

# Poli-hobbyism: A Theory of Mass Politics

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## Abstract

For many citizens, participation in politics is not motivated by civic duty or self-interest, but by hobbyism: the objective is self-gratification. I offer a theory of political hobbyism, situate the theory in existing literature, and define and distinguish the hobbyist motivation from its alternatives. I argue that the prevalence of political hobbyism depends on historical conditions related to the nature of leisure time, the openness of the political process to mass participation, and the level of perceived threat. I articulate an empirical research agenda, highlighting how poli-hobbyism can help explain characteristics of participants, forms of participation, rates of participation, and the nature of partisanship. Political hobbyism presents serious problems for a functioning democracy, including participants confusing high stakes for low stakes, participation too focused on the gratifying aspects of politics, and unnecessarily potent partisan rivalries.

**PLEASE NOTE: This is a first draft. The project - particularly the empirical research agenda - is under development. Comments and criticisms are appreciated - email me!**

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“No reputation is at stake...Not even your dignity need suffer.”<sup>1</sup>

# 1 Introduction

WHY do citizens participate in politics? Why do they vote, petition, organize, lobby, donate, affiliate with political parties, attend rallies, follow the news, and debate one another at dinner tables? The question of political motivation is a central question in a democracy. Motivations for engagement help us understand who participates, when and how. Motivations help us understand why political institutions are set up the way they are and why political systems generate the outcomes they do.

Studies of political participation have long considered both instrumental and non-instrumental motivations for action: pivotality and norms (Dellavigna et al. 2014); a “strategic cost-benefit calculation” and a “consumption activity” (Shachar and Nalebuff 1999); material incentives as well as solidary and purposive ones (Wilson 1974); a Madisonian conception of self-interest and a Tocquevillian conception of duty (Campbell 2006); an ethnic ethos that seeks material benefits for specific communities and a Yankee ethos - “the constant disinterested activity of citizens in public affairs” (Hoffstadter 1955); party machines run by professionals versus cosmopolitan amateurs motivated by ideological principles (Wilson 1962).

Prior research makes clear that a substantial share of political activity is not motivated by instrumental calculations or by the desire to advance a narrow self-interest. But we still have only the vaguest sense of what the alternative to instrumental motivations entails. It is a hazy conglomerate of motivations that includes social benefits of participation as well as intrinsic ones, feelings of duty, patriotism, taste, and pleasure. All of these motivations are wrapped together in a disorderly “D-term” that begs for disambiguation.

I offer a theory of mass behavior that can help explain the rates of participation, forms

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<sup>1</sup>Mulac (1959), cited in Gelber (2013)

of participation, characteristics of participants, and the nature of political partisanship. In its present form, this theory is geared for the United States, but is also likely applicable to other advanced democracies. To the question of motivation - why participate? - the theory offers a simple answer: because politics is, for a subset of the electorate, a hobby. And this answer to the ‘why’ questions yields a set of predictions about the who, what, when, and how of mass political engagement.

Prior research has generally lumped together duty-oriented motivations with pleasure-seeking. In doing so, scholars have missed a central feature of contemporary political participation. For many Americans, political participation is not appropriately described as motivated by duty or self-interest, but is more akin to a hobby. Of course, in many different ways, previous scholars have acknowledged this motivation exists. But the piecemeal references have never been brought under clear theoretical paradigm. Doing so is my aim.

There are two likely reasons why scholars have not generally theorized about political activity as a hobby. First, for those who are deeply engaged in politics and who feel duty-bound to participate, this theory can seem distasteful. Politics *ought* to be of grave importance. It is not a sport. The consequences are real. But what I offer is a positive theory of participation, not a normative one. Actually, this research is motivated by deep concern that politics is being treated as sport.

A second reason why scholars have not worked within this paradigm before may be that the leading theories of participation were crafted in a different time. Specifically, they were developed in a time of more salient threats - memories of world wars and active nuclear rivalries. Our more recent history is one of relative peace. As Inglehart and Welzel (2015) have written, the recent peace means that “young generations grow up taking survival for granted and feel less threatened.” I will argue that the pleasure motivation for political engagement is tied to a political order of *seemingly* low stakes. Since it is tied to the perceived threat, pleasure-motivated participation will wax and wane over time.

A distinct feature of this theory, relative to other theories of motivation, is that it explains a wide range of behaviors. Whereas instrumental and duty-oriented motivations are theorized to explain certain aspects of mass behavior, namely voting, I aim to cast a much wider net. Specifically, the pleasure motivation can induce a range of political acts as well as associations. It motivates voting but also partisanship. It motivates donating and protesting, but also media consumption and peer-to-peer production.

This article introduces the theory. The next section defines the motivation of political hobbyism (poli-hobbyism) by distinguishing it from its alternatives, duty and interest. A hobby is an activity pursued precisely because it does not obligate the participant (as a duty would) and it is not meant primarily to advance some instrumental end. I will focus on driving a theoretical wedge between duty and pleasure, and argue that each motivation ought to generate distinct measurable outcomes.

In defining political hobbyism, I will explain how it can be dangerous to the democratic state. I will also explain the historical conditions under which pleasure-motivated political participation flourishes. Specifically, I will argue that the nature of leisure time, the level of perceived threat, and the openness of government to mass participation ought to condition the motivations of political action.

Finally, I will articulate a range of hypotheses that the theory implies. I will evaluate well-known regularities in American politics and ask whether they are consistent with a hobbyist motivation or with alternative motivations. I will briefly examine voting, donating, policy activism, and partisanship. More precise empirical tests are left for the future, but the empirical expectations are quite far-reaching. To borrow from Mayhew's (1974) argument that the institution of Congress seems to be structured to serve the electoral interests of its members, I argue that the activities of mass political engagement seem designed to serve the hobbyist inclinations of participants rather than to allow individuals to "discharge their obligations (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993)" or pursue self-interest.

## 2 Motivations for Political Engagement

A hobby is an activity that is done a.) *in one's free time*, b.) *for pleasure* and c.) *regularly*. Political engagement - voting, campaign activism, policy activism, media consumption - can be treated as a hobby. My claim, of course, is not that all political activity is motivated by this inclination or that all political participants share this motivation. My initial claim is that this poli-hobbyism is distinct from its alternatives: activities pursued out of duty and those pursued out of self-interest.

The three-pronged definition above implies a distinction from other motivations. Prong one: free time. We do not generally think of obligatory activities (i.e. duties) as taking place in one's free time (Gelber 2013). Some acts of obligation, like church attendance among the devout or voting among the duty-bound, can be both pleasurable and obligatory, but if one feels obligated by such activities, they are not hobbies because they are not activities pursued in free time. Prong two: pleasure. Activities that are done for pleasure are also activities that are not done for material gain, which makes hobbyism different from the pursuit of self-interest. Someone who takes up a handicraft as a hobby can sell their wares for material gain, but the primary motivation is not material gain. Prong three: regularity. Activities pursued without regularity are not hobbies. A person who attends a Super Bowl party but does not otherwise follow football is not a football fan. Similarly, a person who votes every four years out of social pressure but is not otherwise engaged in politics is not participating in politics as a hobby.

