

Political Hobbyism: A Theory of Mass Behavior

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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.

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“No reputation is at stake...Not even your dignity need suffer.”¹

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 they generate the outcomes they do.

Studies of political participation have long considered both instrumental and non-instrumental motivations for action: 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 selective benefits and a Yankee ethos - “the constant disinterested activity of citizens in public affairs” (Hoffstadter 1955).

While it is clear that much of political activity is not motivated by instrumental calculations or by the desire to advance a narrow self-interest, 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.

In this essay, I offer a general theory of mass behavior that is focused on these motivations. In its present form, the 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 an important subset of the electorate, a hobby.

¹Mulac (1959), cited in Gelber (2013)

And this particular answer to the ‘why’ question 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, 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 a clear theoretical paradigm. Doing so is my aim. And I endeavor to cast a wide net. 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.

The next section of this article defines the motivation of political hobbyism (poli-hobbyism) by distinguishing it from its alternatives, duty and interest. As scholarly research in sociology helps us to define, 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 an 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 describe historical conditions under which pleasure-motivated political participation flourishes. Specifically, I will argue that (1) the nature of leisure time, (2) the level of perceived threat, and (3) the openness of government to amateur participation ought to condition the motivations of political action.

I will also 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 far-reaching.

I ask the reader to permit me to develop a broad argument here. I am attempting to cover a lot of ground in this essay - synthesizing a broad literature, building a theory, describing historical processes, and defining an empirical agenda. In doing so, I cannot fully engage with every implication of the argument. But to make theoretical headway, I beg permission for a little more breathing room than is now typical for American politics research.

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*.² Political engagement - voting, campaign activism, policy activism, media consumption - can be viewed 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 is 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 can be both pleasurable and obligatory, but if one feels obligated by such activities, they do not take up "free" time and they are not hobbies. Prong two is 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, but the primary motivation is not material gain. Prong three is regularity. Activities pursued without regularity are not hobbies. A Super Bowl party attendee who does not otherwise follow football is not a fan. A person who votes every four years out of social pressure but is not otherwise politically active is not a political hobbyist.

²Definition from Oxford Dictionaries oxforddictionaries.com/definition/hobby

Given that political engagement among activists can be quite emotional and time-intensive, is the language of hobbyism too light to capture this engagement? No. Common pastimes like sports entail 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.

Still, even when not instrumental and even when not undertaken out of obligation, politics is goal-oriented toward political and policy victories. Are hobbies like this? 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.

As I will detail below, the pleasure motivation for political engagement is tied to a political order of *seemingly* low stakes, an order that characterized much of the past 25 years, maybe up until 2017. As Inglehart and Welzel (2015) have written, the recent peace has meant that “young generations grow up taking survival for granted and feel less threatened.” As McAdam et al. (2005) notice, this is an era where protests are primarily the domain of middle class white suburbanites rather than poor urban minorities, a major shift since 1970. A motivating concern of my theory is that mass political hobbyism in this period of relative safety may have contributed to the current political crisis we face.³ The argument can be viewed as complementary to Cramer's (2016) *The Politics of Resentment*, a book that explains the political engagement of low-SES, rural Americans during the Obama years. In my study, I especially aim to capture the politics of contentment, how a comfortable class of citizens has been engaging in politics as hobbyists.

³See [redacted]

2.1 Political Hobbyism in Prior Work

The idea that political activity can be pursued for pleasure is not new. However, in prior writing, this idea 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 wrapped up together in part because they are both non-instrumental, but also because when the mass public affirms a civic duty, it is often dismissed as cheap talk (Wilson 1974; Blais 2000).⁴ 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.

Elements of the hobbyist motivation are found in past work under the label of of “expressive” actions (Blais and Galais 2016) and “interest in politics,” which Blais (2000) and others label the psychological motivation for engagement (See also Prior (2010); Shani (2009)). Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) show that interest in politics does most of the work in predicting participation. The hobbyist motivation appears in Ansolabehere, De Figueiredo and Snyder’s (2003) study of campaign contributions, in which the authors suggests the bulk of individual campaign donors are engaged in a consumption activity. In Green, Palmquist

⁴As Wilson writes 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).”

and Schickler's (2002) study of partisanship, the authors analogize partisanship to team-manship. The mass media regularly portray political activity in the language of competitive sports (Aalberg, Stromback and de Vreese 2011).⁵

In short, the hobbyist motivation appears frequently but it is often mixed up with other non-instrumental motivations, and it has never been examined rigorously.⁶ The closest past scholarship has come 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)." 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's treatment of hobbyism is incomplete. For one reason, Wilson's research was focused on *groups*; he did not describe more solitary pleasure-seeking behavior, which can also be motivated by pleasure. Furthermore, Wilson 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.

⁵Explaining 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 [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 accessed, March 3, 2016.)

⁶Though Blais and Galais (2016) adds precision to research on civic duty by helping to distinguish duty-bound voting from expressive voting.

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 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 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.”⁷

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.

⁷Eliza Collins, “Gloria Steinem: Young Women Like Sanders Because ‘The Boys are with Bernie,’” POLITICO, February 6, 2016.

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). There are two distinguishing features of duty-bound participation.

The first 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 moral obligation (Blais and Galais 2016). Sometimes, obligations are enjoyable, but oftentimes they are not. The obligated person participates regardless of the personal enjoyment they derive from the experience.⁸

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.⁹ In either case, a sense of duty entails obligation (see Chapman (2015)).

⁸The 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.

⁹Dalton (2008) distinguishes aspects of politics like voting and jury service as duties whereas opinion formation and other activities as ‘engagement.’

Empirically, we should expect 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 such cases, the failure to act ought to generate feelings of regret, shame, or guilt (Blais and Galais 2016). If one does not have these negative feelings, it is difficult to justify calling the action that they did not take as one required by duty.¹⁰ 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 self-interest (Feddersen 2004; Galston 1991; Tjerandsen 1980) (See also Eliasoph (1998) on public-spirited talk.) 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, as in the concept of the general will articulated by Rousseau or in Rawls’ theory of justice. It appears in many variants. Foley (2015) offers the example of the oath that Vermonters must take upon casting ballots in an election. Before voting, Vermonters

¹⁰As John Locke wrote in “Some Thoughts Concerning Education,” “Shame of doing amiss, and deserving Chastisement, is the only true Restraint belonging to Virtue.” qtd in Hunter (2001).

must swear that their intention in voting is the best interest of the state “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. This pledge, consistent with theoretical definitions of duty, reflects a strong view that a person who casts a ballot with a particularistic motivation in mind may have voted in an election but simultaneously failed in their civic duty.

