

Studying Citizen Participation in the USSR and the USA

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1. Background

Observers of modern nation-states probably know much more about the number of hogs' bellies and pigs' feet produced in these nations than about the range and extent of political participation that takes place within their borders. Governments spend a great deal of time and effort collecting, publishing, and analyzing economic statistics, but except for voting records, much less effort is expended in learning about political activity. Because of this neglect, very little information is usually collected at those crucial moments when nations undergo fundamental changes and basic restructuring. With the momentous events now occurring in the Soviet Union, the studies of political participation in the United States and the USSR described in this article may well prove to be an important exception.

This article describes two parallel studies of participation that have been developed cooperatively. One is a study of social and political participation in the United States that is being conducted by Sidney Verba of Harvard University, Kay L. Schlozman of Boston College, and Norman Nie and Henry E. Brady of the University of Chicago. The other is a study of the evolving system of participation in the Soviet Union organized by the Institute of State and Law of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. The overlap of the interests of the two research groups coupled with the new possibilities for joint work led us to explore the possibility of close cooperation in our research endeavors.

The exploration of possibilities began with a meeting between Soviet

and American scholars in September, 1987 in Tallin in the Estonian Republic of the USSR. This meeting was organized by working groups of the USSR's Academy of Sciences and the American Council of Learned Societies. The goal was to discuss the theory and practice of political participation in both societies. This first meeting was followed by a second workshop on citizen participation on Martha's Vineyard during August, 1988. Norman Nie of the University of Chicago, Cynthia Kaplan of UCSB and Mikhail Piskotin and William Smirnov of the Institute of State and Law of the Soviet Academy of Sciences were the principal organizers of this conference which was attended by the research teams from each nation and other scholars. At that meeting, Soviet and American scholars enthusiastically endorsed a Soviet-American agreement for joint empirical studies of political participation in the United States and in the Soviet Union.

The discussions at Martha's Vineyard also led to two other decisions. First, because an American study of political participation was already very far along, the American study would serve as a reference point for the Soviet scholars although this in no way implied a simple replication of the U.S. study in the USSR.

Second, to ensure a truly joint project, Soviet scholars would come to the United States to work with American researchers at the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, and American scholars would go to the Soviet Union to work with their counterparts at the Institute of State and Law.

In this short article, we report upon the rationale for the joint study, the progress of the American and Soviet research, and the products we expect from our collaboration.

2. Rationale and Goals for the Joint Study

The agreement signed at Martha's Vineyard stressed the fundamental importance of political participation in both the United States and the Soviet Union, and the need to study changes occurring in both nations. In the Soviet Union in recent years, questions of democracy and citizen participation have become central to the ongoing reforms. There have been substantial shifts in political consciousness, and the rise of genuine involvement of large masses of hitherto passive people in politics and administration, including the formation of informal groups and movements and even the development of political protest. Election mechanisms have also been undergoing substantial reforms. There is a transition from predominantly consultative, informative, and non-obligatory mechanisms for leaders and for state and public institutions to genuine and decisive modes of political participation. All of these changes provide an exceptional opportunity for serious empirical investigation.

In the United States, the last quarter century has also produced major changes in the traditional participatory system. Elections have been drastically modified by the emergence of primaries and the growing dominance of the mass media over elections at all levels of government.

Consequently, the role of parties has been substantially affected. A new form of non-electoral participation, which some have come to call "check-book" democracy, has come into being with the evolution of national citizen organizations utilizing computer based mass membership rosters. Old participatory forms have withered and new ones have emerged. Moreover, although there have been important studies of political participation in the United States in the past twenty years (including, for example, the General Social Survey's 1987 replication of the 1967 Verba-Nie participation questions), little attention has been paid to considering the new forms of participation such as checkbook participation or to putting political participation in the context of other kinds of activity in charitable and religious organizations. In addition, new theoretical questions have been raised by rational choice and social network theories. There are good reasons, then, to study participation in the United States as well as in the Soviet Union.

We hope to achieve the following goals through our collaboration:

- *A comprehensive study of civic and political participation in the United States.* The Verba-Schlozman-Nie-Brady study involves an innovative sample which should make it possible to study the truly active citizen—members of local boards, major campaign contributors, protestors, organizational leaders, and the like. In addition, activity in politics will be compared with the non-political volunteer activity in organizations, charities, and churches that form such a basic part of American civic life.
- *The first, comprehensive study of how Soviet citizens take part in civic and political life.* This Soviet study will consist of separate samples across a number of Soviet republics (very tentatively, one Baltic Republic, Georgia, Russia, and one middle Asian republic) to study, for the first time, citizen behavior in and attitudes toward the more open and competitive electoral system in the Soviet Union as well as citizen involve-

ment in the rapidly growing sphere of socio-political participation and organization. The study will also deal with workplace participation, a particularly important form of activity in the Soviet Union. We hope that this study will stand as a major contribution to understanding some of the greatest changes in the Soviet Union since, perhaps, the Revolution.