Two initial questions may arise about the language of hobbyism. First, given that political engagement among activists can be quite emotional and time-intensive, does the language of hobbyism seem too light to capture this engagement? Not at all. Common pastimes like sports entail serious contributions of time and emotional energy equivalent to political engagement among active participants. The degree of a participant's emotional commitment

is not what separates politics from other hobbies.

Second, political engagement, even when not instrumental and even when not undertaken out of obligation, is goal-oriented toward political and policy victories. Are hobbies goal-oriented and do they impact the lives of millions of people? In and of itself, the orientation toward winning political battles does not mean that political activity is not done primarily for pleasure. Many pastimes are both goal-oriented and competitive. However, to reiterate, my focus on hobbyism does not mean that this is the only motivation for political activity. Sometimes, for some citizens, political stakes seem so proximate or so important that the citizens feel that they must engage. But *must* is the operative word here. Engagement out of obligation - i.e. duty - is the key alternative motivation to hobbyism.

## 2.1 Political Hobbyism in Prior Work

The idea that political activity can be pursued for pleasure or as a consumption activity is not new. The pastime motivation is apparent in prior writing, but it is often wrapped up, theoretically, with notions of duty. Duty and pleasure are considered together as consumption motivations (Shachar and Nalebuff 1999; Riker and Ordeshook 1968; Fiorina 1976; Aldrich 1993; Ansolabehere, De Figueiredo and Snyder 2003; Hamlin and Jennings 2011). The concepts are typically joined together for three reasons. First, they both share the characteristic of being non-instrumental. Second, while duty is a commonly expressed motivation by research subjects, scholars may dismiss claims of duty as mere lip service (Blais 2000). In other words, duty and hobby are linked together because the duty motivation may be treated as cheap talk. As James Q. Wilson wrote in *Political Organizations*,

This need to cloak the...search for conviviality with larger purposes and more serious intent may be a peculiarly American phenomenon. Just as a voluntary organization based on money incentives will avoid appearing to act solely to

further the material self-interest of its members, so a group seeking solidary benefits will try to avoid creating the impression that status or conviviality are ends in themselves or even that they are important (42).”

Below, I will define duty more precisely and argue that it ought not to be thought of as cheap talk or as equivalent to hobbyism. But, nevertheless, this is a second reason why they have been connected in prior research. The third reason why duty and hobby are wrapped together is simply that most past scholarship has not taken seriously the idea that politics, at least for some set of activists, is nothing more than a pastime.

Elements of the hobbyist motivation are found in past work under the label of “interest in politics,” which Blais (2000) and others label the psychological motivation for engagement. Measuring political interest, Prior (2010) shows that interest in politics is extraordinarily stable over time in the aggregate and within survey subjects (see also Shani (2009)). In their canonical work, Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) acknowledge that interest in politics does most of the work in predicting participation. They study how engagement is influenced not just by motivations but also by resources like time, money, and civic skills. One way that resources affect participation, they argue, is that resources can lead to political interest. I will argue that participatory bias and the distribution of “political interest” in a society can be explained well within the theoretical framework I offer.

The hobbyist motivation appears in Ansolabehere, De Figueiredo and Snyder’s (2003) study of political giving, where the authors suggest the bulk of individual campaign donors are engaged in a consumption activity. In Green, Palmquist and Schickler’s (2002) study of partisanship, the authors analogize partisanship to teamsmanship. The mass media regularly portray political activity in the language of competitive sports (Aalberg, Stromback and de Vreese 2011). The campaign season is commonly referred to as a horse race.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Several thoughtful media commentators have drawn the connection between politics and the pastime motivation. Explaining how he thinks about individuals who are not actively engaged in politics, Jonathan Bernstein describes his own relationship to another hobby, NASCAR. “It’s not as if I know absolutely nothing

In short, the hobbyist motivation appears frequently in past work but it is often mixed up with other non-instrumental motivations, and it has never been examined rigorously. The closest past scholarship that has taken the motivation seriously is in two well-known works by James Q. Wilson. In his famous taxonomy of participatory incentives, Wilson (1974) acknowledged that citizens join together in political groups in large part for “collective solidary” reasons, such as “the fun and conviviality of coming together, the sense of group membership or exclusiveness (34).”<sup>3</sup> In studying local party organizations, Wilson observed that *most* participants “seek neither material benefits nor the achievement of large ends, but merely find politics, or at least coming together in groups to work at politics, intrinsically enjoyable (110).”

But Wilson also struggled for language to distinguish pleasure-driven participants from obligated ones. In *Amateur Politics*, Wilson studied political activists in the mid-twentieth century who came together in groups to discuss politics, push a reform agenda, and generally oppose the kind of politics pursued by urban machines. At the start of his book, he explicitly claimed that these “amateur” activists were not involved “for fun or as an avocation.” They participate for “the sense of having satisfied an obligation.”

But when Wilson actually reports interviews and describes activists involved in amateur associations, many participants appear clearly motivated more by their own enjoyment than by policy goals or the fulfillment of an obligation. In his interviews, Wilson finds that many

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[about NASCAR],” he writes. “It’s just that the stuff I’ve heard is not organized at all, and I’m sure I’ve picked up misinformation along the way, since I don’t scrutinize any of it.” (See Jonathan Bernstein, “Outside the Political Junkie Bubble,” *A Plain Blog about Politics*, February 24, 2011, [plainblogaboutpolitics.blogspot.com/2011/02/outside-political-junkie-bubble.html](http://plainblogaboutpolitics.blogspot.com/2011/02/outside-political-junkie-bubble.html) accessed, March 3, 2016.) Explaining the rise of the Donald Trump candidacy, Ezra Klein argues that the entertaining nature of Trump’s candidacy draws attention away from the danger of his message. Klein writes, “It’s so fun to watch that it’s easy to lose sight of how terrifying it really is.” Klein’s fear is that the low-stakes nature of entertainment can be confused with the high-stakes nature of political reality, a point to which I will return. (See Ezra Klein, “The rise of Donald Trump is a terrifying moment in American politics,” *Vox*, February 10, 2016, <http://www.vox.com/2016/2/10/10956978/donald-trump-terrifying>, accessed March 7, 2016.)

<sup>3</sup>Wilson’s writing on the pleasure-motivated action was focused on social activities, like participation in groups. My focus is more general and includes solitary activities as well as group activities.



people are attracted to “playing the political game.” As one local leader told Wilson, “The principal motivation for many of these people [i.e. active members and leaders] is the sheer fascination of politics. It’s certainly not civic dedication. That wears thin in short order.” Another leader said, “Many people are attracted to the club just because they are lonely and want human contact.” This is similar to recent language by Schlozman (2015) that some people attend protests “to meet girls” and language by Gloria Steinem that young women supported Bernie Sanders over Hillary Clinton in 2016 because “the boys are with Bernie.”<sup>4</sup>

One interviewee summed up his motivations nicely when he explained to Wilson why he likes attending meetings where he debates about politics.