Taking a civic action without a civic motivation makes duty and hobbyism challenging to distinguish empirically. Here, I am not studying attitudes alone or behaviors alone but the connection between them. Two people can take the same political action but one may be motivated by duty while the other is motivated by gratification. This distinction is essential to a theory of behavior.

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.¹¹ This devotion to country, it is argued, can yield actions taken to promote the common good rather than self-interest. (See Sniderman (1981)).

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 (Bellah et al. 1985). It may be difficult to see how

¹¹Citing 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).”

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 higher intentions. Instead, action may be taken out of self-interest or gratification.¹²

2.3 What is hobbyism?

When drawing a connection between leisure and politics, theorists have not generally conceived of politics as a form of leisure. In *Politics*, Aristotle famously argued that leisure is a necessary condition for democracy, “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 leisure activity. Doing so yields a different set of empirical predictions and normative implications than a theory in which leisure activities simply yield political ones.

As I have so far argued, 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.

¹²The 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 for religious people to fear God. Similarly, the modern state makes it harder for citizens to fear instability.

Four additional points about hobbyism ought to be emphasized. First, to claim that hobby's chief aim is gratification does not mean that a participant can have no other motivations in mind. Consider that 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.¹³ However, whereas duty *necessitates* trying to act on behalf of the common interest, hobbyism makes no such demand on one's intentions.

It should be emphasized, then, that ordinary people approach politics with a mix of duty, pleasure, and self-interest and they can bring different motivations to different behaviors. Theoretically, we can examine the weights on these different motivations as well as the change in those weights over time, at micro and macro levels. As with any model of behavior, the theory here simplifies complex phenomena into component parts in the hope of uncovering lessons that otherwise get lost.

A second point about hobbies is that hobbies bear an important relationship to leisure 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 free time is spent (e.g. at home, work, in groups)

¹³Stebbins (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)."

and in what increments. I return to this point below, as the changing nature of leisure time in the workforce affects how people engage in political hobbyism.

A third key point is that participation in hobbies can be encouraged or discouraged through social networks. Whether a particular hobby is a social or solitary activity, networks can inspire higher or lower rates of participation (Siegel 2009). Recent political science literature has paid some attention to how social relationships can stimulate feelings of duty, like by shaming (Gerber, Green and Larimer 2008). But it is important to note that all sorts of behaviors, not just duties, can be stimulated or suppressed through social contagion.

A person may vote, petition, protest or donate because of a “desire for approval,” but a person may also bowl, dance, or play the ukelele out of that same desire for social approval (Iversen and Soskice 2012; Abrams, Iversen and Soskice 2011). 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 actually induced by way of duty. (See also Sinclair (2012); Bond et al. (2012); Rolfe (2013); Gerber et al. (2014)).

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 have chosen their profession and enjoy doing it.

This connection between hobbies and professions matters for two reasons. First, it can

help to explain participatory bias.¹⁴ Second, the feeling of cathartic release from pressures at work and home comes from low stakes.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

The Dangers of Poli-hobbyism. But confusion of the stakes is one of several dangers associated with political hobbyism. Low stakes are what make hobbies restorative (i.e. recreation); they are release from the pressures of work and other obligations. Even hobbies that are exhilarating because they can be dangerous 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 sometimes seem low. In a large republic, an individual's contribution is almost always non-pivotal. Policy in the U.S. often changes very slowly.

¹⁴As 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.

¹⁵As 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).”

¹⁶Two 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 channel 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.

Even on large issues of national significance, it is difficult to know how mass participation translates into concrete policy change. Furthermore, 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, the relative stability of political life can make it difficult to cultivate the public-spirited obligation of civic duty, as I discussed above.¹⁷ 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 may lead citizens to participate in gratifying aspects of politics but not tedious ones.¹⁸ Similarly, lack of obligation means one can cease participation at any time. Moreover, if political participants act out of pleasure rather than obligation, then citizens who do not have an interest in politics may be even less likely to participate. For them, politics can seem like a superfluous activity that does not demand their attention. Without exhibiting shame or guilt, they may feel 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 take a back seat to partisanship when politics

¹⁷A separate cohort of stake-confusers are those who Banfield (1968) describe as young people “in search of excitement, thrills, ‘action,’” and who might participate even in violent protests, or riots, simply for the satisfaction of knowing they can “make things happen.”

¹⁸When 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.

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.

Along with potential dangers of hobbyism, it is worth considering the idea that political hobbyism has an upside. If politics is gratifying, perhaps more people will participate than if it were stale. If civil society benefits from fuller participation, is it not beneficial to make tedious activities fun and to encourage people with free time to take on politics as a hobby?

The make-it-easy-and-fun perspective is not uncommon. For example, people can be encouraged to make a financial contribution to a non-profit organization if the organization hosts an expensive gala event where participants can socialize. A church can make religion more fun by focusing on the gratifying aspects of ritual and socialization rather than on the more demanding aspects of religious adherence.

But as religion scholars have long noticed, religious communities typically are stronger where religions are stricter and more demanding of adherents' time (e.g. Ferguson (2014); Putnam and Campbell (2012)). A church that is open, easy, and fun but that does not cultivate a sense of religious duty is likely to be a church that is shrinking. Han (2016) has noticed a similar phenomenon in political organizations, distinguishing the weaker, transactional forms of mobilization that ask little of participants from the deeper involvement connected with organizing. Furthermore, making politics fun does not bear any necessary relationship to making better political decisions, making participants feel more obligated by duty, furthering useful political agendas, or re-directing hobbyists to productive forms of participation.¹⁹

The extent to which political hobbyism is dangerous depends on the kind of enjoyment that one gets out of politics. There are the higher pleasures associated with robust con-

¹⁹This is, in essence, the slacktivism critique of Internet activity (see Christensen (2011)).

nections to organizations, to neighbors, and to causes, which can be both obligating and pleasurable. There are also lower pleasures associated with partisan fandom, the seeking of cheap thrills, instant gratification, and lack of commitment. With respect to a normative agenda, it is this latter form of hobbyism that raises concern; it characterizes the range of observed behaviors I describe below.

