PARTICIPATORY DISSENT:
A CASE STUDY OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION
IN VANCOUVER'S DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE

by

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ABSTRACT

Literature on political participation suggests that low-income people are not as politically active as other sectors of the population. However, observations of communities like Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside seem to contradict this assertion. The current study is a two-part descriptive investigation of the political behavior of low-income people in the Downtown Eastside which endeavours to gain insight into the low participation rates among low-income people documented in the literature. Part I employs survey methodology (n=161) and is a quantitative investigation of the relationship between sociopolitical control and the political participation of low-income people. Part II is a qualitative investigation of political behavior employing two focus groups (10 participants in total).

The results of this study suggest that the low political participation rates of low-income people documented, in the literature, may to a large extent be due to the way in which political participation is defined in liberal democratic discourse. Low-income people, according to the results, do participate politically, but often in ways that are not typically recognized in liberal democratic discourse as participation. Moreover, the ways in which many low-income people participate appears to be a consequence of their experience of conventional political processes as ineffective or counterproductive. Low-rates of participation, therefore, could more accurately be viewed as high rates of abstention. The implication of these findings for social workers and others interested in promoting political participation is that low rates of political participation among low-income people can more accurately be attributed to the inadequacy of conventional political processes than to the apathy that low-income people are presumed to exhibit. Further research will be needed before these findings can be confidently generalized and applied to other communities.
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[People] make history,
but not in circumstances of their own choosing.

—Karl Marx
**INTRODUCTION**

Citizen participation in community life and local politics is regarded by some as the essence of democracy. Through citizen participation, innovative ideas can be voiced and pursued, public officials and institutions can be influenced and held accountable to those they purport to represent and serve, and citizens can play a role in making decisions which affect them. Since the 1960s, there has been an increasing focus on the role of citizens in democracy which has attempted to extend citizen involvement in politics beyond the mere exercise of the vote to participation in local planning and decision making (Cade, Van Berkel and Lee 1995). Nonetheless, relatively few people in North America take part in government-sponsored participatory initiatives or in grass-roots organizations (Langton 1978). Low rates of citizen participation are the source of a major conundrum in the literature on citizen participation – if citizen participation is so valuable, why do more people not participate? Even more perplexing is evidence which suggests that marginalized populations such as low-income people, whose lives are most directly and profoundly affected by public policies and institutions, are even less inclined to participate politically (Pahl and Wallace 1986; Morrison, Bergman and Rodgers 1982; Redburn, Buss, Foster and Binning 1980; Wright 1976).

Citizen participation is an important concept in social work practice. Social workers involved in community organizing, policy formulation, planning and community-based practice have become increasingly interested in promoting the participation of their constituents, especially since the 1960s (Anisfeld 1981). Low-income people, as the primary consumers of social services, are the target of many of these efforts. Social workers who are interested in promoting the participation of low-income people and communities would be greatly aided in

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1 I choose the term “low-income people” after considerable deliberation. I prefer the term “impoverished” to “poor” because the latter lacks the implicit acknowledgement that the people in question are not just poor (materially at least), but are made poor. However, after talking with some of the people I am trying to describe, I have also become dissatisfied with “impoverished.” As various low-income individuals pointed out to me, “impoverished”, like “poor”, fails to acknowledge that the poverty to which I am referring is specifically material. While people with low-incomes may be materially impoverished, it should be recognized that they are not impoverished in other realms such as morality, emotion, intellect, creativity, etc. Further, “impoverished” and “poor” conjure up, in some people, connotations of passivity, helplessness and pitifulness and should be rejected on this basis. I will, therefore, use the term “low-income” on the suggestion of a woman I met at the Carnegie Centre early in the process of doing this research.
understanding the characteristics and motivations of those who do participate, as well as some of the barriers to participation and the implications of non-participation. This thesis is the product of a two-part study which aims to provide some insights into these issues.

In chapter 1, some of the relevant literature on political participation is presented along with a theoretical overview of the barriers to political participation that disadvantaged groups such as low-income people face. The argument is made in this chapter that poverty, inequalities in the social order, and the mechanisms of power which maintain the social order, interact to constrain and suppress the dissenting voices of many low-income people. Chapter 2 refers briefly to the history of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside as evidence that low-income people and low-income communities are often very politically active despite the constraints on political participation outlined in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, the argument is put forth that the way in which political participation is defined in liberal democratic discourse often undermines and excludes the ways in which many low-income people participate. Low-income people may be involved politically, it is argued, through political activities which fall outside the parameters of liberal democratic discourse and which even oppose it. Two theories—Rational Actors Theory and Locus of Control—are used to explain how the documented nonparticipation of low-income people might be reinterpreted as dissident participation.

Chapters 3 and 4, respectively, describe the methodology and results of a two-part descriptive investigation of the political behavior of low-income people in British Columbia, focusing mainly on the Downtown Eastside. Chapter 5 is a discussion of the results of the study and the significance of nonparticipation in the context of the theoretical framework outlined in Chapters 1 and 2. The limitations of this study are such that the results cannot provide definitive answers. I have not attempted to address race and gender which are extremely important factors in explaining political participation, particularly in the Downtown Eastside. The effects of race and gender on political behavior do need to be addressed but require an in-depth analysis that is not possible within the confines of the current study. Further research may help to illuminate the ways in which race and gender mediate the findings of this study. Despite this study’s limitations, however, a number of conclusions can be drawn from the discussion about where efforts might be focused in order to most effectively promote political empowerment and participatory democracy. Chapter 6 is a summary of these conclusions and an examination of their implications for social work and social research.
CHAPTER 1
THE POLITICS OF PARTICIPATION

Participation is not a plant that grows easily in the human environment. Powerful vested interests, driven by personal greed, erect a number of obstacles to block off routes to people’s political and economic power.

UNDP, Human Development Report

The idea of involving communities in the services and decisions that affect them has become widely valued in social work theory and practice. Evidence exists that community participation in decision-making reduces apathy and hopelessness on the part of the community members who participate (Wallerstein and Bernstein 1988; Cnaan 1991), engenders greater support for and acceptance of the decisions that are made (Langer 1983) and leads to the making of decisions that are more responsive to the community’s needs (Aronson 1993). More broadly, it could be argued that the participation of broader, more diverse communities brings about new means of resolving policy conflict and makes the processes of decision-making, policy-making and service-provision more democratic (Berry 1993). Nonetheless, attempts at promoting citizen participation have often turned out to be less effective and democratic in their implementation than in theory. One study concluded that, despite their pretence of democracy based on community participation, many neighbourhood organizations are clearly oligarchic (Cnaan 1991). Government-initiated participatory processes are rarely representative of the community as a whole (Redburn et al. 1980) and typically elicit only certain types of information (Aronson 1993). Worse still, public decision-makers are often forced to defend the legitimacy of their actions by demonstrating that they have sought the input of those constituents who are most affected by decisions which may already have been made (Bradshaw 1992, cited in Cade et al. 1995). Citizen participation, in this sense, “is sometimes seen as less than empowering and more as a process to ‘be got through’ or even manipulated”
Citizen participation has been the subject of numerous studies in recent years by researchers interested in understanding who participates and why. A number of factors have been identified which help to answer these questions. Some research indicates, for example, that a person's participation in neighbourhood organizations may depend on the importance that person places on issues addressed by the organization, the importance of the neighbourhood to that person, the sense of community in the neighbourhood and the neighbouring behaviors of other people in that neighbourhood (Wandersman and Giamartino 1980). Being well rooted in the community was found in another study to be a factor (Wandersman, Florin, Friedman and Meier 1987), and Davidson and Cotter (1985) found that where there is a strong sense of community, citizens are also more likely to vote, to contact elected officials, and to work on public problems. Other research, however, indicates that it is not so much a sense of community, but the degree of integration into the community that influences voting behavior (Pomper and Sernekos 1991). Additionally, several demographic variables have been identified which seem to effect political participation. Researchers in North America and Scandinavia have linked gender, age, marital status, education and occupation to participation in voluntary organizations (Smith 1975; Togeby 1993; McAdam 1992; Verba and Nie 1972). Similarly, gender and race were found to have a clear mediating effect on participation in protest actions (Krauss 1993).

Among the research findings is a substantial amount of evidence indicating that low-income people are less likely to participate in political actions than are middle-class people (Alford and Scoble 1968; Hyman and Wright 1971). Miliband (1965, 113-115), in fact, summarized numerous studies conducted during the 1950s and 1960s which conclude that participation in all types of political actions (voting, attending political meetings, contacting elected officials, etc) was low among disadvantaged groups such as low-income people. More recent studies have reached similar conclusions. Low-income has been associated with lower voting rates (Wright 1976), lower rates of participation in neighbourhood organizations (Wandersman et al. 1987), and lower rates of participation in broad-based political and social movements (Pahl and Wallace 1986; Krauss 1993). Not only are marginalized populations such as welfare recipients less likely than others to get involved in community processes, according to the research, but they are less likely to speak out or take a leadership role when
they do get involved (Morrison et al. 1982).

