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movements participation

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Determinants of Social Movements Participation

Determinantes de la participación en los movimientos sociales

Determinantes da participação nos movimentos sociais

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Abstract

The participation in Social Movements has been extensively studied from different disciplines such as Sociology, Community Psychology and Political science which suggests that there are many factors that influence the decision of an individual to participate or not in a social movement. In this paper I will start presenting how is the process of decision making about participating in a social movement. Then, I will show the role played by individual characteristics, social structures, and political and economic contexts in the decision to participate and I will finalize with the conclusions.

The Process of Decision-Making of participating in Social Movements

The decision-making to participate or not in a social movement has been analyzed by the different scholars who have studied this topic, as a rational process in which the decision to participate or not depends on a cost-benefit analysis, in other words the participants analyze if their participation allows them to achieve their purposes but additionally take into account the risks associated to belong to a certain movement and the costs in terms of the resources invested in their participation of the mobilization activities (Klandermans and Oegema, 1987).

One of the key elements in the rational decision to participate or not in a social movement are the grievances which are associated with feelings of frustration that individuals experience when they perceive that their personal situation is at a disadvantage in comparison with a situation in the past or with their

notion of justice and equity (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013).

According to Opp (1988), grievances matter as much for participation in the different social movements, however the mechanism through grievances are translated into participation is complex because although they are experienced at the individual level, they are a social construction that originates in the interaction of the individual with the others, that is, the referent that each one has of what is just or unjust or of what it deserves or not depends on the interactions with other actors in society (Grasso and Giugni 2016), then the participation will depend of social networks and the social context to which the individual belongs.

Another complexity in the analysis of grievances as fuel of participation, is the type of emotions that they can trigger, because not necessarily in all cases they motive

action and even in certain circumstances they slow down the participation. According to Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2013) when the individuals experience fear, shame and despair they are less likely to participate in mobilization while when they experience anger, it can encourage them to take action and therefore to participate in a social movement.

From the above it can be said that grievances do not always cause participation and consequently they do not explain by themselves the participation in a social movement, this rational decision depends to a large extent on the availability of resources to which the individual has access and the presence of opportunities.

Resources refers to individual characteristics and the social structures in which individual is embedded, meanwhile the opportunities are given by the

political and economic context in which individual develops. Taking into account that there are costs in terms of time, financial resources and safety, associated to the participation in social movements, those individuals who lack resources and opportunities will hardly participate and will do so only to the extent that the potential benefits — in this case relieve their grievances — that would be obtained from belonging to and participating in a social movement exceed the costs of participating (Klandermans, Van Stekelenburg and Van der Toorn, 2008). Furthermore, those who have resources will decide not to participate if they perceive that they can receive the same benefits, whether they participate or not, what is known as the “free rider” problem (Cohn, Barkan and Halteman 2003).

Next I will describe how the different resources, opportunities and their interaction define the participation of the individuals in social movements.

Individual characteristics

Undoubtedly the individual characteristics play a fundamental role at the time of analyzing the participation in social movements. Factors such as political ideology, culture, financial and human capital and biographical aspects directly affect participation in social movements.

In general, individuals with a sympathetic ideological orientation will have more probabilities of participating. In specific terms of political ideology, Corrigan-Brown (2013) found that people who identifies with the right participate less in mobilizations, however this is a variable that depends largely of the social contexts and therefore it can change on time depending to the ideological trend of the moment, for example it is possible that currently that the right is rising and dominating around the world, people with this ideology may feel more motivated to participate than those of liberal ideology.

On the other hand, cultural elements are key to understand the patterns and trajectories of participation because they are strongly related to the individual characteristics and to the social interaction that individuals perform within social movements. Cultural practices such as prayer meetings, rallies, rituals among others have a high impact on values, beliefs and emotional commitments and it in turn affect participation in social movements (Cohn, Barkan and Halteman, 2003).

