

Rethinking Modes of Political Participation

The Conventional, Unconventional, and Alternative

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► **Abstract:** Political participation is frequently defined as either being conventional or unconventional. This distinction is based on dualistic thinking. Participation is likened to other dualisms, such as legal–illegal, collective–individual, and unity–plurality. Drawing on Niklas Luhmann’s system theory, I argue that understanding political participation in terms of dualisms is reductive, as it overlooks those acts of participation that do not fit the conventional–unconventional distinction. To address this issue, the article introduces the notion of alternative political participation. This category is established by conceiving the existing dualism between conventional and unconventional political participation as a continuum of options existing between polar opposites.

► **Keywords:** alternative, conventional, dualism, Niklas Luhmann, political participation, unconventional

What can be considered as political participation? This question remains central to contemporary political participation research (e.g., Collin 2009; Eklundh 2014; Flinders and Wood 2018; Grasso 2016; Norris 2002; Rowe and Marsh 2018; Sparks 1997; Van Deth 2001, 2014). A strand of answers to this question has been built around the distinction between conventional and unconventional participation (e.g., Akram et al. 2014; Barnes and Kaase 1979; Kaase 1999; Lamprianou 2013; Linssen et al. 2011; Riley et al. 2013; Van Deth 2001; Verba and Nie 1972).

There are two tendencies to describe the conventional and unconventional forms of political participation in contemporary democracies. On the one hand, the categories are perceived as dichotomous (e.g., Akram et al. 2014; Alvarez et al. 2020; Angi 2015; Ardèvol-Abreu et al. 2020; Barnes and Kaase 1979; Kapsa 2019; Linssen et al. 2011, 2017; Riley et al. 2013; Verba and Nie 1972). In a vote-centered system, conventional participation



is considered as something of a higher value than the unconventional options. In the case of representative democracy, the ordained status of conventional participation has strengthened the denial of recognition of unconventional forms of participation as political acts.¹ Additionally, the two types are perceived as something opposite to each other. Hence, this often leads to a lack of recognition for voices articulated through “non-conventional” means (Bourne 2010; Kantola and Lombardo 2017; Linssen et al. 2011; Paxton 2008; Rowe 2015; Strolovitch and Townsend-Bell 2013).

On the other hand, the conventional is considered to be a narrow grouping, while the unconventional is usually considered to be a catch-all category, including everything that is branded as nonconventional (e.g., Akram et al. 2014; Linssen et al. 2011; Riley et al. 2013; Van Deth 2001). Interestingly, the examples representing conventional and unconventional forms of political participation can change, depending on the theoretical approach one takes. If we look at the literature (e.g., Barnes and Kaase 1979; Ekman and Amnå 2012; Pitti 2018; Van Deth 2001; Verba and Nie 1972), we will find no agreement on which forms are strictly unconventional and what makes them such. Some scholars maintain that what at one point in time and space is perceived as unconventional can be elsewhere understood as conventional, such as demonstrations or consumer boycotts (Linssen et al. 2011; Norris 2002). This alteration is possible, as certain types of unconventional participation that have features similar to conventional forms escape a strict distinction between conventional and unconventional, for example “connective action” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), the Indignados movement (Eklundh 2014), or “information activism” (Halupka 2016), which I will elaborate further below. Although many unconventional modes of political participation share characteristics with conventional participation, they are less important than the conventional due to a strict dichotomous meaning behind the two categories.

What is the best way to distinguish between different forms of political participation then? Taking the above reflections into consideration, this article proposes a modified categorization of political participation. First, it argues that conceptualizing participation as only conventional and unconventional is problematic, as it promotes the exclusion of social actions deemed as unconventional. Subsequently, based on Niklas Luhmann’s (2002) concept of drawing distinctions in observation, the existing definitions of the conventional and the unconventional are connected with six dualisms: (1) legal–illegal, (2) institutional–noninstitutional, (3) government–opposition logic vs. government–governed logic, (4) public–private, (5) collective–individual, and (6) unity–plurality. The dualisms have already been used in political and social theory to

describe participation and politics (e.g., Halupka 2016; Marsh and Akram 2015; Rowe and Marsh 2018), but not conjointly, as suggested in this article. Conventional participation is often understood as being a legal (Barnes and Kaase 1979), institutionalized (Kaase 1999; Marien et al. 2010), government-vs.-opposition-logic-driven (Luhmann 1997) process that takes place in the public sphere (Mouffe 2005) through collective action (Biesta 2011; Stoker 2006) and the production of social unity. Drawing on Luhmann, this article argues that the unconventional represents features opposite to those dedicated to the conventional. Hence, the six features on the left side of each dualism represent the conventional, while the six features on the right side of each dualism represent the unconventional. The conventional and unconventional are narrowly defined, and represent a limited repertoire of forms of participation. Finally, this article will use Luhmann's insights to introduce a third category, namely alternative participation.²

