Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism.
Pippa Norris.

[I did not receive the publisher's slip so I do not have prices. Also, I am guessing about
the place of publication.]

Pippa Norris has given us an excellent opportunity to reflect upon the meaning
and assessment of political participation in her latest book. Norris explains that the
present work is the last of a trilogy examining these issues. The first two works –
Virtuous Circle and Digital Divide – dealt with important questions of media and internet
effects on political participation, respectively (p. 3). Democratic Phoenix synthesizes
many of the arguments of the previous works and addresses the larger question of what
constitutes political participation, whether political participation is indeed in decline and
what accounts for any decline.

A central thrust of Norris's work is to define political participation. She
convincingly argues that the voter turnout rate is an inadequate indicator of how
politically involved a polity may be. There are many reasons for this – how and when
data about voter turnout rates are collected, how "new" a democracy is, and how voting
compares to other forms of activism in gauging the political attentiveness of citizens.
Norris wants to challenge our traditional ideas about participation and voting, and
Democratic Phoenix is full of data, carefully gathered and analyzed, to show the
limitations of conventional wisdom. For instance, Norris argues that voting rates are not
really in decline in older Western democracies, but rather have leveled off as increasing
rates of education and socioeconomic development hit their saturation point. That is, in
nearly literate societies, additional increments of education no longer produce like
increments of voting participation. Rather than seeing voting in decline, Norris shows that there is mostly “trendless fluctuation.”

Perhaps the most innovative parts of the argument are those concerning Norris’s operationalization of Putnam’s social capital concept in global perspective and her assessment of the importance of other forms of activism (activities previously seen as “social” rather than political but with strong contemporary political implications) to the general health of democracies. Norris argues that social capital has two components – social networks and social trust. Her analysis shows that social trust has an important effect on participation, but social networks do not. Hence, data on membership levels in traditional mediating institutions (e.g. political parties, trade unions, churches) will not explain much about contemporary activism. Instead, Norris turns our attention to new social movements, protest politics and the internet in chapter 10 – the key chapter in the book.

Norris’s emphasis on alternative forms of participation – and the data to support it – makes this book valuable for all political scientists. Reporting data on rates of petition-signing, economic boycotting, unofficial striking, and building occupation alongside traditional data measures such as voter turnout, party membership and union membership prompts many important questions for students of international relations, comparative politics, and political theory. For example, if attention to alternative forms of participation shows that political awareness is not in decline after all, how do we reconceptualize legitimacy (normally discussed via standard measures of political participation) of nation-states? Further, if modern phenomena like protest politics and the internet have transnational networks urging them on, how do we confine, measure
and operationalize the concept of social capital? Norris gives legitimacy to alternative forms of participation, and this alone should encourage organizers of these activities to continue their efforts to engage citizens who cannot or will not relate to more traditional methods. Such citizens would include young people, undereducated and underemployed people and members of minority groups (racial, ethnic and social). Norris shows that their efforts do not go unnoticed and do indeed have political implications. Finally, the book suggests myriad avenues for future research. How can we monitor trends in alternative politics? How do we measure the influence of the internet on participation? What effect will these new forms of activism have on emerging democracies? Will their institutions develop differently than established democracies? Because this book raises as many questions as it answers, it would be an excellent choice for graduate courses in just about every area of political science and for upper level undergraduates. Professors teaching lower level courses will find it valuable for information and ideas to pass along to their students.

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