2.4 Historical Conditions

Three temporal variables are likely associated with the prevalence of political hobbyism. The first is the nature of the free time. Industrialization and labor laws catalyzed a first major transformation of leisure. Factories moved labor out of homes, which meant that industrial workers could not bring their work home. That, combined with a 40-hour work week, meant that by about 1920 many Americans had up to eight hours a day that could not be dedicated to formal labor. This is the time when hobbies first proliferated in the United States. Political elites actually promoted hobbies as preferable alternatives to more idle forms of leisure time (Gelber 2013; Pack 1934; Thompson 1967).

During the Depression, facing a population with high unemployment and therefore excess free time, political elites further promoted hobbies (Gelber 1991): for example, governments sponsored cultural museums (Pack 1934) and radio personalities promoted 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 free time, and technology did not permit them to bring work home.

In recent years, the Internet has had a profound influence on labor, and as a consequence, on leisure time. Desk workers can both produce and procrastinate in small increments of time throughout the day and night. As Benkler (2006) argues in his landmark study of cultural production, social activities that permit granular contributions are well 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. Cooperative activities, like the production of Wikipedia, contributions to online petitions, Amazon reviews, political debates on Twitter, and community-building on Facebook, occur online and in small increments of leisure time allocated throughout the day.

If people are spending more time at home rather than in social settings (Putnam 2000), political hobbyism today might be expressed more through television viewership and Internet use rather than through in-person organizing. And it will favor granular activities. Politics is not unique in this way. The nature of free time, which changes with the transformation of industry, affects all forms of hobbies.

A second key temporal variable is the openness of the political process to mass participation. The degree of openness is itself a function of technology and government policy. 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, progressive reforms took power away from party machines, and in doing so, made mass politics more burdensome than simply casting a party ticket (see also McGerr (1986); Addonizio, Green and Glaser (2007); Bensele (2004)). As political activism became more demanding, overall voting participation decreased. But for citizens with an actual interest in politics, politics became far more open to participation. Recently, scholars have expressed some alarm at the success of populist reforms and their negative consequences for politics (e.g. Cain (2014); La Raja and Schaffner (2015)).

Of course, the political process is more open not just because of populist reforms, but also because of the Internet, cable television, and changes in the regulation of the media (Prior 2007; Berry and Sobieraj 2014). As Berry and Sobieraj (2014) note, the opportunity for media specialization has led media corporations to focus on delighting pleasure-seeking hobbyists with outrage, the political equivalent of sex and violence.

The United States now 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 it is important here to reflect not only on the historical changes in the nature of leisure time, but also in the changing opportunities available for citizens to learn about and engage in politics as pleasure-seeking “junkies.”²⁰

The final historical variable is the nature of 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. Furthermore, when one’s own well-being is more affected by government policy, then too might a voter feel more threatened. In high-threat settings, citizens are likely to take their own civic role and their own self-interest more seriously (see Albertson and Gadarian (2015)). When political debates are less consequential or less concrete, politics is more likely to be treated as sport.

However, as Levine (2015) shows, when a person is presented with a political issue that speaks to their own economic insecurity, they tend to turn their gaze away from politics and toward dealing with their own personal circumstances. Policy issues that remind voters of their troubles are demobilizing. Thus, even when personal economic stakes are high, individuals might lean away from engagement on issues that remind them of those stakes and toward issues that are a pleasant distraction from them.

Whether threat is emanating from economic hardship, personal safety, or national security, the threat level an individual feels can be difficult to discern. A Democratic voter, deeply immersed in partisan news media, might have viewed the 2012 election as a dire, anxiety-provoking, high-stakes affair at the time, but in 2017 may remember the 2012 election as

²⁰On this point, it is worth noting that political hobbyism is unlikely to flourish in undemocratic regimes, even stable ones, unless such regimes offer opportunities for everyday citizens to gain specialized knowledge and participate actively in politics. For example, Chinese censors focus on blocking online activity that might lead to collective action (King, Pan and Roberts 2013).

entirely unthreatening. That is why objective measures of threat may help us distinguish voters who are more and less personally affected by electoral or policy outcomes. Similarly, at a macro level, depending on the political leadership and on world events, some years are objectively less threatening than others.

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. At least this might be story from roughly 1992 to 2016.

3 Empirical Implications

The empirical questions to consider are a.) who participates in politics as a hobby, and b.) given that a subset of the population is primarily motivated by hobbyism, how do they engage? If someone is participating in politics as a hobbyist, they engage in activities that are gratifying rather in those they deem suited to the common interest or those that are in pursuit of self-interest. Furthermore, failure to participate for a hobbyist does not generate feelings of shame or embarrassment for having failed in one's duty. In answering the question of who participates as a hobbyist, I will mainly consider existing literature on participation and suggest that prior evidence in political science is broadly consistent with a theory of hobbyism. To answer the question about forms of participation, I will turn to four specific mass phenomena: voting, policy activism, campaign contributing, and partisanship. Focusing on multiple issues has the drawback of surface-level analysis but has the benefit of showcasing how the theory operates in different settings.

3.1 Who Participates?

The theory of hobbyism described above generates predictions of political participation that explain “participatory bias” in terms of individual differences in free time, socialization, and taste. Many of the predictions are familiar to political scientists, who have long engaged with theories like the resources model presented by Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995). What is notable is that predictions from a resource model do not actually require a theory of politics. A more general sociological theory of hobbyism is sufficient to arrive at the same predictions as examined in the political science literature. Simply put, politics isn’t special.

Briefly consider the components of a hobbyist theory of participation. 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), as they have more time. Politics is just one activity, out of many, that consumes their free time. Similarly, 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.

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, and history may choose professions as well as hobbies that permit them to engage these tastes. This perspective is consistent with Prior (2016) who shows that political interest leads individuals to choose professions tied to politics, not that professional socialization leads to political engagement. 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.

