

# THE STATUS OF RATIONAL CHOICE EXPLANATIONS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

By Peter Muhlberger

E-MAIL: PETERM@ANDREW.CMU.EDU

Rational choice explanations are among the most important in political science. Green and Shapiro (1994, Chapter 1) point out that rational choice theory and research have come to constitute more than a third of articles in the most prestigious political science journal. The rational choice approach has contributed substantially to what questions are asked and how they are answered. In particular, rational choice explanations dominate political scientists' understandings of the problem of collective action – why individuals engage in costly political participation, such as public interest group involvement. Prominent rational choice theories include Chong's (1992) reputation theory, Lohmann's (1993) signalling model, Opp's (1989) public goods model, and Finkel's (1989) collective rationality model.

Rational choice explanations represent a highly plausible type of explanation of participation choices – intentional explanation. Costly participation choices likely do involve intentions. In addition, intentional explanations are normatively attractive because they allow for freedom of choice and reasoned cooperation.

A fully-developed intentional explanation of participation could also serve as an important theoretical foundation for other types of explanation. Other factors influencing participation – such as demographics (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), resources (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995), context

(Huckfeldt 1986), and mobilization (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993) – probably operate by affecting individual decision processes. A fully-developed intentional explanation of participation decisions could help clarify the microfoundations of these societal-level influences. In addition, a theory of participation could clarify the behavior and structure of political groups, which depend partially on member's motives (Knoke 1990).

But, the promise of rational choice theory has not lived up to the reality. A rational choice theory of participation that would yield insights on organizational dynamics and the effects of societal influences would ideally be widely-accepted and well-elaborated. Instead, a multitude of theories have been proposed, many with slim empirical support and bearing contradictory assumptions about human motives. Political scientists have also not developed a rigorous theory incorporating potentially critical considerations that do not fit readily into rational choice explanation, such as identity and ethical considerations (Fireman and Gamson 1979; Mansbridge 1990; Monroe 1996; Uhlaner 1986).

Green and Shapiro (1994) ascribe the shortcomings in rational choice theory to the commitment of rational choice practitioners to developing a universal theory of human behavior. Practitioners ignore the empirical difficulties of rational choice theories or propose multiple ad hoc solutions to these difficulties because no equally general alternative theory exists. Green and Shapiro recommend that rational choice theory be viewed as only one of many valid explanations. Rational choice explanations should focus narrowly on self-interest, while norms and other factors would be the prerogative of other theories.

Green and Shapiro's recommendations present the danger that intentional explanation might take a backseat in our understandings of costly collective

action. Narrow self-interest cannot adequately explain costly participation, as I will discuss. With rational choice limited to narrow self-interest, norms and other plausible explanations would likely be viewed as non-intentional.

This paper suggests that the shortcomings of rational choice explanations of costly participation stem from the information requirements of intentional explanations. Intentional explanations have certain minimal information needs that have not and probably cannot be met by the existing empirical strategies and theoretical formulations of the rational choice approach. A viable intentional explanation of participation will require measurement of intentions and a theoretical framework that suggests non-obvious hypotheses regarding intentions. Non-obvious hypotheses are necessary to validate the measures of intentions and, more generally, to establish a progressive theory. I will discuss a promising approach in the conclusion.

I limit this paper to examining intentional explanations of participation in public interest groups and campaign organizations. The points made, however, probably generalize to other types of participation.

### **What is Rational Choice?**

Elster (1986) considers rational choice explanation a variety of intentional explanation. According to Elster, rational choice theory asserts that people will seek to realize their desires with the most efficient means available, according to their beliefs. People will choose actions relative to the full set of their weighted desires. Weights are orderings of desires determined by the actor. These assumptions embody instrumental rationality. They imply that people's actions are instrumentally directed at altering the state of the world so their desires can best be fulfilled.

In addition, Elster's definition of rational choice includes the rationality of people's beliefs regarding the consequences of their actions. People's beliefs must be rational – consistent and having the greatest degree of plausibility given the evidence. Some practitioners would weaken Elster's criteria of intentionality and rational belief.

### **Rational Choice as an Explanation: Functions and Limitations**

Most economic and rational choice explanations assume people have stable and consistent (transitive) preferences for goods or bundles of goods. Using information about a person's preferences, rational choice analysis can make predictions regarding the goods the person will seek in the future under different prices and budget constraints. Rational choice theory does not seek to explain people's preference changes. Consequently, unless people's preferences remain stable and consistent over time, rational choice theory cannot predict future behavior.

Stable and consistent preferences are not, however, easily observed, because people do not have stable and consistent preferences for concrete goods. For instance, I may desire and eat many apples today. Tomorrow, I will be revolted by apples. My stable preference is not for apples, nor even the taste of apples, but the pleasure which the taste gives me under certain conditions – such as not having had many apples recently. Becker, an important rational choice theorist, agrees:

The preferences that are assumed to be stable do not refer to market goods and services, ... but to underlying objects of choice.... These underlying preferences are defined over fundamental aspects of life, such as health, prestige, sensual pleasure, benevolence, or envy, that do not always bear a stable relation to market goods and services. (Becker 1976)

In other words, people's stable and consistent preferences are for intangible goods — *goods that cannot be directly observed*.