While it seems unequivocal from the literature that the participation among low-income people is low in every type of political activity measured, explanations for this phenomenon are much more contentious. In this chapter, I will discuss two conflicting perspectives on the political behavior of low-income people, and put forward the theoretical perspective that guides this study.

Theories of Democracy and Political Participation

Theories of the political behavior of low-income people can be loosely grouped into two perspectives depending on the value placed on the participation of marginalized groups. Those that minimize the importance of the participation of low-income people will be called “conservative” theories. Those which regard the participation of low-income people as essential for authentic democracy will be called “participatory” theories. While there is a great deal of variance of thought within each of these perspectives, grouping democratic theories into these two broad perspectives is a useful starting point for understanding the political behavior of low-income people.

Conservative Perspective

The conservative perspective on political participation argues that the low participation of low-income people is not problematic at all. Assuming that low-income people have the opportunity to participate, conservatives interpret the nonparticipation of low-income people cited in the literature as an indication that they are satisfied with the status quo (Almond and Verba, 1963). Research in the 1950s and 1960s, in fact, seemed to support this assertion by concluding that the disadvantaged are uninterested, uninvolved and indifferent regarding politics. Beyond this silent consent, conservatives argue, the political participation of low-income people is neither necessary nor necessarily desirable. According to some conservative theorists, “limited participation and apathy have a positive function for the whole system by cushioning the shock of disagreement, adjustment and change” (Pateman 1970, 7). Too much

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2 Other authors have made a similar distinction. Rosenau and Paehlke (1990, 139) place Marxist-Leninist and Conservative perspectives together as ideologies which oppose the participation of disadvantaged groups, and Western Marxists, Liberals and New Right Conservatives together as those that favour it. Carol Pateman (1970) makes a similar distinction between “contemporary” and “participatory” theories of democracy.

3 See Rosenau and Paehlke (1990, 126) for a summary of the relevant research.
participation threatens the stability of the democratic system. Low-income people in particular are seen as lacking in the tradition, qualifications, skills, and ambition to make important public decisions—they are believed to “lack the basic qualifications required for the ongoing effectiveness of democracy” (Rosenau and Paehlke 1990, 126). Democracy, in this view, is best left to those who understand it. While this may include some particularly skilled low-income people, most do not possess the requisite skills and need not (and should not) be actively encouraged to participate.

**Participatory Perspective**

The participatory perspective argues that the political participation of low-income people is essential for authentic democracy. Proponents of this perspective reject the conservatives’ assumption that low participation among low-income people indicates a silent consent for the status quo, attributing it instead to political alienation, distrust of public officials, and cynicism about the political system brought about by the failure of the political system to involve the disadvantaged in the political process (Rosenau and Paehlke 1990, 129). For the participatory theorists, societal structures based on power and economics are a fundamental influence on political behavior. Rousseau (1968), for instance, argued that for democracy to be truly participatory, the situation must exist where “no citizen shall be rich enough to buy another and none so poor as to be forced to sell himself” (96). In this view, participation is further mitigated by institutions such as family, school and work that socialize political attitudes and behaviors, and the interaction of societal structures with these institutions (Pateman 1970, 42). Participatory theorists value the participation of all sectors of society. To understand the political behavior of low-income people in this view, it is necessary to understand how societal structures and institutions interact to limit their participation.

**Poverty and Work**

Changes in the Canadian job market over the past two decades have important implications for the political participation of low-income people. There has been a clear deterioration of income security in Canada since the mid-1970s (Bellemaire 1994, 57). Global

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4 This conclusion is not unsupported by the literature. Rosenau and Paehlke (1990, 126) cite studies conducted in the 1950s and 1960s which suggest, among other things, that disadvantaged groups are uninformed, irrational, uninterested in politics.
economic restructuring has led to a sharp and sustained increase in unemployment and underemployment. The official unemployment rate has risen to above 11% compared to 7% in 1975 and just 3.4% in 1966\(^5\) (Forum Directors Group 1994, 5). Between 1990 and 1994, the Canadian economy lost at least 524,000 full-time jobs. At the same time, the proportion of employed workers who work at part-time jobs has increased from 13% in 1980 to 18% in 1993, with 51% of people working part-time in 1993 doing so involuntarily, compared to 14% in 1980. In addition to increasing part-time employment, there has been a growth in non-standard jobs such as contract, temporary and self-employment and a deterioration in wages. The average minimum wage in Canada fell from 94% of the poverty line in 1979 to 70% in 1990. The unemployed have also been affected by global economic restructuring. Pressures to curtail spending on income security programs have led to reduced benefits and tighter restrictions on the receipt of benefits (Forum Directors Group 1994, 7). As a result of these changes, more Canadians are experiencing poverty whether they are employed or not. The proportion of Canadian workers among the working poor increased 30% for families and 57% for single people between 1981 and 1991 (Ross, Shillington and Lochhead 1994) and the overall proportion of Canadians living in poverty increased from 14.2% in 1980 to 16.0% in 1990 (Forum Directors Group 1994, 7). Moreover, the nature of work has changed for many Canadians. Many of the available jobs are in low-skilled occupations where work is mundane and repetitive and workers are interchangeable and easily replaced. Thus changes in the Canadian labour market since the 1970s have led to an increase in poverty and alienation among working class Canadians. These changes and their consequences do not only have an impact on economic security and quality of life. The poverty and alienation produced by these changes, it could be argued, also have an important effect on the political behavior of working class Canadians.

Poverty itself plays a role in shaping the political behavior of impoverished people. Empirical evidence strongly supports the conjecture that impoverished people are simply too preoccupied with daily existence to become involved in activities which make demands of time and energy (Wright 1976, 276). The limits that daily survival place on political participation are particularly acute for women who do the vast majority work in the home (Armstrong and Armstrong 1988), who may also be working for wages outside the home (Nelson 1984, 217), and who are more likely than men to live in poverty, even within a not-so-poor family (Smith 1985, 33). Political activity may also involve a monetary cost (membership dues, transportation, childcare, etc.) making it out of reach for the impoverished. Other researchers have documented a trend among impoverished groups to retreat to the private sphere as the focus of defence in

\(^5\) Except where other references are cited, the source of all statistics in this paragraph is the keynote paper of the 1993 National Forum on Family Security (Forum Directors Group 1994, 5).
times of economic insecurity, rather than engaging in collective class struggle: "A sound pragmatic strategy for... people, concerned to get by as comfortably as possible, is to put their resources of time, energy and skill into making the domestic world seem more secure. At least in that sphere they have some control" (Pahl and Wallace 1986, 382). Economic insecurity itself, therefore, pacifies the impoverished.

The perceived lack of control referred to above is an important concept for explaining the role that capitalist work structures play in alienating and pacifying subordinate classes. Alienation has been an important theoretical concept in sociology for many years. Simply stated, it is a condition in which the self and significant aspects of the physical and social environment are experienced as estranged and out of control (Keefe 1984). An alienated person feels isolated and powerless to influence her/his own destiny and is therefore unlikely to engage in actions to change the structures that cause her/his alienation (Keefe 1984). While many psychological variables have been proposed to explain the behavior of impoverished individuals—often clustered loosely under the term "alienation"—psychological reductionism in itself fails to explain the tendency of impoverished people to remain passive politically despite their relative disadvantage in the social order. Alienation theory is important for understanding the political behavior of subordinate classes because it places the sense of powerlessness and apathy of the impoverished people in the context of capitalist work structures. The structure of work, it should be added, has an effect on both those who work for pay and those who do not. The unemployed, who are called on to replace employed workers who the employer views as demanding, inefficient, or uncompliant, are an important component of the labour force. Furthermore, the income security programs which sustain most unemployed Canadians are geared toward reintegrating the unemployed into work through "various regulations intended to incite, or oblige, able-bodied welfare recipients to seek and take employment or employment training" (McGilly 1990, 168). Moreover, socialization toward working for wages, it could be argued, influences everybody in a capitalist society whether gainfully employed or not: "It is one of those pervasive institutions..., so much a part of our social life that we take it for granted" (McGilly 1990, 53).

