Speaking of Participation: A Qualitative Research Note

Michael S. Evans

Abstract
While participation in public life is generally agreed to be important for governance and citizenship, scholars focused on talk-oriented participation (in the Tocquevillian tradition) suggest that there is a participation deficit in the American public sphere. Qualitative analysis of responses from 60 interview respondents about whether or not they are participants in four prominent American debates suggests a novel explanation for this apparent deficit: Persons whom analysts classify as non-participants may believe that they are already participating, because their understanding of participation is not based on public political talk. Moreover, individual responses about participation vary substantially by debate, suggesting that what counts as participation is more fluid for respondents than for analysts. Implications for public sphere studies are discussed.

Keywords
participation, individual, opinion, public sphere, civil society

Background
Concerns about participation in public life have long been central to sociology. In Democracy in America, Alexis de Tocqueville (1847) remarked that

almost the only pleasure of which an American has any idea, is to take a part in the government, and to discuss the part he has taken . . . if an American were condemned to confine his activity to his own affairs, he would be robbed of one half of his existence. (pp. 271-272)

Tocqueville did not use the term public sphere, but his description of American civic life anticipated the more recent formulation of the public sphere as “a common space in which the members of society are deemed to meet through a variety of media . . . to discuss matters of common interest; and thus to be able to form a common mind about these” (Taylor, 2004, p. 83). For Tocqueville, as for many scholars of democracy since, participation in the common space of the public sphere through public political talk is a crucial part of self-governance, citizenship, and the formation of political will (Dahl, 1989; Dewey, 1927; Habermas, 1989; Turner, 1990).

Yet recent influential social science research documents a serious participation deficit in American public life. Robert Putnam (2000) suggests that the rich associational life that characterized the America of Tocqueville’s time has unraveled, loosening the social connections that support the public sphere. As a recent Contexts article put it, “The ties that bind are fraying” (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2008). Similarly, Fung and Wright (2001) claim that efforts to shrink the “affirmative state” have constrained representative institutions and limited opportunities for egalitarian participation in public life. And Lichterman (2005) shows how existing civic organizations (such as church groups) sometimes limit, rather than enable, participation in the public sphere.

The Tocquevillian concern about a general participation deficit is reinforced by studies focusing on how persons engage (or not) in public political talk. Eliasoph (1998) shows that even persons who are already members of civic organizations nevertheless actively practice “avoiding politics.” Overwhelmed by the scale of political problems, and discouraged by the confrontation and division on display in public debate, members avoid “political” talk to preserve “civic etiquette” in their associational groups. Similarly, Mutz (2006) finds that participation decreases when exposure to alternative political perspectives increases, as people solve the problem of “mixed political company” by avoiding confrontation altogether. Americans seem to respond to problems of public debate by “producing apathy” and moving political talk to private life (Eliasoph, 1998).

At the same time, a growing interdisciplinary literature in empirical public sphere studies suggests that the Tocquevillian concern may be misplaced. In contrast to the Tocquevillian account, which treats participation universally as public talk...
about political issues, the alternative account suggests that there is no standard set of activities called “participation” that people do (or not). To take a recent example, Perrin (2006) includes “thinking and talking” as “citizenship activities” along with “voting, running for office, demonstrating, or signing petitions” (p. 19). But, obviously, sometimes “thinking and talking” are not actually “citizenship activities.” Rather, thinking and talking, like many of the things that people already do, are variably directed toward political ends (see, for example, O’Neill, 2010). Likewise, the different activities in which people engage are variably public (e.g., “talking politics,” see Gamson, 1992). And in practice, activities of all sorts are variably treated as “participation” by social scientists, by political elites, and by the alleged participants themselves (Cody, 2011; Evans, 2009; Perrin & McFarland, 2011; Waldner & Dobratz, 2013). From this perspective, there cannot be an overarching participation deficit, because there is no consistent version of “participation” to be evaluated across all cases.

These two positions on participation seem irreconcilable. For the Tocquevillians, increasing “participation” in the form of public political talk is important for creating durable trust relations that extend into other domains and foster development of valuable social capital in communities (Putnam, 2000). But if “participation” describes a contingent and variable configuration of activities, conditions, and descriptions that reflect relations of power in a particular time and place, then efforts toward increasing public political talk may reinforce existing inequalities of access and power (Fraser, 1990; Mouffe, 1999), provide opportunities for private interests to capture the processes of public political talk for their own purposes (Lee, 2007; Lee & Romano, 2013; Walker, 2014), and ignore possibilities to foster democracy as it is actually practiced by citizens (Perrin, 2006).