Hobbies are not just chosen by an individual’s taste, but are also socially contagious. Hobbies go through fads. As Rolfe (2013) notes with regard to turnout, civic participation

can be socially contagious. This does not necessarily mean that individuals shame each other into fulfilling a civic duty. Individuals can be moved to do neutral activities and negative activities on account of social contagion. Social contagion might explain ups and downs of turnout, but could also explain why some aspects of politics, like other hobbies, are gendered, and why a parent's interest in politics (and other hobbies) is predictive of a children's interest (Prior 2016).

Markus Prior's forthcoming monograph on political interest illustrates the connection between interest - a taste for politics - and engagement. Prior finds that political interest is extraordinarily stable over time, within individuals and within countries. Political interest is not something that is high around an election season and low at other times. Indeed, the American National Election Study exhibits no sharp difference in political interest in presidential election seasons and in midterm election seasons. Political interest is not situational. It is a disposition that some people have and others do not, cemented early in one's life and related to parental education, cognitive skills, and personality. People who have it choose "politically impinged" jobs and join political organizations. They do politics with their free time while others do non-political activities with theirs. Moreover, as Atkinson and Fowler (2014) note, non-political social engagement is less likely to lead to political activity as to substitute for political activity. In other words, social leisure activities do not lead to politics; politics is a social leisure activity for those who find it pleasurable.

Again, there is nothing new in the claims that engagement is a function of socialization, taste, and time. What is perhaps new to political science is that politics is one of many leisure activities that can be described in these terms.

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. See Campbell (2003) on the participation of the elderly). Fear of political instability may be more salient among some citizens than others. Citizens who

Table 1: Self-Reported Motivations for Political Participation

I participate in politics because...	
It is a civic duty	46%
I enjoy it	10%
I enjoy it + duty	41%
Another reason	3%

2016 CCES Module, N= 721. Conditioned on R reporting that they participate in politics.

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 (but, again, see Levine (2015)). But those whose daily experience and personal history is one of relative comfort may act more as hobbyists.

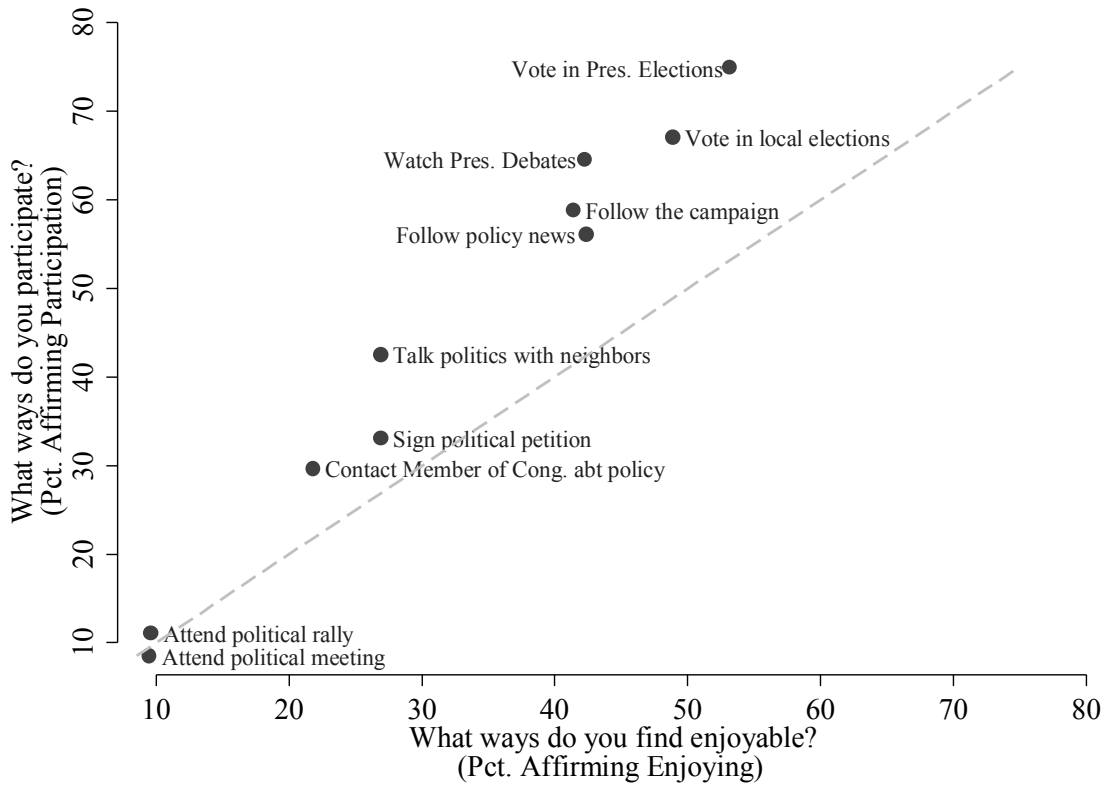
3.2 Mass Participation, Survey Evidence

There are limitations to using surveys to assess political motivation (namely, survey respondents are not always insightful and honest about their own participation), but it is nevertheless worthwhile to at least obtain a baseline for self-reported hobbyism. In the pre-election 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), I asked a sample of 949 US respondents why they participate in politics. The question prompt read, “Some people participate in politics because they enjoy it. Others participate because they see it as their civic duty. Some people participate for both reasons. How about you?”²¹ The respondents could say they politics for enjoyment, out of civic duty, or for both reasons. The order of the enjoyment and duty items was randomized. Respondents could also offer another reason or say they do not participate in politics.

This item provides us with a simple starting point to assess the pleasure motivation. In total, 25% of the sample said they do not participate in politics. Of those who report

²¹Information about data sources can be found in the appendix.

Figure 1: Activities that people say they do versus activities that people say they enjoy



Source: 2016 CCES module. Respondents were randomly split to answer either the participation questions or the enjoyment questions. Forty-five degree line is shown.

participating, only 3% cite a reason other than enjoyment and duty. Forty-six percent of respondents say they participate only out of duty, 10% say only out of enjoyment, and 41% say they are motivated by both duty and enjoyment. Conditional on saying they do participate, 51% of the respondents cite enjoyment as a motivation for participation and 46% cite only duty. As I will describe, many of those who affirm acting out of duty do not mean it. But at a minimum, it is evident, and perhaps surprising, that a large fraction of the public acknowledges enjoyment as a motivation for their own political activity.