- *A comparison between the two nations.* These studies, we hope, will increase American understanding of the Soviet Union and Soviet understanding of the United States. Just as importantly, however, by providing a critical comparative context, this joint work will increase American understanding of the United States and Soviet understanding of the Soviet Union.

Although we are not finished with either the American or the Soviet study, we have already learned a great deal from designing and planning each study and from working with our colleagues in the United States and the Soviet Union.

3. The American Study

The American study has already received funding from several foundations, but it is worth noting the difficulty of obtaining funding for a major study of this type and the inevitable compromises that must be made to stay within budget constraints. Despite these problems, the design of the American study goes beyond past work in three basic ways:

- *A more powerful sample.* For any political act beyond voting, a mass sample survey will uncover only a few activists, an inadequate number for extensive analysis. The American study as well as the Soviet one will overcome this difficulty by using a two-stage sample to oversample political activists and members of minority populations. The first stage of the American study will involve fifteen-minute telephone interviews with approximately 15,000 Americans. This sample will provide us with

the largest and most comprehensive database on political participation ever assembled. It will provide a basis for a detailed picture of "Who Participates?" The second stage will select at least 2,000 activists and minority group members for in-depth 90-minute follow-up interviews in which we will explore "Why Do People Participate?"

- *A broader range of activities.* The study will include not only a broader range of activities than those ordinarily included in studies of participation such as engaging in political protests, but also voluntary activities of a non-political character such as charitable and church activity for comparison. This will make it possible to determine whether charitable and church activity complement or substitute for political activity.
- *A richer set of measures.* The questionnaire developed for the American study and the one being developed for the Soviet study include a much richer set of measures of the characteristics of participatory acts (e.g., their purpose, their substantive content, their frequency, the amount of time involved, and/or the amount of money), of the gratifications and payoffs attendant to participation, and of the resources and social processes that facilitate activity. These measures are meant to "unpack" standard variables which explain participation and to test important theories of participation such as rational choice theory. For example, we know from past studies that "education" has an enormous impact upon political participation. However, we do not know what aspects of education are most important. By having measures of cognitive ability, political information, concrete skills such as writing and speaking, and detailed information on the nature of schooling experiences, we hope to determine why "education" seems to be so important. In addition, by having an extensive battery of "reasons" for participation which measure materialistic benefits, solidarity motives, and purposive goals, we will be able to provide a detailed

picture of the "rationality" of political participation.

The current schedule for the American study calls for beginning screener interviews in the Summer of 1989 and beginning follow-up interviews in the Fall of 1989. The screener data-set should be available early in 1990, and the follow-up interviews soon thereafter. The American team will then use these data to provide detailed answers to three basic questions: "Who participates?" "How do they participate?" and "Why do they participate?"

4. The Soviet Study

The People. On the Soviet side, the research group consists of Soviet scholars well placed in one of the major institutes of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. They are a varied group with substantial experience in sociological research and survey methodology. The head of the research project is Dr. Mikhail Piskotin, Director of the newly formed Institute for Political Science at the Institute for Law and Society of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Another member of the research group is Dr. Konstantin Sheremet, editor of the main Soviet political science journal, *Soviet State and Law*.

Two of the other members of the research group—who will be responsible for much of the hands-on work—are Dr. William Smirnov, Vice President of both the Soviet Political Science Association and the International Political Science Association and Dr. Aleksander Obolonsky, a specialist in public administration at the Institute. An integral member of the research group is Dr. Vladimir Andreenkov, Head of Methodology at the Institute of Sociological Research, a sophisticated quantitative researcher who has been active in several international quantitative studies. Their involvement represents a significant commitment to bringing new social science methods to the study of Soviet society.

Among the American experts on the Soviet Union working on this project, Cynthia Kaplan of the University of California, Santa Barbara, has been the most involved. Through the generosity of the MacArthur

Foundation, several Soviet scholars, Mikhail Piskotin, William Smirnov, Vladimir Andrenkov, and Aleksander Obolonsky, have visited Chicago at NORC's Center for the Study of Politics and Society from February through May, 1989. During their stay, Cynthia Kaplan of UCSB, and Norman Nie and Henry Brady of the University of Chicago have worked closely with them as they have refined their questionnaire for the Soviet study.

In addition, these Soviet scholars have met with members of the NORC staff to learn about American survey research methods. Through this close collaboration, the American scholars have learned a great deal about political participation in the Soviet Union, and the Soviet scholars have had a chance to learn about large-scale social survey work in the United States. As a result of these meetings, the Soviet and American research teams have increased the parallelism between their questionnaires by employing similar survey items.

Design Issues. Comparability for a cross-national survey of this kind is both very important and extremely difficult. Other efforts at doing comparative work such as Nie, Verba and Kim's *Participation and Political Equality: A Seven Nation Comparison* and Samuel Barnes and Max Kaase's *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies* have demonstrated the possibility of using survey research in comparative studies, but they have also demonstrated the great difficulties of doing so. The problems include establishing the functional equivalence of modes of participation, translating questions from one language into another, determining the proper range of explanatory variables, and getting responses to sensitive questions.

