

Rationalizing Engagement in Everyday Political Activity

I. Introduction

The topic of this workshop on everyday life includes the assumption that everyday life can and does ‘define and determine’ big politics. To the extent that everyday life contains regular political activities carried out by individuals or groups of people on a regular basis, this implies that individuals can exercise agency over the ‘big politics’ and critical junctures. I am confident this will be one of many interpretations of our topic. However, it usefully affords the opportunity to re-examine the paradox of participation in collective action, where an otherwise rational, economically-minded, goal oriented person will not participate when his or her contribution is so small and the nature of collective goods offers the opportunity to free-ride instead. This participatory calculus, where individuals have no impact on collective outcomes, thus divorces everyday political activity from the ‘big politics’ of collective outcomes. In this paper I will focus on non-elite individuals and everyday political activities, based on interviews and observations during fieldwork with US Democratic Party grassroots activists, organizers, and campaign workers.

Of course the paradox is not that people don’t participate, as rational models would suggest, but that they do. Moreover, survey data covering a wide variety of participatory domains – that is, voting, donating money to political or civic and collective causes, as well as the ‘high intensity’ participation of grassroots activism that will be considered here – shows that many people not only participate, but cite those very collective goals which scholars like Mancur Olson state the individual will have no impact on as the reason for their involvement. Do those activists who cite collective outcomes as their reasons for involvement know something that we political scientists do not? Or are those activists making a ‘complete miscalculation’ (Klosko 1987: 559)?

In this paper I will first look more carefully at the relationship between agency and rational action in Olson’s original calculus, and how that formulation has been incorporated into some of the studies to follow his. I define ‘collective action’ as those actions which are undertaken in conjunction with other people. ‘Collective outcomes’ are the intended outcomes that collective groups pursue. More specifically, I will follow previous studies of political participation to take working on a political campaign or participating in a political party as a form of collective action that is subject to the paradox of participation, and the collective outcome desired as the election of specific electoral candidates. I interpret ‘everyday political activity’ to include the frequent, repeated, and activities which are often literally carried out every day – attending meetings, canvassing voters, and working on campaigns or in parties more generally.

I will compare the conceptions of collective action in rational choice theory literature and in key surveys of political participation with data gathered during fieldwork on grassroots activists and ‘middle-level elites’ in the US Democratic Party. Viewing the settings, practices, and decisions of participation from the viewpoint of activists themselves, I explore how people make ‘strategic’ decisions, choosing not

Super

only whether or not to join, but also what activities to undertake, in what groups or organizations, and as part of which electoral races.

II. The calculus of rational action

Olson's argument in *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965) is now widely familiar. If an economically rational man can receive the benefits of collective action without having to pay the costs of participation, and if his participation is likely to have so low an impact on the outcome as to be negligible, then no rational man would participate in collective action. Olson's main contribution was to show how unless certain circumstances were met – that is, unless there was enforced participation via the closed union shop, or unless alternative incentives were offered – rational men would free ride over joining in collective action.

In order to reach this conclusion, Olson first made a qualitative distinction between the nature of large organizations or smaller, 'oligarchic' organizations or groups. Large organizations were the main focus of his study, but first Olson drew out an exception, where rational participation was possible in the oligarchic groups. He makes the distinction whether or not an organization is 'large' or intermediate

Depends upon whether any two or more members of the group have a perceptible interdependence, that is, on whether the contribution or lack of contribution of any one individual in the group will have a perceptible effect on the burden or benefit of any other individual or individuals in the group. (Olson 1965: 45).

For Olson, the difference between large and small groups was not one of degree but kind. In a small group one person's participation or contribution, by the nature of the size of the contribution, has the ability to change whether or not the collective outcomes are achieved. For if the effect of the lack of one's participation is to noticeably raise the costs for others, they will not participate, and therefore collective outcomes will not occur. Therefore, in the 'intermediate' groups, individual's have agency because the attainment of collective goods does depend on their participation. While Olson declines to put a firm number on the people in a group, the differentiation between types of groups "depends on whether the individual actions of any one or more members in a group are noticeable to any other individuals in the group" which, he goes on to state, is "obviously" a function of the group size (1965: 45).