In the specific case of religiosity, it is strongly associated to activism insofar as it encourages the search for the common good and collective action. Notwithstanding the way in which the different religious denominations impact participation depends on the context and what is the issue that motivates the mobilization, empirical evidence shows that Catholics are more likely to participate than Protestants

(Corrigal- Brown 2013; Beyerlein, Sikkink, and Hernandez 2018).

Regarding financial and human capital, it has been found that income can be a determinant of participation, but when other variables such as gender and race are included in the analysis, this variable loses significance as a predictor of participation (Corrigal-Brown 2013).

In the case of education although at first glance it would be expected that people with higher education are the ones who participate the most due to their skills and greater understanding of the problems, the empirical results are also ambiguous. In this way, Corrigal-Brown (2013) in a longitudinal study with a sample of high school seniors, found that education has a positive relationship with participation, in contrast Cunningham (2013) in his research about the rise of Ku Klux Klan movement in North Carolina found that the grass roots of this movement was composed mostly by people of low academic level, therefore education will depend on

the nature of the movement.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, I believe that as society advances, that social problems deepen and that technology has allowed social movements to implement it to spread its message and attract its participants, those with more education and more skills are the ones that will have the greatest possibility of participating.

On the other hand, biographical aspects like gender, age, race, marital status also define participation in social movements.

In this way, women are more likely to participate than men probably by the degree of commitment that can come to have and by the role that they play in the activities of the organizations (Corrigal –Brown 2013 and McAdam 1992). Likewise, single and younger people are more likely to participate (Corrigal Brown 2013 and Cohn et al. 2003) because they have more time to attend the movement’s activities. Meanwhile, to have children and work have a positive relationship with

participation (Corrigan-Brown 2013 and Cunningham 2013) which can be explained due to the fact that parents can be more concern with different issues that can affect their children's wellbeing and because workers can have more ties and social networks that in turn can facilitate their participation.

Regarding race, in the case of United States the results presented by Corrigan-Brown (2013) show that whites are less likely to participate than other races.

Although individual characteristics are important to

Social structures

Social networks are important because through them social ties are woven, identities are created and individuals become embedded within the social movement to which they belong. The way in which social networks determine social movement participation is differential and depends to a large extent on how this

identify profiles of participation it is important to include the analysis of social structures like social organizations and social networks because as previously mentioned, the way in which the individual perceives the grievances depends on them, through these structures the individual can empower or access the resources that make possible their involvement in social movements and because the higher the costs and risks associated with mobilization, the stronger and more numerous the ties required to participate (Diani 2004).

sphere of each person's life is integrated with other spheres of their life such as family, studies, work, friends, religious and political engagement.

The greater the integration with the other life's spheres, the greater the probability of participation and

the greater the commitment to the organization (Passy and Giugni 2000). The mechanisms through which social networks sensitize and motivate people to participate and connect them with organizations are associated with the dissemination of information about opportunities for participation, creation and reproduction of solidarity and exchange of social approval, rewards and sanctions (Diani 2004; Passy and Monsch 2014).

Overall, even though social networks are an important element, its effectiveness as a determinant of participation depends on its characteristics and the types of mobilizations. In this way, while private networks like friends or family are important when the message of a movement is well accepted in the environments in which prospective participants develop, networks embedded in political or radical organizations are more relevant when the message has more resistance in the context in which prospective participants live (Diani 2004).

Likewise, social networks definitely will have a key role if the type of mobilization involves more risks for the participants, while in a less risky activism, the role of social networks will be less determinant (Passy and Giugni 2000).

The other social structure that determines the participation in social movements are organizations because it is through them that individual grievances become collective grievances and therefore they become the vehicle to develop collective action. There are different elements related to the organizations that determine participation at individual level.