All day long, I can’t shout back at the boss, I can’t shout back at the wife, I can’t shout back at the kids. But I come here in the evenings, and I shout at these people, and I go away feeling like a new man.

This man, like many others whom Wilson encountered, is motivated by something quite different than civic duty or instrumental ends. But perhaps because political scientists have commonly assumed there is more meaning in political action, they have never quite taken seriously the unserious inclinations that can motivate participation.

## 2.2 What is duty?

In explaining the hobbyist motivation, it is necessary to articulate a definition of duty. Duty has been defined so loosely in prior work that it seems it could incorporate pleasure-oriented motivations (Green and Shapiro 1994; Aldrich 1993; Riker and Ordeshook 1968). These motivations must be distinguished. Specifically, there are two distinguishing features of duty-bound participation.

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<sup>4</sup>Eliza Collins, “Gloria Steinem: Young Women Like Sanders Because ‘The Boys are with Bernie,’” POLITICO, February 6, 2016.

First, a key distinction between duties and hobbies is a sense of obligation. “Unpleasant voluntary activities undertaken out of a sense of civic or religious obligation are not leisure,” writes sociologist Steven Gelber (2013). A participant can stop participating anytime he or she wants (Stebbins 1982). On the other hand, if someone is duty-bound to participate in an activity, by definition they feel a sense of obligation. Sometimes, obligations are enjoyable, but oftentimes they are not. The obligated person participates regardless of the personal enjoyment they derive from the experience. The late 19th century orator George Williams Curtis (1894) described civic duty this way:

That constant and active practical participation in the details of politics without which, upon the part of the most intelligent citizens, the conduct of public affairs falls under the control of selfish and ignorant, or crafty and venal men. I mean that personal attention - which, as it must be incessant, is often wearisome and even repulsive - to the details of politics, attendance at meetings, service upon committees, care and trouble and expense of many kinds.

If one feels a sense of duty, the immediate pleasure of the duty-bound act is immaterial. Some citizens may possess a general feeling of duty to participate. Others may possess a feeling of duty to participate in some concrete ways but they feel no duty to participate in other ways.<sup>5</sup> In either case, a sense of duty entails obligation (see Chapman (2015)).

Empirically, we should expect very high participation rates among people who feel duty-bound to participate, even in supposedly obligatory activities that are unpleasant. Still, for a range of familial, religious, and civic duties, it is possible to both feel duty-bound and fail to take the obligated action. In those cases, the failure to act ought to generate feelings of regret, shame, or guilt. If one does not have these negative feelings, it is difficult to justify

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<sup>5</sup>Dalton (2008) distinguishes aspects of politics like voting and jury service as duties from opinion formation and other activities as ‘engagement.’

calling the action that they did not take as one required by duty. Empirically, then, with a duty-bound motivation, we should also expect to see signs of shame among non-participants.

If the sense of obligation is what distinguishes duties from hobbies, the sense of pursuing the common good is what distinguishes the motivation of duty from the motivation of self-interest. The second distinguishing characteristic of duty-bound action is that the action must be aimed at serving the common good, not immediate self-interest (Feddersen 2004; Galston 1991; Tjerandsen 1980). As orator Washington Gladden put it in 1902, “When I am thinking of my duties I am considering the interests of those to whom my duties are due.” In a recent article, legal scholar Edward Foley (2015) conceives of voting as an act of a fiduciary. “Voters perform a public, not personal function,” he writes. “Each voter is charged with the responsibility of acting on behalf of society as a whole, present and future.” Voters violate their fiduciary responsibility when they consider their own self-interest instead of the commonwealth.

Of course, this notion of civic duty to act on behalf of the common good is deeply rooted in political theory. It is the concept of the general will articulated by Rousseau. It is the concept behind Rawls’ theory of justice. It appears in many variants. Foley brings up the contemporary example of the oath that Vermonters must take upon casting ballots in an election. The oath reads:

You solemnly swear or affirm that whenever you give your vote or suffrage, touching any matter that concerns the State of Vermont, you will do it so as in your conscience you shall judge will most conduce to the best good of the same, as established by the Constitution, without fear or favor of any person.

Vermonters are not required to participate, but if they choose to participate, they must swear that the motivation for their actions is the common good rather than self-interest.

### 2.2.1 The Challenge of Duty

Cultivating a sense of obligation to participate in pursuit of the common good is difficult. Theorists have long been worried about the average citizen's ability to consider the best interests of the community. Political leaders have proposed rituals and education in patriotism to promote feelings of duty and devotion to the commonwealth.<sup>6</sup> This devotion to country, it is argued, can yield actions taken to promote the common good rather than self-interest. (See also: Sniderman (1981)).

However, the task of perceiving the common good is especially challenging when the nation's population is large, the government remote, and relationship between government action and real-life outcomes are hard to discern. As Bellah et al. (1985) wrote,

The associational life of the modern metropolis does not generate the kinds of second languages of social responsibility and practices of commitment to the public good that we saw in the associational life of the 'strong independent township.'

In contemporary America, it may be difficult to see how one's own well-being is tied to the stability of the political state. Under relatively safe and prosperous circumstances, it is hard to cultivate an appropriate fear of political instability. Such a fear, which amounts to perceiving the high stakes of political order, can engender seriousness in purpose and actions taken with the intent of the general welfare. When the stakes of political order seem low, political actions may not seem to warrant these higher intentions.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Citing Montesquieu, Charles Drake (1837) wrote that the "The infant mind...should be trained to regard [the country] as a second mother; claiming in return for protection, love the purest, veneration the deepest, and gratitude the most unbound." In the 1950s, the 4H club defined for its participants a good citizen as someone who "effectively and habitually acts with deep concern for the common welfare (self and others) and takes into balanced account 'freedom with responsibility,' both his rights from others and his obligations to others. (Tjerandsen 1980)"

<sup>7</sup>The difficulty of cultivating a sense of the general will mirrors a difficulty among the religiously devout in cultivating a sense of religious duty. As theologian Shalom Carmy (2008) writes, "Once we prayed for an adequate harvest. Today, when nature withholds her bounty, we either pay higher prices for tomatoes or eat something else." Carmy suggests that agricultural technology makes it harder to fear God. Similarly, the modern state makes it harder to fear instability.

If an act of duty requires an obligation to act to advance the common interest, and if that intentionality is difficult to invoke under the stable circumstances of American political life, then we might expect political activity to lack the gravitas and dignity associated with duty-bound behavior. This is the reason why the connection between duty and the common interest is important to make in the present context. When citizens do not feel obligated to act in the common interest, their actions take on the intentions either of self-interest or of self-gratification.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.3 What is hobbyism?