This tension between competing ideas about participation raises two basic questions for sociologists of the empirical public sphere. First, how can empirical studies of the public sphere distinguish some configurations of politics, publics, and activities as “participation” and not others? Second, and importantly for the historical foundations of sociology, how does a more complicated understanding of participation connect to classic Tocquevillian concerns about declining public political talk, if at all?

Rather than attempt to answer these questions through theoretical elaboration, this research note instead examines first-person accounts from actual American persons speaking about participation. In a recent study of public debates over stem cell research, human origins, environmental policy, and the origins of sexuality, 60 respondents answered questions about whether or not they saw themselves as participants in each debate. The majority describe participation in terms consistent with the talk-oriented participation reported by Tocqueville. Many respondents saw themselves as conventional participants (e.g., arguing in discussion groups). And many respondents did not see themselves as participants, describing how they “produce apathy” (e.g., by avoiding political talk at church, see Eliasoph, 1998).

But a distinct alternative version of “participation” emerged as respondents spoke of participation in terms of whatever activities they were already doing (e.g., recycling), even though such activities are inconsistent with the talk-oriented participation described in other categories of responses. Notably, however, this version of participation only surfaced for some issues, and not for others, even for the same respondents, suggesting that what counts as participation is issue-specific, rather than universal or even respondent-specific.

These empirical findings, though limited in scope, suggest a way forward in reconciling the two approaches. Existing public debate sets boundaries around which activities count as participation for each issue, with different issues producing different configurations of legitimate participation. But sociological understandings of conventional participation and “producing apathy” are useful for evaluating participation on particular issues, therein there is general agreement among actors about what counts as participation. In the concluding discussion, I consider the implications of these insights for future research.

**Method**

**Data Collection**

The data for this research note come from a larger research project comparing “ordinary” understandings of public debate with the actual behavior of elected officials and other prominent media figures over four issues where religion and science are both involved: human origins, environmental policy, stem cell research, and the origins of sexuality. These issues were selected in advance not only because of their religion and science content but also because they have significant public policy implications (unlike, for example, debates over the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ). Beyond these common features, the four issues vary in many respects, and would be expected to have varying personal significance to different respondents depending on their life experiences, interests, and preferences.

To collect data on what “ordinary” persons think about these debates, I conducted multipart, semi-structured interviews with 62 individual respondents across two different locations in the United States (see sample description below). As part of these interviews, I asked a series of open-ended questions to verify that respondents were not elected officials or media figures, as including such non-ordinary persons would confound the comparison. I began discussion of each issue with a set of open-ended questions asking respondents to describe the debate for me as they understood it, and as they discussed it with other people (see Table 1). I then asked, “Do you see yourself as participating in this debate?” Asking such open-ended questions allowed respondents to
express their own understanding of debate and how they might, or might not, be participating (see Luker, 2008; Martin, 2011). Those responses provide the data for this research note.

Given the consistent finding in the existing literature that there is an apparent participation deficit in American public life, I initially expected that most responses to the question “Do you see yourself as participating in this debate?” would be “No.” But from the earliest interviews, it became clear that respondents actually often saw themselves as participants in various public debates, though in different ways and for different reasons. I recorded the surprising initial responses in field notes as an interesting theme for later analysis, but left the interview schedule unchanged to maximize comparisons across all interviews. Interviews ranged in total length from 49 min to just over 2 hr, though the amount of time spent on individual components of each interview varied substantially. All interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed.

Data Analysis

After completing interviews with all respondents in the sample, I counted a total of 187 valid responses to the participation question. In two interviews, the word “participating” was not used, due to interviewer error, so I omitted those respondents from this analysis. The number of responses (187) greatly exceeds the number of respondents (60) because respondents could (and often did) answer the question for multiple issues in each interview. However, not every respondent answered questions about every issue, so the number of responses is less than the theoretical maximum.

Of the 187 valid responses, 98 responses (52%) were positive. Contrary to what reports of participation deficit might predict, in a (slight) majority of instances, respondents saw themselves as participants in public debates. I returned to the transcripts to understand how respondents saw themselves as participants (or not) in public debate. Using generally accepted methods of open and axial coding (see Babbie, 1998), I manually analyzed the open-ended responses from interview transcripts to identify important categories across respondent answers and to expose the conceptual relationships that underpin those categories.

