

## CHAPTER I

---

# The Rise of Activation Strategies

---

The critical element for the health of a democratic order consists in the beliefs, standards and competence of those who constitute the influentials, the opinion-leaders, the political activists in the order. . . . If a democracy tends toward indecision, decay and disorder, the responsibility rests here, not with the mass of the people.

V. O. Key, *Public Opinion and American Democracy*

This book is about the distinction between two words. Their different meanings explain how America's popular politics has changed for the worse over the last one hundred years. The first word is *mobilization*, defined here as the partisan method of stimulating very high turnout in elections during the period of peak party power that lasted from 1876 to 1892. The second word is *activation*, meaning the more contemporary methods that parties, interest groups, and candidates employ to induce particular, finely targeted portions of the public to become active in elections, demonstrations, and lobbying.

The two terms reveal very differing processes by which political

elites engage the public. First, the two processes differ in their *focus*. The partisan mobilization of the past was inclusive, seeking to arouse all possible voters to vote in response to a direct partisan message. Activation, conversely, is exclusive by design. Candidates, interests, and consultants carefully identify those in the public most likely to become active on their behalf and then employ a variety of inducements to stimulate the action. New communication technology makes such microtargeting possible and allows elites to expend resources in arousing the public far more efficiently—and narrowly—than in the days of mobilization.

The two processes also differ in their *agents*, or sources of stimulation of the public. Mobilization was a heavily partisan process, dominated by strong party organizations and party messages. Politics centered on elections, and most voters viewed electoral choice as a partisan choice. In contrast, thousands of different organizations and individuals attempt activation today. Individual candidates now make their own personal appeals to an electorate uninterested in parties. A dizzying array of interest groups seeks to impart selective information and activism expertise to their potential supporters in the public. Parties still get out a message during elections, but it often gets lost in the competitive din of activation appeals.

The processes also differ in their *method*. Partisan mobilization involved broad appeals often carried through personal conversation with local party workers, or through America's then highly partisan press. In contrast, activation is research-driven by polling and focus groups, allowing the activators to target precisely those most likely to respond to appeals. Activation employs telephones, direct mail, and Internet communication in a way that allows distinctively phrased

messages of maximum possible impact. It does not seek to get most potential voters to participate in an election, as does mobilization, but instead fires up a small but potentially effective segment of the public to help a particular candidate at the polls or a particular interest as it lobbies government.

Finally, the processes differ in their *impact on popular rule in America*. Partisan mobilization encouraged heavy turnouts of eligible voters, most of whom cast a clear and decisive ballot for one of the two major parties in an election. A simple, direct, electoral verdict allowed for a relatively clear correspondence between the views of voters and the actions of government. Activation has no such representative function. It works to further the purposes of particular political elites during elections and when they lobby government, regardless of what most citizens think or desire. It is now possible for candidates, parties, and interests to rule without serious regard to majority preferences as expressed at the polls. Mobilization encouraged popular rule. Activation impedes it. Sadly, the rise of activation destroyed the prospects for majority rule in American politics.

The distinction between these two words is not helped by the indiscriminate use of the term *mobilization* by scholars of popular politics. They commonly label the partisan era of 1876–1892 as characterized by a very intense “mobilization of the electorate” (Silbey 1998, 8). Yet, scholars also use *mobilization* to describe the contemporary politics of exclusive targeting. For example, Steven Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen assert, “Intent on creating the greatest effect with the least effort, politicians, parties, interest groups, and activists mobilize people who are known to them, who are well placed in social networks, whose actions are effective, and who are likely to act”

(Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 33). This analysis perfectly describes the logic of contemporary *activation*, not the inclusive partisan *mobilization* of over a century ago.

By using the term *mobilization* indiscriminately, scholars miss the important distinctions, discussed above, between politics during the peak of the partisan era and politics today. The relationship of political elites to the public has shifted greatly in its focus, agency, method, and impact on popular politics. We need to recognize this more explicitly in the way we describe that relationship. Hence the need for the distinction between the two words, and the purpose of this book.