Marx identified four dimensions of alienation which occur through the capitalist division of labour: (1) powerlessness over the products of one's work, (2) waste of creative potential, (3) estrangement among people, and (4) loss of identity. In a capitalist market place, the means of production are owned and controlled by a small minority of people. Those

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6 The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan also identified the concept of alienation of the self which he believed occurred when a person came to view her/himself as object rather than as subject (Benvenuto and Kennedy 1986, 111). Marx's "commodity identity" could be interpreted as a form of alienation of the self.
who come to work for the ruling elite have little or no control over the work they do. Nor do they have control over wages and work conditions, especially as unemployment swells and social programs wither away. Since production is owned and controlled by someone other than the worker, so too are the goods and services the worker produces. In a capitalist market, the goods and services produced are separated from the workers who produce them and are sold to an anonymous buyer for a profit which seldom benefits the worker. By removing the worker from the exchange of the goods and services s/he produces, the products of her/his labour, and her/his labour itself, are commodified (Taylor-Gooby 1991, 184). Workers in a capitalist system are thereby reduced to the value of their labour and become simply tools of production—nameless, faceless cogs in the machinery of production. The unemployed, as replacement workers, are spare parts. Treated as commodities and acting as commodities, workers (employed or not) develop what Marx termed "commodity identity"—a sense of self based not on their activity as loving, social, thinking beings, but on their socioeconomic role: carpenter, boilermaker, housewife, unemployed person (Iatridis 1994, 134).

Work itself has little intrinsic meaning for most workers. Most work is designed to make profits for others through the production of commodities that are controlled by others, that are not socially necessary, and that bear no relation to the worker. For many workers, particularly the growing number of Canadians in the lowest-paid sector of the workforce, the monotony and repetitiveness of their work suppresses curiosity and creativity, and stifles their political consciousness. Work causes workers to become preoccupied with the financial compensation received on the job (Rosenau and Paehlke 1990, 133). The wage becomes a form of material cooptation, subverting the worker's perception of unjust treatment (Mueller 1973, 118) and diverting her/his attention toward money and material consumption and away from other values and experiences (Marcuse 1964).

The structure of the capitalist market place not only estranges people from their own human identity, it also estranges people from each other by reducing relationships between people to market relations (Iatridis 1994, 134). In the work place, relationships are constrained by roles in production and the hierarchy of the enterprise. Forced to accept a hierarchically structured decision-making apparatus, workers are conditioned to passivity (Rosenau and Paehlke 1990, 133). Hopes of job security and scarce promotions atomize workers and place them in direct competition with their peers. Relations with people outside the workplace are predominantly anonymous exchanges of commodities which obscure the relation of individual

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7 For an example of the changing nature of work, see Reiter's (1994) account of working in a fast-food restaurant in Canada.
consumers to the collective productivity of humanity (Taylor-Gooby 1991, 184). The consumer is driven to find the best widget for the best price with little if any consideration being given the person who made the widget or her/his wages and work conditions. As a result of this atomization of people, the development of a commodity identity, and the absence of self-determination in work and control over the products of that work, workers derive a profound sense of isolation, powerlessness and apathy (Oldenquist and Rosner 1991; Keefe 1984).

In a related way, the structure of work influences political behavior at the level of political socialization. According to Almond and Verba (1963), opportunities to “participate in decisions at one’s place of work” are of “crucial significance” to the development of political efficacy. “The structure of authority at the work place is probably the most significant—and salient—structure of that kind with which the average man [sic] finds himself in daily contact” (Almond and Verba 1963, 294). In fact, it was found that the more areas in which an individual participated, the more positive their outlook was on political participation. Low-income people, the working poor in particular, have very little opportunity for participation:

It is almost part of the definition of a low status occupation that the individual has little scope for the exercise of initiative or control over his [sic] job and working conditions, plays no part in decision making in the enterprise and is told what to do by his [sic] organizational superiors. (Pateman 1970, 50)

The apparent lack of effort to control their environment, it could be argued, arises, at least in part, from the “deeply ingrained habits of doing what one is told” (Knupfer 1954, cited in Pateman 1970, 50)

The capitalist market place, it could therefore be argued, serves to pacify low-income people through the constraints of poverty itself, through material cooptation in the form of a wage\(^8\), and through an alienating division of work which shapes workers’ self identity and estranges them from significant aspects of their physical and social environment. As the Canadian economy readjusts to the globalization of trade and working class Canadians become dependent on the dwindling social programs or low-paid jobs, the effects of poverty and alienation on the political behavior of working class Canadians are amplified. Still, many authors contend the political behavior of impoverished people cannot be entirely explained by economics and the structure of market relations (Resnick 1990, 119). Many impoverished people, after all, are extremely active in political struggles. Others perceive no injustice to struggle against. Economic determinism ignores the beliefs, attitudes and superstitions that inspire people toward action, or inaction, regardless of their material circumstances (Boggs 1976, 37).

\(^8\) For the unemployed, as will be argued below, material cooptation takes the form of Unemployment Insurance benefits and welfare cheques.
Hegemony and The Base/Superstructure Dialectic

Scientific Marxists, drawing on the base/superstructure metaphor posed by Marx and Engels, assumed that politics, ideology and culture could be understood as elements of the superstructure and therefore simply derivatives of the material base. "In this view subjectivity is regarded as mere 'appearance', with no independent or continuous existence of its own" (Boggs 1976, 36). Antonio Gramsci emphatically rejected such a crude materialist view. He did not deny the primacy of the "base", but rejected the one-directionality that scientific Marxists applied to the relationship between base and superstructure. A one-directional base/superstructure model, Gramsci observed, could not explain why massive social upheaval, conflict, and revolution occurred in history:

The claim presented as an essential postulate of historical materialism, that every fluctuation of politics and ideology can be presented and expounded as an immediate expression of the structure, must be contested in theory as primitive infantilism.... (Gramsci 1991, 407)

Gramsci believed that the base and superstructure must each be understood as distinct entities which together form the totality of the social world in a historicized and dialectical unity (Golding 1992, 89). To explain the political behavior of impoverished people, what must be considered along with the material base are the beliefs, attitudes, superstitions and myths about the world in which they live because, in their capacity to activate or pacify people, these factors are as real as the actual material base itself. If impoverished people attribute their poverty to their own lack of competence or motivation, they will perceive no fault in the socioeconomic system and will not struggle against it. Reflection on the base alone cannot fully explain the political behavior of impoverished people. What must be considered is the material base of capitalist structure, the ideology of the people living within that structure, and how the two interact and reinforce each other.

To conceptualize the reciprocity between base and superstructure in terms of its impact on class relations and political struggle, Gramsci introduced the notion of "hegemony" (Boggs 1976, 38). Hegemony is achieved when the ideals, beliefs, myths, interests and rationalizations of the ruling class have been internalized by subordinate groups and accepted by all as commonsense, natural and permanent (Schweitzer 1989). Disadvantaged groups who internalize the hegemonic ideology perceive no injustice, no alienation, and no need for, nor benefit in, counterhegemonic political activity. While hegemony is never completely achieved, it can be an extremely effective tool of domination:

Where it appeared as a strong force, it fulfilled a role that guns and tanks could never perform. It mystified power relations, public issues, and events; it encouraged a sense of fatalism and passivity towards political action; and it justified every type of system-serving sacrifice and deprivation. In short, hegemony worked in many ways to induce the
oppressed to accept or ‘consent’ to their own exploitation and daily misery. (Boggs 1976, 40)

Hegemonic ideology in a liberal democratic system stresses, among other things, rugged individualism and the belief that success reflects the individual’s efforts and capabilities (Lerner 1986). Impoverished individuals who internalize this ideology blame themselves for their poverty, rather than blaming the constraints of the economic system (Ryan 1976). The value of individualism thereby justifies cutting social programs to curb abuse and save money, and forces the impoverished to accept their lot.

The creation of hegemony involves a number of variables, but depends mainly on the ability of the ruling elite to manipulate attitudes, values and lifestyles through use of state, media, culture, education, religion, etc. (Boggs 1976, 40; Miliband 1969, 209). In advanced capitalist countries, the influence of the ruling elite pervades all these spheres. A few examples should clarify this point.

The Media

In advanced capitalist countries, the media plays a fundamental role in the promotion of the hegemonic ideology. One feminist analysis contends that the media are rooted in exclusionary practices that suppress opposition groups who differ from the dominant group in gender, race and class (McLaughlin 1993). The role of the mass media in shaping popular opinion is widely supported by empirical evidence (Taylor-Gooby 1991, 155) and the influence of the ruling elite on the messages that the mass media promote is apparent in direct and indirect ways. The fact is that the media are controlled by a corporate elite who have a strong vested interest in maintaining the hegemonic order. The words of James Wechsler, editor of the New York Post in 1957, while spoken nearly 40 years ago remain current in their application:

The American press is overwhelmingly owned and operated by Republicans who fix the rules of U.S. political debate. And I use the words ‘fix’ advisedly.

I know it is a freer press than any prevailing in Communist or Fascist countries; but that is nothing to be complacent about. It is a press that has generally grown comfortable, fat, and self-righteous; and which with some noteworthy exceptions voices the prejudices and preoccupations of entrenched wealth rather than those qualities of critical inquiry and rebellious spirit we associate with our noblest journalistic traditions...