Political thinkers have drawn a connection between leisure and politics, but they have not treated politics as a form of leisure. In *Politics*, Aristotle famously argued that leisure is a necessary condition for democracy: “leisure is needed both for the development of virtue and for active participation in politics (Book VII, 1329b). (See also Cherry (2009); DeGrazia (1964) ).” Social capital theorists have argued that social activity engenders political activity (Hemingway 1999; Putnam 2000). But the literature does not take the perspective of the citizen who may see political activism itself as a hobby. Doing so yields a different set of empirical predictions and normative judgments than a theory in which leisure activities simply yield political ones.

I have defined poli-hobbyism in both positive and negative terms. Hobbies are activities one engages in regularly, in free time, for pleasure. Unlike a duty, a hobby is not undertaken out of obligation. If one ceases participation in a hobby or abstains from participation, he or she feels no guilt. A hobby’s chief aim is for the gratification of the participant.

Four more essential points about hobbyism must be emphasized. First, to claim that

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<sup>8</sup>John Adams wrote to Abigail, “I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain.” Adams imagined his descendants studying hobbies, but neglected that politics as sport might be among those hobbies.

hobby's chief aim is gratification does not mean that a participant can have no other motivations in mind. Consider a football fan. A football fan can be emotionally invested in his favored team's success, yet financially invested in players on other teams doing well (as is the commonly the case for fans participating in fantasy sports). For the sake of the game's long term viability, the fan can hope that no players are injured, yet also hope that his team's players inflict pain on their opponents. In other words, the football fan can have many, even competing, sentiments in mind at the same time: self-interest, partisanship, love of the game. The same is true in politics. For political hobbyists, the primary motivation is gratification, but participants may derive that gratification from taking the perspective of self-interest, partisanship, or patriotism.<sup>9</sup> But, whereas duty necessitates trying to act on behalf of the common interest, hobbyism makes no such demand on one's intentions.

A second point about hobbies is that hobbies bear an important relationship to leisure time. In forming predictions about the kinds of activities pursued by hobbyists and the reasons why the composition of hobbyists looks the way it does, it is imperative to consider the nature of one's free time. It is not just the *amount* of free time that is important to consider, though that is surely important (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). The kinds of activities one pursues in free time can be explained by where that free time can be spent (e.g. at home, work, or elsewhere) and in what increments. I return to this point below when offering historical context.

A third key point is that participation in hobbies can be encouraged or discouraged through social network effects. Whether a particular hobby is a social or solitary activity, networks can inspire higher or lower rates of participation (Siegel 2009). While obvious, this is an important point to make in light of recent literature in political science that has shown the powerful network effects on participation (Gerber, Green and Larimer 2008; Gerber et al.

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<sup>9</sup>Stebbins (1982) writes of the rewards derived from "serious leisure:," "personal enrichment, self-actualization, self express, self-image, self-gratification, recreation, financial return, social attraction, group accomplishment, and "contribution to the maintenance of the group (14)."

2014; Sinclair 2012; Abrams, Iversen and Soskice 2011; Bond et al. 2012).

Like hobbies, duties can also be encouraged or discouraged through social networks, mainly through shaming. People do not generally chastise one another for failing in their civic obligations or for taking political action aimed at narrow interests,<sup>10</sup> but as experiments have shown, social relationships, when exploited, can make one's duties salient (Gerber, Green and Larimer 2008).

Since social networks can induce duty-bound participation as well as hobby participation, one must be careful not to confuse one for the other. A person may vote, petition, protest or donate because of a "desire for approval (Iversen and Soskice 2012)," but a person may also bowl, dance, or play the ukelele out of that same desire for social approval. As Abrams, Iversen and Soskice (2011) note, some people follow baseball and align themselves with a team just to improve social relations, and the same is true in politics. If social relations induce feelings of obligation to contribute to the public good, we might say that duty has been socially manipulated. Otherwise, political activity, when socially encouraged, is not induced by way of duty.

A fourth key point about hobbies is their relationship to a participant's vocation. Sociologists have argued that hobbies can serve both "compensatory" and "cathartic" purposes, relative to one's profession. A compensatory hobby is one that demands a different set of skills than one uses at work. A cathartic hobby utilizes similar skills that one employs in work, except in a low-stakes environment (Gelber 2013; Super 1940). For example, surgeons prefer hobbies like model shipbuilding in which they can do intricate handwork but without any pressure. Hence, catharsis. In general, writes Gelber, "white collar workers more often engage in leisure that replicates attitudes and worldviews typical of their vocations (p.18)." The reason for this is that white collar workers are more likely to be in a profession that

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<sup>10</sup>Again, there is a parallel here to religion, as people do not typically chastise one another for religious sins (Carmy 2008).

they chose and enjoy.

Why one selects particular hobbies is important for two reasons. First, their decision of which hobbies to pursue can help to explain participatory bias.<sup>11</sup> People with civic skills - skills often tied to professional life - are likely to have an interest in politics (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). Lawyers are remarkably active in politics (Bonica, Chilton and Sen 2015). They not only have the skills, but they they have the interest in using those skills in ways that are a cathartic release from their professional duties. They can debate and talk about law, but in an venue distinct from their professional tasks. Below, when I discuss empirical implications, I will return to the origins of personal hobbies and how these origins can help explain the attributes of participants and non-participants in politics.

A second reason why the connection between hobbies and professions matter relates to the idea that hobbies are a cathartic release from the pressures of work. The feeling of catharsis in hobbies comes from low stakes. As Pack (1934) wrote, “hobbyism is not supposed to possess a practical value” and as Gelber states, “The difference between a hobby and work...[is] that the outcome of the hobby has no profound consequence (50).” For a citizen, politics can be something to dabble in. A person who takes a strong position without knowing the facts could be fired in a professional setting but faces no real consequences if engaged in political hobbyism. This is a core reason why politics can be enjoyable.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>As Bourdieu (1984) writes in *Distinction*:

A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possess the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded...A beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colors and lines, without rhyme or reason.

<sup>12</sup>Two other minor points about hobbyism are worth mentioning. One is that hobbies “demand an investment of energy and interest.” This distinguishes hobbies from other modes of leisure. TV surfing is not a hobby because it does not require effort and active engagement. Second, an activity that is a hobby for one person may not be for another. Gardening is a hobby for everyone but professional gardeners. Politics too can be a hobby for some, but for others an obligation or a means to an end.



## 2.4 The Three Dangers of Poli-hobbyism

Confusion of the stakes is the first of three dangers associated with political hobbyism. Low stakes are what make hobbies restorative (i.e. re-creation); they are release from the pressures of work and other obligations. Even hobbies that are exhilarating because they can be dangerous - and many hobbies, like camping, rock climbing, and mountain biking are like this - are exciting because they approach danger but maintain a level of security. Hiking a trail for a few days is fun; being truly lost in the woods for a few days is not.

The stakes in political activity can seem low for several reasons. First, in a large democracy, an individual's contribution is almost always non-pivotal. Second, policy in the U.S. often changes very slowly. Even on large issues of national significance, it is difficult to know how mass participation translates into concrete policy change. Third, and perhaps most importantly, for many citizens actively engaged in politics, the outcome of an election will not affect them in life-and-death ways. Wars are pursued without conscription. Economic policy affects financial returns but for those who are well-off and have a safety net, policy change is unlikely to make or break them.

