

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



M. Margaret Conway. *Political Participation in the United States*. Third edition. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2000. xii + 227 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87187-792-5.

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Explaining Political Behavior

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As this review is written, the result of the 2000 presidential election is unknown. Most prognosticators predicted low turnout, and once again they were correct, in spite of the closeness of the election and massive get-out-the-vote drives mounted by parties and interest groups of all stripes. How can the behavior of the American electorate be explained?

Political Participation in the United States begins with the fundamental notion that paradoxes abound in the subject of electoral behavior in America. (For example, turnout declines despite increases in education.) Conway uses these paradoxes to fashion the questions that her book answers: who takes part in politics, and what form does this political action take?

This is a thorough treatment of the subject, examining topics such as symbolic versus instrumental forms of participation; the social characteristics of voters and non-voters; the psychology of participation; the legal structure surrounding elections in the United States; and the rationality of participation. Using data largely supplied by the American National Election Studies, Conway delineates the patterns of political behavior and their possible explanations. This well-organized book is full of useful notes and tables that provide data on the issues in question. An appendix is also included which presents the question wording of items from the American National Election Studies so that readers can see the precise basis for the generalizations which are made from the data.

Conway identifies the traits related to participation, but then goes beyond that to provide the reader with explanations or competing theories as to why those traits are considered important. For example, Conway provides a detailed discussion of why education influences political participation, and the various levels on which it operates. Complicated issues such as life cycle effects on

participation and the difficulties in measuring the impact of early election projections are dealt with in a clear fashion. A concluding chapter addresses the important question of whether participation makes a difference. Conway tackles this sometimes complex material with a readable writing style.

One of the highlights of this book is the chapter on the rationality of political participation. Conway examines political competition in terms of the analogy of competition in free market economic systems, rational choice theory, and the role of interest groups. Conway draws on the works of Downs, Riker and Ordeshook, Zipp, Olson, and Aldrich in explicating these concepts. Conway even provides an enlightening discussion of game theory in her treatment of the role of interest groups. She is careful, though, to note the criticisms of rational choice theory after its presentation.

As well as the book treats these subjects, the reader is occasionally left wishing that some subjects were dealt with in more detail. For example, Conway's account of the influence of organizations is brief, as is her discussion of forms of political activity other than voting. Several of the competing theories used to explain political behavior seem to receive scant attention, though Conway deserves credit for acknowledging to the reader that there is, indeed, more than one theory out there.

This book has some similarities to another CQ Books title, *Political Behavior of the American Electorate*, by Flanigan and Zingale.[1] Instead of paradoxes, Flanigan and Zingale structure their book around the notions of political change and continuity. While Conway's book contains plenty of information on rational choice theory and the difference that participation can make, Flanigan and Zingale include chapters on political communication and public opinion, topics that are not covered by Conway. Both make use of data from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), but *Political Behavior of the American Electorate* includes far

more, providing sixty-four tables and figures compared with twenty-six in Conway's book. This is a reflection of the differing approaches taken in the two works; Conway's book contains all the tables that it needs, but readers who appreciate greater detail in statistical evidence might prefer Flanigan and Zingale.

The strength of *Political Participation in the United States* lies in its use of the theme of paradoxes of political behavior, a theme that allows Conway to introduce the theories that are so important in putting these data into context. Those interested in the subject might also

wish to consult *Women and Political Participation*, another product of CQ Books.[2] Conway is a co-author.

Notes

[1]. William H. Flanigan and Nancy H. Zingale, *Political Behavior of the American Electorate*, 9th ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1998).

[2]. M. Margaret Conway, Gertrude A. Steuernagel, and David W. Ahern, *Women and Political Participation* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1997).

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