It is a press that sanctimoniously boasts of its independence and means by that its right to do what its Republican owners damn please. The press used to be regarded as a public trust, not a private playground.

It is a press that is far more forthright and resolute in combating Communists tyranny in Hungary than in waging the fight for freedom in the United States. (Quoted in Miliband 1969, 230)

Not only are the media owned by corporations, but they depend on the advertising dollars of the corporate sector for their livelihood. Editorial policies, thus, can never detach themselves from
the demands of the corporate sector (Mueller 1973, 99). Media which challenge corporate interests—either directly through targeting a specific company or practice, or indirectly through challenges to the myths and assumptions underlying capitalism—are a bad investment for the advertising dollars of the company wishing to sell its product in the capitalist marketplace. In order to remain competitive, therefore, the media must shape their programming accordingly. As a result, the stories that become “news” reflect the interests of the ruling elite while they hide behind a veneer of “objective” journalism.

The media maintain the hegemonic order in more subtle ways as well. Corporate control of the media not only marginalizes dissident opinions, but in so-doing it also contains political debate within the parameters of the status quo. Analysis of the Mary Tyler Moore Show, for example, reveals not only how hegemonic ideals such as patriarchy are transmitted through the electronic media, but also how the discourse of debate—in this case feminism—is contained. The show was purported to be feminist even though it was found to be full of patriarchal relationships and gender role stereotypes, and thereby helped to define “feminism” in such a way as to make it compatible with the status quo (Dow 1990). In the words of French sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre, “mass media form the taste and dilute judgment. They instruct and they condition. They fascinate and they debase by saturation with images, with ‘news’ that is not newsworthy. They proliferate communication and threaten coherence and reflection, vocabulary and verbal expression, and language itself” (quoted in Mueller 1973, 98). By creating both what is important and how it is debated, the mass media stifle critical enquiry and fortify the hegemonic order. Advertising also serves to entrench hegemonic values and ideologies. Advertising not only sells a product, but it sells the idea of consumption as well. Effective advertisers create images that show business as soulful, public-oriented, and interested in the consumer’s welfare and happiness (Miliband 1969, 211). Advertising engenders values associated with what Tawney called the “acquisitive society” where the route to happiness and success is consumption, private ownership, and competition.

Education, Religion, and the Paraideologies

Education also plays a role, though not an explicit one, in both the promotion of capitalism and in the transmission of capitalist hegemony. Schools play a role in the transmission of culture and in the teaching of the “cultural heritage of a nation.” What is deemed cultural heritage tends to be confined to the interests or experiences of those who hold the power to make such decisions (Jones 1993). The notion of the two founding nations might be an appropriate

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9 The term “paraideology” is borrowed from Habermas and refers to ideology that is presented as neutral, without an explicit normative basis. Its application will become clear in the paragraphs that follow.
Canadian example. It could also be argued that the propagation of dominant cultural beliefs is achieved through intellectuals and the educational elite. Grayson and Grayson (1980), for example, found a common social consciousness and orientation in their comparison of the literary, economic, and political elite of Canada, supporting the contention that Canadian literary intellectuals contribute importantly to preservation of dominant culture and class hegemony. Furthermore, in two studies of 108 English Canadian novels written over a period of 200 years, Grayson (1981; 1983) found very few that challenged either patriarchy or class structure, suggesting that the English Canadian novel is both a manifestation of hegemony and a factor contributing to it.

Public education also tends to confirm and entrench class divisions. Working class children do more poorly in school than do middle class children, have a higher drop out rate, and seldom move into middle class occupations even if successful in school (Canadian Council on Social Development 1994, 19). Bright working class students are taught to escape the working class, and the others are taught—often through streaming into vocational studies—to accept their subordination and integrate into society (Miliband 1969, 242). The few who escape impoverishment reinforce the notion that there is mobility within the social order and serve as examples that the others are where they are due to some type of insurmountable, God-given, personal inadequacy. Schools teach the core values of capitalist production through an emphasis on punctuality, obedience, and hierarchical structure, and inculcate the hegemonic paraideology of science and reason.

The scientific enlightenment brought with it a positivistic way of viewing the world in which science and reason were presumed to be capable of discerning objective, absolute truth that is free from normative bias. However, as feminist writers have been quick to demonstrate, scientism bears with it a distinct bias and protects the status quo by defining both what constitutes legitimate knowledge and who is considered knowledgeable (Ellsworth 1991; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule 1986). By revering rational deliberation as the route to absolute truth, scientism, it could be argued, “has operated in ways that set up as its opposite an irrational Other, which has been understood historically as the province of women and other exotic Others” (Ellsworth 1991, 301). Science demands a rational mind and a degree of formal education, and since not everyone can meet these criteria, scientism creates a knowledge elite which mystifies dominant knowledge, subjugates common knowledge and debunks the dissent of those who are understood as somehow less rational:

Literary criticism, cultural studies, post-structuralism, feminist studies, comparative studies and media studies have by now amassed overwhelming evidence of the extent to which the myths of the ideal rational person and the ‘universality’ of propositions have been oppressive to those who are not European, White male, middle class, Christian, able-
bodied, thin and heterosexual. (Ellsworth 1991, 304)

The acceptance of scientism thus creates a deference to the authority of the experts and a belief in one’s own ignorance (Gaventa 1993, 30). Furthermore, in organizing social life, the normative impotence of scientism bears with it a distinct class bias. The acceptance of scientism allows the organization of social life to appear disconnected from any normative basis, thereby depoliticizing the criteria by which social life is organized (Mueller 1973, 109). Through embracing scientism, the hegemonic order can be promoted as efficient, independent of class interest, and hence, not a subject for debate. Seymour Lispet made a similar analysis by linking declining ideological debate to

the acceptance of scientific thought in matters which have been at the center of political controversy. Insofar as most organized participants (thus the active minority) in the political struggle accept the authority of experts in economics, military affairs, interpretations of the behavior of foreign nations, and the like, it becomes increasingly difficult to challenge the views of opponents on moralistic “either/or” terms. Where there is some consensus among scientific experts on specific issues, these tend to be removed as possible sources of intense controversy. As the ideology of “scientism” becomes accepted, the ideologies of the extreme left and right lose much of their impact. (Quoted in Mueller 1973, 110)

Although the rise of scientism coincided with a decline of religious value systems, religion still plays an important role in the preservation of hegemony. Religious ideology, at least in traditional institutionalized religion, impedes political debate in a number of ways: by stressing the “natural”, God-given character of existing social structures such as private property and “the” family; by preaching the importance of transcendental commitment over everyday, earthly action to change the world; by applauding the supposed moral virtues of poverty and weakness (it is the meek, after all, who will inherit the earth); and by proclaiming the sacrosanct nature of all forms of authority. The Protestant Reformation, in particular, aligned itself with the interests of the ruling elite with its commitment to “the temporal values of hard work, thrift and frugality, sacrifice, self-discipline, etc.” (Boggs 1976, 44). Such values form the core of industrial capitalism with its reliance upon bureaucracy, efficiency, technology and productivity. In fact, as Gramsci argued, it was this puritanical morality that fuelled Fordism in the United States and the creation of an historically new type of person which Gramsci called the “trained gorilla”—a person “so totally submerged in the rationalized work process that pleasure, sensuality, and critical thinking could be expressed in only the most restrictive (and often guilt-ridden) manner” (Boggs 1976, 44).

Nationalism in some ways parallels the influence of church in Western democracies by asking for personal sacrifice in the name of a greater good. Nationalism uses the idea of “national interests” to ask citizens to subdue their other interests (especially class interests) for
the interests of the country, and thus obscures class relations by focusing attention on interests supposedly held in common (Mooers and Sears 1992, 56). Nationalism, however, must be understood as a paraideology. National interests are presented as apolitical and beneficial to all, thereby hiding the implicit (and often explicit) class bias they contain. Successive Canadian governments, for example, have maximized support for and minimized opposition to deficit reduction policies by stressing the need for short-term individual sacrifice for the long-term good of the country. By defining and promoting national interests, therefore, the state itself also plays a role in manufacturing hegemony and containing dissidence.

The State

The role of the state in manufacturing hegemony and containing dissidence is a crucial one. The state participates directly in the forward progress of capitalism in a number of ways: by providing public education and training, by signing free trade agreements, by cutting social programs which uphold wages and undermine profits, and through direct intervention in the economy. Although the globalization of trade creates pressure on governments to intervene less in the economy in a Keynesian sense, the state's presence in economic and monetary policy persists (Mooers and Sears 1992, 62). In fact, capitalist interests stand to benefit from a government that exercises tight control over, for instance, interest rates, inflation and the supply of money (Resnick 1990, 167). Even social programs can be good for business. Social programs which encourage work reintegration through subsidized job placements or workfare undermine wages, integrate the disadvantaged into the capitalist system and provide free labour to companies who are willing to give the unemployed a break. Through globalization, however, economics have transcended state control and obscured the role of state by separating economics from the state's public (political) function. Thus, public decisions such as those concerning debt, deficit and cuts to social programs are able to hide behind a veneer of objectivity, neutrality and international necessity which shrouds the hegemonic order and ideology which underlie such decisions.