#### EXPLAINING PARADOXES

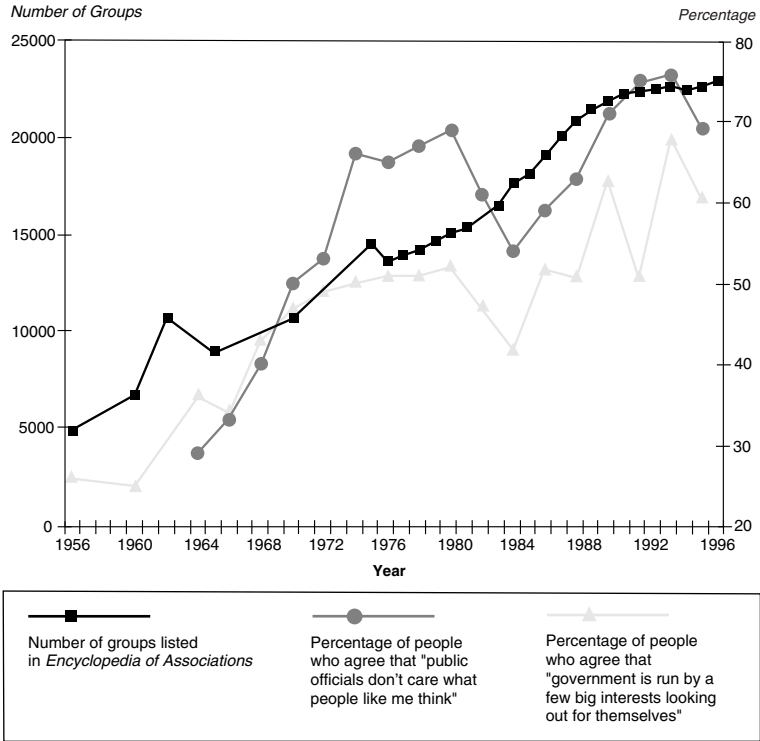
The decline of mobilization and the rise of activation explain many contemporary paradoxes of American politics. It is paradoxical that in an era when direct, participatory democracy seems ever more popular, the public is dismayed at its consequences. The popularity of what James Madison termed “direct rule by the people” is everywhere evident. Polls reveal the public supports abolition of the undemocratic electoral college in selecting presidents. Direct policy-making by initiative and referendum thrives in many states (Cronin 1989, 51). Interest groups enjoy a great vogue as a means of popular participation, their number mushrooming in recent decades (Baumgartner and Leech 1998, 103). One might expect this wave of participation would produce greater popular content with government and its operations.

Not so. Certain forms of direct popular participation in government have become more fashionable, while popular disaffection from government has grown as well. Figure 1.1 charts the rise of interest groups in Washington and the growing number of Americans who believe government is “controlled by a few large interests.” Why

would this perception grow as the number of interest groups rose greatly and the number of Americans joining and active in groups grew as well? The interest group world of Washington in the mid-twentieth century indeed featured “a few large interests”—big business, big labor, veterans’ organizations, and farm groups had far fewer rivals for access and influence than they have now (Baumgartner and Leech 1998, 110–11). Times have changed. A national survey in 1989 found that 79 percent of Americans are members of groups and 48 percent reported affiliation with a group that takes political stands (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995, 63, 50). Today, “groups ‘r’ us” (Rauch 1994, 48). Over a thousand corporate trade organizations, representing businesses ranging from the American Bankers Association to the Association of Dressings and Sauces, now have Washington headquarters. Environmental groups, virtually nonexistent in D.C. in 1950, are numerous and influential, including organizations such as the Friends of the Earth and the Sierra Club. The largest membership group represented in Washington today, the American Association of Retired Persons with thirty million members, did not even exist in 1950. The 1970s witnessed the proliferation of many public interest and social justice groups and movements, many still very active in Washington. In 1959, political scientist Charles Lindblom claimed that “every important interest has its watchdog” in policy making (Lindblom 1959, 85). That is truer now than when he wrote it. Yet the public emphatically does not see it that way.

Figure 1.1 illustrates another paradox of our politics. Despite all this participatory effort, increasing proportions of Americans believe that elected officials do not care what they think. This perception collides with the scholarly picture of officeholders continually “running