In contrast, the large organization is one in which an individual's "own efforts will not have a noticeable effect on the situation of his organization, and he can enjoy any improvements brought about by others whether or not he has worked in support of his organization" (Olson 1965: 16). Collective outcomes are no longer dependent on one individual's participation. Implicitly, because those outcomes are dependent on everyone else's participation, they will still happen and free riding becomes the rational option. Essentially, participation is rational only when one person has the ability to influence outcome. Or, it is rational to participate when, through everyday politics, one individual's contribution can define and determine big politics. For Olson, this rationality is dependent on agency and agency, in turn, depends on the type of group one participates in. In a small or oligarchic group, where one's contribution can affect the collective outcome, it is rational, when one's participation is in a large group and cannot affect the outcome, it is not rational.

Although Olson recognizes a qualitative difference between the large organizations and intermediate ones, the actual substance of participation is conceptualized as similar in both settings. As an economist, he sees participation as analogous to money, so that it is the quantity (as a fraction of the whole) which varies with group size. Because in small groups this participation as a fraction is substantially larger than in large groups, the one dimensional conception of participation is crucial for making the qualitative distinction between when participation is rational and when it is not.

Despite the apparent irrationality of participating in collective action, survey data finds that people take part in collective action – and more particularly, campaign and partisan activity – in both the US and Britain, citing collective outcomes as their incentives for doing so. Among Verba et al's respondents in *Voice and Equality* who reported their primary activity as working on a political campaign, 48% cited collective outcomes¹ among their reasons for getting involved (1995: 115). Using slightly different categorizations of reasons for joining the Labour Party, Seyd and Whitely found in their survey of grassroots membership that 24.9% of respondents cited collective incentives as the most important reason for their joining (Seyd and Whitely 1992: 74).²

As for whether or not these individuals are acting rationally, the researchers treat such respondents with a wary eye. In discussing how they constructed their incentives categories, Verba et al note that “according to the rational choice approach, activists who consider that they got involved in order to promote a collective policy goal are deluding themselves in imagining that their contributions would enhance appreciably the probability of achieving the joint end” (Verba et al 1995: 110). But earlier, they write that “for some acts where the input is very large (a campaign contribution) and the scope of the desired outcome is not too large (a local election, a specific policy affecting the actor), the belief that an individual can make a difference may be less unrealistic” (Verba et al: 103). In their research, Seyd and Whitely take the belief in political efficacy into account, but that belief is treated neutrally. It is neither taken as a truthful account of an individual's role in collective action nor rejected outright, but only put forth as a factor in explaining action.

Unlike Olson's very simple conception of the substance of participation, however, Whitely, Seyd, Verba, and others all measure the distribution of different modes of political activities. These include voting, donating money, canvassing for votes, or displaying a window sign, among other acts. In addition to quantity (dollars spent or hours donated), Verba et al also recognize the varying 'expressive value' of these different modes of activity. However, these modal, quantitative, and expressive variations are not linked to variations in their ability to afford the participant more or less agency. And it is here that treatment of the question of rationality ends. Research shows that other incentives may also animate the reasons for joining collective action, but whether that individual's action then goes on to impact collective outcomes does not get attention in the rest of the surveys mentioned.

In terms of connecting everyday political activity to 'big politics,' this data connects everyday political activity to 'big politics,' in that it shows how activity is motivated by the desire to reach collective outcomes. But by considering the impact

¹ Verba et al use a more general definition of collective outcomes appropriate for their survey or a wider variety of political acts. Collective outcomes are defined as “the chance to influence government policy” (1995: 115)

² Seyd and Whitely similarly used a broader definition of collective outcomes, which included “getting rid of Margaret Thatcher and the Conservatives” as well as obtaining policy goals (1992: 74)

of everyday political activity, individually, as irrational, it writes out any causal connection between those everyday acts and the 'big politics'. If they did have an impact – that is, if individuals did have agency – then it would seem that everyday political activity can shape big politics.

