MOVED TO ACTION

MOTIVATION, PARTICIPATION & INEQUALITY IN AMERICAN POLITICS

Hahrte Han
"An urgently welcome contribution to our understanding of political participation, *Moved to Action* is clearly written, smartly argued, and showcases an important new voice in political science."

**TAEKU LEE, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY**

"Few issues in American politics are as important as political inequality. In this fresh, compelling book, rising star Hahrie Han shows how we can increase political participation and reduce inequality by fostering issue interests through group memberships, especially among lower socioeconomic status individuals. A new must-read in political participation."

**ANDREA LOUISE CAMPBELL, MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY**

"Hahrie Han demonstrates convincingly that a truly representative democracy is possible only by making politics relevant to those who are marginalized in American society."

**DENNIS CHONG, NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY**

"Presents the first big new idea about political participation in a decade."

**PAUL SNIDERMAN, STANFORD UNIVERSITY**

... Persistent inequalities in who participates continue to plague American politics. We know that wealthy, educated, and more privileged people are more likely to participate and be represented in politics than their poorer, less educated, and less privileged counterparts. Yet there are many instances in which those who lack the conventional resources do indeed participate. To reduce these inequalities, we need to understand better how the disadvantaged become motivated to get involved.

*Moved to Action* fills the current gap in this area of research by examining the pathways through which the underprivileged become motivated to participate in politics. Drawing on a combination of original, in-depth interviews with political activists and large-scale survey data, author Hahrie Han contests the traditional idea that people must be politicized before they participate, and that only idiosyncratic factors outside the control of the political system can drive motivation. Her findings show that highly personal commitments, such as the quality of children’s education or the desire to help a friend, have a disproportionately large impact in motivating political participation among people with fewer resources. Han makes the case that civic and political organizations can lay the foundation for greater citizen participation by helping people recognize the connections between their personal commitments and politics.

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Stanford University Press
Stanford, California
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IN THE SPRING OF 2006, New Orleans held its first election to choose a new mayor since Hurricane Katrina devastated the city. Only 38 percent of eligible voters participated. When compared with the 46 percent turnout in the 2002 race and the 38 percent who voted in 1998, this 2006 turnout seems unremarkable. But it was remarkable because of the large numbers of hurricane refugees who went to great lengths to participate. Six months after floodwaters inundated the city in late August 2005, more than half of New Orleans’s 450,000 residents remained in exile, in particular the poorer, less educated African-American residents. Yet 113,591 of these residents found ways to cast ballots for mayor, many of them overcoming huge barriers in order to participate in the political process.¹

This book unravels the reasons for participation among people like the Katrina refugees by providing insight into the personal commitments that motivate participation among traditionally marginalized people. The book seeks to answer the question, How do people without many educational, financial, and civic resources become engaged to participate in politics? Most research on political participation looks at the whole population and asks, What kinds of people are most likely to participate? Previous researchers have concluded that people who generally care about politics (i.e., are motivated), are able to participate (have resources), and are asked to participate will participate.² But they are not the only ones who do. There are many instances, like the 2006 mayoral election in New Orleans, in which people who lack the resources—such as education, money, free time, civic skills—and the general political interest commonly thought necessary for participation. This book explores why.

In the New Orleans mayoral election, the refugees’ strong personal commitments to the outcome motivated their participation—regardless of the resources they possessed. For many displaced voters, the stakes in the

CHAPTER 1

The Challenge of Political Equality
election were particularly high, as much of the city remained “empty and in shambles.” The future of New Orleans seemed to hang in the balance. The final, runoff election came down to a race between an incumbent African-American candidate, Mayor Ray Nagin, and a white candidate, Lieutenant Governor Mitch Landrieu. In the primary election preceding the runoff, Nagin had won easily in the mostly African-American precincts but received less than 10 percent of the white vote. Landrieu, in contrast, had won 30 percent of the white vote and 23 percent of the black vote. Landrieu appeared to be in a better position to woo conservative white voters who had supported other white candidates in the primary. 3

Voting in this election was no easy task. Many New Orleans citizens had to register to vote from Texas, Arkansas, Tennessee, or other states where they were now living. Citizens eligible for absentee voting had to remember to request and postmark absentee ballots by the designated date. By Louisiana state law, first-time voters must vote in person—so any first-time voter (as well as any voter who missed the early voting deadlines) had to appear at the polling place on Election Day. Activist groups arranged charter buses to transport voters from neighboring states to New Orleans to cast their ballots, but evacuees still had to figure out where to board the buses and had to spend an entire day traveling to and from the polling centers. The voters who managed to appear at the polling places faced yet another set of challenges. Poorly labeled polling sites, confusing lines at the mega-polling centers, and missing names on the voter rolls led to substantial confusion. 4 Formidable hurdles to voting existed in this election, especially for the thousands of voters who remained scattered throughout the southern United States.