Alternative participation is neither a substitute for conventional participation nor a synonym for unconventional participation, but rather an alternative to the division upon conventional and unconventional. Alternative participation cannot be defined based on a strict division between the presented dualisms. It is everything in between the two opposites that constitute the conventional–unconventional distinction, and it includes forms of participation that are neither conventional nor unconventional. Each dualism needs to be understood not only as two opposites but as a range of possible options extending between their left and right sides.

Considering political participation as conventional, unconventional, and alternative recognizes the discrepancy between the reductionist nature of dualisms, especially conventional–unconventional, and the plurality of forms of participation that can be described by blurring dualistic distinctions. This shift in perspective opens up possibilities for the political recognition of forms of participation that have been denied such appreciation, as they were previously counted as unconventional or they did not fit the conventional–unconventional distinction. Consider, for example, connective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), lifestyle politics (Portwood-Stacer 2013), the Indignados movement (Eklundh 2014), and information activism (Halupka 2016).

Problems with the Existing Conception of Political Participation

While it is difficult to determine when the distinction between conventional and unconventional first came into use, there is much scholarship

that utilizes it. For example, the dualism was used in *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies* edited by Samuel H. Barnes and Max Kaase (1979). In this book, conventional participation is understood as activities related to the electoral process and unconventional participation is defined as a protest behavior (Barnes and Kaase 1979). Protest behavior is linked to illegality and violence. This association is an example of the normative division between the more ordained conventional participation and the unconventional participation defined as informal and unrestrained. In the time when Barnes and Kaase published their research, the attention in participation research was set on voting and other conventional forms that were considered to influence governments and politicians, such as contacting politicians or donating money (Ekman and Amnå 2012; Van Deth 2001). However, voting and other forms of participation associated with political parties remain central themes of research despite 40 or so years of scholarship challenging the centrality of a limited number of prescribed activities, like voting and writing to one's representative, parsing to conventional participation (e.g., Coleman 2013; Geys 2006; Mair and van Biezen 2001; Rolfe 2013). Also, the observed retreat of citizens from electoral politics, which represents the core of conventional participation, is considered not a sign of a shift to different forms of participation, but a result of social apathy and a general withdrawal from participation (e.g., Stoker 2006). At the same time, this argument negates the assumption that unconventional participation is on the increase.

Scholars utilizing the narrow conventionalist perspective deliver a diagnosis of the state of democracy in various settings. For instance, if one concentrates on the contemporary role of women in Parliaments as venues of conventional participation, one will see a growing presence of women in those arenas. However, feminist scholars demonstrate that conventional sites of politics are only a small part of the picture when it comes to women's emancipation in society (Kantola and Lombardo 2017; Paxton 2008). On a similar note, a focus on the conventional alone can produce discourses that disengage people from participation. Lowering the voting age as a countermeasure for low voting turnout can be an example of such a situation. It preserves voting as the primary form of participation but does not encourage other forms of participation. It indeed allows younger people to vote, which undoubtedly emancipates some previously denied groups and discourses; however, lowering the voting age signifies the abandonment of those in higher age groups that do not participate through voting. This is especially true in times when people abstain from voting. Hence, the conventional discursive approach to political participation has the potential to divide and disempower people.

In contrast to those who negate the assumption that unconventional participation is on the increase, some maintain that indeed people are withdrawing from conventional participation, while a proliferation of unconventional forms of participation is taking place (Dalton 2008; Hay 2007; Norris 2002). However, when unconventional forms of participation are being discussed, they are positioned in contrast to conventional participation such as in the work of Rik Linssen and colleagues (2011) and Sarah Riley and colleagues (2013). This distinction is often underlined by the replacing of the word “unconventional” with the word “alternative” to symbolize an alternative to traditional forms of participation. Thus, alternative participation is understood as a synonym for unconventional participation in their framework.