III. Research Design

Data is presented from observations and interviews collected during field research conducted between the 2004 US presidential elections and the 2006 US midterm elections in a 'blue' northeastern state. Respondents were selected on the basis of spending time with a US Democratic Party organization, committee, or candidate's campaign, where one of the organization's purposes would be electing Democratic candidates. Informants (respondents or participants) were recruited based on their attendance of local ward or town committee meetings, or of events held by one of the three Democratic Gubernatorial campaigns. The sample of interviewees was expanded by using the snowballing method, and 53 interviews in total were conducted. Interviews were semi-structured and were followed by a standard set of questions about additional group memberships and political activities. Below, interviews are analyzed using discourse analysis.

By their very engagement in 'high intensity' political activity, these interviewees represent the exception rather than the norm of 'typical' political activity for US population as a whole. Nonetheless, while not typical, nor would they traditionally be considered political 'elites.' Respondents mainly consisted of 'non-elite' actors, whose participation was voluntary, and whose primary occupation lay outside the political realm. Some respondents were also 'middle-level elites' who worked full time for candidates or party organizations organizing volunteers and grassroots field activity.

While not representative, their sustained high levels of participation are well matched for the purpose of asking questions about everyday politics. In addition, the extended field work period allowed the researcher to gain a much more in depth understanding of the organizational and socio-cultural setting in which participants situated their activity.

One of the frequent answers to the question, "and did you have any particular goals in mind in joining this campaign?" was "to win." Winning is perhaps implicit in Seyd and Whitely's 'to get rid of Thatcher and the Conservatives' category, and much more concrete than the abstract 'chance to influence government policy' in Verba et al's research. Similar to other studies, this was not the only goal that people mentioned. Participants also articulated material goals, such as advancing their career, or gaining greater access to elected officials. Given the focus of this paper, however, it is the only goal I will consider here.

Winning, as expressed by participants, was a fairly straightforward concept. In contrast to lengthy explanations and discussions which often characterized the answers to other questions, if the answer to "did you have any particular goals in mind in joining this campaign?" was "win" it rarely elicited more than that word. In fact, in some interviews, the question actually created an awkward distance between interviewer and interviewee, because for the interviewee the answer was so obvious that to even ask the question demonstrated a fundamental misunderstanding on the part of the interviewer.

How did participants think through their approaches to winning elections? In the next section, I discuss the different considerations for participants about how to orient and structure their time and energies.

IV. Organising concept: “The best use of my time”

Because respondents were selected on the basis of actively participating in campaigns and party activities, they had already made the first decision to ‘join’ collective action. Interviews covered this first decision to join, but, given their ongoing participation, also provided the opportunity to ask about all the decisions about action which took place throughout the course of actually ‘doing’ collective action. As I will discuss below, in many ways the decision to join in collective action in the first place was the simplest one to make. It was all the decisions afterwards – about what to actually do in participating – that were more complex.

The question of what was a good use of time whilst participating was an important organizing concept for participants. The concept was often expressed as a consideration of how to use one’s ‘limited time.’ One participant explained a conversation she had with one of the campaigns, saying “as I told him, I would love to give you [the candidate] my life. But I still have 24 hours a day, the nuclear reactor has applied to re-license, I’ve filed a motion to intervene with a lawyer. That will be a thirty month process. Any extra time will be minimal, but for them [the campaign].” By highlighting the other demands on her time, this participant foregrounds the limited time she has for one campaign. Following this point was a long list of things that she could do and did do to help the campaign, in her limited time. But the starting point was an acknowledgement of the limited time, and then an explanation of what activities her participation consisted of on the campaign.

At its core the concept of ‘best use of my time’ was an everyday way of expressing efficiency. Tacitly, it also involves an evaluation of effectiveness, because participants are not efficiently attempting to not reach their goals. In other words, efficiency leads to effectively achieving outcomes. In terms of rational choice models, ‘best use of my time’ represents a way of incorporating an efficiency and effectiveness evaluation into the process of deciding what actions to take. And that process of evaluation was an ongoing and complex process.