Despite the difficulty of participating in the election, turnout in heavily black precincts actually increased from that in previous elections. Nagin won the race, drawing support primarily from African-American areas as well as from some crossover support from whites. 5 Although numerous voters did not overcome the barriers to voting, many others cared enough about this election to make an extraordinary effort. Dorothy Stukes, chairwoman of the ACORN Katrina Survivors Association, said, “We all want to be a part of the rebuilding and have a voice in selecting someone who wants us back, because there’s a lot of people in New Orleans that’s try-
ing to keep us out.” Similarly, Terry Jackson, a New Orleanian working in Houston to sign up voters, said, “Even though they’re making a new start, they want to get involved because they have families still there. Their mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters are all still there.”

This story defies a common narrative in American politics in which underprivileged people are unlikely to participate. In the New Orleans mayoral race, many voters did not fit the conventional profile of well-heeled participants. Most Katrina refugees were not very wealthy or highly educated and thus lacked the resources that existing models assert are the best predictors of political participation. Yet Katrina refugees overcame formidable barriers to voting because they were highly motivated to have their voices heard. Certainly the civic organizations that mobilized participation mattered. Ultimately, however, mobilization without motivation is meaningless. The refugees participated because they cared passionately about who won the mayoral election, as the winner was likely to have a deep impact on their lives and the lives of loved ones. Without their support, it is unlikely that Nagin would have won. The 2006 mayoral election is one of many instances in which a traditionally marginalized group with few resources possessed sufficient motivation to participate and thereby have an impact on the political system.

To understand participation among underprivileged people like the Katrina refugees, I argue that we need a better understanding of how people are motivated. Most political science research assumes that people are motivated through political interest—that is, people must be politicized before they participate, so that they have a general interest in and knowledge about politics. Research shows, however, that the affluent are much more likely to have this interest and knowledge than the disadvantaged. This book argues for a broader conception of motivation that is rooted in personal goals that move people to action. People act not only because they generally care about politics but also because they care about addressing problems in their own lives or living up to a personal sense of who they are. Because a diverse range of people have personal commitments that connect them to politics, this conception of motivation helps us better understand participation among the Katrina refugees. The book analyzes survey data to show that these personal commitments are particularly
important for predicting participation among underresourced populations and draws on in-depth interviews with political participants to illustrate commonalities in the way people develop such commitments.

**Participation and Political Inequality**

Explaining what motivated the Katrina refugees to participate has implications for political equality in America. The ideal of political equality has always been a key feature of American democracy. From Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence to Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech, the notion that “all men are created equal” has been a central part of the American creed. Yet reality has often failed to meet this ideal. Chronic inequality has been an unfortunate reality in American politics for years. Because wealthy individuals participate through campaign donations, for example, they are more likely to gain access to politicians and thereby influence political outcomes. Stories abound of elected officials taking large campaign contributions from wealthy individuals. The media often portray political leaders taking lavish weekend junkets with rich and powerful representatives from corporate America. Scandalous stories of congressional corruption emerge regularly, in which representatives like California Republican Randy “Duke” Cunningham explicitly negotiate with companies to receive bribes in exchange for access to government contracts. Given the plethora of such stories, it is hard not to imagine that wealthy individuals can “buy” influence in government. Indeed, studies of democratic representation have shown that certain people are better represented than others.8 People who are wealthy or loyal partisans are better represented than those who are not.9 As the American Political Science Association’s Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy recently concluded, “Citizens with lower or moderate incomes speak with a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government officials, while the advantaged roar with a clarity and consistency that policymakers readily hear and routinely follow.”10 Wealthy, well-educated citizens have persistently had more voice in the political process than less advantaged individuals—and, according to the Task Force’s report, this trend has only been increasing.