The intangible nature of such goods creates two important hurdles for rational choice theories. To predict people's intentions, rational choice theory requires information regarding people's preferences for intangible goods. Second, rational choice theory is only able to predict the pursuit of intangible goods. Therefore, in order to predict a person's behavior, rational choice theory requires information regarding which concrete actions a person will take to pursue the intangible goods they prefer.

These information needs of rational choice theory are parallel to the information needs of any intentional explanation. Such an explanation must have information regarding what a person intends, which is unobservable. This information need could be met, for example, by a theory that indicates what observables indicate particular intentions. Second, if intentions are driven by abstract goals, such an explanation requires information regarding which concrete actions will be taken to achieve these goals.

Economists and rational choice practitioners have evolved a variety of strategies to address these two information needs. These include restrictive assumptions, aggregation, and what I call cognitive linkage. I will examine how these strategies apply to explaining costly participation decisions.

### **Restrictive Assumptions**

Rational choice prediction requires information regarding which intangible goods people prefer and how desires for intangible goods translate into action. This information can be obtained through strong restrictive assumptions, albeit such information is hypothetical. Two restrictive assumptions are sufficient to meet these information needs. One is that people

are purely self-interested, in the sense of single-mindedly pursuing their material well-being. The second is that all behavior is instrumental to acquiring desired material goods. Simon (1995) observes that these assumptions substitute for empirically-grounded theory, at times to the detriment of the rational choice approach.

The assumptions of material self-interest and instrumental rationality make the inference of behavior from intangible preferences straightforward. The actions of narrowly self-interested persons will be directed at accumulating money and possessions – goods that are easy to observe. Moreover, if these persons are instrumentally rational, they will not engage in any actions that do not achieve their self-interest. Consequently, all actions should be predictable on the assumption that these actions maximize self-interest. Predictions of behavior are made possible by calculating the value of behavioral options in terms of the common denominator of money.

In contrast, if people are significantly motivated by altruism, these guideposts for explaining and predicting behavior disappear. Altruism involves acting on behalf of the preferences or needs of others. Which others, which of their preferences, and how much these preferences are taken into account must be clarified empirically. As Lalman and his colleagues (1993) observe: "If not self-interest, what? Beyond self-interest lies an infinity of alternative conjectures." (p. 80) Altruistic preferences do not narrow the range of behavioral possibilities, because altruism could be implemented in so many different ways.

Importantly, certain types of self-interest would have the same consequences as altruism. Suppose that people's apparent altruism is actually an attempt to obtain psychological rewards for acting altruistically. Such *complex self-interest* would be as predictively intractable as true altruism because we

would again need to know precisely what leads to the psychic rewards—benefits to which others, which of their needs, and so forth.

I hope to show that rational choice theories have not succeeded in explaining political participation using nothing but strong restrictive assumptions. These theories either conflict strongly with the empirical evidence or do not succeed in eliminating altruism or complex self-interest. The following subsections briefly present and conceptually critique several important instrumental self-interest models. In a final subsection, I will discuss the empirical evidence regarding these models.

### Selective Incentives

In Olson's (1965) selective incentives theory, people participate to acquire selective incentives, which are non-purposive rewards—that is, rewards not associated with the collective goals (political goals) of their group. Olson focuses on material incentives—such as discounts and glossy magazines—and social incentives. Contributing to purposive ends is not instrumentally rational according to Olson, because most people cannot individually alter large-scale policy outcomes.

Olson (1965) concedes that altruism might affect participation in non-economic organizations. In a later piece, however, Olson (1979) defends the application of his theory to public interest groups. A generation of political scientists, too, considered Olson's theory relevant to political groups.

Selective incentives do matter for participation. Nonetheless, an explanation of participation relying *only* on selective incentives conflicts with abundant evidence to the contrary, as the last subsection below will show.

### Signaling

Lohmann (1993) offers an instrumental self-interest theory that, if correct, would mean that some people could reasonably believe they have a noticeable likelihood of affecting political outcomes. According to Lohmann, policy makers generally disregard anti-status quo extremists, whose political actions do not provide information about how policies affect the lives of others. Policy makers are, however, sensitive to participation by political moderates, whose participation does reflect how policies affect the silent majority. Only when political action reaches a certain level do leaders believe moderates are participating and do they alter policies to improve their own chances of re-election. Political action by a few additional moderates can therefore cause leaders to change policies. Moderates could, therefore, reasonably believe that they could personally affect policy.

Lohmann's theory requires either altruism or irrationality on the part of participants. A critical component of her model is that leaders can confidently believe that moderate participants represent the needs of a much larger class of non-participants. But, these participants might represent only themselves—a plausible possibility given the exceptional nature of participation. Lohmann addresses this point by observing that people's policy preferences are affected by the experiences of others around them. Purely self-interested people would not, however, react to the experiences of others, unless these experiences clarify their own self-interest. This hardly guarantees that participants will represent the overall interests of many non-participants. A guarantee would be possible only if participants irrationally conclude that the interests of others are their own interests or participants take the interests of others into account out of altruism. Either possibility violates assumptions Lohmann has gone to great lengths to defend.