Table 1. Opening Interview Question Sequence For Each Debate.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 | Can you briefly describe the . . . debate as you see it? |
| 2 | Where did you learn about . . . ? Can you be specific? |
| 3 | Do you talk to other people about . . . Who? |
| 4 | When is the last time you talked to other people about . . . ? |
| 5 | Does . . . matter (to you)? |
| 6 | Do you see yourself as participating in the debate over . . . ? |

Results

Respondents were recruited using a snowball approach seeded with convenient contacts in purposive target groups. With the limited target size of the sample (approximately 60 respondents), the goal was not to achieve statistical representativeness, as a random sample might not actually capture enough different cases to derive useful theoretical insight. Instead, I sought to maximize range (Weiss, 1994). Because of the religion and science content of the selected debates, I formally enforced heterogeneity of religious affiliation and occupation, but the sample also ranged usefully in other categories.

Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 79 years (average 40). The sample (with invalid respondents omitted) included 33 women and 27 men. In all, 75% of respondents came from a Southern California city of more than 1.5 million residents that is known for high-tech industries and military presence. The remaining 25% came from a South Florida city of fewer than 200,000 residents that is primarily known as a tourism and retirement destination. The overall ratio of White to non-White respondents (about 3 to 1) approximately matched that of the U.S. general population, though non-White racial/ethnic composition varied by site. All respondents had completed high school, though postsecondary education ranged from none to PhD, with most respondents having taken at least some college courses and a majority having earned AA/AS or BA/BS degrees. In short, though the sample is not intended to be generalizable, it resembles the U.S. general population along many dimensions (but not education). Nevertheless, this is a qualitative analysis, and I do not attempt general quantitative inferences in what follows.
Three qualitative categories emerged as distinct combinations of responses. Responses in each category share a distinct configuration of ideas about debate, activity, and participation. Note that these are not simply linguistic distinctions over the meaning of the word “participation,” but broader categories that encompass understandings of participation, debate, and activity for specific issues in the public sphere. I call these three categories “conventional participation,” “producing apathy,” and “personal participation.”

While responses in the first two categories are consistent with the Tocquevillian understanding of participation as public political talk, responses in the third category are not, because they describe participation as not public, not political, or, most commonly, not talk. Moreover, while responses fit into these three categories, respondents themselves did not. Approximately 75% of respondents who answered questions for multiple issues actually switched from one qualitative response category into another depending on the issue. In relating these findings below, I use pseudonyms to facilitate reporting, but this should not be taken to mean that a respondent only returned responses in the category in which they are quoted.

Conventional Participation

The first category of responses combines the elements of Tocqueville’s civic ideal. Responses in this category usually describe debate as interactive, ranging in setting from small discussion groups to electoral politics, and sometimes conflictual. Relevant activities typically include holding and giving opinions, especially in small-group settings, as well as several varieties of activism, such as raising and donating money, voting, and advocating for causes. Importantly, all responses in this category contain a “yes” reply to the participation question. Arthur typifies this category in his answer about participation in human origins debate:

I have been voting liberal for quite a long time, but I still joined the Rebuild the Party group and wanted to contribute my ideas. They were just collecting all kinds of ideas for what is wrong with the Republicans. And so I did go online and I did participate in those debates. You know, by participate I mean, I added comments to the issues that I had something to say on. And yes, I basically did tell them like, “Look, drop the young earth creationists.”

Responses in this category usually involve advocating actively, generating conversations, and otherwise seeking out ways to form and shape opinions about public issues. For example, Lewis said, “I’ve been in the discussion groups that we have [at church] because I’m definitely in favor of stem cell research and I know people that would seriously benefit.” Tamara talked about how she just completed a research project designed to present her position on the origins of sexuality, and also recently “went to the AIDS Walk” and “talked to all sorts of people about [sexuality].” Josefina “contribute[s] $10.00 a week to Human Rights [Campaign, an advocacy group] just because I believe it’s a human rights issue in the way people are treated.” In short, conventional participation means actively contributing to public discussion of political issues, through a variety of means and in a variety of public settings.

Producing Apathy

A second category of responses is consistent with Eliasoph’s (1998) findings about “civic etiquette” (see also Mutz, 2006). Responses in this category often describe debate as interactive, occurring in a variety of settings, and largely conflictual. Respondents discuss taking part in a variety of social activities, such as chatting with friends, family, and coworkers, and they often belong to civic groups. However, respondents do not understand this activity to be participation. When discussing participation explicitly, respondents downplay social activities or talk about individual activities instead, such as “considering issues,” “listening,” or “having an opinion.” This category is characterized by the deliberate avoidance of public debate. All responses in this category contain a “no” reply to the participation question.

Responses in this category especially emphasize avoidance of the confrontation and conflict that is seen to characterize debate. Penny, for example, describes how she has “kind of resigned from the debating society.” Similarly, Morgane says that she is “kind of a weenie” and avoids confrontation. Morris emphasizes that he is “not a crusader.”