I asked half of the respondents in the CCES sample whether or not they participate in any of ten political activities. To the other half I asked not if they actually participate but

whether they enjoy any of these ten aspects of politics. In Figure 1, I compare the rate of self-reported participation with the rate of self-reported enjoyment.

There is a strong relationship between activities people say they do and activities people say they enjoy. For instance, when asked if they enjoy attending political meetings or rallies, only about 10% of respondents say yes. When another set of respondents is asked if they participate in these activities, only 10% say yes as well.

The relationship between enjoyment and action would not be expected if people were actually behaving out of self-interest, civic duty, or to effect change. The evidence makes more sense when politics is viewed as a hobby. It is consistent with Prior's (2016) work on political interest. Prior notes that some 75% of individuals who are very or extremely interested in politics agree that "following politics is fun," but almost nobody who is not interested in politics finds it fun. Again, if duty obligated people, we would not see this strong relationship between action and enjoyment.

Notice that some of the behaviors that are more popular (in both dimensions) exhibit higher rates of individuals affirming they do the activities than enjoying them. A duty-oriented model would likely predict that activities such as contacting Congress and attending political meetings would be "off-diagonal" in this graph (i.e. people do not like doing these things, but they do them nevertheless). But actually, the activities that are allegedly done more than enjoyed include watching presidential debates and following political news, activities that are more consumption forms of politics than advocacy or participation. If duty is compelling people to participate in ways that are not enjoyable, it is certainly odd that duty is especially compelling at getting individuals to watch televised debates but not, say, to contact a member of Congress about public policy.

Also notice the two voting items in this graph. The most popular items for both participation and enjoyment are voting in presidential elections and voting in local elections. Voting in local elections - a behavior often done at single-digit levels - is reported to be done

here by close to 70% of respondents and is something enjoyable to 50% of respondents.

This brings us to important questions about voter turnout: why do people affirm a strong norm of participation but fail to vote? Why do they lie about voting when they fail to vote? To put some concrete numbers on this, when 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.²² Eighty-nine percent of respondents agreed that “everyone has a duty to be involved in community activities to address local issues.” For 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 General Social Survey).²³

When people fail to vote, and when they admit to failing to vote, they do not generally exhibit shame. Because shame is theorized to be the key indicator of someone neglecting a duty, I asked about shame in the 2016 pre-election CCES survey. I found a clear absence of shame among self-reported non-voters. I first reminded respondents that 64% of eligible adults did not participate in the 2014 midterm election. I prompted them in this way to encourage them to admit that they might not have voted. Of the respondents who said they did not, I asked them, on a four point scale, if they felt ashamed about this. Eighty-six percent said they felt little or no shame.

As an alternative take on the question of shame, consider the 2014 Current Population Survey about election participation. After the 2014 federal election in which only 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

²²Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, telephone interview (landline and cellphone), conducted April 4-15, 2012. Accessed via Roper Center iPOLL database.

²³General Social Survey, conducted February 6- June 26, 2002. Accessed via Roper Center iPOLL Database.

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).²⁴ For the majority of non-voters, voting - even if a professed duty - is not really something that obligates them.

If most non-voters tell the Census they did not vote because they were too busy and most admitted non-voters report feeling little or no shame in their decision not to vote, then the affirmation that voting is a duty for some 90% of the public is cheap talk. A duty is something that obligates, but voting does not obligate most people.

This still leaves the question about why many non-voters refuse to admit to non-voting (a problem more significant in academic surveys like the CCES than government surveys like the CPS). Isn't the very act of misreporting evidence that some individuals feel shame?

While it must be true that some non-voters feel ashamed, widespread misreporting about voter turnout is not itself evidence of widespread feelings of shame. Just because voting may be socially desirable (which leads to overreporting) does not mean it is something that individuals are treating as a duty and are ashamed if they neglect. Consider other forms of survey misreporting. For instance, male college students "over-report" their sexual history, citing more sexual partners and more one-night-stands than they actually have experienced (Fisher 2013). It is unlikely that these college students are ashamed they did not fulfill some duty of experiencing more sex, but rather that they just like conveying an image that they have lots of sex. For managing their personal image, people lie about behaviors that are not particularly desirable. And so too they may lie about voting, not because of duty and

²⁴See Scott Clement, "Why Don't Americans Vote? We're 'too busy.'" Washington Post, July 17, 2015.

shame, but just to curate a self-image that they think others will like.

3.3 Mass Participation, Revealed Behavior

3.3.1 Voting

Given the limitations of surveys to assess motivations, consider some evidence of the revealed behavior of citizens. And in considering the macro dynamics of voting, look first at the macro dynamics of football. On a typical Sunday evening during the 2016 regular season of the National Football League, about 11 million viewers watched the game. In the playoffs, viewership on Sunday night rose beyond 20 million viewers in the first round to over 25 million in the next round. On Sunday evening of the Super Bowl, over 111 million Americans viewed the game.²⁵ Viewership, then, was ten times greater on Super Bowl Sunday than on a regular season Sunday.

Why? This seems like a silly question. 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. Even people who do not like football and do not know the rules of the game watch the Super Bowl.

Now consider voter turnout, the basic dynamics of which are well-known. Turnout is at its highest, by far, 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. Surveying participants in presidential elections, it is clear that many are not politically interested or

²⁵The NFL TV Ratings Page, Sports Media Watch, <http://www.sportsmediawatch.com/nfl-tv-ratings-viewership-nbc-cbs-fox-espn-nfln-regular-season-playoffs/> Accessed 27 February, 2017.

engaged and they know very little about the rules of the political system (Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2016; DeNardo 1980).

Instrumental motivations cannot well explain voting dynamics, and neither can duty. As stated above, it is difficult to take seriously a notion of duty that is simultaneously 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 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)”? 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. But this is no different from “mobilizing” football viewership. Some portion of indirect mobilization might occur through reminding citizens of their civic obligation to participate, 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.