Lohmann's extremists also do not participate to convey information about how policies affect their lives. Lohmann needs this assumption to explain why in real life low levels of participation do not appear to radically influence policy. But if extremists do not participate to convey information about how policies affect their lives, their participation is either not instrumental or not self-interested. Finally, it is unclear why leaders would depend on unreliably observed participation levels when they have access to public opinion polls that are arguably better guides to getting re-elected.

### Reputation and Expression

Chong's reputation-expression theory (1991; 1992) paints a complex portrait of why people joined and remained in the Civil Rights movement. Chong at points introduces apparently altruistic considerations. On the whole, however, he appeals to altruistic considerations as a last resort.

Chong proposes that most people participate in social movements primarily to acquire a good reputation. Good reputations lead to material side-payments unconnected to political activity. People also seek catharsis.

Chong's (1991) theory needs to explain how mass movements get started, because an infant movement cannot command the social recognition that makes reputational side-payments or catharsis possible. Perhaps leaders are entrepreneurs who invest in their own long-term self-interest by starting social movements (Salisbury 1969). This possibility seems implausible to Chong in the case he analyzes—the Civil Rights movement. Nor does it seem plausible in terms of risk and opportunity costs. Chong instead argues that those who got the Civil Rights movement started were altruists. Social movement leaders, Chong argues, are moral Kantians who participate for moral reasons and regardless of the efficacy of participation.

Again, the theory seems incongruous. In order to depict most participants as rationally self-interested, the theory requires some to be saints. Chong attempts to weaken this incongruity by suggesting that some people become Kantians because they believe being Kantians promotes their long-term interest. This theory of the genesis of moral motivation cannot be addressed with Chong's data.

### The Empirical Evidence

Signalling theory has not been empirically tested. Chong finds evidence for his reputation thesis in his historical analysis of the Civil Rights Movement. Much of this evidence shows that people are concerned for their reputations. It does not demonstrate that people are concerned for their reputations chiefly because of calculations of material self-interest. Chong himself suggests that reputational considerations might be ends in themselves. Thus, the evidence does not clearly support the view that self-interest drives most participation. Only Olson's theory has been subject to rigorous empirical tests. Tillock and Morrison (1979) disconfirm key empirical predictions of the theory. Other research shows that, contrary to the selective incentives theory, people participate in large part because of the collective goals of their groups.

The empirical literature on public interest and campaign participation indicates that people's concerns about policy outcomes is the chief reason they participate. Three types of evidence are involved. The weakest line of evidence shows that survey respondents report that collective goals are critical to why they joined public interest groups or campaign organizations (Cook 1984; Hedges 1984; McCulloch 1990; Miller, Jewell, and Sigelman 1987; Shaw 1981; Tillock and Morrison 1979). For example, Schlozman et al. (1995) find that

politically active persons cite policy and civic gratifications as the major reasons for their participation.

Defenders of the selective incentives hypothesis respond, however, by citing evidence that people are unaware of their true motives for acting and are quite willing to offer incorrect but self-flattering reconstructions of their motives (Markus 1986; Nisbett and Wilson 1977). The implications of this line of evidence has, perhaps, been overdrawn. Other research suggests that people do have privileged knowledge of their own reasons for acting (White 1980). Earlier findings that people do not know their reasons for acting may be the result of people forgetting their reasons for engaging in trivial actions (McClure 1983). Participation should not be a trivial action for many activists, which may mean their self-reported motivation should not be dismissed.

Another set of studies employs a methodology less susceptible to the problems of asking respondents to reconstruct their motives. These studies involve surveying respondents with questions about how much of various incentives they perceive participation would provide. Regression analysis is then used to reconstruct the importance of each incentive for behavior (Finkel and Opp 1991; Opp, Hartmann, and Hartmann 1989). Studies of this type do not ask subjects to make inferences about their reasons for acting but infer these reasons statistically using self-reported behavior or, better, behavioral measures as the dependent variable. For example, Muhlberger (1997a) finds that reported perceptions of altruistic benefits predict who will show for a subsequent public interest group meeting. Social desirability bias is also reduced in interviews consisting of self-administered or mailed questionnaires (Gibson 1991; Godwin and Mitchell 1982; Knoke 1988; Muhlberger 1997a).

Finally, some studies employ methodologies that are impervious to the problems of motive reconstruction or social desirability bias. Berry (1977)

observes that 86% of the 83 national public interest groups in his sample offered no services and 67% of the groups had no local chapters. Contributors to most of these groups could not have been attracted by either material or solidary incentives. Berry concludes that purposive benefits must explain involvement in such groups.

Hansen's (1985) analysis of three national political associations shows that membership rose dramatically in response to group provision of collective incentives, even controlling for group provision of material incentives. Remarkably, Hansen's findings extend to include not just public interest groups but two traditional economic-based political groups.

The evidence that people are concerned with policy outcomes, however, does not address the possibility that purposive benefits may nonetheless be self-interested. The signaling and reputation models maintain that people seek to alter policy outcomes for their personal gain.

Some additional empirical findings, however, indicate that material self-interest need not be the driving force behind concern over collective goods. Reviewing the internal minutes and documents of 17 national interest groups, Shaw (1981) observes that dialogue and persuasion within these groups depends primarily on the notion of a common good. Also, a substantial body of experimental research shows that people often act to help others even when helping is costly and the beneficiaries are strangers (Batson and Coke 1981; Dawes, Kragt, and Orbell 1990; Marwell and Ames 1980).