**Figure 1.1** Increase in Groups and Public Alienation



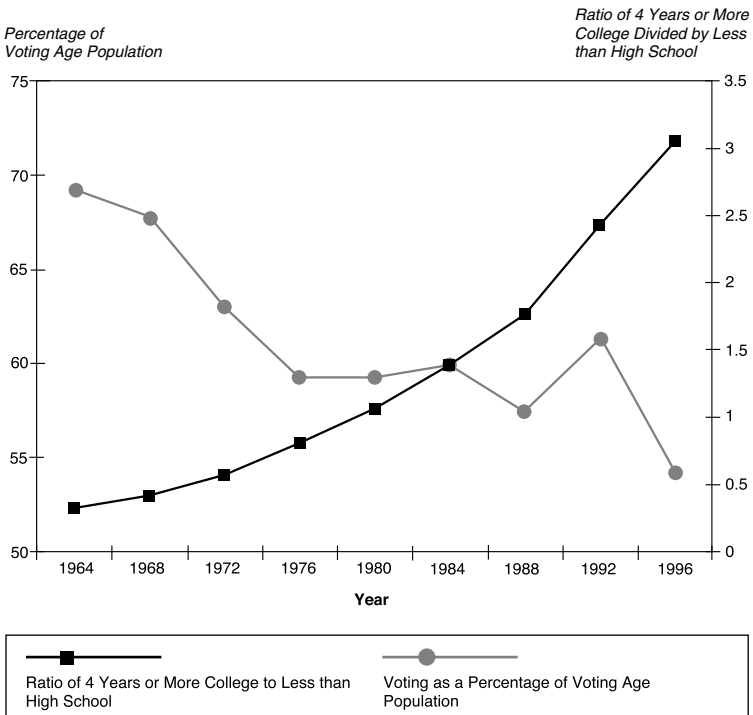
scared” of popular opinion and attempting to be as responsive as possible (King 1997). Figure 1.2 adds a further dimension to this curious situation. Alongside the growth in groups and rising level of public education is a drooping trend in voter turnout. Political scientists have long held that higher education promotes a person’s likelihood of voting (Campbell et al. 1960; Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996). Rising education levels may stimulate group activity, but certainly not voting. Political scientists have sound explanations for the rise of interest groups and the decline of voting despite rising edu-

ication levels, as future chapters make clear (Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996).

The rise of activation strategies spawned the advent of these paradoxes. Although the American public has more political resources—in terms of education, at least—that should yield high electoral participation, citizens do not receive inclusive invitations to participate. Instead, an exclusive, invitation-only sort of targeting dominates American politics. The result: a more educated public that participates less, and the rise of popular alienation.

Political activists and operatives efficiently stimulate participation

**Figure 1.2** Voting as a Percentage of Voting Age Population and Increase in Education



by the parts of the public most likely to become active for them given an appropriate stimulus. Campaigns target the undecided and less than firmly committed voters with ads and phone calls in the final weeks of an election campaign. Interest groups through phone and mail contact those members most likely to respond with activism. The message delivered through these strategies seeks to influence an incentive held dear by a political decision maker: reelection, or power over legislation, budgets, and policy implementation. The result is a complex and frequently tawdry battle among a multitude of national groups and officeholders. Richard Neustadt describes current Washington policy making as

Warfare among elites, waged since the 1960s in the name of causes, not compromises, fueled by technology, manned by consultants, rousing supporters by damning opponents, while serving the separate interests of particular candidates and groups at times. . . . They try incessantly to win a given election, to promote or to stop a given legislative provision, regulation, appointment, contract, or executive decision in diplomacy and defense. (Neustadt 1997, 187)

Activation strategies occur because elites—officeholders, campaign consultants, interest group operatives—have limited resources. They cannot contact everyone in the nation about their agendas. Given limited time, money, and expertise, it is only rational to identify likely supporters as accurately as possible and stimulate them to help you as efficiently as you can. Much of our national politics results from activation strategy. It is the political variant of “niche marketing” found throughout our economy. In Washington, everyone is doing it. Who does it best greatly determines who governs.

Activation strategies contrast starkly with electoral mass mobilization by political parties. Mobilization predominated during election campaigns during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,



declining greatly in presence and effectiveness after 1950. Party mobilization involved geographically based, partisan appeals for voters. Party organizations sought power through elections and offered voters a variety of material, social, and issue benefits in return (Wilson 1995, 30–56). Traditional partisan mobilization was a crude tool, operating via personal and print communication. Precise targeting technologies were not yet invented. Unable to efficiently identify those most likely to become active, party leaders blanketed entire neighborhoods with partisan appeals. Instead of narrowcasting to the active, parties broadcast to the masses. Parties sought to lower information costs for low-knowledge voters by advocating a simple party-line vote. Many voters willingly obliged, producing higher turnout than strategic activation has produced in recent decades (Ginsberg and Shefter 1990, 3). Party elites had to encourage rule by popular majorities in order to gain power.

Activation strategies, in contrast, mobilize strategic minorities while cloaking the effort in a misleading guise of popular rule. The “legitimizing arguments” come, as we will see, from the proponents of participatory democracy. Washington operatives use strategic activation of *their* people as an example of direct rule by *the* people, conflating a faction of the public mobilized by an elite with majority opinion. This is not misleading if *their* people in the aggregate resemble *the* people. They usually do not.