Linssen and colleagues (2011) maintain that political participation is considered as participation to the extent that it is directed to influence government decision-making. According to the authors, “next to conventional participation, citizens can urge political authorities to represent their interests via unconventional means of participation. These activities are not structurally embedded in the political system and may be illegal” (2011: 4). However, to position political participation as necessarily state-centered but situate unconventional participation outside of the political system reproduces the uneven relationship between conventional and unconventional. The same problem is present in the work of Riley and colleagues (2013), where the scholars claim that leisure activity should be understood as an alternative form of participation. Leisure activity, like electronic dance music gatherings, is positioned as an alternative to conventional politics. The authors of this research state that such activity is genuine political participation because it tends to question existing social norms. Therefore, the political action done as a leisure activity is supposed to produce social plurality. However, through articulating the problem in terms of recognition of leisure in relation to the overwhelming presence of the conventional, the scholars reproduce the orthodox distinction between conventional and unconventional political participation.

Other studies, such as the work of Pippa Norris (2002), Joakim Ekman and Erik Amnå (2012), and Jan van Deth (2014), propose new ways to categorize political participation. Nevertheless, their ideas are not without limitations, as they tend to politicize specific modes of participation while excluding others.

Norris (2002) names three categories that define political participation—that is, (1) agency, (2) repertoire, and (3) target. In doing so, she enables the inclusion of all kinds of participation in this broad framework. The framework thus helps to legitimize the new forms of political participation. However, there are several problems with this framework.

First, while it enables us to include various modes in one category of political activity, it does not encourage scholars to acknowledge new forms of political activity. Second, as Pia Rowe and David Marsh point out, for Norris “an action is political to the extent that it is directly trying to influence government processes and policies” (2018: 91). Thus, Norris’s consideration contains the same limitation as does that of Linssen and colleagues (2011).

Ekman and Amnå (2012) have pleaded for the inclusion of latent participation in the framework of participation. Latent participation is a “pre-political” action “that may not be directly or unequivocally classified as political participation” (2012: 287). They also add nonparticipation as a form of participation, and thus create a broad categorization of political action. They argue that latent participation and nonparticipation can influence politics. Hence, in this framework some unconventional forms of participation, such as voluntary work in local communities, gain recognition. The framework offers an important departure from the conventional–unconventional dualism. However, while discussing nonparticipation, the authors define active and passive nonparticipation, and consider the latter a nonpolitical attitude characterized by a lack of interest in participation and politics. Nevertheless, the problem of nonparticipation has more than two dimensions. Structural oppression can produce disengagement, which is a cause of nonparticipation (McNay 2014). In consequence, the categorization proposed by Ekman and Amnå (2012) deprives the field of political participation an important characteristic: the function of understanding the distinct reasons for the nonparticipation of individuals. Moreover, while the authors perceive everyday talk to be of significance to politics, their theory does not mention any other acts that have the potential to take place in the private sphere. This distinction between the private and public is a consequence of adopting a limited notion of participation. For example, they use a definition of political participation borrowed from Richard Adler and Judy Goggin (2005: 241): “Civic engagement conventionally refers to activities by ordinary citizens that are intended to influence circumstances in a society that is of relevance to others, outside the own family and circle of close friends” (Ekman and Amnå 2012: 291). While the definition is broad, it excludes family members and close friends from the concept. It is not clear whether participation can be based solely on the intention to influence circumstances in society. The example of lifestyle politics (Portwood-Stacer 2013) and MamaBakers (Rowe 2015) shows that a focus on family, friends, or the personal can motivate political action.

In this context, the categorization proposed by Van Deth (2014) could be considered the most comprehensive mapping of political participation

modes to date. The author uses existing notions of what political participation is to put together a robust categorization. Nevertheless, as Marc Hooghe (2014) and Bengü Hosch-Dayican (2014) suggest, the framework has some limitations. To give an example, Bengü Hosch-Dayican (2014) suggests that the definition is exclusionary because it reduces online participation to forms of nonpolitical action.