The state also plays an important role in stabilizing capitalism and legitimating the social order. Loney (1976), for example, contends that government initiatives in the 1960s and 1970s to increase the democratic participation of disempowered groups actually led to cooptation and the mainstreaming of dissent under a veneer of pluralism. State funded social programs like welfare help to prop up a shaky base by quelling the discontent of impoverished people—by paying off those who benefit least from capitalism (Piven and Cloward 1971). Furthermore, dependence on social programs, particularly where coupled with a strong stigma, carries with it a
sense of shame and engenders a “don’t bite the hand that feeds you” mentality that stifles meaningful dissent. In the words of Richard Titmuss:

Welfare, as an institutional means can serve different masters. A multitude of sins may be committed in its appealing name. Welfare can be used simply as a tool for economic growth which, by benefiting a minority, indirectly promotes greater inequality.... Welfare can be used used to narrow allegiances and not to diffuse them—as in employers’ fringe benefit system. Individual gain and political quietism, fostered by the new feudalism of the corporation, may substitute for the sense of common humanity nourished by systems of non-discriminatory mutual aid. (Titmuss 1964, 33)

Business leaders and political elite have made similar observations noting that income security programs are a significant reason “why there isn’t blood in the streets” (Loney 1977, 446)

Nonetheless, some caution should be taken when aligning the state with capitalism. The apparent alignment of state and capitalism, it could be argued, is more the result of a system of power relations which transcends state structures than the result of the state itself wielding power:

I don’t want to say that the State isn’t important; what I want to say is that relations of power, and hence the analysis that must be made of them necessarily extends beyond the limits of the State... because the State, for all the omnipotence of its apparatuses, is far from being able to occupy that whole field of actual power relations, and further because the State can only operate on the basis of other, already existing power relations. The state is superstructural in relation to a whole series of power networks that invest body, sexuality, the family, kinship, knowledge, technology and so forth. (Foucault, in Gordon 1980, 122)

Furthermore, as capitalism transcends the nation-state, the state loses much of its power:

The inherited institutions, including the political parties and the democratic system, no longer seem to respond to people’s urgent needs and demands. This is true on the level of the economy. Here we see the dissolution of the national economies into the one global capitalist economy, controlled by transnational mega-corporations.... But while the economy has become global, the institutions that controlled the economy in the past, governments and labour unions, are still national. (Baum 1989, 14)

Conclusion

The democratic dream—that is, the conservative perspective—is that we are all equals, that we all have equal opportunity to express our political opinions, that we all have equal power. However, I have argued with the participatory theorists that this ideology is false. The changes in employment brought about by globalized trade are not only impoverishing working class Canadians, but are simultaneously undermining their ability to struggle for change. Increasing poverty has meant increases in the time and energy needed to survive, and has relegated many impoverished Canadians to the private sphere where they exercise at least some control. The changes in work and increasing unemployment leave both employed and unemployed workers feeling alienated and powerless. The loss of full-time jobs and consequent reliance on low-skilled, low-paying, meaningless work jobs suppresses curiosity and creativity, and stifles political
consciousness.

As capitalism transcends the boundaries of the nation-state, however, the entrenchment of the values, ideologies and myths that support it must also be examined in their capacity to subvert political dissent. As the public and private institutions of media, education, religion and state combine to inculcate the capitalist hegemony, impoverished people come to accept as true and natural the ideology underlying the capitalist expansion which impoverishes and immobilizes them. Hegemonic ideology is thus simultaneously a consequence of and a support for the material base.

What must be considered along with specific ideologies such as rugged individualism and deficit-reduction fetishism, however, is the role of paraideologies in diverting attention away from systemic inequities. The scientific enlightenment brought with it a way of thinking about the world where reality could supposedly be separated from any normative basis and discerned in absolute objectivity. The widespread acceptance of scientism marginalizes dissent and has allowed economics and the role of state to appear disconnected from their normative basis and independent of class interest, thereby depoliticizing the criteria by which social life is organized. The existing order has therefore emerged as neutral, natural and, although subject to reform within the confines of the existing structure, unchangeable.

Capitalist structures, ideologies and the institutions that shape ideology, it would therefore seem, reinforce one another and interact to maintain the status quo and to suppress dissent. Nonetheless, it must be recognized that there is growing dissent among unemployed and impoverished Canadians which is expressed in their everyday life if not through conventional political processes. In the next chapter, I will briefly explore some of the literature on grassroots struggles and a theoretical perspective which assumes a degree of active participation in political behavior which may account for nonparticipation as well as participation.
Where there is power, there is resistance.
Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1.

It has been argued, so far, that societal structures and power relations greatly constrain the political participation of low-income people. While this may explain the low overall participation among low-income people, it fails to explain how many low-income people and groups nonetheless do become active—extremely active in many cases—in all kinds of political activities. As Hasson and Ley (1994) observe, the first half of Karl Marx’s adage “Men [sic] make history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing” has often been overshadowed in political theory by the second half (311).

Despite the constraints of circumstance, disadvantaged populations such as low-income people often do become politically active. Gramsci’s observations of social upheaval, conflict and revolution as they occurred in history, in fact, led him to the formulation of the concept of hegemony discussed previously. Gramsci argued that, while hegemony has an overall tendency toward pacifying disadvantaged groups, hegemony is not static and is never fully achieved (Boggs 1976, 38). Similarly, Castells (1983; 1978) rejects the assumption that “technology, nature, economy, culture and power come together to form the city which is then imposed on its dwellers as given” (1983, 1). Such social darwinism fails to explain urban social movements such as the communes of Paris and Castilla which were led by citizens and which significantly transformed the urban experience. From his research on cities, Castells concludes that “the definition of the city for each society is what historical actors struggling in such a society try to make it” (1983, 71). Hasson and Ley (1994) argue that the process whereby “structural or macrostructural features are read, deconstructed, and reconstructed by active human beings” is
more complex than Castells' analysis accounts for, but nonetheless agree with the proposition that “people may react to structural forces, changes and even crises in varied ways, by opting for exit, resistance, or adaptation, or by retreating into apathy” (311). In short, there is always a degree of counterhegemonic activity, or resistance, observed among subordinated groups.

The History of Struggle in the Downtown Eastside

The Downtown Eastside, long known as Vancouver's skid row, is an example of resistance and human agency in action. The Downtown Eastside has a long history of poverty and marginalization. According to some accounts,10 the Downtown Eastside has long been the most marginalized district in the city, neglected by the state or mired in the discourse of “skid row” and “tax sinks.” Nonetheless, it also has a long history of conflict and activism.

The Downtown Eastside is Vancouver's oldest neighbourhood and was, for many years, the site of all kinds of industrial activity as well as dozens of businesses serving the workers and people arriving at the docks. As a result of its intensely industrial base and working class population, the Downtown Eastside became a hotbed of political mobilization during the depression of the 1930s when it was the locus of countless demonstrations and labour marches as well as several bitter conflicts with the police. The sites of many of these conflicts remain intact today as a symbolic reminder of the Downtown Eastside’s labour history.11 Following the second world war, business and industry in the area failed to recover and the population of the Downtown Eastside became even more marginal to mainstream society. There was by then a high concentration of retired workers living in the area, many of whom had been injured or disabled in industrial accidents. By the 1960s, a population of transient middle-aged and elderly men, transient youth and displaced Native people had moved in. Poverty and unemployment were very high, and crime and substance abuse were rampant. By the late 1960s, the Downtown Eastside was recognized publicly as skid row, and plans were soon made to redevelop and renovate parts of the neighbourhood.

Redevelopment plans, however, sparked a new era of mobilization in the Downtown

10 This brief account of the history of the Downtown Eastside is taken almost exclusively from Hasson and Ley (1994, 172-204).

11 Oppenheimer Park (then the Powell Street Grounds), for example, was a rallying place for many demonstrations and labour marches. Victory Square was the site of a demonstration which ended with Mayor McGreer reading the Riot Act to the demonstrators. Carnegie Centre was part of many protest actions and, in fact, became the central issue in a successful series of protest aimed at keeping Carnegie as a community centre and library for the Downtown Eastside.
Eastside. With redevelopment came eviction notices to many of the low-income and often long-term residents of the hotel and rooming houses in the area. Redevelopment thus stimulated the organization and mobilization of Downtown Eastside residents interested in consolidating stable, decent and affordable housing for themselves and for other low-income people. Central to this struggle was the Downtown Eastside Residents' Association (DERA) which formed in August 1973. DERA’s membership grew steadily through the 1970s and 1980s. By 1980, DERA claimed 4,500 members. The efforts of DERA and others through the 1970s and 1980s won some important improvements for the area including tighter regulation of housing standards, the preservation of important community services such as CRAB Park and Carnegie Centre, and the creation of hundreds of new social housing units. By 1990, in fact, DERA had become one of the largest landlords in the Downtown Eastside.