Of course, policy *does* affect real lives. But for some citizens, particularly those who are financially comfortable and not a family member of a soldier, the relative stability of political life can make it difficult to cultivate the public-spirited obligation of civic duty, as I discussed above. Any activity in which one acts as if the stakes are low when they are actually high is dangerous.

A second danger of political hobbyism comes from the lack of obligation. If political participation is not obligated, this will likely lead to citizens participating in gratifying aspects of politics but not tedious ones.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, lack of obligation means one can cease

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<sup>13</sup>When amateur clubs (i.e. upper-middle class hobbyists) engaged in community service, noted Wilson (1962), they tended to do things like host art shows for themselves. To Wilson, this stood in sharp contrast to political machines, for which community service involved offering vaccine shots and free turkeys to the poor.

participation at any time, which will undersupply participants who are in it for the long-term. Moreover, if political participants act out of pleasure rather than obligation, then citizens who do not have an interest in politics will be even less likely to participate. For them, politics can seem like a superfluous activity that does not demand their attention. They may say, without exhibiting shame or guilt, that politics interests some people but does not interest them.

A third danger is that those engaged in a competitive hobbies find it gratifying to take a partisan side. As sociologist Arthur Pack (1934) wrote, “Man needs an antagonist, both for work and for play.” Public spiritedness can easily take a back seat to partisanship when politics is treated as a game. Indeed, when the media treat politics like a strategic game, the focus is on the self-serving interests of participants rather than on the common good (Aalberg, Stromback and de Vreese 2011; Cappella and Jamieson 1997). In political hobbyism, there is no demand to take a high road or compromise. The goal is to defeat opponents at a game.

## **2.5 Historical Conditions**

Three temporal variables ought to be associated with political hobbyism. The first is the nature of the free time. In the United States, industrialization coupled with labor laws catalyzed a major transformation of leisure time. Factories meant that one’s work took place at a facility distinct from one’s home (thus, workers could not work at home), and the 40-hour work week meant that, by about 1920, many Americans had up to eight hours a day that were not dedicated to formal labor. This is the time when hobbies first proliferated. Elites promoted hobbies as preferable alternatives to more idle forms of leisure time (Gelber 2013; Pack 1934; Thompson 1967).

During the Depression, as large numbers of Americans were unemployed and had time on their hands, elite promotion of hobbies increased (Gelber 1991) (e.g. the government’s

sponsorship of cultural museums (Pack 1934), radio personalities promoting hobbies and volunteerism (Gelber 2013)). Putnam's (2000) discussion of the Depression generation's proclivity to join clubs is tied to the particular conditions of leisure time presented to that generation: people had time on their hands and technology did not permit them to bring their work home.

A distinguishing features of leisure time today is that it often takes place online and in comparatively small increments of time. As Benkler (2006) argues in his landmark study of cultural production, social cultural activities that require granular contributions are more suited to online life because a participant can engage for a few minutes here and there, and small contributions by many people can add up quickly. Social activities, like the production of Wikipedia, contributions to online petitions, Amazon reviews, political debates on Twitter, community-building on Facebook, occur online and in small increments of leisure time allocated throughout the day.

Mass political activity, online as well as offline, may be particularly well-suited as a hobby if it can take place in small blocks of time. Furthermore, if people are spending more time at home rather than in social settings (Putnam 2000), political hobbyism today might be expressed through television viewership and Internet use rather than through in-person organizing. The nature of free time, which changes with the transformation of industry, affects all forms of hobbies, including political hobbyism.

A second key historical variable is the openness of the political process to mass participation. At the same time as workers gained discrete blocks of leisure time at the turn of the twentieth century, progressive era reforms changed politics. As Schudson (2003) notes, reforms taking power away from party machines meant that politics required more work on the part of citizens than simply casting a party ticket (see also McGerr (1986); Addonizio, Green and Glaser (2007)). Political activism became more demanding on the citizen, and overall voting participation decreased substantially. But for citizens with an interest in pol-

itics, politics became a hobby that was both open to them (on account of populist reforms) and ripe for hobbyist specialization (on account of the newly available leisure time).

In contemporary politics, there are many avenues open for citizens who desire to learn intricate details of politics and to participate in activities like donating to candidates, signing petitions, and voting on initiatives. Recently, scholars have expressed alarm at the success of populist reforms and their consequences for politics (e.g. Cain (2014); La Raja and Schaffner (2015)). The U.S. at this time offers political hobbyists significant opportunities to participate and gain specialized knowledge. That was not always the case and may not continue to be the case. But the history of leisure time and the history of populist reforms bear an important, and heretofore unacknowledged, historical relationship to one another.

The final historical condition is perceived threat. When the nation is actively engaged in war (with military conscription) or when there is a nuclear cold war, citizens likely approach politics differently than when the issues of the day are more minor, abstract, or remote. Specifically, when grave threats are easy to perceive, citizens might take their own civic role more seriously. When political debates are less consequential or less concrete, politics is more likely to be treated as sport.

All three historical conditions I have laid out present the current generation with a political setting ripe for hobbyism. Citizens who are interested in politics are likely to have free time available to them, a multitude of avenues to study and participate in politics with that free time, and the opportunity to engage in political debates that are important but do not rise to the threat-level of previous generations.

### **3 Empirical Implications**

Having laid out the theory, its alternatives, and its normative implications, I now turn to defining empirical questions. The first empirical question must be whether poli-hobbyism

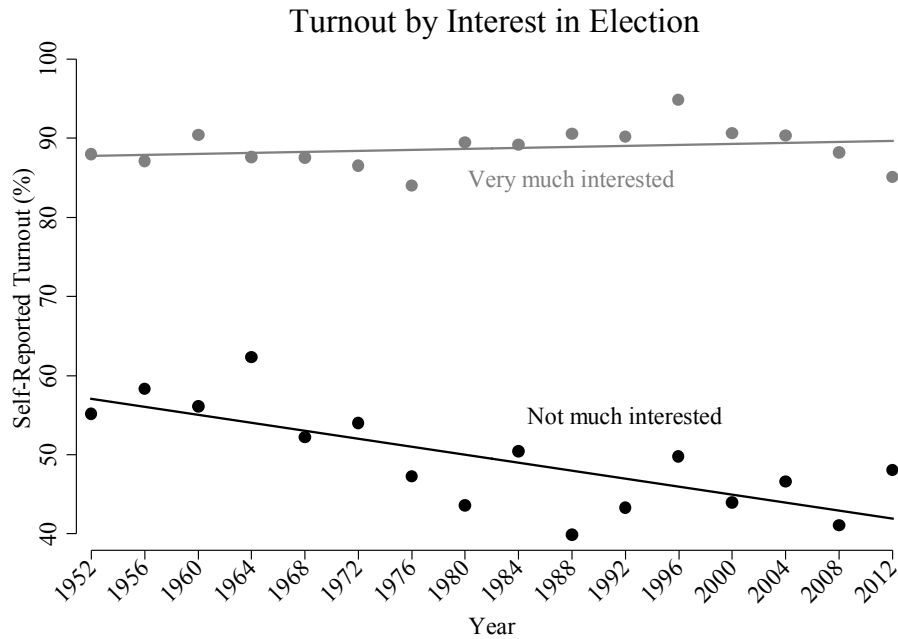
is a genuine motivation for a significant share of the population. Poli-hobbyism can offer explanations of the who, what, when, and how of mass political activity, but to what extent can we confirm that poli-hobbyism is a correct answer to the why of political activity?