The attempts to recategorize political participation are expanding the meaning of what participation is, and they are beginning to resolve the problem of unequal treatment of unconventional participation in both theory and practice. Nevertheless, they do not go far enough in addressing the uneven relationship between the conventional and unconventional forms of political participation. The existing proposals (e.g., Norris 2002; Ekman and Amnå 2012; Van Deth 2014) are also exclusive to certain ways of doing politics. Thus, they are not capable of recognizing potentially new or emerging forms of participation and discourses as political. Furthermore, a growing number of studies introduce new definitions to describe unconventional forms of political activity – that is, activity that is extreme, unofficial, informal, or unorthodox (Demetriou 2013). Many of the adjectives hold a negative meaning and are utilized to mark the participation as unconventional and a departure from whatever conventional participation is understood to be. Further, branding the forms of participation as unconventional (or through some other synonym) is counterproductive when it comes to recognizing those forms of political participation that elude capture or that are excluded by preexisting dualistic models of political participation that are designed to determine what counts as a legitimate political act.

There is a need to develop a framework that is not exclusive but inclusive of diverse forms of political action. Hence, it is essential to acknowledge acts of participation that have so far been denied recognition due to the normative distinctions placed upon the preexisting conventional–unconventional dualism. In this article, the attempt to deliver a new categorization of participation – *alternative participation* – starts by re-considering the conventional and unconventional forms of participation.

Conventional Participation

Although there is little agreement on what forms of political participation should be defined as conventional and unconventional participation, voting is considered to be a conventional form (e.g., Akram et al. 2014; Barnes and Kaase 1979; Lamprianou 2013; Linssen et al. 2011; Riley et al. 2013; Van Deth 2001, 2014; Verba and Nie 1972). Thus, conventional participation will be defined mainly based on the example of voting. It is

an action done by citizens to elect their representatives on every possible level of state administration (representative democracy). The goal of voting is to obtain control over state administration. In the literature on voting and political participation in general, one can discover a set of six characteristics that have been used to describe conventional participation. At the same time, those characteristics represent the features of the democratic representative system of politics. Most of those characteristics are already well-known in political participation research and are associated with forms of conventional participation, such as legality and institutionalization (e.g., Barnes and Kaase 1979; Halupka 2016; Marien et al. 2010; Mouffe 2005; Pitti 2018; Rowe and Marsh 2018).

As mentioned above, the first two characteristics of conventional participation are legality and institutionalization (Barnes and Kaase 1979; Kaase 1999; Marien et al. 2010). Conventional participation is legal, as it functions according to the rules of conduct written in the form of state law. It is institutionalized because there are formal structures and institutions (i.e., political parties) that allow participation. It makes it possible to choose formal representatives that are responsible for public policy and state management. This applies to voting and some forms of participation, which are also understood as electoral participation, for example campaign donations or party membership and activism. Those are institutionalized, since their presence is related to the existence of formal political parties.

The third characteristic of conventional participation is the internal logic it supports. In Luhmann's (1997) system theory, the differentiation between government and the opposition functions as a code that organizes the operation of a democratic political system. It can also be applied to understand the logic of conventional participation. Both voting and electoral politics are tools for political parties to accumulate support and gain control over the government. However, the government–opposition system guarantees that even if a party fails it still can win in the future. Through conventional participation, the public addresses their claims to government or opposition, thus enforcing parties' differentiation and delivering alternatives to choose from (Luhmann 1997). The goal of participation is a peaceful competition and not a violent struggle leading to the elimination of adversaries (Mouffe 2005).

The fourth characteristic of conventional participation is the fact that it happens in specific arenas that are in the public sphere. According to Chantal Mouffe, "in traditional conception [of politics], one had to leave the private sphere in order to become political, and it was only in the public sphere, through party politics, that the political was achieved" (2005: 40). This explanation goes together with the "arena definition of politics," which sees politics as taking place only in specific venues, such

as Parliaments (Leftwich 2004). The idea connects with the definition of participation as an act directed at influencing governments.

The fifth feature of conventional participation is the collective nature of this type of participation; for example, Gerry Stoker (2006) sees politics as necessarily collective. Although it is individuals who participate, considering the logic of government–opposition and the idea of representative democracy, it is the majority that obtains authority. This also means that the majority decide the future of the state, which has the potential to exclude the voices of the minority. It introduces a social order that represents the majority, producing certain power relations and the hegemony of norms.

The sixth and final feature of conventional participation is the promotion of social unity rather than plurality. As a consequence, this type of participation reduces social plurality. This is also true for political parties whose function is to catalyze social interest to such a state that it is observable for the political system. Conventional participation is designed to cultivate a certain amount of plurality, but the main argument against conventional participation and representative democracy is that through aggregation it reduces social plurality (Barber 2003; Dryzek 2010; Escobar 2017; Mouffe 2005). Hence, conventional participation is a tool to elevate unity and promote majoritarian goals and interests.