Many struggles undertaken by DERA and others during this period were less successful. In fact, the gains made by the Downtown Eastside residents came after many attempts to bring about change had failed. Moreover, the struggles of the Downtown Eastside around issues such as poverty, housing and gentrification are far from over. The residents of the Downtown Eastside continue to struggle in a variety of ways and through a variety of organizations. Nonetheless, these struggles, whether won, lost or ongoing are an indication that people in communities like the Downtown Eastside are actively involved in community life. DERA has not been the only organization active in the Downtown Eastside since the 1970s and is not the only organization active now. Many associations, committees and individuals are actively struggling for change in the neighbourhood. However, DERA is an important part of a history of the Downtown Eastside which is testament to the capacity of local communities and citizens to mobilize and struggle, often successfully, despite their material disadvantage.

It is clear that the Downtown Eastside has a rich history of resistance and political conflict which follows through into the present. However, what is puzzling is the incongruity of this conclusion with the body of research which indicates that low-income people tend not to be very politically active. An important question therefore remains unanswered: “Is the Downtown Eastside simply an exception or are there other factors which account for the coexistence of these seemingly contradictory conclusions?”
The Democratic Myth

Within liberal democratic discourse, the expression political dissent typically has well-defined parameters. Dissent can be expressed through voting, through contact with the elected representatives, through government-initiated participatory processes, or in some cases through lobby and protest. Moreover, when lobby or protest tactics are employed, they are seen in conventional wisdom as ineffectual if they are not organized. However, there is evidence of resistance and dissent outside of these conventional parameters. Kerkvliet (1994), for example, looked at everyday resistance in the Philippines—"what people do short of organised confrontation that reveals disgust, anger, indignation, or opposition to what they regard as unjust or unfair actions by others more wealthy or powerful than they" (236)—and argues that unorganized, individual acts of resistance are not only commonplace, but can be an effective means of protest. Illegal activity and the underground economy can also be viewed as resistance since they both subvert the capitalist economy. Bougois (1994) contends that illegal activity in Spanish Harlem is both a response to and a consequence of a social order where gross economic inequalities conflict with a strong emphasis in socialization toward getting money.

Confining an analysis of political participation to electoral processes and organized protest, therefore, may not result in a complete picture of the political participation of low-income people. In fact, there is some evidence that nonparticipation in conventional processes is a result of the constraints placed on participation by liberal democratic discourse. Government-initiated participatory processes may be rejected as ineffective or even counterproductive. In Vancouver, citizen expectations of participatory processes that evolved during a mood of decentralization at all levels of government during the 1970s were high and invariably disappointed (Hasson and Ley 1994, 268). Some authors have gone as far as to argue that government-sponsored initiatives are no more than deliberate and "sophisticated strategies for reincorporating potentially dissident groups into the mainstream of society" (Loney 1977, 446). Although Loney's theory is arguably a conspiracy theory, others have shared his skepticism about mandated citizen participation endeavours. According to one Vancouver agency active in the 1970s, the state's strategy to increase community participation was simply "a sham attempt to dupe citizens into being manipulated by civic bureaucrats" (Hasson and Ley 1994, 269). As Bradshaw (1992) observes, "elected officials are frequently forced to
defend the legitimacy of their actions particularly since they lack representation of constituencies affected by policies or plans that are being developed" (cited in Cade et al. 1995). Participation, in other words, may be used to legitimate decisions already made or actions already taken. Bregha in 1973 (cited in Cade et al. 1995) noted that certain disadvantaged groups were not participating in politics because of their perception that the process did little other than maintain the status quo.

Electoral processes, for example, may be rejected as ineffective and unresponsive to local needs. Hager (1993) attributes the rise of grassroots organizations in Germany, in part, to a loss of faith in electoral and representative processes. Moreover, voting plays an important role in legitimating the democratic myth and its assumption of equality. The liberal democratic state, it could be argued, stifles dissent through the very institutions which we call “democratic.” Democratic theory and elections become a legitimating ideology which mediates against questioning the system (Rosenau and Paehlke 1990, 133). “The act of voting is a part of a much larger political process, characterised... by marked inequalities of influence. Concentration on the act of voting itself, in which formal equality does prevail, helps to obscure that inequality, and serves a crucially important legitimating function” (Miliband 1969, 194). Voting signifies consent for the electoral process and diverts voter attention away from the inequalities inherent in the social order and onto the the state and the candidate running for office. Citizens of modern democracies thus pursue contradictory goals. By participating in government enough to legitimate the state but not enough to change it, voters are themselves consenting to the preservation of the status quo and the forward progress of capitalism (Habermas 1976, 77). Nonparticipation in electoral processes, therefore, could be interpreted as a refusal to legitimate the electoral process or a reaction to a political system which is experienced as unresponsive and meaningless.

**Rational Actors Theory**

Rational actors theory provides a theoretical context which is consistent with this conclusion. Rational actors theory assumes people behave in a rational, purposeful manner (Uhlner 1986). People will participate in political activities, therefore, when the expected utility of participating exceeds the utility of abstention. A number of studies support this theory by concluding that the decision to participate or not participate in political activities involves an
analysis of the costs and benefits of participating (Moe 1980; Rich 1980; Wandersman et al. 1987; Chong 1993). This theory thus presents an interesting hypothesis about the political behavior of low-income people by interpreting both their participation and nonparticipation as rational, meaningful acts.

Taken at face value, rational actors theory seems to have difficulty in reconciling that people do participate, even when their individual effort produces minimal change or entrenches the status quo. However, recent reformulations of the theory are careful to articulate rational action in such a way as to include intangible social and psychological costs and benefits as well as personal and material ones (Uhlaner 1986). Wandersman et al. (1987) found that helping others was a more salient factor in the decision to participate in neighbourhood organizations than was material gain. Chong (1993) argues that not participating in a successful political movement can be as costly in terms of the group belonging and satisfaction as participating in ineffective ones. Voting may be perceived as beneficial even if it does not produce change. Socialization which emphasizes the exercise of the vote as not only an opportunity but a duty creates psychological benefits for participation and costs for nonparticipation (Uhlaner 1986). Conversely, if, as argued above, voting is viewed simply as a waste of time or as legitimating an unjust social order, the perceived utility of abstaining from voting may exceed the utility of voting. Nonetheless, a rational act need not be a highly conscious one. While it may be the result of a complex set of assumptions and deductions, a rational act may simply be one that is logical and sensible given the actor's material experience. A person who experiences voting as a waste of time, therefore, acts rationally by not voting at subsequent elections whether s/he views electoral politics as related to injustices in the social order or not.

Rational actors theory, then, provides a theoretical understanding of how the low political participation of low-income people may be interpreted as a form of resistance—that is, a rejection of established political processes as ineffective or even illegitimate. If it is accepted, as established earlier, (1) that the political participation of low-income people is constrained in a number of ways and (2) that many forms of political participation can be interpreted as actually silencing dissenting voices and legitimating an unjust social order, then the abstention of low-income people from participating in many political processes, regardless of the consciousness of the individual actor, is a rational act. Nonetheless, in order to conclude that low rates of participation among low-income people have significance as a form of participation, it must first
be established that nonparticipation is, at least to a significant extent, the result of a perception that taking part in the conventional forms of political participation yields few positive results. One way to test this assertion is to compare the political behavior of low-income people to a measure of how much influence they perceive they have in the sociopolitical context. Locus of control provides one such measure.

**Locus of Control**

According to the theoretical conception of locus of control, individuals can be differentiated on a measure of how much control they feel they have over their environment and the outcome of their actions (Rotter 1971). People who feel they have the ability to influence their environment are said to have an internal locus of control. People who feel their situation and environment is controlled by forces outside their control, conversely, are said to be external in their locus of control. Defined as such, locus of control is a useful concept for understanding motivation. People who do not value the outcome of a particular action or do not believe that acting will lead to the desired outcomes will not engage in that behavior. The results of Phares (1962) confirm that reinforcement is not the only determinant of a particular behavior, but that there must also be an expectation that the occurrence of that reinforcement is linked to that behavior. The motivation of students, for example, has been clearly linked to locus of control (Nundy and Singhal 1981; Garner and Cole 1986). Students who are external in their locus of control are less motivated because they attribute scholastic achievement to luck, fate, or the control of powerful others rather than to their own abilities and efforts. They do not try because they feel their efforts are futile.