Addressing problems of inequality in representation depends first on addressing problems of inequality in participation. Participation is the
mechanism through which certain individuals become better represented than others. In a complex policy-making environment, elected officials are likely to encounter a cacophony of signals about how to act on any given policy issue. Citizens who distinguish themselves in this cacophony have an implicit advantage in influencing legislative decision making. Through voting, citizens communicate their preferences for one candidate or another. By devoting time to writing letters and contacting their elected officials, citizens express preferences for certain policy alternatives. By contributing money, they express support for or dissatisfaction with particular candidates, parties, or organized interests. Elected officials are much more likely to heed the concerns of those whose voices they hear. Only by participating in the political process can citizens make their voices heard.

Historically, nonparticipants disproportionately come from marginalized groups, such as the poor and less educated. Figure 1.1 shows the percentages of people at different education levels who participated in presidential elections from 1948 to 2000. While rates of participation among
individuals with at least some college education have remained relatively stable, rates of participation among people with only a grade school or high school education have actually fallen. In 1952 the participation gap between people with a grade school education and people with at least a college degree was about 30 percentage points. By 2000 the participation gap between people with high and low educational resources had increased to more than 40 percentage points. This growing gap poses a central challenge to any effort to remedy inequality in American politics. To ameliorate such inequalities, we need to understand how individuals with few resources become engaged in the political process.

The Need for a Multitiered Approach to Understanding Participation

Creating a political system that involves a broad base of people is central to any democracy and presents an ongoing challenge to American politics. History has shown that people of low education, income, and other resources are the most difficult to engage in politics. Increasing participation among this group depends first on understanding the mechanisms that draw these individuals into politics. A broad, single-tiered research strategy that considers the entire population at once may not be appropriate for examining participation within this group. Instead, a multitiered approach that asks whether certain mechanisms are more effective in engaging certain communities—especially the disadvantaged—may be needed. This book thus focuses on a key question: What are the mechanisms by which traditionally marginalized individuals become involved in politics? In other words, what factors draw underresourced individuals into politics?

A rich tradition of research on political participation reveals that people are more likely to participate in politics when the costs of participation are low and the benefits are high. People will not participate if the time and effort it takes to get involved are too costly. Conventional theories of participation argue that people do not participate because “they can’t, they were not asked, or they do not want to.” Though it oversimplifies the many factors that may enter into a person’s decision of whether to participate, political scientists generally explain participation by three main factors: resources, recruitment, and motivation.
People who do not participate either cannot (they lack the resources, such as money, time, information, and knowledge about politics), were not asked (they were not recruited), or did not want to participate (they lack motivation).

Most existing empirical research on participation, however, pays minimal attention to the importance of motivation in facilitating participation. In his review of research on participation, Morris Fiorina notes that the dominant, resource-mobilization model of participation focuses primarily on the role of resources and recruitment. In part, this model dominates because many resource-mobilization theorists began by asking why people who have the motivation to participate do not participate. Why do so many people who are politically interested, knowledgeable, and efficacious fail to participate? Taking these motivations as a given, they asked what other factors were important for facilitating participation. Scholars focusing on the civic voluntarism model and its predecessor, the socioeconomic status model, found that individual resources such as education, money, and civic skills help reduce the costs of participation. Mobilization theorists moved beyond individual traits and capacities and focused on the role that recruitment and social interactions play in delivering a contextual supply of information to increase participation. Recruitment helps defray the costs of participation by providing individuals with the information and access they need to participate, and it enhances benefits by providing social rewards. Although these scholars have always acknowledged motivation to be an important factor, they have not theorized much about the way it works. Leading scholars have argued that motivation remains the least understood factor in facilitating participation.

The theoretical focus on resources and recruitment at the expense of motivation has particularly limited our understanding of participation among the underprivileged. People without resources for participation must really want to participate if they are to overcome the obstacles posed by their lack of education, money, or skills. Is motivation enough, however? Without much research on what motivates participation, we lack a clear sense of the possibilities. As Figure 1.2 shows, we have a clearer sense of how participation works among certain segments of the population than among others. One dimension of the figure distinguishes between people
who have either few or many of the educational, financial, and civic resources that facilitate participation. The second dimension distinguishes between people who have either low or high levels of motivation. We know that people who have both the resources and the motivation for participation (group 4 in Figure 1.2) are likely to participate. Many Katrina refugees participated, however, even though they were not in that group. Many of them lacked resources for participation but presumably were highly motivated (group 3 in Figure 1.2). Yet existing research does little to explain how motivation pushes people who lack resources to participate.