What do participants think is the ‘best use of their time’? By following this concept through their explanations and descriptions of their experiences, one can identify the different components or elements of participation that factor into the evaluation of the best use of time. They include evaluations of which electoral races are important or relevant for the interviewees own goals, what organizations or candidate’s campaigns to join, which of those organizations are effective, what activities to undertake, and an assessment of their own skills. These evaluations of what is a good use of time are constantly updated throughout an individual’s time participating, which can stretch over a lifetime. They are frequently used as part of the ‘best use of my time’ framework in order to explain decisions taken as part of everyday political activity. In this next section, I elaborate on how each of these components of participation are related to decisions about what to do, how, and when.

Electoral races

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The multitude of elected offices and races presents the opportunity to decide *which* contests are most relevant for achieving collective outcomes. One participant, who expressed deep concern over the US military involvement in Iraq, summed up his decision not to become highly engaged in state contests as a matter of relevance to the war:

The governor can be a positive influence, but I'm not really worried about the outcome of our - the fate of our state does not hang in the balance. In the same way that the fate of the country really is in the balance right now, thanks to like, Bush's big, I feel like, you know, Ned Lamont, against Joe Lieberman in the primary is like one of the biggest races in the country right now. Because if Ned Lamont wins the primary, I think he'll win. And I think having a guy like Ned Lamont in the Senate, would be like - it's going to be a new generation of Senators that's going to be a little different than people like Joe Lieberman in the senate.

By contrasting the relevance of the gubernatorial race to the relevance of a US Senate race in terms of the personally important stakes, this participant came to the conclusion that it was not worth investing the same time in the gubernatorial race that he would in another race. Based on this assessment, he accordingly scaled down his activity for the state races.

Not all participants shared this view of the importance of national over state races. One participant, after working on presidential elections for several years, came to the opposite conclusion:

In '95 my views changed about whether to stay focused on national elections because in '94 [the Republican governor] had won re-election, and it became obvious to me that this was not just a temporary thing where [he] won one term and that was it. The Republicans had shown, had a commanding victory in '94 in the gubernatorial race. So it was in '95, when I was kind of reflecting on things, that I said I would get involved in [the state] and that's when I joined my ward committee, that's when I started giving money to the state party, and volunteering for state elections.

Based on an assessment of how he thought Democrats stood in the state, this participant came to the opposite conclusions of the first participant, where he elevated the importance of outcomes at the federal level above the state level. In both cases, however, political activity was explained as following from evaluations about which electoral races are important. Tacitly, using one's time on an electoral contest that is only remotely connected to the participant's primary concerns was not a good use of time.

Organizations and candidates

Just as a multitude of races provided a choice about how to use one's time, the multiplicity of organizations and individual candidate's campaigns presented another choice to make. In addition to candidates for different electoral races, in the primary season there were multiple candidates running for the Democratic nomination of everything from the Governor's office to the Register of Deeds. Like the choice of races, the choices about organizations sometimes had to do with the relevance for those goals. Those participants who did not spend time with ward or town committees often implicitly or explicitly described them as irrelevant. One interview was with a former Congressional staff member who was still involved in electoral politics. I asked if he ever attended his local ward committee, and the interviewee responded no, saying that given his strengths, which were his contacts with other government

officials and his expertise in several policy areas, it made more sense for him to “focus his time and energies” in a setting where those strengths would be the greatest asset. For him, the local ward committee – which was traditionally a locus for discussions and get out the vote activity – did not fit for where he could effectively use his ‘time and energy’.

Evaluating organizations and candidate’s campaigns also involved assessments of effectiveness. As Muller and Opp have noted in their studies of participation in rebellious action (Muller and Opp 1987), and later as Seyd and Whitely have studied in their work on Labour and Conservative Party members (Seyd and Whitely 1992, Whitely and Seyd 1994), evaluations of efficacy were part of the ‘calculus’ of participation. One participant explained not joining a campaign earlier because “I was turned off from it, strategically. Like oh no, here’s another progressive candidate who I really like that’s running a bad, bad campaign. And I was like, do I want to get involved?”

