

WHY DO HIGH INCOME PEOPLE PARTICIPATE MORE IN POLITICS?

Bruno S. Frey*

I. THE EMPIRICAL FACTS

One of the best established facts in political science is that political participation is positively correlated with income. Robert E. Lane [3, p. 7] gives e.g., the following figures for the most prominent type of participation, namely voting:

TABLE 1

<u>Income</u>	Per Cent of Voting Election year	
	<u>1948</u>	<u>1952</u>
Under \$2,000	46	53
\$ 2,000 - 2,999	61	68
\$ 3,000 - 3,999	74	76
\$ 4,000 - 4,999	75	83
\$ 5,000 - and over	82	88

Robert A. Dahl [1, p. 283] finds in his community study an equally clear increase of general political participation with an increase in income.

TABLE 2

<u>Income</u>	Per Cent of Citizens	
	<u>Highly active</u>	<u>Highly inactive</u>
Under \$2,000	4	82
\$ 2,000 - 5,000	17	71
\$ 5,000 - 8,000	20	59
\$ 8,000 and over	38	42

A host of further studies all leading to the same result are summarized in Lester W. Milbrath [4].

*Professor of Economics, Universities of Konstanz and of Basel.

II. THE OPPORTUNITY COST ARGUMENT

An adherent of the "economic approach to politics" must be disturbed by these empirical findings. This is reflected in the muddled and uneasy arguments which can be found in the literature. The reason for this uneasiness simply is that the empirical facts mentioned above are known but that a straightforward application of economic reasoning apparently leads to the opposite conclusion: Higher income people have higher opportunity costs of their time and should therefore participate *less* in politics. It is interesting to note that this opportunity cost argument is widely held by "new political economists" but that they are reluctant to put it down in print because of the all too obvious contradictions with reality. They rather distort the theoretical arguments in order to arrive at a conclusion in accordance with empirical observations. With respect to voting, Anthony Downs [2] e.g., argues

"time is the principal cost of voting" (p. 265)

and

"... the principal cost of voting is usually the utility income lost by devoting time to it rather than something else. If the time must be taken out of working hours, this cost can be quite high, in which case high-income groups have an advantage." (p. 266).

The two first sentences correctly describe the opportunity costs of voting. The third sentence draws a *false* conclusion: Though it may be true that the rich are better able to carry the same \$-amount of cost than the poor, their higher income (from work) means, of course, that their (opportunity) cost is correspondingly higher.

III. THE SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLANATION

Compared to arguments such as Downs' the sociological explanation seems at first to be the only recourse. The higher political participation of the upper income classes is seen as the result of the particular "values" (e.g., the norm of citizen's duty) and the "culture" which have been "internalized" since birth (See Milbrath [4, p.120 et seq.]). There remains, however, the question, why the high income families do transfer such values upon their children. Usually, no explanation is offered.

IV. TAKING ACCOUNT OF PRODUCTIVITY

With somewhat more careful reasoning, however, the economic approach can give a perfectly good explanation of the higher political participation of upper income groups. It is important to differentiate between two factors:

- a) The *opportunity cost* of voting in terms of time;
- b) The *productivity* in the use of time to perform political activities.

a) is clearly higher for people with higher income, but b) is equally clearly higher for them. Citizens with high paying jobs are more used to deal with political questions which are in principle of the same character as their daily work, and which are therefore done much more efficiently. Consider, e.g., writing a letter to a Congressman. Citizens with low income from manual work find it very difficult to formulate it, as it is completely outside their occupation. An executive, on the other hand, dictates it to his secretary along with the rest of his routine work.

With respect to voting, high income receivers are again performing more efficiently as it detracts them relatively less from their ordinary job duties. They may, e.g., think over their business problems while on the way to and from the voting office.

Thus, time used for political participation is more costly to high income people, but they require much less in order to perform the same task. The higher participation rate observed can *ex post* be attributed to the proportionally greater weight of efficiency.

The "economic" hypothesis suggested here may also be used in an *ex ante* sense, and thus be falsified. One would have to identify high income groups with low productivity in political participation, such as possibly successful professional wrestlers. According to the theory they must be expected to participate little, as factor a) is probably high relative to b). On the other hand, low income groups with much experience in written and verbal communication and a high general standard of information (such as certain teachers) are expected to participate much, because of low opportunity costs and high efficiency. Some indication is given by empirical voting studies showing that citizens with higher education are more likely participants in politics (see Milbrath [4, p. 122 et seq.]). A good education does, however, not correlate perfectly with "productivity" as used here, because it also depends on material factors, such as an office with a secretary.

V. SUMMARY

To rationally explain political participation, two factors must be taken into account:

- a) the opportunity costs of the time expended, and
- b) the productivity of time use in performing political activities.

Ceteris paribus, the higher a), the lower is participation and the higher b), the higher is participation. A combination of these factors gives the following tendencies.

TABLE 3

Political participation rate:

		opportunity costs	
		high	low
productivity of time use	high	?	high
	low	low	?

REFERENCES

1. Dahl, Robert A., *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*. New Haven, 1961.
2. Downs, Anthony, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York, 1957.
3. Lane, Robert E., *Political Involvement Through Voting*. In: B. Scasholes (ed.) *Voting, Interest Groups, and Parties*. Glenview (Ill.) 1966.
4. Milbrath, Lester W., *Political Participation. How and Why Do People Get Involved in Politics?* Chicago, 1965.