding of what is being participated *in*. Doing so will strengthen analyses of what changes in political participation mean for democracy. In the case of creative participation, there are some specific concerns. Specifically, scholars are often dealing with participation in new political arenas, yet research has not engaged sufficiently with understanding what effects contexts like social media platforms or the local food economy might have on the meaning of participation in terms of e.g. power and democracy. Hence, engaging with these wider theoretical debates – for instance through more contextualized research and analyses of people’s understanding of their own creative participation – offers considerable opportunities to deepen and expand discussions on changes in political participation and its meaning for democracy.

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