Finally, the multitude of organizations also meant evaluating what combination of organizations to get involved in and how to distribute one’s participation across the different organizations. One participant compared how he was taking his time with the actions of others in the same city:

I feel like a lot of the people who are active [here], they're active in 50 things, and good at nothing... I guess I'm kind of taking the time - well I'll give you the opposite. I'm doing one thing, and hopefully be good at it. Let everybody else do the 50 petitions this summer, and the protesting on the Cape Wind farm, and doing this and doing that. I'll just do one thing, and hope I can do it halfway decent. So yeah, I'm trying to just keep focused on one -the campaign is all.

For this interviewee, he made the conscious choice to limit the number of organizations he was active in with the aim of being “halfway decent” or “hopefully good at it.” Strategically, it did not make sense for this volunteer to risk the influence he could have by dividing his contributions among so many organizations.

Activities

Explanations of activities, and in particular field work, were very often framed by an understanding of effectiveness. One participant explained his focus on field work activities by harking back to Kerry’s primary wins which he thought were exemplars of good field work. It was important because “if you have people on the ground, as actually Kerry showed in Iowa and New Hampshire, it looked like he wasn’t going to be very successful against [Howard] Dean, but because he was building that grassroots even though he was down in the polls, he was actually spreading his message on the ground.” He then went on to describe the array of field work options Kerry had available – meetings, canvassing, etc. – and why they were important.

Another participant, who worked as a full-time campaigns officer for presidential candidates and now a labour union, explained his choice to continue organizing field work – in addition to public affairs work – in a moment of ‘candour’ during an interview:

I know this is recorded, but I’m sorry, I hate field, I hate making phone calls, I hate going door-to-door, I hate breaking out walk kits, I hate it. It’s like tedious, and I don’t like it. But it’s the most effective way for our organization to run. If we’re not effective, and we don’t, if we don’t win as much as we do on legislative races, and city council races, planning boards

Super

and these kinds of things that we've done pretty successfully for the last two years... we have to do the field work, and we have to do it because that's how we're most effective, if we're not effective we don't win, if we don't win, everybody's screwed. Because that means bad people are getting into office.

Even against his own personal preferences, this participant chose to do one kind of activity – field work – because of its perceived effectiveness, its strategic value. And, he directly connects the effectiveness to the ultimate goals of winning and keeping 'bad people' out of office. Here, his choice of activities is directly tied to the outcomes of collective actions, in terms of who wins elections. Had he solely chosen another activity (public affairs work, for instance) and not used the methods he thought were most effective, then he would forsake the chance that his participation would have any bearing on the outcome.

As one final example of activity choice, one volunteer organizer described going out to organize a primary campaign in a rural area of the state. His purpose in going out there was to 'whip them into shape' and make sure they won. It was, he explained,

A very small election, and it's going to be a low voter turnout, so all, that means that it's all about turning out your vote. And she's a very well known candidate. They weren't doing voter ID. So I basically went out there and kind of like set up the voter ID system, and got that rolling, and then was helping out with other stuff like visibilities.

Here, as in the last case, the participant chooses a course of action based on what he thinks will lead to winning, based on an assessment of the type of race, the candidate, and what he knows from being a long time participant.

Because he joined the organization in a management position, his decisions set the course of action for what other participants would do as well. Does this position make his participation qualitatively different from other participants who are not in a managerial role? In this particular campaign, he was in charge, for a short period of time, of the entire field operation of the campaign. In that case there were other areas of the campaign that he was not in charge of – fundraising, message, what the candidate says – but, at that stage of the campaign, he effectively was in charge of the majority of the activity that was going on. And he was doing that managing and activity based on a strategic assessment of how to win. If he had not participated, it is not clear that anyone else could have filled the managerial and voter ID setup role that he did. This is qualitatively different than interchangeable, non-unique activity that Olson conceptualizes in his large organizational participation. Going back to the definition of rationality, in terms of effectively and efficiently using his resources (time) in order to reach a particular goal (winning the election); it would seem that this interviewee's participation was actually rational.