Motivations are difficult to measure directly. When, for instance, citizens are asked if they agree that “it’s my duty as a citizen to always vote,” as Pew asked respondents in 2012 and in several other years, some 90% of respondents completely or mostly agreed. Eighty-nine percent of respondents agreed that “everyone has a duty to be involved in community activities to address local issues.” To put this in perspective, a greater proportion of survey respondents will say there is a duty to participate in politics than there is a duty for adult children to take care of their elderly parents (74% agreed, in a 2002 GSS). One could draw several conclusions from that comparison, one of them being that affirmations of civic duties are lip service. It is difficult to square affirmations of civic duty with the reality of civic participation. Most people who affirm the duty to always vote fail to vote. Most who affirm the duty to participate in local community issues fail to do so.

If duty implies obligation, we should expect evidence of guilt or shame among non-participants. We should also expect to see no relationship between one’s enjoyment of an activity and their willingness to engage in that supposedly obligatory activity. A duty obligates a person regardless of how enjoyable the experience is. If participation is only high in activities that citizens find enjoyable, then this suggests their participation is for gratification rather than for fulfillment of duties.

If today’s politics are more conducive to political hobbyism than in previous generations, we should also expect to see a stronger relationship between interest in politics and participation in politics now than in the past. Indeed, for an initial look, consider the relationship between self-reported voting and one’s interest in political campaigns (Figure 1). Each year, the National Election Study has asked respondents if they are very much interested, somewhat interested, or not much interested, in following the political campaigns.

Figure 1: Bivariate Relationship between Interest in Campaign News and Voting, 1952-2012”



Source: American National Election Study Time Series. Survey weights employed.

While self-reported turnout among those very interested remains around 90% throughout the sixty-year time series, turnout has sharply declined among those not much interested in campaigns. In the 1950s and 1960s, most respondents who weren't interested in politics nevertheless said they voted. In the 2000s, most said they did not vote.

While surveys may offer modest tests of the theory, survey instruments will not take us far in testing poli-hobbyism. We can only put so much faith in the stated motivations of survey respondents. Instead, we need to look at the revealed behavior of citizens and ask whether their actions are consistent with hobbyism or with its alternatives.

### 3.1 Who Participates?

To the extent that politics is a hobby, scholarship on hobbies ought to be informative about the kinds of people who participate. As noted above, the amount and character of one's free time predicts the level and types of hobby activities. Retirees, for example, are avid hobbyists compared to younger people (Gelber 2013). Individuals who sit in front of computers and can procrastinate for short periods of time during the day and night have "excess capacity," to use Benkler's (2006) phrasing. They might engage in hobby activities online that would be impractical for laborers.

Second, hobbies exhibit socio-economic biases, but compared to one's social and professional activities, hobbies transcend class lines. Rich and poor can both have a home carpenter's workbench, even though the rich person is likely to have nicer tools. Similarly, political participation is only modestly correlated with socio-economic status (Ansolabehere and Hersh 2012), though some forms of participation differ among rich and poor (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995).

Third, as noted above, white-collar professionals are more likely to have chosen their profession, enjoy it, and replicate their favored skills in their hobbies. Those who have a taste for debate, competition, law, rules, history, and so forth, may choose professions as well as hobbies that permit them to engage these tastes. This perspective suggests a more nuanced set of hypotheses about the relationship between vocation and politics. We should expect higher levels of participation among lawyers than doctors, history teachers than science teachers, law enforcement agents than insurance agents. Individuals who choose professions according to their taste will engage in proximate hobbies.

Fourth, hobbies are not just chosen by an individual's taste, but are also socially determined. Specific hobbies go through fads. Some hobbies are quite gendered. A parent's hobby is likely to be a strong predictor of a child's hobby.

Claiming that there is a socialization component, a taste component, a socio-economic

component, and a time component that predict political participation is not novel. But several points are novel. First, these predictions do not require a theory of politics. Politics, for hobbyists, fit into a broader class of leisure activities, and participation can be predicted without regard to political variables. Second, the theory is informative about the nature of “political interest” or taste for politics. For one, such a taste should be correlated with one’s choice of profession. For another, the theory suggests that those with a taste for politics treat politics as a cathartic low-stakes setting in which to pursue a hobby, which presents normative implications.

Political hobbyism also provides an explanation of the decision to not participate in politics. Remember, 90% of citizens say it’s their duty to always vote. If we took those affirmations seriously, how can we explain high rates of non-voting? For example, after the 2014 federal election in which 36% of eligible citizens cast ballots (the lowest turnout since 1942), the Census asked non-voters why they did not vote. One might expect duty-bound, guilt-ridden non-voters to cite issues of access to the polls; perhaps they were unable to fulfill their duty because they had transportation issues, they had registration issues, the weather was bad, or they were ill. If only logistics did not get in the way, one might think, these non-voters would have fulfilled their obligation. But only 17% of non-voters cited any of these issues to the Census. Most non-voters simply said that they were too busy (28%), not interested (16%), forgot (8%), or were out of town (10%, in spite of almost all voters permitted to cast ballots early if they are out of town on Election Day).<sup>14</sup> For the majority of non-voters, voting - even if a professed duty - is not really something that obligates them. They just are not interested. It does not gratify them.

To be sure, not everyone participates in politics for gratification. Self-interested actions and duty-bound actions have different (though in some cases overlapping) predictions about who participates (e.g. Campbell (2003)). For instance, fear of political instability may be

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<sup>14</sup>See Scott Clement, “Why Don’t Americans Vote? We’re ‘too busy.’” Washington Post, July 17, 2015.



more salient among some citizens than others. Citizens who have been through war, whose families are refugees, or who have day-to-day experience with social unrest might act more out of duty. Citizens who are financially insecure, work for the government, or whose personal life is affected substantially by government action might act with self-interested motivations in mind. Those whose daily experience and personal history is one of relative comfort may act more as hobbyists.

### **3.2 Forms and Rates of Participation**

A duty-bound citizen asks: what actions are demanded of me? An instrumental citizen asks: what actions will make a difference? A hobbyist asks: what actions are gratifying? In many areas of political engagement, we see evidence that action is guided by gratification. This tends to mean that political activities are popular when they are more focused on competition, gossip, status, and socializing, even if such a focus does not prioritize useful action.