#### PATTERNS OF ACTIVATION STRATEGIES

The citizens who respond to activation strategies are often an unrepresentative lot. Only a small fraction of the public makes up America’s activist population. For many interest groups, strategic activation simply involves “rounding up the usual suspects” who by mak-

ing their views heard in government give the illusion of widespread popular sentiment. Most of these activists come from an elite stratum of the public whose members are far more politically sophisticated than the average citizen. Activists have much more knowledge of and interest in politics than their fellow citizens.

W. Russell Neuman found the public divides into three groups with varying degrees of political sophistication. Twenty percent of the public are “a self-consistent and unabashedly apolitical lot” (Neuman 1986, 170). The apoliticals very seldom vote and are not ashamed of their apathy. Most citizens are found among the 75 percent comprising Neuman’s “mass public” who are “marginally attentive to politics and mildly cynical about the behavior of politicians, but they accept the duty to vote, and do so with fair regularity” (1986, 170). Those most likely the targets of activation strategies are the activists, comprising only 5 percent of the adult population with uniquely high levels of political involvement and sophistication (170).

Other recent studies reveal the unrepresentative characteristics of political activists. Steven Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen find that “the pool of political activists is enormously unrepresentative of the population, no matter how many people are involved” (1993, 235). The authors identify “governmental activists,” those who attempt to influence governmental officials, and “electoral activists,” those who are active in elections beyond voting. Both groups are much more educated and affluent than those who are less active. The political activity with by far the lowest education and income skew is voting, much less unequal in its incidence than attending meetings, writing legislators, working on campaigns, or attempting to influence the voting of others (1993, 234–37). A landmark study of political par-

ticipation by Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady found a similar pattern. The authors create a measure of “participatory distortion” for a variety of activities. This compares average characteristics of activists who engage in various political activities with the average of the public at large (1995, 468). Corroborating Rosenstone and Hansen, the authors discover that voting produces the least distortion, but campaign contributions the most.

The evidence is clear. No other political activity is as representative of the public will as voting. One reason why other activities—writing letters, attending protests, joining groups, giving money—are less representative is that they result from strategic activation. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady find that whites and high-income individuals report many more invitations to participate in politics than blacks, Latinos, and low-income individuals (1995, 150–53). Although America has a profusion of interest groups, the pattern of activism skews the resources of groups toward advantaged individuals, whatever their issue agenda.

Rosenstone and Hansen present the underlying logic for this pattern of strategic activation. One must understand the costs and benefits individuals perceive when deciding whether to participate. All of us are members of social networks involving friends, family, neighbors, and co-workers. Since all of us seek acceptance from fellow network members, we are inclined to take cues from them. Social networks share the cost of acquiring political information and create social expectations for political participation or nonparticipation. Groups and campaigns try to spur activism directly through contacting individuals and indirectly by encouraging network members to encourage participation among fellow networkers. Groups and cam-

paigns, given their limited resources, try to induce activism as efficiently as possible.<sup>1</sup>

Given this drive for efficiency, Rosenstone and Hansen list the tendencies of activation strategies. First, campaigns and groups are most likely to contact people they know. The cost is low, and probability of success is high. Second, people at the center of social networks are more likely strategic targets. They are easier to identify and more likely to be effective. Third, those most effective at producing political outcomes are more likely strategic targets. Fourth, those likely to respond by participating are also likely targets (1993, 30–31). This logic produces the skew in activism revealed in the preceding paragraphs. The logic of strategic activation produces a self-sustaining stratification of political activity in which a small proportion of the public is effectively and constantly induced to participate directly in politics. The current vogue of participatory democracy is both a consequence and a cause of this activation syndrome.

#### THE PARTICIPATORY JUSTIFICATION

The term *participatory democracy* can encompass a variety of political arrangements. A more participatory democracy can result from increased use of reforms such as initiative, referendum, and recall and

1. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) and many other political scientists use the term *mobilization* to denote activities to induce political participation. Here I use the term *activation* instead in order to contrast it with wider-scale mobilization efforts of political parties in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus activation strategies commonly seek to spur activity in a small, carefully targeted fraction of the public. The distinction between activation and mobilization has great consequences for empirical democratic theory and the possibility of majority rule, as subsequent chapters reveal. I am indebted to John Green, director of the Ray Bliss Center at the University of Akron, for the distinction.

through more “grassroots” political activity. Some go further and argue that new technology permits direct popular voting on policy as the norm in government (Budge 1996). Both incremental and radical participatory reformers draw inspiration from Jean Jacques Rousseau, a prominent early participatory theorist. In his famous *Social Contract*, Rousseau argued that the people as a whole are sovereign and all laws must flow ultimately from assembled meetings of the people. “The sovereign, having no other force than the legislative power, acts only by laws; and since the laws are only authentic acts of the general will, the sovereign can only act when the people is assembled” (Rousseau 1978, 98).