Our incomplete understanding of how the underprivileged become engaged stems partially from a narrow view of what motivation is. Studies of participation often conceptualize motivation as some combination of general levels of political interest, knowledge, efficacy, and party identification. As Kay Lehman Schlozman writes, people are more likely to participate “if they know and care about politics and if they think that their participation would make a difference.” Taken at face value, this idea is relatively unsurprising. People who are more politicized in their interests and orientations are more likely to participate. What this conception of motivation lacks, however, is a sense of what people are trying to achieve through their participation—the specific goals that motivate them to take action.

This generalized conception of motivation probably would not have captured the motivation of Katrina refugees voting in the 2006 mayoral
election. Many of these voters are unlikely to have scored very highly on measures of general political knowledge, political efficacy, or even general interest in politics. Those qualities are most likely to be found in people who also have the educational, financial, and civic resources needed for participation. For example, according to the 2004 American National Elections Study (ANES), 54 percent of respondents who had at least a bachelor’s degree said they were “very much interested” in politics, but only 36 percent of respondents with a high school education (or less) said they were “very much interested.” And while only 6 percent of respondents with a bachelor’s degree or more said they were “not much interested” in politics, 23 percent of respondents with a high school degree or less said so. According to these data, there is a 17- to 18-percentage-point difference in how politicized respondents are, based on how educated they are. Under a generalized definition of motivation, people without many resources do not appear to be very motivated. Yet the underprivileged do get involved, as exemplified by the participation of Katrina refugees. These former residents of the poor neighborhoods hardest hit by the hurricane participated even though they did not have the high levels of income and education commonly associated with high levels of participation. In this specific instance, on this specific issue, these individuals were highly interested, informed, and motivated because they cared deeply about the end being sought.

We need a model of participation that includes the goals that drive people to participate in politics. As Henry Brady writes in his review of research on political participation, “Most models of participation emphasize factors affecting the supply of participation (e.g., political interest, money, time, skills, and education). Little attention is given to those factors, typically the political and social context of an individual, that create a demand for political participation.” It is hard to argue with the notion that people with highly politicized interests and identities are more likely to participate than people with apolitical interests and identities. What we lack is a good understanding of what drives individuals to become active in the political system. Or, as John Aldrich has written, “Having even copious resources, strong psychological engagement in politics, and dense networks soliciting one’s activity is not, I believe, sufficient to answer, ‘Why did she get involved?’ What is missing is a domain-specific
measure of political preference, of what it is they want to achieve, or, in short, why they are participating. In particular, the individual must care about the political end sought.”26 Although measures of general political interest, knowledge, and efficacy indicate an individual’s general orientation toward politics, they are all content-free. They ignore that an important source of motivation may be caring about particular issues.27 Understanding the importance of motivation to underresourced populations necessitates more precise theories about motivation than those that currently dominate empirical research on participation.

This book argues that personal goals, particularly personal policy commitments, can be especially important for motivating participation among the disadvantaged. Imagine two people, Rahul and Mary.28 Rahul, the son of two doctors, attended a prestigious private university. He is married and works as a manager in one of the larger private companies in town. He has a strong network of friends from work and school in the area, most of whom are also college-educated professionals. Although politics is not at the forefront of his personal interests, he votes in elections when he can, keeps up with politics enough to discuss it with friends, and has volunteered with local civic organizations in the past when friends have recruited him. Rahul has many of the resources necessary for voter participation: he is educated enough to have basic knowledge about politics and how the political system works; he is embedded in social networks that encourage him to maintain some interest and awareness of politics; he is connected to people who are involved; and he has the financial resources and time to participate when he is so inclined.

Mary is a single mother and former welfare recipient. She has one daughter and pieces together odd jobs to make ends meet. She attends church regularly and grew up in a working-class community. No one in her family and few of her friends and acquaintances have graduated from college. Mary does not regularly read the newspaper or keep up with politics, but she has gotten involved with local politics when an issue directly affected her. The first time she became involved, she and her neighbors organized to protest a landlord threatening to raise rents and push them out of their homes. Unlike Rahul, Mary possesses few of the resources thought necessary for voter participation: she is not very well educated
about politics and the political system, she is not part of a social network that encourages interest and participation in politics, and she lacks the financial resources and spare time to devote to politics.