A first element is related to the degree of hierarchy. In general, the more hierarchies exist and the more centralized the decision-making, the individuals belonging to this type of organization will feel less incentives and less motivation for participation, while more horizontal organizational structures encourage participation and reaffirm the feeling of commitment and belonging of

individuals with their social movement since these settings favor the development of interpersonal relationships (Christens and Speer 2011; Corrigan-Brown 2013; Tesdahl and Speer 2015).

The second element is associated to identity. According to Corrigan- Brown (2013) when the individuals participate in a social movement they can develop three types of identities: activist, organizational and identity based in values. The activist identity is not directly linked to the organization as such, but to the personal history of the individual and their experiences in activism, those individuals who identify themselves as activists are more likely to participate and to persist in this activity through time. Meanwhile, the organizational identity and identity based on values depends on whether the organization focuses

on one or several issues and how they connect with each other. In multi issue organizations identity is generated around values and their members are more likely to transfer to another organization, whereas in the case of single issue organizations, the identity is generated around the organization and participants in these movements are less likely to transfer to another organization (Corrigan-Brown, 2013).

The third element are the frames and strategies that the organization offers to attract more members. Individuals will be more likely to participate in those organizations that provide frames that are highly related to their ideologies and own frames, and in those whose strategies are based more on collective than on individual and hierarchical work (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013).

Political and Economic Context

The third element that define the participation in social movements is the political and economic context. This is important because it is there where the opportunities of collective action of the organizations are generated and therefore it is constituted in the framework in which the individuals participate. The political context is associated to political system, structure of the state and the degree of territorial decentralization.

In general, democratic countries facilitate participation while in autocratic countries or dictatorships there will be more fear among the population to participate in mobilization, however not in all democracies the levels of participation are high. In a comparative study of 25 democratic nations, Vrábliková (2013) found that the opportunities to participate will be generated in countries with high levels of territorial and administrative decentralization and where the

regions have a higher level of autonomy. She also found that in those countries where there is a variety of political parties the participation of citizens in mobilizations is less since in these contexts the scope and action of social networks is more limited in comparison to bipartisan countries where ideologies and Identity are more defined and therefore social networks and organizations have a greater impact on mobilization.

Regarding the economic context, Grasso and Giugni (2016) argue that the macroeconomic context has a high impact in the way that individuals perceive deprivation. In those countries with high levels of social expenditures, the social problems like poverty and inequality are they are understood as political problems and therefore the citizens participate more actively because they have greater certainty that their requests will be heard and that therefore solutions will be given.

In contrast, in those countries with a neoliberal tendency with low participation of the state as a supplier of goods and services, individuals are less incentivized to participate because in these contexts, individual action takes precedence over collective action. These authors have

also found that in countries with low levels of GDP and high unemployment rates, the participation is greater since the grievances and deprivation are amplified in these contexts and therefore the political opportunity for mobilization is created.

Conclusions

Participation in social movements is determined by many factors that define the way people make their decisions to participate or not and how they participate. The decision to participate is mediated by the way in which grievances are perceived by the individual, for the costs associated to the participation, the availability of resources and the benefits that are expected to be obtained. To the extent that individuals perceive that their participation will be effective and have resources to participate, there will be a greater probability that they will participate.

Resources can be individual or collective. Among the individual resources, the empirical evidence has shown that people with clearly defined political and religious ideologies participate more. Likewise, the youth, people with higher levels of education, single, workers and people with children also have higher levels of participation. Regarding collective resources these are important because they affect the way people perceive grievances and because through them people build ties with others, share values and develop identities that define the way they participate.

Finally, the political and economic context is relevant because it defines the opportunities for social mobilization. Countries that exhibit high levels of decentralization and low variety of political parties offer greater political opportunity and in them social networks have a greater impact on individual decision. Similarly, socialist countries with high levels of social spending provide more political opportunities for

mobilization since these contexts are amplified and individuals rely on collective action as a mechanism for their claims to be addressed.

Although, as mentioned at the beginning of the paper, there is a wide literature on this topic, very little research has been done on how all these elements interact and towards this objective I believe that future research should be focused.

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