Experimental research may not be externally valid. Some research, however, has gone to lengths to establish the external validity of seemingly altruistic behavior. Schwartz (1970) sent confederates to a blood bank where they posed as medical personnel and asked people to donate bone marrow. Schwartz manipulated the described altruistic value of donation and found that

the higher the altruistic value, the more likely people were to donate bone marrow. Schwartz also finds that reported moral responsibility correlates significantly with related helping behavior measured surreptitiously months later in non-experimental settings (Schwartz and Howard 1984).

### Conclusions Regarding Instrumental Self-Interest Theories

The self-interest theories of Olson, Lohmann, and Chong strain against both empirical and conceptual difficulties. Empirical findings contradict Olson's hypothesis that people do not participate to achieve collective goals. More empirically plausible theories, such as those of Lohmann and Chong, seek to make a desire for collective benefits consistent with the assumption of material self-interest. Implicitly or explicitly these theories require saintly altruism by a few people while contending the majority possess no altruism, a serious conceptual tension. This tension might be justified if the empirical evidence indicated that most people act exclusively in materially self-interested ways, but a large body of experimental and naturalistic evidence suggests not.

Even if this evidence only shows that people are good at *appearing* altruistic, the evidence undermines the feasibility of a rational choice theory based on the self-interest restrictive assumption. This assumption helps meet the information needs of rational choice theory by stipulating that people's self-interest involves pursuit of tangible material commodities. By so stipulating, rational choice theorists can predict what actions a person will pursue – those that maximize wealth and consumption in monetary terms.

If, however, people receive unobserved psychic rewards from appearing altruistic, rational choice theorists are confronted by complexities as great as for pure altruism. They would need to know what goals and actions result in

psychic rewards and how psychic rewards trade off with other preferences. Such information can only be obtained empirically, not *a priori*.

A similar point can be made about an argument that continuously slips into the political science debate regarding self-interest, notably in Chong (1991). The argument states that while people are genuinely altruistic this altruism originates in self-interest. Whether or not real altruism originates in self-interest by some socialization or internalization process does not make seemingly altruistic political behavior easier to explain via restrictive assumptions. Analysis of the origins of altruism is best left to psychologists.

Genuine altruism – that is, altruism whose ultimate goal is improving the world, not obtaining psychic rewards – may well exist, but the issue is outside the realm of political science and possibly out of the realm of answerable questions. Unbeknownst to many political scientists, an impressive and subtle body of experimental evidence suggests that genuine altruism exists (Batson 1991; Batson and Shaw 1991; Karylowski 1984). But, there will be doubts when it comes to something so difficult to measure (Cialdini, Schaller, Houlihan et al. 1987).

### **Aggregation**

Another way to address the problem of inferring between observable data and intangible preferences is to find concrete behaviors that strongly correlate with the intangible goods people desire. This collapses the intangible-observable distinction, permitting prediction of concrete future behavior from concrete past behavior, a strategy used by economists.

A person's pleasure in eating an apple differs from time to time. But if a person found pleasure in eating an apple in the past, that person will likely find pleasure in eating an apple again at some point in the future. The number of

apples a person will eat this coming year might therefore be well predicted by the number she or he ate last year, under the same price and budget. Similarly, aggregate demand for apples in Chicago today might accurately predict demand tomorrow. Aggregation over people or over time makes prediction possible because the amount of pleasure and other intangible goods to be had from a concrete commodity may be reasonably constant when aggregated.

A rational choice theory based on aggregation probably cannot adequately explain individual decisions to join political groups. Aggregate data can only give ambiguous evidence regarding what psychological mechanisms underlie participation decisions. Aggregation of a person's choices over time would make prediction of individual decisions theoretically possible. But such aggregation might not work well for such infrequent behaviors as joining a political group.

Aggregation, whether across persons or time, might also not be predictively successful if altruistic or purposive benefits are an important component of participation decisions. Beliefs about the altruistic value of public interest and campaign participation tend to be highly subjective and therefore volatile over time. Hansen (1985) observes that intangible benefits tend to be elastic and subject to changes in fashion. Knoke (1990, p.111) points out that purposively motivated people will join and leave a group based on slight changes in their perceptions of the relative normative value of the group. Inferences about the altruistic value of participation depend on political beliefs, which are recognized as subjective and volatile (Edelman 1964; Zaller 1992). Finally, the psychological literature suggests that altruism often depends on complex judgments that can be reversed by the minute details and framing of a person's information (Batson 1991; Schwartz and Howard 1981).

Unsurprisingly, few attempts have been made to develop a theory of participation choice based on aggregation. One of the few examples that might be viewed as an application of the aggregation device is Hansen's (1985) rational choice analysis of interest group membership. Hansen hypothesizes that people will be risk averse with respect to losses. Consequently, when events threaten the existing distribution of resources to some constituency, constituents will be so risk averse they will join political groups.

Hansen's explanation assumes pure self-interest. People are only seeking to benefit themselves via the expected utility of their own action. Realistically, the likelihood of personally affecting nationwide political goals should be quite small for most individuals. Thus, for Hansen's explanation to work, people must be so risk averse that even a minute likelihood of influencing outcomes is cause for action, which makes them irrational.