Understanding motivation is particularly important for understanding how people like Mary, who do not have many political, financial, or educational resources, become engaged. For Rahul, there are instances when the costs of participation are low—when friends provide him with all the information he needs to participate, or when his work schedule affords him the time to participate. For Mary, the costs of participation are always high. Finding information about politics and finding the time to participate are consistently a challenge. If both individuals are trying to vote, it is easier for Rahul to figure out where he should go to register, when Election Day is, and where he should be voting. In addition, it is probably easier for him to take the time out of his day to vote. For Mary to overcome these barriers to participation, she must really want to participate. Mary participated when she wanted to protect the home in which she and her daughter lived. Regardless of how politicized Mary was, when she had a clear commitment that was personally important to her, she found the motivation to overcome the barriers to participation.

Existing models of participation do a good job of predicting participation among citizens like Rahul who fit conventional profiles of political participants; they are not as good at predicting participation among underresourced individuals like Mary who participate more sporadically. To understand patterns of political participation among traditionally marginalized individuals, we need more nuanced models that account for the sources of motivation for various subgroups of people. This book puts forth such a model by focusing on the personal roots of political action.

**The Issue Public Hypothesis**

To study the goals that people bring to politics, I draw on the concept of “issue publics.” There is a nearly infinite list of issues people can care about in politics. Philip Converse first coined the term “issue publics” to refer to the different groups of voters who have particular personal concern for certain policy issues. He argued that within the mass public a series of overlapping groups exists, each of which cares about a different issue. In
other words, the subset of people who care about environmental issues is the environmental public and the subset that cares about health policy is the health public. A person may belong to both, neither, or just one of these issue publics. Although government handles issues ranging from space exploration to housing subsidies in low-income communities to foreign aid, most citizens care personally about only a small subset of issues, if any. These people have built connections between their personal goals and a specific policy issue.

The issue public hypothesis asks whether personal policy commitments are more important in motivating participation among people at lower levels of education. Conventional models of political participation have not examined the impact of belonging to an issue public. In focusing on the resources (such as education, income, and civic skills) that enable people to participate, the traditional resource-mobilization model overlooks the possibility that people with fewer resources may be drawn into the political process by personal motivations, such as belonging to an issue public. Having a strong personal commitment to policy outcomes is not exclusively the purview of the wealthy and the well-educated. Even though many of the displaced New Orleanians lacked political resources, they did care personally about how the city would rebuild. By illuminating the role that personal policy commitments can play in motivating participation and democratic representation, the issue public hypothesis depicts one way that a broader range of people can become engaged into politics.

Like conventional models of participation, the issue public hypothesis accepts the importance of resources, recruitment, and motivation in facilitating participation. Unlike the conventional model, however, it goes beyond the resources necessary for participation and focuses more on the desire to participate. In doing so, it provides an alternate conception of motivation that accounts for the personal goals people are trying to achieve through their participation.

An Alternate Conception of Motivation

The issue public hypothesis deviates from traditional models of participation that conceptualize motivation in only very generalized terms. The hypothesis argues that political motivation is rooted not only in high levels
of general political awareness but also in personal concerns that connect politics to people’s lives. A mother who is not politically interested may become motivated by concern over her son’s schooling; a man who does not regularly read the paper may become motivated when he sees his tax bills steadily rising. These people recognize that political action can help fulfill their personal goals. Motivation in this view is not simply about how interested and aware people are about politics generally; it is about the specific personal life concerns that generate political action.

What differentiates a personal commitment from a political one? As discussed in greater depth in Chapter 2, the crux of the distinction is whether the person has become generally politicized or not. “Politicization” refers to the extent to which a person has expressed a general interest in, knowledge about, and sense of efficacy towards politics. Put another way, politicization is the process of developing a political identity. Much previous research assumes that politicization precedes participation, but this book argues that politicization is not necessary. Instead, personal goals—in particular, personal policy commitments—can be enough. People who have a personal commitment to an issue may get involved even if they are not generally interested in politics. It is important to reiterate that belonging to an issue public, as defined here, indicates a high level of personal concern for an issue. Just as most of us consider what happens to our family or loved ones to be of personal concern, members of issue publics consider what happens to government policy to be personally important. Because they care passionately about the political outcomes, they are more likely to participate in an effort to influence those outcomes.

How do these personal commitments lead to political action? The issue public hypothesis conceptualizes motivation as a dynamic process, instead of a set of static individual traits that capture a person’s potential to become motivated. This alternate approach builds on a burgeoning body of motivation research in psychology and cognitive neuroscience that shows action to be heavily dependent on the extent to which people have emotional reactions to particular stimuli. Motivation is a process of interpreting the world and making choices about what needs attention. Emotions are critical because they interpret external stimuli and act as signals of what we personally value. Emotions determine and prioritize the external stimuli
that require a response. Therefore emotion is fundamental—without emotion, an individual lacks the energizing force necessary for action.  