Unconventional Participation

To define unconventional participation, one can refer to Luhmann's (1990, 1997, 2002) idea of making sense of reality by drawing distinctions in observation. While the use of Luhmann's system theory may seem misguided at first, it gives an interesting perspective on political participation. Luhmann's theory delivers a distinct understanding of society and the social construction of reality, vindicating the role of other-than-conventional forms of participation. Luhmann's ideas allow us to understand how meaning is created in society through drawing distinctions in observation, such as the conventional–unconventional distinction. He argues that every distinction is reductive and helps to simplify complex reality. However, to observe and give meaning to a complex reality, one must go beyond drawing simplified distinctions.

For Luhmann, society is a collection of closed systems—for example, the political system. The representative political system uses the government–opposition distinction to understand its environment (Luhmann 1990, 1997). In Luhmann's theory, communications are filtered according to the government–opposition coding, or rather its designatory value, which in the case of the political system is “government.” What is

understood as the government is relevant, and that what is understood as the opposition is not considered relevant until the opposition becomes the government. This is true in the case of ideology; conservatism is preferred when the government is conservative, but this may change if the liberal opposition becomes the government. In the case of the economy, the government may propose specific tools to stimulate changes in the economy; these tools will be seen as more effective than those that are anticipated by the opposition. Thus, through the distinction between government and opposition, the system can decide whether specific tools constitute successful stimuli. Human consciousness is also a closed system, and, as such, it observes and makes sense of society through drawing distinctions (Luhmann 2002). All social meaning is organized around distinctions that can accumulate in the consciousness. An apple could be described through distinctions like eatable–uneatable, red–not red, and so on. Through these distinctions, closed systems create meaning for themselves. Hence, for Luhmann the distinction between the conventional and unconventional would also be a product of making sense of reality.

According to this logic, the unconventional is always defined as the opposite of conventional. By designating the conventional, it becomes possible – by default – to define its exterior (Luhmann 1997, 2002). Based on this notion, the unconventional can be characterized with the help of features opposite to those used to define conventional participation. As it was argued in the previous section, the conventional is (1) legal, (2) institutionalized, (3) government–opposition–logic driven, (4) takes place in the public sphere, (5) collective, and (6) promotes social unity. For Luhmann, the consciousness understands reality through drawing distinctions; for example, if something is defined as legal, there also needs to be an opposite value. If this logic is given recognition, it is only natural to assume that the six features of conventional participation also have opposites, which define that which is not conventional participation and that which is unconventional participation. Unconventional participation does not fit into the government–opposition internal logic of the political system but follows a government–governed internal logic. Luhmann (1997) believed that the government–opposition coding is typical for democratic political systems. The government–governed form is typical for undemocratic regimes. It is a form that could be considered as Mouffe’s (2005) notion of antagonism. The “we” of the participants is always placed in the position of the governed, and the “they” is placed in the position of the government. One side fights to abolish the other. Additionally, unconventional participation does not have the same function as the conventional to unify and select social discourses to increase the stability of the state or political system. Minorities or individuals engage in unconventional

participation, which is there to foster social plurality. These are forms practiced outside the arenas of politics and outside the public sphere. In this sense, unconventional participation can be only illegal and not institutionalized. Those who practice unconventional participation do it outside of the available formal channels of political participation.

One particular example of unconventional participation is the underground self-production and print of state-censored materials critical of the actions of a regime: a form of action most likely common in totalitarian regimes, such as European communist states. The activity was considered to be illegal, not institutionalized, individual, and done in private; it also often promoted a different worldview, thus introducing pluralism. This activity was also motivated by a government-governed logic, where the participants acted against the regime.

The definitions of conventional and unconventional are, thus, erected around at least six dualisms: (1) legal-illegal, (2) institutionalized-not institutionalized, (3) government-opposition vs. government-governed logic, (4) public-private, (5) collective-individual, and (6) unity-plurality. This composition represents a truly dichotomous distinction between what is conventional and unconventional participation. At the beginning of this article, it was mentioned that scholars perceive the conventional and unconventional as dichotomous categories. The conventional and unconventional, in the Luhmannian perspective, is also a dichotomous category. A form of participation is not conventional if it is not legal, institutionalized, and collective, government-vs.-opposition-logic-driven; if it does not take place in the public sphere; and if it is not unity-building. The same applies to the category of unconventional participation, although it is often considered as a catch-all category. Hence, what needs to be done is to acknowledge that some forms can be defined as conventional and unconventional, but the strict demarcation automatically excludes many modes of participation from being recognized and categorized. The dualism thus is not appropriate to describe the complex nature of political participation. It is necessary to change the perspective to describe and observe modes of political participation that cannot be characterized by a strict dichotomous distinction.