What's also different from Olson's single-organization and single-issue game is that this particular interviewee also spent time with other organizations as well. When he wasn't out running the campaign for a short period of time, he spent time making canvassing phone calls for a progressive pressure group and also organized a university Democratic Party group. His participation in the phone bank would have been more familiar to Olson, for this interviewee's participation was interchangeable with all the other phone banker's participation, and the volume of calls that were made, across the state, that each individual's contribution was sufficiently small enough that one could question whether the whole outcome would actually hang on the 2,000 phone calls he made, versus the other 200,000 calls that were made. Does that mean that whilst phone banking, this participant was not acting rationally, but

whilst managing the campaign, he was? I will return to this question in the discussion section.

Skills

One final component that was used for determining what the best use of time would be was an assessment of the participant's own particular skills. There is much more to say about skill development and the process of doing daily political activities than can be covered here, but the basic point that participants perceived there were some skills that would make participating more effective will have to suffice. Skills factored into what activities to do, but also where to match those skills to organizations or goals. Like the former Congressional aide who thought that ward committees would not be the place to focus his time and energies, some participants sought out participatory spaces and opportunities where their skills could be of use. For the former Congressional aide, this meant participating in an informal, volunteer advisory role for one campaign's policy writing team. For others, skills and process knowledge factored into figuring out how to go about certain tasks. One former city council candidate described his work on another candidate's campaign by saying, "I think Mark and I know enough about how to do it [field work] well and what needs to happen, we just need maybe energy and time." Skills might not decrease the units of time that would be needed to complete a job, but they increased effectiveness.

Of course, while each of these components have been described here individually, the process of deciding the 'best use of my time' involved the evaluation of all these components – electoral race, organization, activities, and skills – at the same time. One final example that demonstrates the interplay between all these components comes from a participant who flew down to Florida for a month to work on the Kerry-Edwards general election campaign in the fall of 2004. Having made the decision to go down to Florida, this respondent (who worked as a lawyer) decided to "do field stuff and not legal."

Why's that?

Well, I thought that as the year was going on, that there were so many lawyers who were volunteering to do legal work that they were going to be flooded with volunteers doing that. And I had no special expertise in election law, so I thought that my time would be better spent being an organizer, than standing outside of a poll, and telling people what to do. And in retrospect I think absolutely the right decision. I thought Florida was over-lawyered.

First, the very decision to go down to Florida as part of the national campaign, rather than staying and working in the safe blue state he lived in, represented a choice to go where there were the electoral contest itself was an important one. Like the participant who opted not to participate in gubernatorial campaigns because it had no bearing on the national state of affairs, this participant used the same logic – choose a race that has some bearing on the national outcome – to go down to Florida. Secondly, he assessed what was happening in terms of other people participating as lawyers, and what the options for his activity as a lawyer were. In a somewhat dismissive manner, he described the lawyering activities as 'standing outside a poll, telling people what to do' – with the implication that this wasn't a very effective way to participate. And third, it included an assessment of his own skills, both as a lawyer and as a field organizer. As a lawyer he did not have any 'special expertise' that would make his contribution unique or more effective. But as an organizer, as it was

clear throughout the interview, he was well practiced and paid attention to finding 'effective' ways of turning the vote out. All of these considerations are bundled up into the conclusion that "my time would be better spent being an organizer."

V. Discussion

'Best use of my time' captures the multidimensional components of an individual's contribution in these campaigns and party organizations that varies significantly from the one-dimensional, money-like quality that Olson uses. It involves an assessment of the individual's own skills, the organizations, and the electoral races at hand, all while trying to reach a specific goal. Each of these components – skills, activities, organizations, races, what others are doing – can each be weighted positively or negatively. In contrast, Olson's participation only consists of one variable – a money-like 'contribution' – and that contribution can only vary one way, in amount. Recall that Olson's formulation presupposes a level of uniformity and interchangeability between one individual's contribution and another's, where the potential difference lies in quantity but not quality. In many ways, 'best use of my time' was about finding a way to make one's own contribution weighty enough, or distinctly not interchangeable, with other's contributions.