Locus of control can be used to explain political participation. Rotter (1966) confirmed his hypothesis that externals are less likely to participate in attempts to control their environment than are internals because they perceive they have little personal power to make a difference. Numerous studies have reported similar findings by linking higher political participation rates to a sense of personal efficacy (Renshon 1974; Rosen and Salling 1971; Barber 1969; Almond and Verba 1963; Dahl 1961). Other pioneer studies found that internals were more likely than

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12 More recent formulations often do away with the internal-external continuum and speak instead of “high control” versus “low control”.

13 See Rotter (1966), Phares (1976), or Lefcourt (1976) for a more complete discussion of the behavioural correlates of locus of control.
externals to become civil rights activists (Gore and Rotter 1963; Strickland 1965), were more likely to join unions, were more active in those unions, and had greater general knowledge about political affairs than did externals (Seeman 1964, cited in Rotter 1966, 21). Internal locus of control has also been positively correlated with cognitive dimensions of political involvement (knowledge and comprehension of political processes) and affective dimensions of political involvement (political cynicism and attachment to government) (Sigel 1975) as well as with initial involvement in neighbourhood actions (Wandersman et al. 1987; Wandersman and Giamartino 1980). High external locus of control, conversely, has been correlated with less activism (Lefcourt 1976), alienation from community life, apprehension about participating in community organizations, and low involvement in local political decisions (Paulhus 1983).

How much people feel they are able to make a difference, therefore, seems to influence how much they participate politically.

Locus of control derives mainly from social learning theory which assumes that to understand the individual, the individual must be considered within her/his meaningful environment (Phares 1976, 11). A person’s expectation that they have some control over their environment, therefore, is assumed to develop from reality and that person’s past experience. Numerous studies in various contexts support this assumption. Alloy, Clements and Koenig (1993), for example, concluded that the actual relationship between behavior and outcome was a major determinant of the perception of control. Thompson (1993) found that chronic illness, and other situations where control is actually reduced, influences people’s general perception of control. Other researchers have found that people who are dependent on others come to attribute outcomes to the control of others rather than to their own behavior (Brehm 1993). Consistent with this finding, Blackburn (1991) found that welfare systems help to take that feeling of control away from people. A person’s perception of control (that is, locus of control), therefore, clearly has a basis in material reality. After reviewing the literature, Lefcourt (1976) comes to the conclusion that “access to opportunity for contingent responses, then, whether in the home or in the larger social milieu, seems to be essential in the development of locus of control” (149). “The implication is that those social and ethnic groups that have relatively little access to significant power, social mobility, opportunity, or material advantages will manifest relatively higher external scores” (Phares 1976, 151).

Despite its basis in material reality, a person’s perception of control is not necessarily
an accurate perception. Wortman (1975) and Langer (1975)\textsuperscript{14} found that subjects in an experimental situation often attribute an element of control even to outcomes that depend purely on chance.\textsuperscript{15} The same is no less true in nonexperimental situations. Imagine, for example, the person who carefully chooses her/his numbers for a lottery, or the observed tendency of people who play craps to roll the dice lightly when they want low numbers and harder when they want high numbers (Wortman 1975). People may also perceive less control than they actually have. In new situations, individuals must rely on perceptions of control which develop through experiences in similar types of situations or from a generalized sense of control drawn from the accumulation of past experiences (Phares 1976, 15). A person who has experienced very little in the way of control in the past, therefore, will perceive very little control in new situations even if s/he actually is in a position to exert some influence. Michael Lerner (1986) describes almost exactly this phenomenon at the group level. Lerner maintains that while disadvantaged groups do have limited power, they often develop what he terms “surplus powerlessness”: a generalized perception of powerlessness which persists and immobilizes people even in situations where they do have some power.

According to Fisher (1984), social and economic deprivation weaken sense of control: “Poverty curtails freedom of choice. The freedom to eat as you wish, to go where and when you like, to seek the leisure pursuits or political activities which others accept; all are denied to those without resources.” A number of studies indicate that low-income people generally perceive a low level of control. Garcia and Levenson (1975) found that low-income students are more external in locus of control than the general population of students. Other researchers have found that lower-class blacks are more external than middle-class blacks, middle class children are more internal than lower class children (Battle and Rotter 1963), and that low-income mothers are more external than mothers in general (Ramey and Campbell 1976). In fact, strong evidence exists to support the claim that people with lower socioeconomic status are generally more external in locus of control than the general population (Gruen and Ottinger 1969; Rotter 1966). Consistent with this literature, Piven (1968) contends that one of the main

\textsuperscript{14} In fact, a number of studies conducted in the 1950s and 1960s arrive at the same conclusion. See Wortman (1975) or Langer (1975) for a more complete review of the relevant literature.

\textsuperscript{15} While neither of these authors offer a definitive reason for this phenomenon, Langer (1975) does include a discussion of the “just world” hypothesis and a review of the literature that supports it. The “just world” hypothesis contends that since many people have a general belief that good things happen to good people, chance events are often attributed to merit and/or skill.
reasons for the relatively low rates of political participation among the urban poor is that they have little belief in their ability to affect their world. The constraints of poverty lead to a perception—which reflects the reality of living in poverty—that an individual has little influence over her/his environment, and therefore little motivation to engage in actions to bring about change. Many researchers have attributed a sense of fatalism, passivity and alienation among impoverished and powerless people to a perceived lack of control.\textsuperscript{16}

The literature on locus of control as it relates to political participation, however, is not entirely consistent. A number of studies suggest that externals are more politically active than internals (Silvern and Nakamura 1971; Thomas 1970). Other studies have failed to link locus of control to sociopolitical participation in any way (Geller and Howard 1972; Evans and Alexander 1970; Rotter 1966). The inconsistency in the literature seems to indicate a need for a multidimensional conception of locus of control (Zimmerman and Zahniser 1991; Paulhus 1983). Numerous studies point to a need to differentiate between mastery over private life and perceived impact on sociopolitical institutions (Joe and Jahn 1973; Lao 1970; Gurin, Gurin, Lao and Beattie 1969). Other authors provide evidence for further subdivision of locus of control along more dimensions (Paulhus 1983; Collins 1974). A person’s perceived control within one sphere may be different from perceived control in another (Zimmerman and Zahniser 1991). A housewife who can manage a family of four, for example, may feel completely alienated from decision-making at the local school board. A measure of control that is specific to the sociopolitical sphere may allow researchers to study aspects of behavior that are specific to that sphere, and may help to clarify some of the inconsistencies in research relating to locus of control and political activism (Paulhus 1983).

Other studies suggest that locus of control may not be as important for understanding how active people are politically as it is for understanding the types of political activities they engage in (Sigel 1975; Anisfeld 1981; Longus 1976). Silvern and Nakamura (1971) found externality to be associated with participation in protest activity and left-wing causes. Non-

\textsuperscript{16} There is some evidence for a close link between locus of control and alienation. Rotter (1966), in fact, believed alienation to be the sociological equivalent of locus of control—a type of locus of control that operates at the group level rather than at the individual level. Other evidence supports Lacan’s notion of alienation of the self as subject. Elkins (1961) and Bettelheim (1943) observed a detached docility among oppressed groups despite the horrors that exist all around them (Blacks in the southern U.S. in Elkins’ case and Jews in concentration camps in Bettelheim’s), and attributed it mostly to the loss of the sense of as a differentiated individual, a subject or actor [cited in Lefcourt (1976, 20)].

\textsuperscript{17} For a complete review of the literature relevant to this point, see Lefcourt (1976, 15-24).
leftist were found to be more internal. Anisfeld (1981) differentiated between political behaviors that he grouped as “radical” and those he grouped as “conventional”, and found that individuals with a sense of low person control over the extant political context (external locus of control) were geared toward radical, extrasystemic political activity. People who sensed they had more control over the extant context (internal locus of control), on the other hand, were more involved in established political procedures such as voting and party politics. Similarly, Longus (1976) found that activists who are external in locus of control are more likely to become engaged in collective political behavior than in individual-oriented activities such as voting. Thus, the inconsistency in the literature about locus of control and political participation may reflect a failure in the research to consider the meaning the actor attaches to her/his perception of control in addition to the perception of control itself.

Conclusion

Although the existing research is not entirely consistent, there is considerable evidence that locus of control affects both how active people are politically and the type of political activity they engage in (individual vs. collective, conventional vs. radical). Consistent with rational actors theory, locus of control assumes that people act in a rational, purposeful manner based on, in this case, a perception of how much difference their participation is going to make. People who feel their participation in the political system is ineffectual or counterproductive will abstain from participating or will participate in ways that they perceive to be more effective or satisfying. Although people's perceptions of political efficacy are not always entirely conscious or entirely accurate, these perceptions nonetheless derive from their past experiences and life circumstances. Low-income people, whose choices are constrained by social and economic deprivation and by alienating work places or a welfare system that curtails freedoms, often perceive relatively little control and thus participate less.