Hansen's evidence indicates that when people's incomes are low, they are more likely to join based on a given increase in the group's provision of the collective good and more likely to leave based on a decline in that provision. Hansen interprets the fact that people are more responsive when their incomes are low as evidence they are risk averse to losses. This interpretation goes beyond Hansen's data, which contain no information on anticipated or actual losses.

Alternative explanations of Hansen's findings abound. For example, perhaps people wish to altruistically provide collective goods to others, and the value of these goods seems higher when incomes are low. Or perhaps organizations more actively mobilize their constituency in times of distress.

Aggregate data gives at best ambiguous information regarding individual decision processes. Also, even if aggregated, participation decisions are likely to

be too sensitive to new information and context to provide information on stable preferences.

### **Cognitive Linkage Theories**

Aggregation and strong restrictive assumptions address the information needs of rational choice models with minimal data. Rational choice theorists need to know how much altruism or other intangible goods people believe they are purchasing. Why not ask them? Theories that make use of such information can be called cognitive linkage theories because they seek to link intangibles and observables using reported cognitions.

Karl-Dieter Opp and his associates implement this solution in their public goods and collective rationality models of participation (Finkel, Muller, and Opp 1989; Muller and Opp 1986; Opp 1986; Opp, Hartmann, and Hartmann 1989). These are a species of cognitive linkage theory that I will call "extended rational choice theory." The public goods and collective rationality models allow any kind of motivation, including altruism. These models assume that people desire to provide collective goods for all, including through political action.

Furthermore, people are "instrumental" altruists. That is, they are more motivated to participate the greater the expected value of their own or their group's contribution to public goods. The expected value of an action is the product of the value of the goals of the action times the probability the action will achieve these goals. Opp's instrumental altruists consider two kinds of probabilities: how likely they are to personally bring about political goals and how likely their group is to bring about the goals.

The extended rational choice methodology involves surveying respondents to determine their cognitions of various participation costs and benefits. The researcher predetermines a list of costs and benefits. Reported

cognitions are then used to predict participation, using regression analysis. This approach, or something similar, is followed by most of the existing empirical research on political participation decisions, including research by Opp, Opp's colleagues (Muller, Dietz, and Finkel 1991), Gibson (1991), Godwin and Mitchell (1982), and Knoke (1988, 1990).

I will discuss four points regarding extended rational choice theory: The theory contains problematic conceptual tensions. Research reported to date does not convincingly demonstrate that people pursue expected collective utility. Extended rational choice theory has led to a regressive research program. And, extended rational choice methodology is too limited to convincingly demonstrate the theory's claims.

### Conceptual Tensions

Extended theory contends that people choose participation opportunities that maximize collective value times the probability of the group achieving these values. An instrumentally-rational person would not, however, pay attention to group efficacy. Thus, extended rational choice theory abandons the assumption that behavior is individually instrumental. If researchers abandon this assumption, however, they have no rationale for stipulating that people seek to maximize expected value, a hypothesis of the theory. Also, to the extent that respondents report that they have a noticeable chance of personally affecting policy outcomes, they are irrational.

### Evidence for the Expected Collective Value Explanation

The key contribution of rational choice theory to the public goods and collective rationality models is the proposition that participation decisions are informed by perceptions of expected collective benefits. The data analyses of

Opp and his colleagues are, however, statistically flawed. (I would prefer to reanalyze the data, but Opp and Finkel have rejected my requests for the data.)

In none of their reported work do these researchers indicate that they test the expected collective benefits terms while controlling for the main effects. By not including these terms, proponents of extended theory make the strong assumption that none of the variables has any effect on participation when any one of them is zero. If this assumption is incorrect, the p-value they obtain for expected collective benefits will be incorrect, perhaps dramatically.

In addition, by not testing the expected collective benefits interaction against the main effects, these researchers do not determine whether the expected collective benefits explanation does any better than the simple additive alternative. If it were not to do better, the hypothesis that people take into account expected collective benefits should be rejected.

In some of their research, Finkel and his colleagues (Finkel, Muller, and Opp 1989) fit participation to a Cobb-Douglas functional form of the expected collective value interaction. This approach faces the same objections as the multiplicative interaction approach.

#### A Non-Progressive Theory

The key contribution of rational choice theory to extended theory is, as just discussed, the notion that expected collective benefits might matter. Beyond this contribution, extended rational choice theory proves atheoretical.

Opp argues that the concepts of "benefits" and "costs" in the public goods and collective rationality models are meaningless placeholders for any variable that might have an effect (Opp, Hartmann, and Hartmann 1989). If so, these concepts cannot guide researchers toward novel hypotheses.

In practice, extended rational choice researchers use commonsense in selecting benefits and costs to include in their models. As a result, they do not test non-obvious hypotheses. In addition, the benefits and costs tested receive no additional theoretical justification or empirical validation. Not even a comprehensive factor analysis is provided to establish measurement validity.

The same measures can prove significant repeatedly not because they correctly capture cognitions relevant to people's reasoning, but because respondents are doing their best to interpret close-ended questions so they can reveal their actual reasons (Schwarz, Strack, Hilton et al. 1991). Researchers need alternative theoretical frameworks to suggest other testable cognitions.