By sorting through how participants described what would be a good use of their time, a much more rich and complex world of participation comes to light than the essentialised version used in rational choice models. While I began thinking about rational choice theory expecting to come to the conclusion that the actual calculus of costs and benefits was qualitatively different from that used by participants, I think the real difference is in the conceptualization of the substance of participation itself. Factoring in Olson's description of participation in intermediate groups, there are circumstances in which participating with the goal of achieving collective outcomes in mind is, in fact, rational without additional incentives offered for participation. In their explanations, many participants struggled with similar questions of efficiency and agency that Olson described as the basis of rational decision making.

This brings us to a second problem, but one that is also familiar to social science researchers. Can we trust post-hoc explanations of why people did things a certain way? Schlozman and others have written about the problems of the social desirability of some answers, such that informants will give accounts they think will please the interviewer (Schlozman et al 1995:10). Some, such as Whitely and Seyd, have taken such considerations into their research design and used proxy questions in order to measure socially undesirable incentives, such as wishing to reach higher office (Whitely and Seyd 1992, see Granik 2005 for more discussion). In their research, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady accept the difficulties of post-hoc accounts, but also point out the ways in which the incentives named vary so naturally with the type of action involved, increasing the believability of answers. For example, if very few people report that they participate in their church in order to rub elbows with important or powerful people, but they do report such an incentive for attending political fundraisers, then we should consider that probably those answers are believable (Verba et al 1995).

Such issues apply here as well. However, as previously noted, and consistent with survey data on political participation, interviewees reported a variety of rewards for their actions and their reasons for getting involved in the first place. This would indicate that there may be some reason to think that, at least in some of the cases,

interviewees were giving a truthful account. Moreover, the complexity of explanations involving ‘strategic’ decision-making, and the variety of forms in which they came, would indicate that they were previously thought out.

Even if the ‘rational,’ efficiency maximizing, ‘best use of my time’ accounts are socially desirable, however, that very desirability is a telling aspect of the participant’s experience. Given that there are such well chronicled alternative reasons for participating in general, the fact that participants would tailor their very specific explanations of campaign participation as effective belies a rational, goal oriented ethos within their immediate social surroundings in the campaign. That is, even if they don’t actually think they are acting rationally, the fact that they want to appear to be acting rationally makes their explanations interesting. For it indicates that efficacy is actually important to participants.

The issue of the relationship between actions as they actually were and explanations given also begs a further question. Even if participants *think* that they were being rational – efficient and goal oriented – were they, in the end? In other words, is it the process of attempting to maximize impact, and the circumstances under which one does so, that makes action rational, or is it the actual outcome of those actions that makes it rational?

In trying to find the ‘best use of their time,’ participants explained acting with a particular goal in mind and attempted to reach that goal in a way that was efficiency maximizing. Where they found participatory spaces – organizations, races – and roles – activities, ways of doing things – that they thought were effective, they did participate. When they assessed that a participatory space or activity was not relevant or effective for reaching their goals, they did not.

If it’s the circumstances that make an action rational, then by the process of evaluating what is the most effective and efficient way of reaching the goal, and attempting to find ways of conducting everyday political activity that make their participation unique or of critical value, then participants are acting rationally. When participants seek out organizational settings that are closer to the circumstances of the oligarchic group, where their participation is unique – such as the informal policy advisor or the manager who set up the voter ID program – then they have agency, and they are rational.

However, if rationality is actually based on being effective – that is, if rationality only occurs when it is possible to prove that one particular action caused a collective outcome to come about – then action is not rational. Even for Muller and Opp, the possibility of everyday political activity actually being effective is doubtful. In responding to Klosko’s critiques, they set out a future research agenda to

Investigate empirically the question of whether individuals are unaware of or misunderstand the principle that their own participation will have a negligible effect on the realization of their public-goods preferences or whether they consciously reject this principle in favor of an alternative general rule that success of collective action depends on the groups acting together as a unified whole (Muller and Opp 1987: 563).

By this logic, individuals cannot actually have an effect on collective goods outcomes. By substituting in group efficacy, individuals get around the agency question by disregarding their own, but the basic assumption remains that an individual will never actually be able to affect the outcomes of public goods preferences.