Rousseau has more in common with incremental rather than radical participatory reformers. He favored daily rule by an elected “aristocracy” with occasional popular meetings to ratify the results (1978, 86). Current advocates of participatory democracy tend to share Rousseau’s aversion to representative government, which he termed an inadequate substitute for the sovereign “general will” of the people (101–04). Representatives cannot represent the general will, because that only resides in the people and sovereignty cannot be transferred (102–04). A similar critique of representative government informed the thinking of another major source of current participatory thinking, the progressive movement of early twentieth-century America.

Progressives argued that the corrupt behavior of elected representatives in certain cities and states amounted to an abuse of sovereignty. The source of corruption lay in the party machines that used control of government as a means to enrich their supporters (Mackenzie 1996; Ginsburg and Shefter 1990). The progressive movement created a new electoral regime to weaken party control and

strengthen participatory democracy. Civil service reform ended government employment through partisan patronage. The secret ballot and registration requirements lessened party-sponsored fraud and coercion at the polls. Primary elections weakened party organization control of nominations. Replacing party column ballots with office-bloc and nonpartisan ballots increased the difficulty of following partisan cues in the voting booth. The initiative, referendum, and recall allowed for popular, participatory circumvention of party-controlled legislatures (Cronin 1989, 38–59). The widespread adoption of these reforms lessened partisan mobilization and boosted participatory mechanisms that would encourage the advent of activation strategies.

Leading progressive reformers justified their actions in the name of direct, participatory democracy. Governor Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin advocated the direct primary based on a simple normative principle. “Go back to the first principle of democracy. Go back to the people” (Lovejoy 1941, 36). Governor Hiram Johnson of California claimed that the initiative, referendum, and recall “give to the electorate the power of action when desired, and they do place in the hands of the people the means by which they may protect themselves” (Lee and Berg 1976, 98). Individual voters could protect themselves from the predations of corrupt parties and interests that can flourish in representative institutions. By making participation more complex and difficult, however, progressive reformers increased the cost of mobilizing popular majorities and made rule by activated minorities more possible and thus more widely attempted. Chapter 2 develops this point further.

The turbulence of the 1960s brought another wave of participatory fervor into American politics with the rise of many “movements” of aggrieved citizens—women, gays and lesbians, Christian conser-

vatives, African Americans, and opponents of the Vietnam War. Many political theorists, sympathetic to these movements, wrote in support of participatory democracy. Jack Walker argued that such movements help society in many ways; they “break society’s log jams . . . prevent ossification of the political system . . . prompt and justify major innovations in social policy and economic organization” (Walker 1970, 244). Carol Pateman, a leading participatory theorist of the time, admitted that participatory democracy asks much of individual citizens, but that the results of participation can be grand. “One might characterize the participatory model as one where maximum input (participation) is required and where output includes not just policies (decisions) but also the development of the social and political capacities of each individual, so that there is ‘feedback’ from output to input” (Pateman 1970, 43). Participation produces more able, better citizens, an argument Pateman shares with John Stuart Mill and other earlier democratic theorists (Mill 1910, 217). Pateman’s study of worker self-management in Yugoslavia led her to conclude that participatory mechanisms increase citizen knowledge and efficacy. Since participation makes better citizens without threatening regime stability, more participatory democracy is needed (Pateman 1970, 49).

Benjamin Barber continued the theoretical defense of participatory democracy into the late twentieth century. Barber argued that American citizens were apathetic because they were powerless, not powerless because they were apathetic. Our “thin democracy” of representative institutions and elite interest groups produced this powerlessness (Barber 1984, 3–26). The antidote is “strong democracy” incorporating progressive participatory structures and more: national town meetings, neighborhood assemblies, office holding by lottery, national initiative and referendum, and other reforms (273–98). The

goal is to create more knowledgeable, active, and public-spirited citizens. “Only in a strong democratic community are individuals transformed. Their autonomy is preserved because their vision of their own freedom and interest has been enlarged to include others; and their obedience to the common force is rendered legitimate because their enlarged vision enables them to perceive in the common force the working of their own wills” (Barber 1984, 232).