Alternative Participation

Dualistic distinctions are used to understand observed reality (Luhmann 1990, 2002). The introduction of these distinctions has shaped the notion of politics and political participation. George W. F. Hegel (1956), for example, maintained that the division of individual and collective was

introduced together with the Christian tradition. The notions of individualism and collectivism are also present within other religions (Cohen et al. 2016; Dumont 1983; Turner 2020). In the West, this division was reproduced by the republican notion of the common good, which emphasizes the utmost role of collectives in contrast to individuals (Agresto 1977). With time, society has been understood more as a collection of individuals than as a collective (Markantonatou 2013). The distinction between the collective and the individual has been rearticulated as the distinction between public and private, and between unity and plurality. The ideas of the public sphere and unity have been given a positive moral connotation. Institutions were built around those concepts, which reproduced the image of legality. Institutions have been perceived as necessary to bring forth a democratic system based on a government-vs.-opposition logic.

Scholars have used these distinctions focusing on participation, especially the distinction between conventional and unconventional. To name but a few examples, the divisions between legal and illegal and institutionalized and noninstitutionalized have already been utilized by Barnes and Kaase (1979) and more recently by Sofie Marien and colleagues (2010). The distinction between the public sphere and the private sphere has been shared by such scholars as Barnes and Kaase (1979) but also by scholars such as Riley and colleagues (2013). The collective–individual dualism has been accentuated, for example, by Stoker (2006) and Gert Biesta (2011). The division between two different logics of participation can also be found in Mouffe’s (2005) agonistic pluralism, where democratic struggles are agonistic (government–opposition logic) while other struggles are antagonistic (government–governed logic). The relation between the notion of political participation and some of the dichotomous distinctions, like public–private and collective–individual, has been recently discussed by David Marsh and Sadiya Akram (2015), Max Halupka (2016), and Rowe and Marsh (2018). In other words, the six dichotomous distinctions reproduce similar dualistic logics and are chiefly responsible for the way in which contemporary politics and political participation are comprehended. Although it is futile to pinpoint the exact time when each of the distinctions came into use, they appear to be a product of the process of drawing distinctions in observation. For Luhmann (1997, 2002), differentiation through building distinctions is associated with the fact that consciousness is functionally separated from its environment, so that it can differentiate between itself and the exterior. Perhaps this is where the individual–collective distinction originates.

Luhmann (1990, 2002) claims that modern societies originate from the differentiation of functional systems of society by means of applying

distinctions. If this logic is correct, it becomes conceivable to argue that the presented distinctions have originated as a part of this process as a way for the society to describe itself to itself. Thus, the meaning of politics is reproduced from the way society defines itself, but the sides of the dichotomous distinctions are not evenly conceived in the meaning of politics. The actions that can be characterized as legal, institutional, government-vs.-opposition-logic-driven, collective, public, and unity-producing have been considered as the designatory value and normatively more adequate to represent politics. This development has produced an exclusive and reductive idea of politics and political participation. While we have seen attempts to broaden this definition, it is still based on the dualisms and thus remains exclusive. According to Luhmann (2002), the disadvantage of drawing a distinction is the concealment of the totality, which was there before the division. Understanding politics and participation through the perspective of dualisms allows one to simplify the observed phenomenon, but misses its complexity.

The distinctions drawn between conventional and unconventional political participation create artificial boundaries between notions, for example between collective and individual. For instance, Luhmann (1997) maintains that, while the political system for its functionality defines the line between the common and individual good, such a distinction does not exist in reality. Similar conclusions come to mind when one focuses on the idea of connective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), which, by definition, lies somewhere between the collective and the individual. What is more, the same suppositions have been voiced about the public-private dualism (e.g., Rowe and Marsh 2018; Van Deth 2001, 2014).