Personal commitments can determine what kinds of things generate emotional reactions. Political stimuli are one of many kinds of stimuli people receive. A campaign advertisement, a canvasser on an individual’s doorstep, a story in the newspaper, or a conversation with a friend can all act as political stimuli. In many cases, these stimuli will pass relatively unnoticed in the individual’s life. If a person is part of an issue public, however, and cares passionately about a political issue, a related advertisement or conversation may spark an emotional reaction. Given this reaction, the person is then more likely to take political action.

This alternate conception of motivation is thus rooted in the personal goals and commitments that people have. Through daily, ongoing interactions with other people and the surrounding environment, people discover different ways to meet their personal goals. Sometimes they recognize the connection between their personal goals and politics. Once this connection is made (as with issue public members), people value politics more highly in their lives and are thus more likely to act on it.

Participation Pathways

The importance of personal issue commitments to participation leads to a key question: how do people become members of issue publics? How do these connections between personal goals and politics emerge? The tendency in previous research has been to treat the development of motivation as exogenous and to simply study whether or not people are motivated. That research assumes that motivation is the result of idiosyncratic, biographical factors. Some people may be motivated because they were born into highly politicized families; others may be unmotivated because politics was never something discussed at home. Exceptions to this line of reasoning include studies of political socialization, which identify factors that contribute to positive long-term orientations toward politics. These studies focus largely on immutable characteristics of the individual (such as family circumstance or generational cohorts) and examine what effect they have on whether the individual matures into a politically active adult.
Conceptualizing motivation as a process necessitates that we better understand how people connect their personal concerns to politics. This book examines the pathways by which fifty-eight people became involved in public life and argues that their pathways have distinct commonalities, despite differences in educational and financial backgrounds, gender, age, region, and race. Some of the people came from highly resourced backgrounds, while others came from relatively underresourced backgrounds. The key finding from this study is that there are systematic patterns to the way personal commitments and the motivation to participate emerges. This counters the traditional assumption that motivation develops in idiosyncratic ways that are dependent on the unpredictable circumstances that shape an individual’s life.

The development of political motivation does not have to be idiosyncratic or exogenous to the political system. Studying the pathways people take to political involvement shows that civic and political organizations can play a crucial role in developing issue commitments that motivate action, pushing people to see the connection between their personal goals and political action, and creating conditions that make it more likely people will participate. The commonalities in the pathways that these fifty-eight people described form the basis for a more thorough understanding of the ways that political organizations and institutions of democracy can foster motivation.

**Addressing Problems of Inequality**

This chapter began by posing a key question about reducing persistent inequalities in American politics: Are the mechanisms that draw individuals without many resources into the political system the same as the mechanisms that draw people with many political resources? And if not, how do they differ? The issue public hypothesis argues that one way traditionally marginalized groups become engaged to participate is through personal commitments to policy outcomes. Such motivation can engage marginalized individuals because personal commitments are distributed more equally through the population than are participatory resources. Belonging to an issue public does not depend on having a lot of money or being very well educated. For example, parents of all types can become...
engaged in education policy through concern for their children, and citizens of all backgrounds can become engaged in abortion policy through their religious commitments. An individual must simply have a personal commitment to a particular policy issue. It is much harder to endow people from disadvantaged backgrounds with educational, financial, and civic resources. The problem of persistently low or unequal rates of participation can therefore be partly conceptualized as a problem of motivation. Underresourced individuals may not be participating because they are not motivated to participate.

The issue public hypothesis counters the conventional idea that only the wealthy and the well-educated are likely to have their voices heard in politics. Because people with high levels of personal concern for an issue are likely to be more motivated to participate in political activities that bear on that issue, they should also be more likely to have their views represented. For example, because senior citizens are especially interested in and active on matters relating to Social Security policy, they influence policy outcomes. Similarly, evangelical churches are often disproportionately active on certain social policy issues such as abortion and gay marriage, and minority groups are often very active around civil rights issues. Because these issue publics participate more actively on these issues, their voices are more likely to be heard.