Barber’s vision is indeed beguiling, but it must be examined in light of the realities of America’s current system of strategic activation. Participatory theorists ask more of citizens in order that citizens might contribute more to the quality of our collective political life. Participatory contributions require time and information-gathering and processing costs. For a minority of more educated and informed citizens, the information-gathering costs of participation are lower. Further, the benefits of participation will not be valued equally by citizens. More educated and informed—“properly socialized”—citizens will value the personal benefits of participation more than those who have been less inculcated with civic virtues. The market for participation is very cost-sensitive. This sensitivity gives rise to activation strategies. These strategies don’t aim at the improvement of the commons as a primary goal (and as participatory theorists would wish) but instead serve to further narrow group or campaign goals. The arguments of participatory theorists, however, give a grand normative justification to the pursuit of meaner goals through strategic activation.

Jeremy Richardson explains some broader implications of the market specialization resulting from political activation:

Just as consumer products and services have become more differentiated and specialized in response to more sophisticated consumer demands, . . . participation in the political process is increasingly linked to specialized or “attentive”



publics, specialized issues and specialized participatory organizations. This trend may not be solely due to a more sophisticated and better-educated citizenry. Just as with products and services in the marketplace, there are entrepreneurs who seek market opportunities for political participation. New issue-related organizations emerge, not just because of existing public concern about an issue, but also because organizational entrepreneurs emerge who see opportunities to create new organizations (and careers for themselves) by mobilizing public support and funding for interest groups around new issues which they place on the political agenda. . . . These new “entrepreneur-driven” organizations are increasingly important in setting the political agenda to which political parties, as well as governments and legislatures, have to respond. (Richardson 1995, 124)

These are not the results foreseen or desired by participatory advocates. The current plethora of entrepreneurs and issue-based organizations exists alongside a larger group of passive citizens. Entrepreneurs carve up the public into targets of activation opportunity, rather than mobilizing most citizens into a fully participatory democracy. Only inclusive electoral participation spawns majority rule. Partisan mobilization passed this test, but contemporary activation does not. Participatory theory that fails to acknowledge and address the shortcomings of activation hardly furthers inclusive popular rule in America. We now have political participation without a popularly inclusive government. The shortcomings of participatory theory become obvious once the origins of activation strategies come into focus. Its sweeping endorsement of participation in an era of activation reveals a disastrous incomprehension of the reasons for the decline of popular government in America.

#### ORIGINS OF ACTIVATION STRATEGIES

Why the widespread use of activation strategies at the end of the twentieth century? Their onset is not a mysterious dispensation of

fate. Instead, it became rational and efficient for individuals to pursue opportunities for political influence through the narrow scope of activation instead of the broader framework of traditional partisan mobilization. Three large phenomena account for the shift: (1) the decline of party influence in the electoral process and among voters, (2) the proliferation of interest groups since 1960, and (3) transformations in the technology of politics that greatly contributed to (1) and (2). Together they created an environment in which entrepreneurial politicians and group leaders relentlessly activate fragments of the public to vote and press demands upon government. *For parties, campaigns, and interests, activation is the rational response to a political environment transformed by these forces.*

Over the last hundred years, elections in America gradually converted from party-dominated to candidate-dominated competitions. Old-style party mobilization grew from party dominance over the key campaign resource of the time: labor. Government patronage delivered armies of party workers during the election season. "The capacity of party chairmen to offer government jobs in return for party support was a major resource relied upon by party organizations" (Rose 1997, 53). The passage of civil service reform at the national, state, and local levels, beginning with the national Pendleton Act in 1883, gradually drained away from parties the control of labor essential for organizational muscle in pre-electronic election campaigns. The advent of the direct primary, a participatory reform mentioned above, was another major blow to party electoral power. By losing the power to bestow nominations, party organizations lost control over their candidates. Candidates, in turn, found themselves individually responsible for attracting voters. "The introduction of the direct primary encouraged candidates to develop their own campaign organi-

zations, or pseudo-parties, for contesting primary elections” (Herrnson 1988, 26). By midcentury, primaries were ubiquitous in elections for state and national office. Party organizations found themselves possessing few of the desirable resources for electoral competition and no controlling authority over the identity of their candidates. The national campaign finance legislation of the 1970s reinforced this pattern by sharply limiting party spending on behalf of candidates and structuring legal fund-raising and accounting for contributions around the campaigns of individual candidates (Sabato 1984, 276–86).