This work of “producing apathy” (Eliasoph, 1998) continues even when respondents recognize that participation might be seen as desirable. As Phoebe put it, “I am so uninvolved. It’s horrible.” Yet responses consistently indicate that the benefits of avoiding debate outweigh the benefits of participation. Oscar sums it up as “You know, no. I’m a live and let live guy.” In short, producing apathy means recognizing participation as public political talk, but consciously and actively not participating, and instead retreating from conflictual public debate, even when otherwise involved in civic or social activities.
**Personal Participation**

While the previous two categories account for a majority of responses, analysis also revealed a surprising third category of participation that is distinct from public political talk. Much like the previous two categories, responses in this category described debate as public, interactive, and sometimes conflictual. Also, like the “producing apathy” category, responses emphasized individual activities such as “having an opinion,” “listening,” “paying attention,” and “setting an example.”

But surprisingly, respondents nonetheless saw themselves as participants in debate, even when they shared a view of public debate as conflictual or confrontational, and even when they described their activities in terms more consistent with producing apathy rather than conventional participation. Responses in this category all contained a “yes” answer to the participation question.

I call this category “personal participation” to capture this unique response to (perceived) bad debate. For the responses in this category, respondents produce an alternative version of participation that is not necessarily public, not necessarily political, and definitely not talk-oriented. This allows them to understand themselves as participants, even though their activities fall outside the realm of public political talk. For example, Zoe sees herself as participating by relocating debate from the conflictual public sphere to her individual thoughts:

Well, I participate more in my own mind. I have some friends who are definitely against homosexuality, and it’s not worth it for me to bring it up because I know I’m not going to change their minds and so it’d create a rift between us and so. But it definitely gets me thinking about things.

Responses in this category largely describe participating in public debate as such individual activity rather than talk or interaction. For example, Sterling describes his participation in environmental policy debate by recounting how he rides his bicycle to work, recycles, and minimizes water usage, concluding that “I pay attention to those things, and my behavior is modified by my attention to them.”

But even when responses in this category acknowledge a broader realm of public talk, they uniformly emphasize individual readiness or preparation to talk, rather than starting a conversation or advocating a position to others. Holly praises herself on being ready to give an opinion “if asked.” Likewise, Barry describes himself as “aware of arguments,” while Crystal sees herself as “willing to share [her] perspective.” Grace emphasizes that she does not usually talk to people, but is instead a “living testimony.” Similarly, Chantal seeks to “set an example” but does not seek out arguments. In short, personal participation means (re)imagining individual activities such as opinion formation or recycling as legitimate modes of participation in their own right, thereby turning what might otherwise be apathy over conflictual public debate into participation.

**Switching**

Perhaps more surprising than the emergence of the “personal participation” category is the finding that even though responses fit into categories, respondents generally do not. Nor are the three categories of responses evenly distributed across debates. Instead, what counts as participation varies by debate, both at the level of individual respondents and at the aggregate level of debate. At the individual level, many respondents switch qualitative response categories depending on the debate being discussed. Of 54 respondents who answered the question for multiple issues, fewer than 25% gave consistent (either positive or negative) responses across issues.

In some cases, the same activity is seen as participation in one debate, but not in another. For example, Sienna consistently describes “talking to friends and family” as relevant activity across debates, but only counts this activity as participation for environmental policy debate, and not for stem cell research or human origins debate. But in most cases of switching, respondents simply understand the relationship between debate, activity, and participation differently for different debates. For example, in environmental policy debate Anita participates conventionally, “saying what I think” to friends and strangers alike, but when it comes to debate over the origins of sexuality, she produces apathy by avoiding participation in debate in favor of “private talk.”

Given the diversity of the issues under discussion, in theory this individual switching could be explained in multiple ways. Respondents might simply have different levels of commitment to different issues. For example, when discussing sexuality, respondents often used personal examples from relationships with family or friends. If “the personal is political” (Hanisch, 1970), then modes of participation around this issue might be understood differently than modes of participation around issues that do not connect to personal experience and interests in the same way. Another explanation is that individual switching reflects the context of discussion. For example, in most instances respondents claimed to talk about issues with friends and family, if they claimed to talk about an issue at all. But when religious respondents reflected on who they talked to, they more frequently named fellow churchgoers and coreligionists for the issue of sexuality than for other issues. For those respondents, it makes sense that modes of participation in a church setting might be understood differently than modes of participation in other settings.

**Issue Variation**

Individual switching between responses from the same respondent is noteworthy. But at the aggregate level of debate, it is apparent that different debates have different patterns of “participation” across respondents. Even when issues do not necessarily provoke a personal response, and even when they do not share a common discussion context.
debate. Whether or not they see themselves as participating, respondents tend to associate some activities, and not others, with participation in debate over a given issue.