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 with the hobbyists, the truly duty-bound, and the ends-motivated participants to be part of a spectacle.

3.3.2 Policy Activism

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 mil-

lion 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.

Organizing for America, however, faced a challenge in that policy advocacy is less gratifying than a campaign (e.g. Figure 1). 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.

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,²⁶ but blame may be more appropriately directed toward the activists, for whom campaigns are likely to be more gratifying than the slow pace and compromise associated with governance. Even during the campaign, supporters were much less engaged by policy than by the sport of politics (Melber 2010).

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 difficulty in getting his supporters enthusiastic about policy.²⁷ One explanation of why OFA failed is that activism ceased to be fun after the election season was over. Because activists were primarily motivated by fun rather than by duty, they ceased their participation.

²⁶e.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.

²⁷See Enos and Hersh (2015) on the Obama campaign's use of activists for mobilization.

Petitioning. The Internet has provided Americans with new tools to learn about politics and new ways to take action. Not only can citizens take individual actions like registering to vote and contributing to a campaign, they can also engage in collective action, like in signing policy-oriented petitions. Signing an online petition is a popular way for citizens to convey their policy views in a low-cost setting.

In 2011, the Obama White House established a program called ‘We the People,’ whereby individuals could design a petition that could be circulated online. If the proposal achieved a certain number of signatures within a certain amount of time, the White House would promise a response. Along with [redacted], I assessed the policy orientation of the 1,806 petitions submitted by 13 million individuals to the White House program over a period of about twenty months [redacted]. See the appendix for details.

The main empirical task here was to classify petitions by the type of public policy they targeted. First, we flag petitions that have as their chief aim either humor or partisan venting rather than actual policy advocacy. Fifteen percent of the signature-weighted petitions to White House were nothing more than jokes or opportunities to vent.

Then, we divided the policy-oriented petitions by scope (i.e. whether they target broad-based or particularistic policy goals). In distinguishing particularistic from broad-based policy, we consider policies aimed at particular individuals, small group financial interests, narrow ideological interests, or small geographic areas to be particularistic. Conversely, broad-based petitions are targeted to a national interest or a large subset of the population. Of the serious petitions, 50% were particularistic.

After classifying petitions as broad-based and particularistic, we finally subset the broad-based petitions into redistributive and non-redistributive groups. Redistributive-oriented petitions could be about taxes or about government services. Government benefits like healthcare subsidies, public education, social security, and food stamps are redistributive.

We refer to non-redistributive petitions as “post-materialist.” Issues concerning sexual

behavior, recreational drugs, firearms, as well as issues ranging from redistricting to cell phone regulations to puppy mills falls into the post-materialist framework.

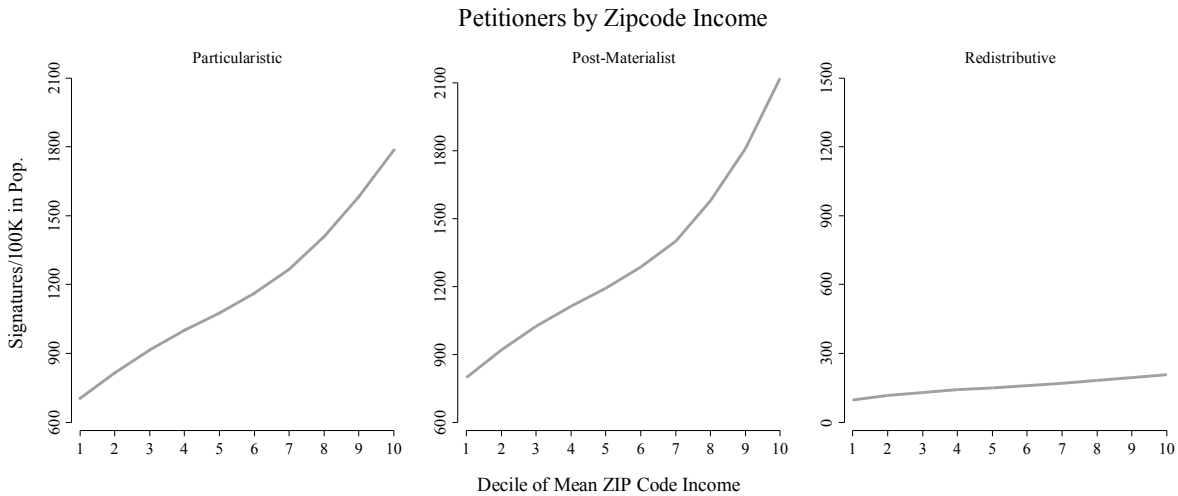
The upshot of our classification is that only 5% of the policy-oriented petitions concern redistributive policy. Combining all redistributive policies from paid leave to health care to funding school libraries only amounts to a small fraction of policy inputs into the White House’s petition program.

Why is so little attention paid to redistributive policy? Scholars like Gilens (2012) have argued that public policy is broadly not responsive to the poor because of wealthy elites who control the agenda. But here, in this very open platform, there is almost no attention paid to redistributive policies either. One reason for this is that narrow policies are easier for people to get their heads around and to support. We see this in many realms of politics, from ballot measures (Glaser 2002) to processing of episodic versus thematic frames (Aarøe 2011; Iyengar 1991).

A second reason is that while petition platforms are far more egalitarian than traditional forms of policy engagement, the kinds of people who end up signing petitions tend to be middle class professionals (Levine 2015). This cohort has less at stake in policy and tends to support post-materialist policies rather than redistributive ones.

Consider Figure 2. Here, I utilize the zip code of each petitioner who signed a White House petition (the lowest-level geographic aggregation offered by the White House API) to measure the rate of petitioning by income-level of a zipcode, subset by the policy focus of the petition. Note that all three subplots in Figure 2 are on the same scale, but the third plot is shifted down to accommodate the data. For the redistributive petitions, the highest-income zipcodes are twice as likely to sign a petition as the poorest zipcodes. But for the post-materialist petitions, the highest-income zipcodes are almost three times as likely to sign a petition compared to the lowest-earning zipcodes. In other words, individuals from richer neighborhoods are more likely than those from poorer neighborhoods to sign petitions

Figure 2: Petition Support, by Zip Code Income and Category of Petition



Source: [See Appendix]

in general, but their enthusiasm for petitions appears highest when the issues are unrelated to redistribution.