In addition to declining power in the electoral process, parties also suffered in the hearts and minds of voters. Beginning in midcentury, voters began to split partisan tickets more frequently. The percentage of self-identified independents rose from 23 percent in 1952 to 33 percent in 1996 (Center for Political Studies 1996). Further, the proportion of Americans having no views about either of the major parties grew steadily in the late twentieth century (Wattenberg 1996, 50–73). With depleted resources, parties also found voters less willing to consider or accept partisan messages. Individual candidates, ever sensitive to voter preferences, responded by running campaigns with less partisan and more individualist themes.

In the 1980s, national and state parties adapted to their reduced circumstances by enhancing their role as service providers for their candidates (Coleman 1996b, 371). Party organizations raised money and subcontracted for polling and advertising on behalf of their candidates. By targeting money and services strategically, the national parties could maximize their impact on elections. They now help most in the small group of hotly competitive House and Senate races, while remaining only minimally involved in other races (Herrnson

1988, 109). Such activities keep party organizations relevant, but hardly dominant, in electoral competition. State and national parties provide a far smaller share of campaign resources to their candidates than they did one hundred years ago, and they have far less control over who runs under their party labels.

One major consequence is the steady decline in the number of people who report being contacted by a party during an election campaign (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 162–77). This contributed to declining turnout in elections. At the same time, however, increasing numbers of Americans reported contacting governmental officials. While electoral politics shrivels, governmental politics thrives (Rosenstone and Hansen 71–125). We can solve this puzzle by examining the second force behind the rise of activation strategies, the proliferation of interest groups.

To understand the group proliferation displayed in figure 1.1 of this chapter, it helps to comprehend the reasons why groups form. Any explanation must begin with Mancur Olson’s landmark work, *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965). Olson argued that when individuals seek material benefits in the form of collective (nondivisible) goods from government, group organization is often difficult because of the “free rider” problem. That is, individuals may choose not to join the group because they will receive the collective good anyway if the group forms and succeeds. This spawns entrepreneurial activity by group leaders to provide selective benefits for joiners (or impose selective costs upon those who don’t join). Hence the abundance of large membership interest groups offering special benefits (travel tours, magazines, insurance) for members. Group entrepreneurs also often attract a smaller group of individuals motivated to express their views about ideology or particular issues. Satisfying the “expressive”

goal of “voicing deeply felt value commitments” has become an entrepreneurial activity of recent decades (Salisbury 1990, 210). The rise of many movement and cause groups in myriad issue areas attests to the success of entrepreneurs offering expressive benefits.

But why now? What prompted the burgeoning of entrepreneurial group formation in recent decades? G. Calvin Mackenzie (1996, 59–60) provides a roster of likely reasons. Three major structural transformations of society and politics in the mid-twentieth century helped to create the more proximate causes of group formation. First, the rise of an educated and affluent middle class created a huge set of consumers of group benefits. Activating more knowledgeable and affluent citizens is easier because they get the message more readily and have more resources to devote to supporting the message. The costs of activation became lower, contributing to its proliferation.

Second, party decline, discussed above, provided new opportunities for entrepreneurial activity. With weakened party identification, entrepreneurs could more readily create commitments for group-based goals and find more resources to do so with the decline of party dominance of electoral resources. Third, new technologies made communication with prospective members less costly—quicker and more efficient. While print and personal conversation dominated during the early partisan era, multiple communication and targeting technologies now allow entrepreneurs to efficiently locate potential supporters and make the pitch to them. Technological change is such a major force propelling activation that it receives extended treatment below.

Given party decline, widespread education and affluence, and new technology, more specific political circumstances helped to drive group growth. National government involvement in domestic prob-

lems expanded in the 1960s, creating new issue areas ripe for group formation—environmental, urban, cultural, and poverty issues among them. Concurrently, and in part because of governmental expansion (Walker 1991; Costain 1992), new movements of previously marginalized groups—African Americans, Latinos, women, Christian conservatives, and gays and lesbians—further broadened the issue agenda of national politics. With more issues gaining popular currency, additional group formation became possible. This wave of entrepreneurial activity among group and movement leaders lowered the information costs for future entrepreneurs by showing them how group formation was done—how to target and with which technology and message. Mackenzie calls this the effect of “contagion” (Mackenzie 1996, 60). The spiral of group organization, once begun, fed on itself.