#### Methodological Limitations

Extended rational choice research involves regressing a measure of participation on a number of benefits and costs. This methodology improves on a methodology based purely on self reports. For social desirability bias to affect this methodology, respondents would have to systematically distort their reported perceptions. Nevertheless, they might do just this. These difficulties can, I believe, be addressed with non-obvious hypotheses and greater methodological diversity, as I will discuss in the conclusion.

#### **Conclusion: Toward a New Approach**

I will summarize key points and then open a discussion of promising new directions of inquiry. An effective rational choice explanation requires information regarding which intangible goods people prefer and how desires for intangible goods translate into action. These two information needs have been addressed in one of three ways—restrictive assumptions, aggregation, and cognitive linkage. These solutions, as currently implemented, have not been

adequate for addressing the altruistic or seemingly altruistic components of such decisions.

The restrictive assumption approach presupposes that people are purely self-interested and instrumentally rational. Whether these assumptions are good ones depends on whether they yield useful predictions and coherent explanations. Theories of participation based on the restrictive approach clash with vast bodies of empirical findings. The more empirically plausible self-interest theories implicitly or explicitly introduce intense altruism for at least some people, a theoretical incongruity. Finally, a substantial body of findings indicates that people do act in ways that help others at cost to themselves. These findings might mean that people are self-interested but simply collect psychic rewards for their acts of altruism. Even if so, the findings suggest that self-interest is sufficiently complex and hard to observe that self-interest theories cannot meet their information needs with *a priori* assumptions.

Aggregation over an individual's past actions or over large numbers of people might, conceivably, be used as the basis of a rational choice theory of public interest participation. But, aggregation seems to provide only ambiguous clues regarding how individuals decide to participate. Finally, aggregation might not be adequate for dealing with actions based on complex and variable considerations, such as the purposive benefits of participation.

A third approach, the cognitive linkage approach, incorporates information about people's perceptions. Unfortunately, the dominant models of this kind, the public goods and collective rationality models, venture into human cognition and reasoning without strong theoretical guidance. Consequently, the theory suggests few non-obvious hypotheses. A key theoretical point, that expected collective benefits matter, has not been adequately tested. This approach also does not satisfy those who consider verbal reports inaccurate.

These critical observations are largely irrelevant unless a more promising alternative can be suggested. In light of the analysis presented, the most promising direction for an intentional explanation of participation decisions is one that incorporates verbal reports. The aggregation and restrictive assumptions approaches have faltered, most likely because these approaches attempt to do too much with scant recourse to empirical information. Rational choice explanation presupposes that intentions matter. It should hardly be surprising that such an explanation may need to make use of verbal reports. However, any new approach should address criticisms of the validity of verbal reports.

Political scientists should explore a multitude of options in search of a better theory of participation. My goal here is to demonstrate that promising alternatives exist. I will therefore focus on an alternative with which I am familiar. I have elsewhere (Muhlberger 1997a)zz proposed an ethical responsibility theory of public interest participation choice. This theory originates in psychological theories of altruistic decision making and motivation. Because of its rich theoretical heritage and its attempt to model actual decisions, the theory suggests many non-obvious hypotheses for further research. Responsibility theory contributes to understanding the altruistic or seemingly altruistic component of participation decisions. It also allows a role for self-interested selective incentives.

Responsibility theory claims that deliberated participation decisions involve consideration of several summary judgments. A person deciding whether to participate considers whether the goals of a group are relevant to their identity and whether these goals further ethical values in which they believe. These two considerations determine the level of responsibility a person

feels to participate. Responsibility results in motivation to participate via both anticipations of psychic rewards and directly.

The linkages between these cognitions depend on certain motivational and cognitive processes. For example, the direct link between responsibility and motivation to participate might depend on processes such as focus of attention (Karylowski 1982), empathy (Batson 1991), integrated motivation (Ryan and Connell 1989), perspective (Monroe 1996), and moral reasoning sophistication (Rest 1979).

Numerous non-obvious hypotheses suggest themselves. For example, manipulations of focus of attention should affect the strength of links between cognitions in the model (path coefficients). Elsewhere, I show that an attention manipulation, placing some subjects in front of a mirror, has precisely such effects (Muhlberger 1996). I also find that a measure of moral reasoning complexity, which has virtually no political content, has powerful and expected effects on model links (Muhlberger 1997b).

Such non-obvious findings suggest the ethical responsibility model does tap real motivational processes leading to participation. The findings also clarify how these processes affect participation choice.

The responsibility model can be defended against the view that verbal reports do not result in action. The model significantly predicts subsequent, surreptitiously recorded, joining attempts (Muhlberger 1995). The causal direction of model cognitions could be discerned using manipulations of information about the public interest groups (Diamond 1990) and manipulations of identity. And, causal direction could be inferred from response latencies to measures presented in random order.

The ethical responsibility approach also opens a new means of exploring how considerations of value, identity, and perspective affect political action—

considerations that rational choice theories have shied from explaining. These considerations should influence specific cognitions in the responsibility model or the strength of path coefficients between cognitions. For example, certain self-descriptions significantly increase the likelihood that a person will find public interest groups self-relevant, a model cognition (Muhlberger 1995). These identities should, therefore, make participation more likely. The responsibility model and corresponding approach represents one potentially promising avenue for exploring participation decisions.