Making representation more equal can thus be a function of expanding participation. According to the issue public hypothesis, expanding participation is about increasing motivation. Whereas conventional models of participation might argue that inequalities are a function of unequal distribution of resources, the issue public hypothesis argues that inequalities can partially be a function of unequal levels of motivation in distinct segments of society. Civic and political organizations can play an important role in fostering the motivation to participate, and they need to recognize that people who are not politically aware can still be motivated to participate. Political organizations have generally assumed that politically uninterested people without many resources are not likely to be motivated, and thus these organizations ignore certain segments of the population in their mobilization efforts. This approach has left much potential untapped. People who do not fit certain demographic profiles are often
not targeted and therefore not mobilized. Mobilization could instead be about reaching out to new groups of people and connecting politics to their personal values, such that they develop the personal commitments necessary for action.

PREVIEWING UPCOMING CHAPTERS

The following chapters unpack the issue public argument. The core idea is that people without many resources for participation are more likely to overcome the barriers to participation when they are highly motivated. Chapter 2 lays the theoretical foundation for the issue public hypothesis by developing a more precise definition of motivation that shows how personal issue commitments can motivate action. The standard resource-mobilization model of participation conceptualizes motivation as a set of individual traits that characterize an individual’s potential to participate. The more politicized a person is, the more potential that person has to participate. Chapter 2 draws on existing research from political science and psychology to develop an alternate conception of motivation in which personal goals animate the emotional arousal necessary for action, regardless of people’s general levels of interest in politics. People become energized to take political action when they recognize it as a way of fulfilling their personal goals. Issue publics represent one way people connect their personal commitments to politics.

Chapter 3 defines and describes issue publics in greater depth and shows that people from diverse backgrounds can have personal policy commitments. Research on issue publics is embedded in a broader debate about how political interest and information is distributed in the population. This chapter contrasts the issue public model, which assumes that people specialize in the concerns they have about politics, and the attentive public model, which assumes that people are political generalists. While the former allows for a broad distribution of interest and concern in the population, the latter assumes that only a narrow group of elite are politically aware. By reviewing previous research on issue publics, data on the distribution of issue public members in society, and some of their demographic characteristics, this chapter shows that people of varied backgrounds belong to issue publics. Issue public members are not
necessarily better educated or richer than people who do not belong to issue publics; even people with few educational and financial resources have personal commitments that drive political action.

Chapter 4 then shows that having personal policy commitments makes participation more likely, particularly for people with less education. Drawing on observational data from the 1996 American National Election Study and the 1990 American Citizen Participation Study, the chapter shows empirically that people who have strong personal commitments to politics are more likely to participate. These analyses use instrumental variables and two-stage least-squares regression to account for the possibility that personal issue commitments can grow out of participation just as they facilitate participation. The analyses also examine whether the effect of personal issue commitments varies by education level and find that it does. Personal policy commitments are especially important in predicting participation among people with low levels of education. This chapter thus establishes the key links in the issue public hypothesis: the effect of personal issue commitments on participation, and the increasing importance of these commitments as an individual’s access to the resources typically linked with participation declines.

Given the importance of personal issue commitments in explaining participation, Chapter 5 explores how they emerge. The chapter draws on the Study of Political Pathways, a set of fifty-eight in-depth interviews with political participants about the processes by which they became involved in politics. Three common themes emerged in the pathways these people described. First, subjects’ participation was rooted in a set of personal values, but those values were not enough to predict participation. Most of these people experienced a trigger—a particular life event, a mentor, or an organization—that specifically connected their personal values to political action. Second, the issue commitments of many subjects grew out of or were strengthened by their participation. These commitments were not completely idiosyncratic. Instead (and the third theme), what political organizations did mattered in whether or not people stayed involved. Certain characteristics about individuals’ early experiences mattered in escalating their involvement. The systematic patterns in the pathways people take to participation underscore the idea that institutions of de-
mocracy—political parties, campaigns, and civic organizations—can play a key role in generating the motivation to participate.

Chapter 6 concludes by discussing alternate ways political organizations can motivate participation. Instead of simply “activating” people who are already motivated, I argue that political organizations can adopt a multitiered approach that recognizes the broad range of people who have the potential to be motivated. Although some people become politically aware of their own accord, many others do not. Political organizations can recognize these differences and focus on connecting people to politics through their personal values and commitments. Through this approach, we can build a more broadly participatory democracy.