How far should this statement be stretched to include all people in the electoral arena? The lack of rationality always applies to everyday politics, but in this

case, should it be applied to elites as well? If the problem is agency, then should political elites such as candidates or pollsters be considered irrational as well? In any complex collective action, such as campaigns or elections, multiple factors will interact to create certain outcomes. Political elites such as pollsters and candidates themselves strive to create certain outcomes, but they are not always successful. If the logic of collective action dictates that participation is not rational because of the impact any one person has, then it would seem that this logic should apply to elites and everyday people equally.

Alternatively, one could take the view that the process of attempting to maximize effectiveness in the pursuit of particular goals is rational, regardless of (unknown) outcomes, with the additional caveat that the repeated actions should include a clause for the learning process in order to be considered rational. What the discussion today attempts to reveal is that this process of thinking strategically about 'the best use of time' does not occur solely in the upper echelons of campaign organizations, but is thought out by the lowliest phone bankers and highest campaign managers alike.

Returning to the discussion of the volunteer who both managed one campaign and worked as a phone banker in another, a further consideration is how to assess degrees of agency or efficacy. Should the uniqueness of different organizational roles change our assessment of their agency? According to Olson, as long as the organizational arrangements are such that the whole organization could not function without one person's contribution, then that contribution is rational. In this sense the rationality of any given participatory act is not dependent on its uniqueness but simply that it is necessary. While the manager's ability to organize a voter ID effort may be critical and unique, the ten or fifty or two hundred people who go out to collect the voter ID data do not do unique participatory acts, but they are critical. As long as a volunteer chooses an action that is effective and does actually contribute to a given outcome, then it could be rational.

There is another reason to take the issue of rationality in everyday political activity seriously, and that is because it is not an academic one for participants. When everyday activity was undertaken with at least one of the goals as winning an election, making that connection between the daily activity and the big outcomes was crucial for the activity itself. When participants considered that a given form of participation did not have a connection to outcomes, they did not do it. They did something else instead or nothing at all. This pattern falls clearly into the rational choice model of action. Rather than determining that that action generally does not have a bearing on big outcomes, taking seriously the possibility that it *does* opens up interesting new avenues of inquiry. If the goal is to have an impact on collective outcomes, how can that participation be effective? This would seem to be a prime subject for political scientists, and one that is already well studied at the elite levels. But relatively less has been said about when everyday action is rational and effective, perhaps in part because it is assumed to not be rational.

And yet, finding what is effective is very much the concern for many participants. It is interesting that the one scholarly study which transcended the formal knowledge grounds of political science magazines and made it into the 'everyday' knowledge of political action is the results of Gerber and Green's field experiments on effective get out the vote tactics (Gerber and Green 2000, 2004). "The Yale guys," as they were known, showed that door-to-door canvassing was the most effective means of all get out the vote tactics, yielding approximately a 10% increase in voter turnout. As field organizers emphasized every time they tried to recruit volunteers,

that was higher than results for phone canvassing, automatic phone messages ('robo calls'), or leaflets ('door hangers'). In all my time in the field, I never heard mention of any other political science works – none on the normative importance of political engagement, nor any on varying incentives, nor any on rational choice models. Which is not to say that these other components did not factor into discussions and explanations, nor that alternative rewards – such as friendship, feeling like one did one's bit – was not important. Rather, it is only to say that the effectiveness of the actual substance and means of participation was of critical importance to everyday political activity. If, in the process of explaining ways around rationality we disregard the importance of rationality and agency in everyday political activity, then we risk missing the meaning of that everyday political activity.

Finally, foregrounding the richness and variations in everyday political activity provide a useful starting point for understanding how systems of collective political action develop. As the appeal based on the "Yale guys" data indicates, many campaign organizers were very aware of the importance of efficacy to recruiting volunteers. Many were also, after the 2004 Democratic Primaries (and helped by Howard Dean's chairmanship of the DNC) aware of the impact grassroots and netroots political activity could have on the big outcomes of electoral races. Therefore, it was in their interest to get as many people involved, in the right ways, as possible, in order to further winning. In a sense the practice of everyday politics is still ahead of our understanding of it, where party structures and potentially electoral outcomes are reforming because of effective everyday politics. Understanding those big changes necessarily involves understanding the means and ways of everyday political activity.

Super

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