## Bibliography

- Batson, C. Daniel. 1991. *The Altruism Question : Toward a Social Psychological Answer*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Batson, C. Daniel, and Jay S. Coke. 1981. "Empathy: A Source of Altruistic Motivation for Helping?" In *Altruism and Helping Behavior: Social, Personality, and Developmental Perspectives*, ed. J. Philippe Rushton, and Richard M. Sorrentine. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Batson, C. Daniel, and Laura L. Shaw. 1991. "Evidence for Altruism: Toward a Pluralism of Prosocial Motives." *Psychological Inquiry* 2: 107-122.
- Becker, Gary. 1976. *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Berry, Jeffrey M. 1977. *Lobbying for the People: The Political Behavior of Public Interest Groups*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Brady, Henry E., Sidney Verba, and Kay Lehman Schlozman. 1995. "Beyond SES: A Resource Model of Political Participation." *American Political Science Review* 89: 271-294.
- Chong, Dennis. 1991. *Collective Action and the Civil Rights Movement*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Chong, Dennis. 1992. "Reputation and Cooperative Behavior." *Rationality and Society* 31: 683-709.
- Cialdini, Robert B., Mark Schaller, Donald Houlihan, Kevin Arps, and Jim Fultz. 1987. "Empathy-Based Helping: Is it Selflessly or Selfishly Motivated?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52: 749-758.
- Cook, Constance Ewing. 1984. "Participation in Public Interest Groups: Membership Motivations." *American Politics Quarterly* 12: 409-430.
- Dawes, Robyn M., Alphons J.C. van de Kragt, and John M. Orbell. 1990. "Cooperation for the Benefit of Us--Not Me, or My Conscience." In *Beyond Self Interest*, ed. Jane J. Mansbridge. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Diamond, Gregory Andrade. 1990. *Murky (Re)Solutions: Cognitive Determinants of Individual Response to Collective Threat*. University of Michigan.

- Edelman, Murray. 1964. *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*. Urbana, Chicago, and London: University of Illinois Press.
- Elster, Jon. 1986. "Introduction." In *Rational Choice*, ed. Jon Elster. Washington Square, New York: New York University Press.
- Finkel, Steven E., Edward N. Muller, and Karl-Dieter Opp. 1989. "Personal Influence, Collective Rationality, and Mass Political Action." *American Political Science Review* 83: 885-903.
- Finkel, Steven E., and Karl-Dieter Opp. 1991. "Party Identification and Participation in Collective Political Action." *Journal of Politics* 53: pp. 339-371.
- Fireman, Bruce, and William A. Gamson. 1979. "Utilitarian Logic in the Resource Mobilization Perspective." In *The Dynamics of Social Movements: Resource Mobilization, Social Control, and Tactics*, ed. Mayer N. Zald, and John D. McCarthy. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Winthrop Publishers, Inc.
- Gibson, Martha Liebler. 1991. "Public Goods, Alienation, and Political Protest: The Sanctuary Movement as a Test of the Public Goods Model of Collective Rebellious Behavior." *Political Psychology* 12: 623-651.
- Godwin, R. Kenneth, and Robert Cameron Mitchell. 1982. "Rational Models, Collective Goods, and Nonelectoral Political Behavior." *Western Political Quarterly* 35: 161-180.
- Green, Donald P., and Ian Shapiro. 1994. *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory: A Critique of Applications in Political Science*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Hansen, John M. 1985. "The Political Economy of Group Membership." *American Political Science Review* March: 79-96.
- Hedges, Roman B. 1984. "Reasons for Political Involvement: A Study of Contributors to the 1972 Presidential Campaign." *Western Political Quarterly* 37: pp. 257-271.
- Huckfeldt, Robert. 1986. *Politics in Context: Assimilation and Conflict in Urban Neighborhoods*. New York: Agathon Press.
- Karylowski, Jerzy. 1982. "Two Types of Altruistic Behavior: Doing Good to Feel Good or to Make the Other Feel Good." In *Cooperation and Helping Behavior: Theories and Research*, ed. Valerian J. Derlega, and Janusz Grelak. New York: Academic Press.

