



Using Daily Routines to Encourage Civic Engagement

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Democracy relies on a fundamental deal between political actors, in which losers pledge to respect the results of elections, winners promise to not interfere with the capacity of adversaries to run again in the future, and everyone recognizes a set of basic rights involving civil and political life. Needless to say, this is a fragile arrangement, as recent years have demonstrated. Ideological radicalization, anti-systemic voting, and institutional backsliding are affecting developed and developing nations around the world, ending a period of optimism spurred by political liberalization in regions such as Eastern Europe and Latin America.

Citizen activism has proven essential to safeguarding against continued damage to democratic institutions, yet mobilizing communities is always a challenge. When trying to understand political participation, much attention has been given to ideological processes. However, research suggests that practices also play a crucial role. In fact, providing opportunities to engage in meaningful routines can serve as a major appeal for grassroots organizations, allowing them to attract new members and encourage long-term involvement.

Democratic Erosion

Much of the discussion about how to prevent democratic erosion focuses on the capacity of different branches of government to constrain each other and thwart authoritarian attempts. Yet this is only one form of control. Just as important are the checks that civil society imposes on authorities through voting, petitioning, and protesting. An active, mobilized and diverse citizenry serves as an effective barrier to potential abuses of power. In contrast, when apathy and indifference prevail, it is easier for extremist actors to control the public debate and advance policies that violate the rights of others.

Thus, understanding political participation is more important than ever: civic and grassroots organizations can benefit from knowledge about what contributes to people's involvement in collective action, especially among marginalized groups and those most likely to be affected by democratic backsliding. Fortunately, recent decades have witnessed a remarkable expansion in research about these topics. As a result, we now have a much clearer understanding of the complexity and diversity of activism.

Motivations for Activism

One of the central components to understanding civic engagement is how personal beliefs and activist experiences interact to influence an individual's political participation. This is the question I tackle in my own research on the Unemployed Workers' Movement in Argentina. Since the 1990s, organizations in this movement have congregated residents of poor neighborhoods affected by deindustrialization and joblessness, managing workfare plans, productive cooperatives, and local infrastructure programs which sustain thousands of families across the nation.

Using participant observation and life-history interviews, I find that although these individuals face substantial obstacles to long-term involvement, many of them are able to overcome isolation, destitution, and disempowerment to become active contributors to one of the country's most influential grassroots experiences. What is more interesting, respondents' commitment to the movement does not appear to depend on their personal viewpoints. A substantial portion of them express opinions that are in direct opposition to those held by their organizations. Instead, a key appeal of involvement is the opportunity to enact daily routines associated with working-class respectability, such as getting up early, completing demanding tasks, and helping others in the community. Everyday life in the movement allows older participants to reconstruct the habits they connect with a golden past in which factory jobs were plentiful. Younger activists are able to develop the kind of dispositions they were raised to see as wholesome. Finally, all members use the movement to protect aspects of communal life undermined by the expansion of poverty.

This suggests that everyday practices in a community organization can be as important in sustaining involvement as the official platform of the group. Moreover, the fact that rank and file members of a movement protect traditional notions of labor and family by getting involved in progressive politics indicates that, in contrast to what many observers have argued, rising inequality and widespread job loss do not necessarily lead to right-wing radicalization.

Implications for Grassroots Movements

We live at a time when the globalization of labor markets, the undermining of safety nets, and the rise of automation-driven structural unemployment have caused rising inequality and exposed large segments of the world's population to increasing precariousness. Coupled with the persistence of longstanding prejudices and the challenges of media-fueled polarization, this is a dangerous prospect for democracy. Yet this need not be the outcome. Local organizations in disadvantaged areas can increase the efficiency of social assistance, generate meaningful connections among individuals, and reduce the appeal of extremist politics. A better understanding of activism can thus help us design policies that promote an engaged and tolerant citizenry while strengthening the community networks pushing for social justice and political inclusion.

Read more in Marcos Pérez, *Proletarian Lives. Routines, Identity and Culture in Contentious Politics*, Cambridge University Press (2022).