Although referring to these dualisms is problematic, they are an integral part of the social construction of our reality. A framework that is not exclusive but allows us to analyze political participation cannot entirely discard the fact that making sense of reality takes place by drawing distinctions and instituting dualisms. We have to define political participation by utilizing dichotomous distinctions, although no preference should be given to any side of the distinction. Only in such form is it possible to comprehend participation in its totality, observe the emergence of new modes, and argue for an inclusive idea of political participation. The dichotomous distinctions should be understood as a range of variations between two opposites to overcome their limitations. A similar argument has been made by Marsh and Akram (2015), Halupka (2016), and Rowe and Marsh (2018), who argue that the distinction between the social and political should be understood not as a dualism but as a duality.

For instance, Halupka (2016) shows how important it is to observe what lies in-between the dualism to grasp the significance of some forms

of participation. By doing so, he describes a mode of participation – information activism – that exists between the public–private dualism and the collective–connective dualism. He argues that “the collective and connective action dualism informs our understanding of the efficacy of participatory forms, their capacity to bring about change in a democratic system” (2016: 3) and that “information activism is a conceptual anchor for a broader understanding of political participation, which sees political participation as a continuum, ranging from the personal sphere, through to the more formal political arena” (2016: 14). The argument is voiced here as well. However, a strong emphasis is placed on the importance of all six dualisms in defining political participation.³ The analysis of the efficacy of information activism as an act of political participation would be more comprehensive if one discusses the other dualisms as well. For instance, information activism switches through noninstitutional action to a form of coordinated action, which propels the need of the participants to spread information and provide solidarity. Also, the will to disseminate information and influence public opinion suggests that there was a motivation to the action that could be characterized either through Luhmann’s government–opposition logic or the government–governed logic of participation. If information activism was highly institutionalized and succumbed to the government–governed logic of participation, it would likely be spotted by state actors and regarded as obstructive to the state agenda. Halupka also considers the motivation of participants and institutionalization of the movement because those are issues that are directly linked with the dualisms he discusses. However, he does not identify the issue of motivation and organization as dualisms (these would be the government–opposition vs. government–governed and the institutionalized–not institutionalized dualisms) and does not discuss them at length.

Some scholars argue that an attempt at the marginalization of the conventional definition of participation (e.g., Hay 2014) undermines representative democracy. However, as Halupka (2016) points out, this is only true when the definition of the political is constructed based on dualisms: “By seeing a process definition as separate from an arena approach, one does tend to reduce the importance of the political arena. Similarly, by conceiving an arena definition as distinct from a process definition, one marginalises those emerging forms of engagement that do not conform to traditional avenues but are still seen as important by citizens” (2016: 5). For Halupka, to prevent marginalization it is essential to see dualisms that are incorporated into the meaning of politics and political participation as dualities. In different terms, the dualisms should be seen as a continuum set between two polar opposite points. Some forms of political

participation will be easily defined by employing a dualistic distinction upon the conventional and unconventional, while others will require an alternative approach, which is the blurring of those dualistic distinctions.

Alternative participation is a category encompassing forms of political participation that exist between the strictly defined conventional-unconventional dualism. Those are the forms of participation that can be described through the six dualisms understood, however, as a continuum set of options between polar opposites. What is more, when every form of participation is analyzed with a focus on all six dualisms in conjunction, it is possible to position a form of participation in the continuum between conventional and unconventional participation. The positioning of a form of participation on the continuum determines whether it represents conventional, unconventional, or alternative participation. This perspective helps to explain why in a specific setting certain forms of participation are excluded as nonpolitical and what the necessary conditions for the politicization of specific forms of participation would be in a given setting.

Information activism, connective action, lifestyle politics, and the Indignados movement can be categorized as alternative participation. As for other examples of alternative participation, one needs to remember that a strict division between the conventional and unconventional has left certain forms of participation outside of the scope of these categories. This applies, for example, to protest, demonstrations, or boycotting products. These forms of participation are also alternative.

Conclusion

In this article, drawing on Luhmann's work, I argue that the existing way of distinguishing between conventional and unconventional participation reduces the complexity of political participation. I highlight that a set of dualisms, which are discursively coupled to the conventional-unconventional distinction. These include legal-illegal, institutional-non-institutional, government-opposition logic vs. government-governed logic, public-private, collective-individual, and unity-plurality. While the conventional is always defined by the features on the left side of each dualism, the unconventional is defined by the right side of each dualism.

This dualistic thinking makes it difficult, if not impossible, to observe, acknowledge, and conceptualize the acts of political participation, blurring the line of the given distinction. Even scholars who advocate a broad definition of political participation (e.g., Norris 2002; Linszen et al. 2011; Ekman and Amnå 2012; Riley et al. 2013; Van Deth 2014) settle for a

definition of political participation that underlines the normative superiority of the conventional, for example by depending on the other six dualisms to make sense of politics and political participation.