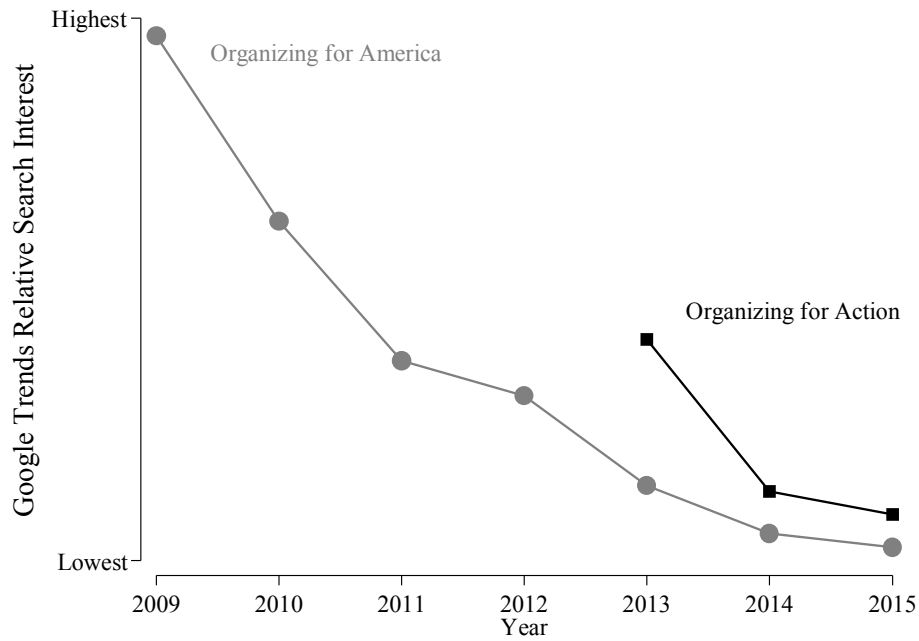
Consider three examples: activism, donations, and voting. In 2008, Barack Obama won the presidency with an unprecedented base of volunteers. Over 13 million supporters provided the campaign with their email addresses. Over two million volunteered. The campaign hoped it could channel the grassroots energy that powered electoral victory into policy advocacy. Thus, the campaign organization - and its lists of supporters - turned into Organizing for America, a group positioned to push the President's policy agenda through grassroots advocacy.

The problem is that policy advocacy is much less gratifying than campaigning. Policy involves compromise. To advocate generally requires some amount of policy-specific knowledge. Victories happen in fits and starts, with committee votes, floor votes, conference votes, regulations, and so forth. In short, policy advocacy is tedious.

When Organizing for America began mobilizing support for its first big policy item, the

Affordable Care Act in 2009, only a small fraction of campaign supporters took action (Melber 2010; Milkis, Rhodes and Charnock 2012). The organization tried to get supporters to town-hall meetings where conservatives were a dominant presence and were offering the media displays of profound dissatisfaction with the policy. But the millions of supporters engaged by the Obama campaign largely disengaged, even in the first year of his administration and even on the signature policy of his tenure.

Figure 2: Relative Google Searches for “Organizing for America” and “Organizing for Action” by Year



Source: trends.google.com

The further demise of Organizing for America (and its reboot after the 2012 election, Organizing for Action) has been blamed both on the media (see Melber (2010)) and on the Obama leadership team,<sup>15</sup> but that blame is misplaced. For most hobbyists, governing is less gratifying the campaigning. Even during the campaign, supporters were much less engaged

<sup>15</sup>e.g. Tim Dickinson, “No We Can’t,” Rolling Stone, February 2, 2010. Marshall Ganz, “How Obama lost his voice, and how he can get it back” Los Angeles Times, November 3, 2010.

by policy than by the sport of politics. The most popular campaign blog posts and emails in 2008 were not about policy, but instead featured pictures of the Obamas or discussed Sarah Palin (Melber 2010). If I measure Google searches for “Organizing for America” and for “Organizing for Action,” as shown in Figure 2, we see an atrophy of interest. Searches for OFA organizations were highest in 2009, when the group made a concerted effort to mobilize around health reform (and even then showed signs of lagging activist interest). Google searches declined steadily from there.

I am not taking a normative position here that citizens ought to be involved in policy advocacy. I am arguing that there are both campaign-oriented and policy-oriented opportunities for engagement, and the latter are far less engaging to activists. Even the one politician who built the biggest list of supporters and established a campaign-like organization to channel the enthusiasm of supporters to public policy had tremendous difficulty in getting his supporters enthusiastic about policy.<sup>16</sup> When hobbies cease to be fun, there is no shame in abstention.

For a second illustration, consider campaign finance. Past research suggests that most campaign donations come from ideologically-oriented individuals rather than instrumental donors (Bonica 2014; Ansolabehere, De Figueiredo and Snyder 2003). In the 2012 election cycle, only 3% of donors gave to both parties. Most money comes from individuals rather than political action committees. Recent evidence presented by Hill and Huber (2015) suggests that while donors focus on supporting like-minded partisans, donors do not appear to sort to candidates on ideology. Barber, Canes-Wrone and Trhower (2016) finds modest evidence of ideological sorting, but in their analysis too, much of what is going is merely partisan boosting rather than pinpointing donations to ideological kindred spirits. Furthermore, the office that generates by far the most enthusiasm among donors is the Presidency, even

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<sup>16</sup>For related points on activists, see Enos and Hersh (2015) on the Obama campaign’s use of activists for mobilization and Hersh and Schaffner (2016) on online petitioner activists.

though the marginal contribution is likely to be more meaningful for lower-tiered races.<sup>17</sup>

If most donors are not contributing for material self-interest and are not even donating because of an ideological agenda (beyond supporting candidates from their preferred party), what exactly are they doing? Most of them are just having a good time (or are pressured to donate by their colleagues who are having a good time). The campaign fundraising industry is designed for the hobbyists. As is well known, fundraising is extraordinarily time-inefficient. If donors were interested in an ideological or self-interested agenda, they would want donations to be more transactional (as they more often are for PACs). They would want policymakers to spend less time talking to them and more time getting things done.

But what high-dollar individual donors (e.g. \$2,000+ per election cycle) are paying for is not policy outcomes, but time with their celebrity crushes. Donors want to attend cocktail parties, pose in photographs, and golf with candidates. They want to socialize with other donors and feel important. They want the candidates to solicit their advice just like donors to non-profits want the recipient organizations to solicit their advice. Petty as it sounds, what hobbyist donors crave is to be friends with their favored politicians.

The skeptic asks, would a rich person really spend thousands of dollars in campaign contributions just for their own gratification? Such a skeptic may not realize that the wealthy spend a lot of money for gratification in ways that seem unfathomable to the non-wealthy. Politics is one such outlet. As one example from the 2016 cycle, media noticed that wealthy donors were traveling around the country to attend the live televised Presidential debates. They would fly in, attend a cocktail party, and then watch the debate in the arena with the locals. Debate organizers allocated seats to high-dollar contributors so they could join in. Why were wealthy donors traveling to Iowa and New Hampshire and all around the country to attend multiple debates in person? Because they are groupies. Republican donor Foster

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<sup>17</sup>Donor Demographics. Open Secrets, Center of Responsive Politics, Accessed March 16, 2016, <https://www.opensecrets.org/bigpicture/donordemographics.php?cycle=2012>

Friess told the Washington Post, “It’s the same thing as going to a football game. If you’re in the crowd, you can hear the cheers, unfiltered by microphones. The chemistry is so much more exciting.”<sup>18</sup> For the avid and wealthy hobbyist, a few thousands dollars is a fair price to attend a good show.