- Karylowski, Jerzy. 1984. "Focus of Attention and Altruism: Endocentric and Exocentric Sources of Altruistic Behavior." In *Development and Maintenance of Prosocial Behavior*, ed. Ervin Staub, Daniel Bar-Tal, Jerzy Karylowski, and Janusz Reykowski. New York and London: Plenum Press.
- Knoke, David. 1988. "Incentives in Collective Action Organizations." *American Sociological Review* 53: 311-329.
- Knoke, David. 1990. *Organizing for Collective Action: The Political Economies of Associations*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Lalman, David, Joe Oppenheimer, and Piotr Swistak. 1993. "Formal Rational Choice Theory: A Cumulative Science of Politics." In *Political Science: The State of the Discipline II*, ed. Ada W. Finifter. Washington, D.C.: American Political Science Association.
- Lohmann, Susanne. 1993. "A Signaling Model of Informative and Manipulative Political Action." *American Political Science Review* 87: 319-333.
- Mansbridge, Jane, eds. 1990. *Beyond Self Interest*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Markus, Gregory B. 1986. "Stability and Change in Political Attitudes: Observed, Recalled, and Explained." *Political Behavior* 8: 21-43.
- Marwell, Gerald, and Ruth E. Ames. 1980. "Experiments on the Provision of Public Goods, II: Provision Points, Stakes, Experience, and the Free-Rider Problem." *American Journal of Sociology* 85: 926.
- McClure, John. 1983. "Telling More than They can Know: The Positivist Account of Verbal Reports and Mental Processes. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*." 13 1: 111-127.
- McCulloch, Alistair. 1990. "Joining a Political Party: A Reassessment of the Economic Approach to Membership." *British Journal of Sociology* 41: pp. 497-516.
- Miller, Penny M., Malcolm E. Jewell, and Lee Sigelman. 1987. "Reconsidering a Typology of Incentives Among Campaign Activists." *Western Political Quarterly* 40: pp. 519-526.
- Monroe, Kristen Renwick. 1996. *The Heart of Altruism : Perceptions of a Common Humanity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Muhlberger, Peter. 1995. "Participation in Public Interest Groups and Campaign Organizations: From Rational Choice to an Explanation Based on Altruism and Ethical Reasoning (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1995)." *Dissertation Abstracts International* 56-08A: 266 (University Microfilms No. 9542919).
- Muhlberger, Peter 1996. *The Role of Attention in Public Interest Participation Decisions*. Presented at the International Society of Political Psychology Annual Meeting, Vancouver, B.C., .
- Muhlberger, Peter. 1997a. "An Ethical Responsibility Explanation of Public Interest and Campaign Participation." Manuscript Submitted for Publication
- Muhlberger, Peter. 1997b. "Moral Reasoning Effects on Political Participation Decisions." Manuscript Submitted for Publication
- Muller, Edward N., Henry A. Dietz, and Steven E. Finkel. 1991. "Discontent and the Expected Utility of Rebellion: The Case of Peru." *American Political Science Review* 85: 1261-1281.
- Muller, Edward N., and Karl-Dieter Opp. 1986. "Rational Choice and Rebellious Collective Action." *American Political Science Review* 80: 471-487.
- Nisbett, Richard E., and Timothy D. Wilson. 1977. "Telling more than we can know: Verbal reports on mental processes." *Psychological Review* 84: 231-259.
- Olson, Mancur. 1965. *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Opp, Karl-Dieter. 1986. "Soft Incentives and Collective Action: Participation in the Anti-Nuclear Movement." *British Journal of Political Science* 16: 87-112.
- Opp, Karl-Dieter, Peter Hartmann, and Petra Hartmann. 1989. *The Rationality of Political Protest: A Comparative Analysis of Rational Choice Theory*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Rest, James R. 1979. *Development in Judging Moral Issues*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Rosenstone, Steven J., and John Mark Hansen. 1993. *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*. New York: Macmillan.

- Ryan, Richard M., and James P. Connell. 1989. "Perceived Locus of Causality and Internalization: Examining Reasons for Acting in Two Domains." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57: 749-761.
- Salisbury, Robert. 1969. "An Exchange Theory of Interest Groups." *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 8: 1-32.
- Schlozman, Kay Lehman, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady. 1995. "Participation's Not a Paradox: The View from American Activists." *British Journal of Political Science* 25: 1-36.
- Schwartz, Shalom H. 1970. "Elicitation of Moral Obligation and Self-Sacrificing Behavior: An Experimental Study of Volunteering to be a Bone Marrow Donor." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 13: 283-293.
- Schwartz, Shalom H., and Judith A. Howard. 1981. "A Normative Decision-Making Model of Altruism." In *Altruism and Helping Behavior: Social, Personality, and Developmental Perspectives*, ed. J. Philippe Rushton, and Richard M. Sorrentine. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Schwartz, Shalom H., and Judith A. Howard. 1984. "Internalized Values as Motivators of Altruism." In *Development and Maintenance of Prosocial Behavior*, ed. Ervin Staub, Daniel Bar-Tal, Jerzy Karylowski, and Janusz Reykowski. New York and London: Plenum Press.
- Schwarz, Norbert, Fritz Strack, Denis J. Hilton, and Gabi Naderer. 1991. "Base rates, representativeness, and the logic of conversation: The contextual relevance of "irrelevant" information." *Social Cognition* 9: 67-84.
- Shaw, Catherine Anne. 1981. *In the Public Interest: Public Interest Groups and American Democracy*. University of Michigan.
- Simon, Herbert A. 1995. "Rationality in Political Behavior." *Political Psychology* 16: 45-61.
- Tillock, Harriet, and Denton T. Morrison. 1979. "Group Size and Contributions to Collective Action: An Examination of Olson's Theory Using Data From Zero Population Growth, Inc." In *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, ed.
- Uhlener, Carole Jean. 1986. "Political Participation, Rational Actors, and Rationality: A New Approach." *Political Psychology* 7: 551-573.
- White, Peter. 1980. "Limitations on Verbal Reports of Internal Events: A Refutation of Nisbett and Wilson and of Bem." *Psychological Review* 87: 105-112.

Wolfinger, Raymond E., and Steven J. Rosenstone. 1980. *Who Votes?* New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Zaller, John R. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.