Luhmann (2002) asserts that to understand how society is described we need to recognize social reality as constructed and understand how the creation of meaning reduces our ability to comprehend complex reality. Radical democrats and feminist scholars have seen this kind of deconstruction as essential for counteracting harmful social norms and uncovering social inequality (e.g., Kantola and Lombardo 2017; McNay 2014; Paxton 2008; Strolovitch and Townsend-Bell 2013). Only through understanding how reality is constructed does it become possible to counter the adverse effects of such construction. The reductionistic and exclusionary nature of the distinction leads to unequal representation and social inequality (Kantola and Lombardo 2017; Paxton 2008; Rowe 2015; Strolovitch and Townsend-Bell 2013). Luhmann also claims that, although the distinctions are exclusionary, drawing distinctions is a natural function that allows us to make sense of reality. The paradox of observation is that we want to make sense of reality but in consequence reduce our perspective, which does not allow us to understand the whole picture.

What can we do to escape this paradox? It is crucial to highlight the negative consequences of drawing distinctions. In the case of political participation research, the utilization of dualistic distinctions makes it challenging to acknowledge the modes of political participation that exist between the dualisms. Under a narrow vote-centric understanding of political participation, forms of participation that escape classification as conventional are not recognized as political acts. Lack of recognition may produce disengagement, which is not of free choice. Hence, we arrive at a situation of inequality, where people who participate in recognized ways have more influence on political decisions. At first sight, however, lack of participation by the disengaged is not recognized as a sign of inequality but rather as a seemingly objective observation that those acts of political participation are just not taking place.

Considering political participation as conventional, unconventional, and alternative recognizes the discrepancy between the reductionist nature of dualisms, especially conventional–unconventional, and the plurality of forms of participation that can be described by blurring dualistic distinctions. First, conventional participation is always only legal, institutional, collective, and driven by the government–opposition logic; it takes place in the public sphere and produces social unity. Second, unconventional participation is illegal, noninstitutional, driven by the government–governed logic, private, and individual; it produces social plurality. Third, alternative participation is the category that holds all the acts of

participation that exist between the presented dualisms. Although the normative idea that conventional participation is the focal point of democracy is questioned, conventional participation has not been rejected.

In this way, it becomes possible to redefine the catch-all character of unconventional participation and highlight that most of the unconventional forms are not categorizable because their characteristics exceed a strict division between conventional and unconventional. This fact allows us to argue that many forms of political participation represent a variation of those two categories and exemplify alternative forms of participation. It also implies that the study of political participation is the analysis of the positions of modes of participation on a continuum ranging from one side to the other side of each dualism. To comprehend the nature of each form of participation, its societal efficacy, and the way it is discursively immersed in society, scholars need to focus on the dualisms conjointly. What is more, the dualisms represent different topics of political participation analysis, such as motivation, organization, and outcome.

However, it must be mentioned that the six dichotomous distinctions utilized in the definition of political participation do not need to be a final grouping; it may be possible to include additional binary distinctions in this collection. It is essential to continue the discussion of the role of those dualisms in political participation research and in surrounding issues. In this article, the proposed distinction of three categories of participation is part of such a discussion. While the constructed framework is directed to solve certain problems surrounding the definition of political participation and propose a more holistic perspective on political participation, this topic still requires further elaboration.

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►► NOTES

1. Contemporary forms of conventional participation are considered as the conventional only under representative systems and with a focus on voting.
2. The expression "alternative participation" has been used in the literature as a synonym for unconventional participation. Occasionally, scholars use different adjectives to describe the unconventional. However, they do not question the dichotomous distinction between conventional and unconventional. In this article, the expression "alternative participation" is used to symbolize that this category and its characteristics are an alternative to the perception

of participation as conventional/unconventional. While that may be confusing, I have refrained from using a different adjective. There is no rational reason to add new expressions to the already large collection of adjectives that describe participation. Hence, the word “alternative” is used to describe a third category that is in opposition to the dualistic division between conventional and unconventional.

3. There are some differences between my conceptualization of the dualisms and the division proposed by Halupka (2016). Halupka is concerned with what he describes as the collective–connective dualism, while I see connective action not as the opposite of collective action but as a point on the continuum between collective and individual action.

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