For example, in discussing stem cell research debate, respondents typically understand participation to mean “being informed,” “talking to friends and family,” “giving an opinion,” and occasionally some form of “political activism” such as “protest” or “going to rallies.” Whether or not respondents see themselves as participating, they recognize that these are the activities that constitute participation in stem cell research debate. By contrast, in discussing debate over environmental policy, respondents typically understand participation to mean either individual choices that they make, such as “changing light bulbs,” “preserving things in good shape,” and “recycling,” or, to a much lesser extent, formal political activity such as voting. Whether or not respondents see themselves as participating, they recognize that these are the activities that constitute participation in environmental policy debate.

What counts as participation for each debate is not exclusive. Sometimes activities (e.g., “giving an opinion”) are considered participation for several issues. And it is not simply that some debates are seen as public issues while others are seen as private issues. For example, neither “being informed” nor “changing light bulbs” are especially public activities in their own right. But note that these shared notions of “participation” are sharply different with regard to the public sphere. In the case of stem cell research, “participation” generally involves the conventionally understood public sphere. But for debate over environmental policy, “participation” generally means personal activities that bypass the conventionally understood public sphere altogether.

So, while there are individual variations and exceptions, the overall pattern across debate is of distinctive groups of activities that are (together) considered to be participation for each issue. On one hand, this is not surprising, as public debates over particular issues have distinctive histories, unique trajectories, and characteristic language that shapes how debates can unfold. But on the other hand, it is surprising to see how these distinctive features manifest in respondent understandings of their own participation. Certainly whether or not individuals see themselves as participating partly depends on the debate under consideration. But more fundamentally, what can count as participation at all appears to vary by debate. Respondents do not consistently mobilize a universal reference definition for participation and evaluate their own activities accordingly. Instead, each debate is characterized by a distinctive range of acceptable forms of participation, from which respondents make sense of their own activities and respond within the constraints of each debate.

**Discussion**

This research note has reported novel findings about participation from a recent qualitative study of multiple public debates. Two clear findings emerge. First, conventional participation and “producing apathy” are empirical categories that surface only for particular issues in which participation is understood as a particular configuration of political engagement and public activities (especially public talk). Second, each issue sets the boundaries for what counts as participation. Taken together, these findings suggest a way forward for evaluating participation deficit in empirical public sphere studies.

The obvious implication of these findings is that the Tocquevillian understanding of participation as public political talk should not be considered universal or even general. In one sense, the qualitative evidence here suggests a reason that public political talk might actually be in decline. Perhaps Americans do not participate (in public political talk) because they already think that they are participating (through various individual activities).

But the deeper implication is that concerns about declining participation need to account for a variety of views of participation. Instead of starting from a universal Tocquevillian definition of participation as public political talk, then judging the failure of Americans to engage in public political talk as participation deficit, it makes more sense to start from the empirical case and judge the success or failure of Americans to participate based on what counts as participation in that empirical case. At a minimum, future research into (apparent) participation deficit in American public life should not simply treat participation as obvious and universal, but should first answer the question, “What counts as participation here?”

Despite potential misdirection, the Tocquevillian concern is hardly unfounded. These findings suggest that it should be multiplied. Each issue and debate may well have its own version of participation, and therefore its own version of participation deficit, to examine. In this study, what counts as participation (and therefore what counts as participation deficit) varies, even for the same respondent, depending on the issue under consideration. This finding aligns usefully with recent research, suggesting that the qualities of a particular issue set the horizon of possibility for how persons might participate in debates about that issue (Perrin & Vaisey, 2008). Future research with a much larger and more representative sample would allow exploration of differences between persons and issues regarding what counts as participation and participation deficit. Such research might usefully distinguish between effects of individual characteristics and effects of debate structure, and might identify patterns of participation across issues that are not visible in this limited study.

Regardless of sample size, future research should also explore how inequalities of participation are multidimensional in ways that are not reducible to the individual qualities,
attributes, preferences, or activities of (non-) participants. When different versions of participation are seen as more or less legitimate, what counts as participation at all may be a source of inequality in its own right. And if such legitimacy depends on the constraints of the issue under debate rather than (or in addition to) the efforts of individual citizens, then the possibilities for alternative and more equitable forms of participation may also be constrained.

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Author Biography
Michael S. Evans is a William H. Neukom 1964 Fellow in Film and Media Studies and Sociology at Dartmouth College. His recent qualitative and computational research on media, science, religion, and democracy has appeared in Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, PLOS ONE, Science Communication, and Sociological Forum.