MoveOn and CREDO, two liberal organizations that circulate petitions, exhibit the same phenomenon as White House petitions. Redistributive issues compose a minority of their popular petitions. Issues like protecting whales and dolphins, food policy, and funding for NPR and PBS dominate the petitions [redacted].

The lesson from this example is that policy activism in the setting of online petitions has a distinctly low-stakes accent. This is a setting where the only formal barrier to entry is an Internet connection, and yet the policy agenda that forms is dominated by particularistic initiatives and post-materialist preferences. As a class of activists, online petitioners seem to be acting as hobbyists. It is unlikely that civic duty, the common good, or self-interest motivates them to collectively prioritize this way online. As with many other forms of online activity, this is a consumption activity.

To broaden the example to online behavior in general, Berry and Sobieraj (2014) find that niche political media consumers are often motivated by a desire for “a risk-free option

for political companionship (131).” When citizens tune into partisan news media or engage in partisan online communities, they find safe spaces where they feel they are morally right and politically informed, and where they make social connections as if they are in a special club. This kind of behavior is hard to characterize as motivated by anything other than hobbyism.

3.4 Elite Campaign Contributors

Scholars studying the role of money in politics have long expressed interest in the motivations of donors. Donors may be motivated by economic self-interest, ideological affinity with a candidate, or to show support for their political party (Barber, Canes-Wrone and Thrower 2016; Barber 2016; Hill and Huber 2017; Ansolabehere, De Figueiredo and Snyder 2003).

The basic findings about individual donor behavior are inconsistent with an economic self-interest story. Only a small fraction of donors (2% in 2016) give to both parties. Most money comes from individuals rather than political action committees. The presidency generates by far the most enthusiasm among donors, even though the marginal contribution is likely to be more meaningful for lower-tiered races.²⁸ Donors are certainly motivated to support their party, but the evidence is not particularly strong that donors sort ideologically to candidates within party (Hill and Huber 2017; Barber, Canes-Wrone and Thrower 2016).

Perhaps wealthy donors are more attracted to contributing for pleasure: to attend cocktail parties, rub elbows with politicians and other wealthy people, and to be part of the sport.²⁹ Campaign fundraising, with its emphasis on events and donor contact, is time-inefficient for

²⁸Donor Demographics. Open Secrets, Center of Responsive Politics, Accessed March 16, 2016, <https://www.opensecrets.org/bigpicture/donordemographics.php?cycle=2016>

²⁹This is a more specific hypothesis than offered by Ansolabehere, De Figueiredo and Snyder (2003), who incorporate notions of civic duty into their claim that contributing is a consumption activity.

politicians. If donors were interested in an ideological or self-interested agenda, they might reasonably want donations to be transactional, with policymakers spending less time talking to them and more time getting things done. But the opposite is true.

To explore the hobbyist motivation of donors in more detail, I, along with [redacted], conducted an original survey of donors. The study differs from other recent studies in that a.) we primarily surveyed donors who gave the maximum of \$2,700 to a candidate, and b.) we asked the donor about the circumstances of one specific contribution to encourage them to think concretely about a specific experience rather than just their general perspective. The sample was stratified by level of office (House, Senate, Presidency), and, for Congressional races, by incumbency status. The study offered no incentives for participation and achieved a response rate of 17%. The sample of max-out donors consisted of 678 respondents (we also sampled donors at the \$200-500 level).

The survey asked donors directly about self-interest (the majority claimed they were not motivated by self interest), but to gauge motivations in more subtle ways, the survey posed a couple of useful hypothetical scenarios, which I will describe here. Donors were asked if they would donate to a candidate with whom they are personally close, but who lost their election and needs money to retire their campaign debts. Notice in this scenario that there is no self-interested reason or policy reason to make this donation. After all, the candidate lost. And yet, 61% (N= 648) of max-out donors say they would make this donation.

Of course, donors might help a politician pay down campaign debts because they hold a general value that they ought to support their party. Indeed, a donor might contribute to a candidate who is nearly certain to win or lose, not in attempt to instrumentally affect the outcome or voice concern about an issue, but for the sake of generic party boosting (Hill and Huber 2017).

Depending how it is construed, party boosting is different from pure hobbyism. Party boosting is not just cheering for a team, but doing one's part to support the institution of

a party in a general way. To distinguish party boosting from pure hobbyism, the survey contained a simple pair of questions, randomized to two groups of respondents. Half of the sample was asked if they would be likely to pay \$1,000 to their political party to be able to attend an intimate dinner with a prominent elected leader. The other half of the sample was asked if they would be likely to pay a \$1,000 *fee to an event planning company* to attend the dinner.

In the first scenario, a donor gets the consumption benefit of the dinner with a politician along with the party-boosting benefit of supporting their party. In the second scenario, the contributor gets the dinner but there's no party benefit. Forty-nine percent of donors in the first condition said they were somewhat or very likely to contribute when the money went to the party. In the second condition, when the money went to an event planning company, still 38% of donors would pay the fee. While lower than the first scenario, this is still a remarkable share of donors who would pay to socialize with politicians even if the money did not advance a candidate's or party's cause. This is a purer form of hobbyism.³⁰

3.5 Partisanship

The nature of partisanship in the U.S., or at least our understanding of it, has changed in the last 60 years. Consider that in 1964, when the presidential election featured a sharp ideological contrast between President Johnson and Senator Barry Goldwater, 65% of NES

³⁰A party-booster would not want to pay a fee to a company for a dinner, but perhaps a self-interested donor would do so. Maybe the dinner would present a chance to talk policy even if it was not a vehicle for financial support. But there is little evidence for this hypothesis. For one, the responses to the two questions are nearly identical (48% for party-boosting, 35% for the event fee) among retirees (N= 189) who do not have an obvious business interest in an intimate dinner. Furthermore, a self-interested donor would see the transaction of funds as the carrot for policy influence. Without the campaign contribution, why would the politician pay special consideration to the donor's view?

respondents said they cared who won and 55% said they saw an important difference between what the parties stand for. Compare this to 2012, where the differences in policy and disposition between President Obama and Mitt Romney were unambiguously less stark than Johnson and Goldwater. But in 2012, 81% of respondents cared who won and 81% saw a important difference between the parties.³¹

Seemingly more than ever, people feel strong emotions about the other party. Among highly engaged partisans, most say the other party makes them afraid.³² In a 2012 study, Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes (2012) find that 27% of Republicans and 20% of Democrats would be upset if their child married someone of the other party. This compares to research from 1960 showing about 5% of partisans affirmed this position (see also Lelkes (2016)). Arguably, political scientists now mostly understand partisanship as a form of social identity (Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2002; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Huddy, Mason and Aaroe 2015; Theodoridis 2016). 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.