**Motivated Participation**

Woven throughout the argument in this book are hints about the cyclical relationship between political organizations—such as political parties, campaigns, and civic organizations—and motivation. Just as political motivation facilitates participation in political organizations, political organizations have the potential to facilitate motivation. Throughout the 2008 presidential campaign, political observers marveled at Barack Obama’s ability to energize participation among a broad base of citizens. Multiple stories emerged about people who had never been involved in politics but nonetheless devoted multiple hours to supporting Obama’s run for president. In an online postelection survey conducted with more than 500,000 of the campaign’s most energized volunteers, 66 percent of respondents reported never having previously volunteered for a political campaign. Despite being novice political activists, more than 180,000 (or two-thirds) of those who had never before been involved in campaigns said they would like to continue being involved in their communities as part of some Obama-related organization after the election. This unprecedented level of participation among people who would not have been targeted as likely participants surprised the political community. Even those within the campaign seemed incredulous. In a postcampaign interview, reporter Lisa Taddeo describes campaign manager David Plouffe as marveling about the people they were able to engage in politics: “Do you realize that more than half those volunteers had never been involved in politics before?” David
Plouffe is wide-eyed now, and leaning in. ‘More than half.’ He emphasizes the final word to let the incredulity settle.”41 Since the campaign’s end in November 2008, many political analysts have sought to understand how these previously disengaged people became involved.

One technique the Obama campaign used to motivate people was to personalize the campaign for supporters by connecting to the values and local issues that animated their lives. Joy Cushman, an organizer with the Obama campaign and a former activist with the conservative Christian movement, described her experience organizing within the Christian Right: “We were organizing around abortion and prayer in schools, but it was not just focused on Washington, but focused on our local communities. The brilliance of the [conservative] movement was that they realized that for everyday people to be involved, the issues needed to connect to our values and that we needed to have a very local and meaningful way to get involved.”42 The Obama campaign adopted a similar strategy and thus brought to the forefront of politics questions about how political campaigns motivate people to get involved. We know that people are more likely to participate when someone asks them to do so, and this book implies that increasing motivation by connecting to people’s personal concerns is one mechanism through which recruitment operates. Some research has studied how political institutions can affect motivation through policy feedbacks, examining the way the structure and design of policy creates communities of people motivated to protect their stake in government.43 Other research on mobilization has studied the role organizations can play in providing skills and information to potential participants.44 This book implies that civic and political organizations can play another role by helping generate the desire to participate, thereby influencing who is most active in the political process.

Who gets mobilized, however, depends partially on our assumptions about which individual traits make participation likely. As Steven Schier argues in By Invitation Only: The Rise of Exclusive Politics in the United States, political organizations do not reach out to all people equally. Instead, they target their resources by recruiting those who they think are most likely to participate.45 Given the research finding that people with more resources and more general interest in politics are more likely to
participate, political organizations often mobilize them first. This strategy reinforces existing inequalities in society by mobilizing a narrow group of people. Part of what was so surprising about Obama’s success in organizing new voters is that he engaged people who were not broadly interested in politics. People who did not have the traits many thought were necessary for participation became activists within his campaign. A broader conception of motivation that includes personal values and commitments implies that more people can be motivated than we thought. Even people who are not generally politicized can be motivated if they connect politics to their personal lives. Changing assumptions made by political organizations about who is motivated has implications for whether the underprivileged get mobilized to participate.

The normative implications of these findings are strikingly important, because they offer a means for reducing inequalities in political participation. The issue public hypothesis presents a theoretical and empirical basis for a more equitable approach to politics. It highlights reasons for political involvement that we previously did not appreciate. People we thought did not or would not get involved in politics in fact do. People who have strong personal commitments to politics are similar in terms of income and education to people who do not. Thus the book specifies a mechanism for popular involvement that does not depend on an individual’s income or education level. This lays the foundation for developing a richer understanding of how to shape political participation and remedy persistently low or unequal rates of participation.

Refocusing on the importance of political organizations in motivating people to participate in politics can have implications for American democracy. Democracy necessitates a give-and-take between citizens and political institutions. In representing citizen views, institutions “take” information from citizens and translate it into government action. Much research has focused on the “take.” Representative institutions can also “give” back to citizens by shaping the motivation to participate. Given the connection between wanting to participate and finding voice in politics, the legitimacy of the political system begins, in some sense, with those the institutions seek to mobilize. How political institutions shape citizens affects who participates. Who participates subsequently affects
who is represented in the political system and how legitimate a democracy it is. Democratic institutions that mobilize only small groups of people are no more legitimate than a democracy that is responsive to only the concerns of narrow minorities. Recognizing the cyclical relationship between motivation, participation, and political organizations helps us locate democratic legitimacy in a new place. Both the give and the take between political institutions and citizens are necessary to form the rich fabric of democracy.