Under this onslaught, some established, large organizations began to suffer fragmentation. Heinz, Laumann, Nelson, and Salisbury (1993) find that farm groups fragmented in the 1970s and 1980s into more specialized organizations. Why? “Larger associations tend to take positions that minimize internal conflict, thus encouraging specialized interests to develop independent strategies” (1993, 376). “Peak” business organizations such as the National Organization of Manufacturers and the Chamber of Commerce found themselves advocating alongside over a thousand specialized trade associations by the 1990s. As larger, established groups sought to avoid internal conflict, demand for more specialized interest organizations rose. Potential members found the political stakes great enough to support new groups. Entrepreneurs discovered they could command sufficient resources to influence politics with narrower groups. Concurrently, policy-making became less dominated by exclusive “iron triangles” of

groups, bureaucracies, and congressional committees (Hecló 1978). The cost of entry into policy competition declined as more groups formed. The motives, means, and opportunities for new groups grew together.

By the end of the century, an issue-oriented citizen desiring to participate in national politics had no shortage of interest group options. And groups might seem a more appealing venue than political parties. “Parties offer a wide-ranging program of policies which may include some policies to which the individual is opposed or at least unsympathetic. An alternative is to join or donate resources to a pressure group . . . espousing either a single-issue or a related set of issues—thus avoiding the need to accept policies and programs to which one is opposed” (Richardson 1995, 126). Group entrepreneurs perfected a variety of grassroots recruitment and activation strategies—employing material and expressive incentives—to identify and utilize potential supporters (Faucheux 1994).

Changes in technology, a third big structural change, shaped the particular activation behaviors by entrepreneurs in the less partisan, more group dominated environment. Partisan politics of decades ago thrived on the military-style mobilization of party workers in election campaigns. Reformers took this control of labor in elections away from party organizations, and new technologies arose that could be widely dispersed and employed in elections and in lobbying government. Technology made money more important than labor in elections, and primary nominations made individual candidates the central money-raisers of the new campaign system (Lowi and Ginsburg 1998, 289–301). As independent entrepreneurs, candidates began hiring their own pollsters, direct mail firms, and advertising consultants with the money they raised. The primary campaign expense became

TV time for ads tailored carefully to the sensibilities of “swing” voters.

The “few large interests” that dominated Washington in midcentury suffered a similar fate to that of party organizations. Traditional lobbying (Hrebнар 1997, 79–117) involved personal contact between established Washington interest representatives—usually lawyers—and lawmakers, bureaucrats, and administration officials. This highly skilled labor was in relatively short supply and expensive to purchase. New technology changed dramatically the arts of advocacy in Washington and greatly lessened the advantages of traditional lobbying. Direct mail could target possible members and communicate with supporters, as could satellite television, phone calls, e-mail, web pages, and faxes. Activating loyal members to contact their legislators proved more effective than merely hiring traditional Washington lawyers. Washington law firms had to adapt to the new technology and grassroots tactics it spawned. Many now use grassroots tactics (Plebani 1997).

The new technology lowers the costs of activation. Identifying supporters and communicating with them is easier than ever before in national politics. The technology is also widely available and transportable. One can arrange state-of-the-art communication from anywhere in the country. All this should stimulate group formation and the uses of activation. With ever more activators operating, competitively successful activation becomes more difficult, particularly when each individual candidate or organization has limited resources. Hence activation involves narrow, precise targeting of the public in order to be successful. Gone are the days when large partisan organizations could monopolize resources for mobilization and engage the



general public broadly at election time. The new *modus operandi* involves slicing surgically into the public to bring out just the right segment to vote in an election or make a spiel to government. The content of such messages is crucial. That content has changed in recent decades as public attitudes have altered.

#### CAMPAIGN AND INTEREST GROUP MESSAGES

Successful activation turns mainly on accurate identification of the appropriate audience and the appropriate tone and content for that audience. Candidates and interests use messages that they estimate are most likely to succeed with their targeted segments of the public. Hitting the right target with limited resources involves differentiation between those more or less likely to become active. Activation thus serves to reinforce the stratification of public activity and knowledge about politics. The intended audience also must find the tone and content of the message persuasive. Activation also reflects the configuration of attitudes about politics, politicians, and the political system among the target audience. Those attitudes are often postpartisan, cynical, and critical of established authority.

The core logic of activation involves nudging those with the greatest marginal propensity to become active into motion. This is the part of the public with the greatest motivation to learn about politics. Motivation to learn results from a constellation of traits: interest in politics, a personal sense of political efficacy (a belief that activism is worthwhile and produces benefits), and a sense of civic duty (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 214). Education is the key facilitator of such motivation. Education reduces the costs of gaining and processing political information in several ways. More educated people can sort