

Appendix II: Conventional and unconventional political participation

In the United States, citizens are allowed to participate in the political system in many ways. Some ways are common, or conventional, and some are rare, or unconventional. Common examples of types of participation are detailed below. Read the summaries and complete the assignment at the end of the worksheet.

Conventional political participation: Voting

Voting is the most prominent form of political participation, a method by which people interact with their government. It is considered “conventional participation,” or a common and widely accepted way to interact with government. To participate in voting in the United States, citizens must be registered to vote. Requirements to register include being eighteen years old or above, a non-felon (in some states), and a legal resident of the state in which you wish to vote. At our nation’s founding, only white, property-owning men could vote in most states, but after reforms such as the Fifteenth Amendment (allowing black men to vote), the Nineteenth Amendment (allowing women to vote), and the Twenty-Sixth Amendment (allowing eighteen-year-olds to vote), the electorate, or the people who are able to vote, has immensely increased in size.

The United States is one of the few democracies that requires citizens to register themselves rather than having the government take responsibility for automatically registering them. This, along with other factors like voter apathy and lack of education about the issues, has led to generally low voter turnout in the United States compared to turnout in other nations. Steps have been taken to improve turnout, including same-day registration (in some states, you may register and vote on the same day), "motor voter" laws (allowing people to register to vote at the Department of Motor Vehicles where they get a driver’s license), and early/absentee voting (allowing people to vote before Election Day or to vote on a mail-in ballot).

Conventional political participation: Contacting public officials

Expressing opinions to leaders is one avenue of political participation. It’s becoming easier and easier to contact officials today because of the availability of information and the ease of contact through the internet. Many people still write and post letters to public officials through the Postal Service, and often, people call the offices of their congressmen as well.

Conventional political participation: Donating money, time, or running yourself

During campaigns, people work for political parties and their candidates, organize campaign events, and discuss issues with friends and family. New medias offer additional opportunities for people to engage in campaigns, as people can blog or participate in message boards related to an election. They can use social media sites like Facebook or Twitter to gain supporters, advertise campaign events, or encourage friends to donate money to a campaign. Another avenue for political participation is running for office yourself.

Conventional political participation: Joining a group or association

People sometimes choose to join civic groups like the Rotary Club or interest groups like the American Civil Liberties Union, National Rifle Association, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, or the Sierra Club, as well as business and professional associations and private and government labor unions. Joining these groups allows citizens to become active in their communities and educate themselves and others about issues that matter to the membership.

Unconventional political participation: Protesting

Political protest is another type of political participation. Protests are unconventional, and often unpopular and controversial, actions that are utilized to gain attention from the public, government, and media. Protests can take different forms, but a commonality is that these group actions have political objectives. Common examples of protests include opposing or supporting an elected official or advocating for or demonstrating against a proposed law. This tactic was used during the 1960s civil rights movement and has been employed in the past by women's movements, labor movements, environmental movements, and more recently by various groups such as the Women's March, Black Lives Matter, and the Dakota pipeline protesters. Social media may be making protest behavior easier today. Typical types of protests include marches, demonstrations, and carrying signs in public. Extreme forms of protest behavior include illegal acts that cause harm, like rioting. These types of behavior are typically counterproductive because they are so widely unpopular with the public and so often cause harm to people, property, and the integrity of the movement. States and the federal government allow but regulate protests to ensure they do not break laws or disrupt civil order.

Unconventional political participation: Civil disobedience

People sometimes choose to engage in nonviolent acts of civil disobedience where they deliberately break a law they consider to be unjust or prejudiced. This tactic was used to great success during the civil rights movement with sit-ins, marches, and other tactics.

Unconventional political participation: Boycotting

Boycotting may also be used by some groups to try to achieve a desired goal. Boycotting is an activity where people refuse to support or purchase goods or services from certain companies, groups, or people. In the last few years, boycotts of many businesses have been undertaken with varying degrees of success.

Assignment: What would you do?

Imagine yourself in each of the three scenarios below. Consider each of the two general categories and specific types of political participation under each category explained in the handout. On a separate sheet of paper, (1) choose one or more types of conventional and/or unconventional participation you would use to remedy the situation and list your specific types of participation choice(s); and (2) justify your choice(s) by explaining why you selected a given method of participation for the particular circumstance and why you think it would be effective at creating the desired change.

Scenario No. 1: Young voters

You are a college student considering a major in political science. One issue, above all others, has grabbed your interest: low voter turnout among young people. Your research indicates that eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds have lower turnout rates than any other age group. You know that politics turn off many young people, but you also know that political engagement through voting is one of the surest ways to have your preferences as an individual or as a group member represented in government. You decide to do something, but you don't know what, exactly. What would you do?

Scenario No. 2: Business owner vs. bureaucracy

You are a business owner who has enjoyed great success recently. However, the product that you manufacture has a competitor in another state that is rapidly growing and starting to expand into your region. To keep up your businesses growth and to beat your competitor, you decide you will open a new manufacturing plant. You immediately begin the building permit approval process with the state and local government, only to find that it's expected to take over three months to complete all the required paperwork. Your competitor's local and state government has a much more streamlined process and the competitor is able to open multiple plants in the time it takes you to receive your permit. Your business takes a hit. You're angry and you want to do something about the bureaucratic "red tape" so that this doesn't happen again. What would you do?

Scenario No. 3: Missing local government

You are the resident of a small town. You enjoy many aspects of living in a small town, but recently, you've noticed that the local government isn't very active. The mayor shows up to meetings, but, from what you can see, nothing else. City Council members don't attend parades, grant interviews, or go to local civic club meetings, and they don't make appearances in public for ribbon-cutting ceremonies, building dedications, or graduations at the local schools. People keep voting the same council and mayor into office, though. You're in a tough spot. You know many people seem to like the town government because they keep returning officials to office, but you also know that very few people vote in local elections. You believe that local government is important and that your local government isn't representing you well, but you know that being too "loud" about your concerns might offend some people from your town. What would you do?