As a third illustration, consider voting. But before considering voting, consider football. In the 2014 NFL season, Sunday Night Football (the most popular primetime event in the U.S.) averaged 21 million viewers per week. The two conference championship games drew 42 million and 50 million viewers. The Super Bowl drew 114 million viewers.<sup>19</sup> The dynamics of football viewership are not a profound mystery. As the regular season transitions to the post-season and as the post-season culminates in the Super Bowl, many people tune in to the excitement, the high stakes, and end of a season. To the annoyance of football fans everywhere, Super Bowls are often watched in the presence of people who do not actually enjoy football, or worse, people who do not even know the rules of the game.

With that in mind, let us now consider the dynamics of voter turnout. The basic facts of turnout dynamics are well-known. Turnout is by far at its highest at presidential elections. In midterm years, in local elections, and in primaries, turnout is much lower. Even in places that are not contested by Presidential campaigns (i.e. no direct mobilization), turnout is higher in Presidential contests than when those same places have competitive contests for offices like governor or mayor.

Instrumental motivations cannot well explain voting, and neither can duty. As stated above, it is difficult to take seriously a notion of duty that is both affirmed and ignored by most citizens. It is also difficult to see why duty would obligate someone in Presidential contests but not in other contests. Strategic mobilization by parties and campaigns can

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<sup>18</sup>Matea Gold. “The GOP Debates Have Become Like Super Bowl Parties for Top Donors.” Washington Post. January 19, 2016.

<sup>19</sup>See <http://sportstvratings.com/tag/nfl-playoff-ratings/>, <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2015/01/09/nfl-2014-tv-recap-202-million-viewers-game-viewership-nearly-triples-broadcast-primetime/> and <http://variety.com/2015/tv/ratings/super-bowl-ratings-hit-all-time-high-with-patriots-win-on-nbc-12>

also only explain so much of turnout dynamics, as the Electoral College permits targeted strategies to states while turnout levels are only marginally affected by those strategies.

What about so-called “indirect mobilization (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993)”? Everyday voters hear far more about the Presidential race from the news and from their acquaintances than they hear about other political races. The media and social connections mobilize participation. Is this different from “mobilizing” football viewership? Some portion of indirect mobilization might occur through reminding citizens of their civic obligation to participate (Gerber, Green and Larimer 2008), and that is different than in football. But probably a larger portion of indirect mobilization simply piques interest and encourages non-hobbyists to join the fun for a day, just like with the Super Bowl. These are peripheral voters, they know little about politics (Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2016), and their participation is not as thought out as for the hobbyists. As DeNardo (1980) wrote, “peripheral voters are just as fickle inside the voting booth as they are about getting to it.” In short, the relatively high turnout associated with Presidential elections may not present any more of a puzzle or merit any more sophisticated or politically-oriented explanation than the higher viewership associated with a championship football game. In the culminating game, non-hobbyists join the hobbyists, the truly duty-bound, and the ends-motivated participants to be part of the spectacle.

### **3.3 Partisanship**

The social identity theory of partisanship, articulated clearly by Green, Palmquist and Schickler (2002) fits well within the poli-hobbyism framework (see also: Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes (2012); Iyengar and Westwood (2015); Huddy, Mason and Aaroe (2015)). Evidence suggests that partisan attachments are less about ideology and running tallies of incumbent performance and more akin to support for sports teams. Neither events nor policy tend to change one’s allegiance.

Green, Palmquist and Schickler (2002) offer two ways in which the analogy to sports teamsmanship breaks down. They write: “Partisan attachment often runs deeper than attachment to a sports franchise...Small wonder that polite conversation admit sports talk but excludes politics.” And second, winning the championship in politics means real changes in policy that affect people’s lives in material ways (though the authors are mindful that partisan attachments seem only loosely tied to policy).

The tension in the sports analogy is about the stakes. Objectively speaking, the stakes in political contestation are much higher than in sports competitions. But for the hobbyists, the stakes may not always seem particularly high. As I discussed above, for someone far enough removed from war, economic hardship, discrimination, and social unrest, the stakes in politics can actually seem low. They can seem especially low for participants who generally only talk to like-minded partisans.

Importantly, sometimes people who perceive different stakes interact with one another, and this is the reason why it is more polite to talk about sports than politics over dinner. We generally expect friction between groups of citizens who have opposing ideological preferences. But real friction occurs when someone engaged in hobbyism does not realize that they are in conversation with someone who is duty-bound or who has a personal stake in political outcomes. This is analogous to a boxing match between a fighter who is playing a game and a fighter who is fighting for survival. Hobbyists can have animated, gratifying debates about politics (usually only in the company of partisan allies (Center 2014)). But Thanksgiving dinner disputes take an unfriendly turn because of unmatched stakes rather than unmatched issue positions.

## 4 Conclusion

These empirical implications related to attributes of participants, forms and rates of participation, and partisanship are just a start to a broad research agenda. To assess participatory bias, poli-hobbyism suggests that political scientists turn to the sociological theories of leisure. There, the evidence suggests that hobbies can provide a cathartic release for people with particular tastes. Political scientists ought to consider the full set of predictions regarding leisure time, vocation, social pressure, and resources in answering questions of participatory bias. As stated above, explanations for political activity may not necessitate conferring special status on political variables. For some subset of participants, politics might just be like any other hobby.

Poli-hobbyism also suggests that political scientists focus on the ways in which politics can be gratifying and tiresome. No matter how important or consequential an activity may be, poli-hobbyism suggests that participation rates and timing will be strongly impacted by whether the activity is gratifying. Gratifying activities are those that are focused on competition, celebrity, and incorporate frequent feelings of accomplishment. Poli-hobbyism helps to explain why activities ranging from voting to donating to policy activism are appealing or not appealing to citizens. Civic behavior in these activities makes little sense from a perspective of duty or self-interest; it makes a lot more sense when politics is viewed as a hobby.

In this introductory statement of the theory, I have shown that poli-hobbyism is distinct from duty-oriented and interest-oriented theories of political motivation. Poli-hobbyism arises in a particular historical setting in which citizens have opportunities to participate in politics and to learn specialized knowledge, in which citizens have leisure time to pursue hobbies, and in which the political stakes are remote enough that, at least for some people, political action does not merit the level of seriousness associated with civic duty. Because



hobbyists act as if the stakes are low, fail to perform acts that are not gratifying, and act in ways focused on partisan competition, poli-hobbyism is a concerning theory of democratic politics and deserves attention in future research.

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