There are some common and some unique patterns of political involvement for each society. For example, we have struggled to find the American equivalent of the extensive workplace participation in the Soviet Union, but we have been unable to find much parallelism. There are simply not very many American firms where workers get to vote on

their bosses and the policies of the firm.

Even where there is an apparent similarity between American and Soviet practices, the meaning of an activity may differ from one society to another. For example, particularized contacts in Soviet society are greatly determined by the fact that most resources are still distributed by the state through governmental employers. Therefore, although the requests and complaints of Soviet citizens may sound familiar to American ears, they involve a much broader sphere of social activity than those of American citizens.

Consequently, the Soviet scholars will place more emphasis than their American colleagues on participation in the workplace, on particularized contacting, and on the creation and application of laws while the American scholars will focus on activities such as the donation of money in political campaigns, direct mail appeals, and the relationship between religion and politics.

A familiar problem of cross-national research is the difficulty of translating a questionnaire from one language to another. This problem is made even more difficult by our desire to study several Soviet Republics with very different languages. In the search for linguistic equivalence in the Soviet Union, we intend to use focus groups and back-translation methods, but the difficulties will still be substantial. Indeed, even after surmounting language barriers, we will have to worry about the different cultures of the various Soviet Republics. Parallel problems, of course, exist in the United States where we hope to study the participation of Hispanic-Americans which requires a capacity to conduct interviews in Spanish.

Another problem is identifying the proper explanatory variables in the Soviet Union. Very little is known about the correlates and causes of political participation in the Soviet Union. We suspect, for example, that just as organizational involvement is important in the United States, it will also be important in the Soviet Union, but we do not know what kinds of memberships we should study. It seems likely that church involvement will be less

important than in the United States, but we know so little about the locus of both traditional and innovative forms of political participation in the Soviet Union, that it is hard to know what to ask questions about.

Even standard demographic variables must be treated differently in the two countries. For example, in Soviet society the gap between urban and rural areas is much more significant than in America because of the bigger urban-rural differences in communication, education, the standard of living, and transportation. As a result, citizens in villages are much less involved in politics and have fewer resources for participation than those in urban areas. Consequently, the Soviet study will pay more attention to "unpacking" the urban-rural differences than will the American survey.

There are also problems surrounding the execution of a large-scale sample survey in the Soviet Union. Even in the United States, it is still a major task to construct a representative national sample using the decennial census and other information on the location of the population. In the Soviet Union, there is very little experience doing this, and the census data are much less available and perhaps less reliable. In addition, field supervisors, interviewing staffs, and the other organizational features of survey work are not in place and ready for their work. Finally, the respondents themselves are not familiar with the American tradition of polling and survey research. American respondents are better prepared for interviews of this kind—they have much more experience. Moreover, some kinds of political behavior, such as protest and non-voting, are still quite sensitive for Soviet citizens.

One of the major goals of having Soviet researchers come to the United States and American researchers go to the Soviet Union has been to facilitate the identification and solution of these design problems. The preceding recitation should make it clear that we have gone a long way towards identifying many important problems. We are also confident that we have begun to find solutions for them as well.

Schedule. Because the American team had already begun their work when the first conference was held in Tallin, the Soviet study lags the American effort by about one year. Just as American scholars must work hard to convince a variety of funding sources of the merits of their ideas, the Soviet scholars must seek sufficient funding for their project within the Soviet Union. Based upon the level of funding they receive, they still must make many basic design decisions such as the number of Soviet republics to be included in the study, the number of interviews, and many other matters. Consequently, we expect that the earliest starting date for the field work for the Soviet study will be the summer of 1990.

5. Major Products of the Study

The most fundamental product to be produced by this joint study will be computer data tapes for both studies. The project includes a formal commitment for a full exchange of original survey data between the nations so that these tapes will be available to any interested scholar. This is an important step in international cooperation, and it is an exciting prospect for scholars of both the Soviet Union and the United States. In addition, the American team and the Soviet team each intend to produce one or more books based upon the data from their own country. There is also a commitment from both sides for an edited volume which will include analyses of the national data by scholars from the other country. This volume will emphasize comparisons between the two countries.

Finally, the William Benton Foundation is supporting the production of a television documentary on the research project as part of their William Benton Broadcast Project located at the University of Chicago. At the moment, they have committed themselves to a one-hour program on the American survey which will be available to public television stations and other outlets. The program will deal with both the research project itself (how social scientists design and carry out large-scale survey research)

and the subject matter of the research (how people participate).

6. Conclusions

The Soviet and American studies will not be identical. The systems of participation are very different and at different levels of development. However, there will be significant overlaps in our concerns because of our common interests in how socio-political organizations are formed and in the reasons why people become involved with them. In addition, with the changes now taking place in the Soviet Union, a comparison of many forms of participation such as candidate nominations, voting, and protest is of much greater interest than it would have been even a few years ago. The happy coincidence of the American group's work on a study of social and political participation in the United States and Soviet scholars' interest in and growing ability to study the subject in the Soviet Union creates a great opportunity for some important cross-national research.

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