But Green, Palmquist and Schickler (2002) argue that while partisan attachments are similar to sports allegiances, they seem to run deeper. Even though partisan attachments are only loosely connected to policy, the authors suggest that the stakes are higher in elections than a sports contest and this affects how people engage these allegiances. As Green, Palmquist and Schickler (2002) write, "Small wonder that polite conversation admit sports talk but excludes politics."

While partisanship may operate at an emotional level, there is a question of how much substance it has to it. Is it like a sports affinity or is it really something deeper? For many

³¹See ANES cross-tabs available at http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/toptable/tab6d_7.htm and http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/toptable/tab2b_4.htm.

³²Pew Research Center, "Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016." June 2016.

citizens, rahing and booing a party may simply be a form of posturing and a way to plug into a competition. Consider research suggesting that affiliating or not with a party is a form of managing one's image (Klar and Krupnikov 2016), that some amount of polarization is "false polarization" (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016), and that partisan motivated reasoning operates in the context of sports just as it operates in politics (Carey et al. 2016).

Building on this line of research, I ran a Survey Monkey poll of 1,071 Americans in July 2016, designed to be representative of individuals in the northeast (from Maine to Pennsylvania). I asked the interparty marriage question, as utilized recently by Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes (2012), to gauge whether individuals would be upset if their children married someone of the opposite party.

But I also asked something else. In this sample of northeasterners, I solicited whether they have a favorite baseball team. Fifty-seven percent claimed to be fans of the Red Sox, Yankees, Mets, or Phillies. Another 11% were fans of another team, and the remainder of the sample said they were not fans of baseball. I then posed the marriage question geared to baseball allegiances. Would Red Sox fans be upset if their child married a Yankees fan (and vice versa)? Would Mets fans be upset if their child married Phillies fans (and vice versa)? Bear in mind that when this survey was fielded, the baseball season was in its sleepy midpoint and these traditional rivals had stiffer competition in their divisions than one another.

Even so, 17, 18, 20, and 20% of Red Sox, Yankees, Phillies, and Mets fans, respectively, said they would be upset about their child marrying a rival team supporter. This rate is about 4 times higher than individuals expressed about political allegiances in 1960.

For comparison, I asked the sample the political marriage question as well (and I randomized whether they saw the sports question first or the politics question first). In July 2016, politics, unlike baseball, was at an intense moment given the emergence of Donald Trump as Republican nominee for President. In this sample of northeasters, 19% of Republicans affirmed they would be upset about their son or daughter marrying a Democrat - that's the

same rate as in the sports questions. A greater share of Democrats in the northeast (32%) affirmed they would be upset about a Republican marriage.

In sum, the rate at which people affirm in a survey they would be upset about an inter-team marriage is not much different than the rate at which they affirm disappointment with inter-party marriage. One interpretation of this is that many people take sports very seriously. A better interpretation is that in both cases of sports and politics, these survey respondents are offering a lot of hot air. For all the ink spilled about partisan animosities, it isn't clear that politics is particularly special in encouraging emotional connections to teams. Many people who are engaged in hobbies are drawn to competition (Pack 1934). They take pleasure in activities where there are winners and losers. It is just that political scientists, focused as they are on politics, rarely stop to anchor partisan effects (and the theories that generate them) to parallel non-political phenomena.

What changed with partisanship from 1964 to 2012 is not that the stakes got higher. They did not. But Americans *feel* differently about partisanship. At issue in the scholarship is how much substance there is underlying those feelings. Given historical trends discussed above about the ways people spend free time, the opportunities they have to learn and participate as a result of a changed media environment and populist reforms, and a lower level of perceived threat, one theory of partisanship is this: the feelings and emotions are strong because people, in recent years, have been engaging in a hobby that features competition as its central focal point. It's not that partisans actually hate each other, but rather that they permit themselves to play a role in a game. And the less that partisans interact with people on the other side, the easier and more fun it is to keep up the act.

4 Discussion

The brief and broad empirical overview suggests several key insights. First, much of the existing literature focused on who participates in politics can be placed within a broader theory of participation in leisure activities. Interest in politics, like interest in other hobbies, is explained by mechanisms like socialization, taste, and free time. Second, the failure to participate in an activity that is often touted as motivated by duty (i.e. voting) does not seem to generate feelings of shame. People lie about voting, but the lying can be a form of image management that has little to do with failing to perform a civic duty.

Third, I have shown evidence that self-reported participation in activities is highly correlated with activities that citizens consider enjoyable. In behaviors that are actually motivated by duty or self-interest, this relationship typically does not exist. For example, the rate at which parents change diapers likely bears little relationship to their enjoyment of doing this activity that they feel is their parental duty.

Fourth, I have shown in several instances, including policy activism organized by President Obama, online petition-signing, campaign contributing, even partisan emoting, that many forms of participation taken in the US make less sense under models of self-interest, duty, or policy influence, and are more aptly described as examples of political hobbyism.

These empirical findings are just a beginning. While I have offered some original estimates, we do not yet know in more concrete terms the relative weight of hobbyism versus duty versus interest as they exist within individuals or communities, or how the weights change over time.

In this introductory statement that is mostly focused on theory rather than empirics, 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, they may fail to perform acts that are important but not gratifying. They may focus more on partisan competition than is useful for the public good. And for lack of civic-mindedness, perhaps they will have trouble invoking duty when political stakes suddenly rise.

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