

10th International Conference of Panel Data Users in Switzerland

Workshop - Politics and attitudes

Title

The psychological underpinnings of political activity: Does subjective wellbeing affect participation?

Authors

Annika Lindholm, Université de Lausanne

Abstract

This study examines whether individual changes in subjective wellbeing can predict political participation. Theory on the determinants of participation has in the past strongly focused on the role of personal resources, notably time, money, or civic skills, or on mobilizing contextual factors, in explaining differences in participation. Meanwhile, participation patterns are not only traced back to a favourable institutional context or to the availability of time or socio-economic status (SES), but participation is also likely affected by the psychological resources that the individual has at their disposal. This research contributes to the current understanding of the individual-level determinants of participation in politics by extending the focus to individuals' level of subjective wellbeing and the associated emotions.

Subjective wellbeing has in past research been positively correlated with political participation, however fewer studies have focused on explaining the causal mechanism that would link wellbeing and participation, including the direction of that relationship. The majority of existing literature assume that the causal effect runs from participation to wellbeing, arguing that political participation would have a positive effect on sentiments of individual competence (self-efficacy), and a sense of belonging and contributing to the society.

This research takes the opposite approach by arguing that it is theoretically plausible that the state of subjective wellbeing instead *precedes* and *affects* the decision to take part in political activities, or to abstain from conducting political acts. The influence of wellbeing is, however, likely to be different depending on whether one considers conventional or protest-oriented forms of participation.

On the one hand, feeling well is likely to increase conventional political participation, due to its beneficial effects on the development of self-efficacy and a willingness to take action in the public domain. Conversely, not feeling well could have a negative impact on the psychological predisposition and motivation to invest time and energy into conventional political activities, and can prevent the individual from developing a desire to pursue goals of individual and societal wellbeing through political engagement from within the political system.

On the other hand, wellbeing could also have the opposite effect in relation to protest participation, i.e. participation by challenging the political system. High levels of negative affect could in fact mobilize individuals into protest participation, as protesting becomes a channel through which individuals express their grievances. In addition, not feeling well could serve as fertile ground for triggering feelings of anger and outrage, and blaming the surrounding society for one's grievances. These sentiments are likely to make persons more receptive to participation in protest activities. The state of individual wellbeing is therefore likely to influence participation, and not only be the consequence of taking political action. Moreover, wellbeing is likely to have different consequences on political activity, depending on the nature of the activity that we consider.

This study has two principal aims: firstly, to clarify whether we can speak of a causal relationship between subjective wellbeing and political participation, and secondly, to test whether the assumed causal relationship changes when we consider political activities of a conflictual nature. In other words, this paper intends to respond to the following: does subjective wellbeing increase political participation, and is this relationship stable irrespective of the nature of the political activity under consideration? Or, instead, is low wellbeing a motivator for protest participation?

In the empirical part I show that changes in subjective wellbeing affect political participation patterns, and more specifically, that frequently experiencing negative emotions increases intentions of protest participation within individuals. Meanwhile, I do not find evidence of a causal relationship between wellbeing increases and conventional political participation, i.e. voting. The results suggest that, while low wellbeing increases citizen's protest intentions, paying attention to people's wellbeing is not a fix for the decreasing turnout rates in a time when a disenchantment with conventional politics is more widespread than ever in contemporary societies.

...