Nonetheless, it should not be assumed that low-income people do not participate. The history of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, for example, provides adequate proof that many low-income people are extremely tenacious and effective political activists. In fact, it could be argued that political dissent is much more pervasive among low-income people than much of the literature on political participation recognizes. According to Michel Foucault (1978), resistance is present wherever there is power. However, resistance and political dissent do not always
occur through the channels deemed legitimate by liberal democratic discourse. In fact, for low-income people and other disadvantaged groups, political dissent may be a reaction to an unresponsive political system and an unjust social order, and may be expressed through abstention from participating in those processes or participation in others. For some the decision to abstain may simply be a subconscious reaction to their accumulated experience with ineffective political processes. For others, abstention may reflect a more conscious rebellion against political processes and the social order. However, since in both cases the actor makes an evaluation about the utility of participation and abstention, abstention can be construed as a rational, political act.

The degree to which low-income people are involved in political activity, therefore, may be underestimated in the literature. In the next chapter, I will embark on a description of a two-part study of the political participation and nonparticipation of low-income people in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Rational actors theory was used above to argue that nonparticipation can be a political act: abstention. For this to be true, however, depends on the assumption that at least part of the reason low-income people do or do not participate in political activities has to do with how much positive change they feel their participation or abstention will make. While countless other factors also play a role in determining an individual’s political behavior, it should be possible to demonstrate that an analysis of how much positive influence an individual can have through the established political processes is a salient factor in her/his decision to participate or not. Part I of this study investigates the relationship between how much influence an individual feels s/he can exert through various forms of political participation, and how much s/he participates in them. Part II aims to elaborate on the results of Part I to gain a better understanding of the political attitudes and behaviors of low-income people in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside and the significance, if any, of nonparticipation.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Design

The current study is a two-part descriptive investigation of the political participation of low-income people in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Part I uses survey methodology to describe the relationship between sociopolitical control and the political participation of low-income people who are affiliated with any of five specified community agencies. Part II uses focus group methodology to explore attitudes that low-income people in the Downtown Eastside have about particular forms of political participation. While participants were recruited from all over British Columbia, the majority of the study was conducted in the Downtown Eastside using people who are part of the Downtown Eastside community. Part II of the study was conducted entirely in the Downtown Eastside.

Part I: The Questionnaire

Agency Settings

Questionnaires were distributed through five community organizations that serve low-income people in British Columbia. Federated Anti-Poverty Groups (FAPG) is a coalition of anti-poverty groups from throughout British Columbia and provides supports to its members in various ways including the provision of welfare advocacy training workshops. The Vancouver and District Public Housing Tenants’ Association (VDPHTA) is a Vancouver-based organization which serves the tenants of public housing in the lower mainland. The Dugout is a drop-in centre in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside where men and women with little money can watch television, organize meetings, or socialize over a game of cards and a cup of coffee. First United Church also serves as a drop-in centre for low-income people in the Downtown Eastside and provides welfare advocacy as well as a variety of other support services. Carnegie Centre is an extremely active community centre in the Downtown Eastside which provides low-income
people numerous services and resources including a cafeteria which serves meals for a reasonable price, a library, an adult learning centre, meeting rooms, a theatre and much more.

Participants

Participants were recruited from the staff and clientele of the five agency settings through convenience sampling. To be included in the study, participants had to define themselves as low-income and had to be present at the setting on the days the questionnaires were being distributed. Convenience sampling was determined to be the most feasible sampling method given the population of the study and the level of the design.

Sampling procedures varied slightly across the different settings. Subjects were recruited at the Dugout and First United Church through face-to-face contact. Volunteer staff and clientele who were present at the Dugout on the day of the study were approached individually; were given a brief introduction to the study, its purpose, the means of ensuring confidentiality, the participant’s right to refuse to participate, etc.; and were asked to complete a questionnaire. At First United Church, participants were recruited through face-to-face contact with two groups who meet there regularly. After introducing the study to the group and answering any questions they had, questionnaires and pens were made available at various locations in the meeting room and all group members who were interested in the study were invited to complete a questionnaire. At Carnegie Centre, a sign was posted to invite people to participate in the study. Those who were interested in the study approached the researcher who introduced the study to them, answered any questions they had about the study and invited them to complete a questionnaire. Each subject at these three agencies was given the option of self-administering the questionnaire or having the researcher (or another person) administer it in interview form. A total of 7 participants requested researcher assistance in completing the questionnaire. All other questionnaires (161 in total) were self-completed. Questionnaires completed at the Dugout, First United Church and Carnegie Centre were returned to the researcher on the same day. Six questionnaires were distributed and not returned.

Questionnaires at FAPG were distributed to participants throughout British Columbia through welfare advocacy training workshops and through face to face contact between members. Most were distributed by the animator of the workshops and collected the same day. A few were mailed in. Questionnaires distributed through the VDPHTA were printed in the bimonthly
newsletter which goes out to approximately 4,500 public housing tenants in the the lower mainland. Participants were asked to mail the completed questionnaires to the VDPHTA head office.

The total sample consisted of two subsamples. To improve response rates and due to problems of feasibility with printing the full questionnaire, a short form of the questionnaire was circulated through VDPHTA. The total sample consisted of 161 completed questionnaires: 117 full forms (22 from First United Church, 20 from The Dugout, 10 from Carnegie Centre, and 65 from FAPG), and 44 short forms (from VDPHTA). Differences in procedures used for sampling and collecting completed questionnaires account for the differences in response rates. 70 (43%) of the sample of 161 were men, 90 (56%) were women. One participant was self-identified as transgender. The largest proportion of participants was those who were single with no children (58%), but approximately one participant in four (24%) was a single mother (there were no single fathers reported), most of whom had children who were under school age (58%). The participants ranged in age from 17 to 76 years (x=44 years) and had lived in the communities they currently live in for anywhere from two weeks to 36 years. The education of the participants is difficult to measure. Half of the participants had a grade 12 education or higher, but a broad range of other types of education was also reported. Many had certificates in a variety of trades and occupations, others were self-taught or trained on the job. A number of participants had either previously taken or were currently enrolled in courses ranging from high school upgrading, to business administration, to community organizing.

**Measures**

Variables were measured through a questionnaire developed for this study consisting of three sections: demographics, sociopolitical locus of control, political participation (see Appendix A). There was also a space on each questionnaire for comments. The short form consisted only of the first two sections.

Locus of control was measured using the Sociopolitical Control Scale (SPCS)

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18 See “Measures” below for a description of the short form and the rationale for using it.

19 The fact that one person reported being transgender shows how the assumptions of the researcher can enter into questionnaire development. The gender variable on this questionnaire was presented as a dichotomous variable (Female, Male)—a forced choice as it turns out. I suspect that more of the participants would have checked “transgender” if it had been offered as a category.
developed by Zimmerman and Zahniser (1991). The SPCS is a 17-item instrument with two subscales (leadership competency and policy control) and fairly good internal consistency. Alphas for the subscales range from 0.75 to 0.78. The SPCS also has good construct validity. Correlations have been found in the predicted directions between the SPCS and measures of locus of control, alienation, and willingness to lead, and both subscales have been shown to differ with different levels of participation in community activities.

The SPCS was chosen as the measure of locus of control because of its established reliability and validity, and because it measures locus of control as it relates specifically to the sociopolitical sphere.

Political participation was measured using an 11 item instrument developed for this study. Since the existing literature suggests that locus of control is related to both rates and types of political participation, the political participation scale consists of items designed to include a broad range of types of participation. Since this is a new scale, pretests were conducted to determine face validity and reliability. Information regarding test/retest reliability and concurrent validity is not available. Content validity was established through informal interviews with staff members of two of the agency settings (First United Church and The Dugout), activists in the Downtown Eastside (contacted through the agency staff) and a professor from the U. B. C. School of Social Work. These six experts assessed 2-3 drafts of items for the political participation scale to determine if each item accurately represented the behavior it intended to measure. Pretests were conducted at two of the agency settings (First United Church and the Dugout) with people drawn from the population of study. Pretest participants (6 at each agency) were asked to complete the questionnaire, paying special attention to questions that seemed out of place, difficult to understand or ambiguous, and noting any relevant topics that seemed to be missing. After completing the questionnaire, participants at each setting met informally as a group to discuss matters of reliability and face validity. Feedback from the pretest was incorporated into the final design of the questionnaire.

The short form consisted of demographics and the Sociopolitical Control Scale and was used at the VDPHTA because the full questionnaire was too long to publish in the VDPHTA newsletter. Furthermore, it was felt that people would be more likely to complete and return a shorter questionnaire. Data from the short form were only used for the descriptive analysis of demographics, SPC and associations between the two (n=161). Only the completed
full questionnaires were used to investigate associations between these variables and political participation (n=117).

**Procedures**

Part I of this study is a descriptive investigation employing survey methodology. Surveys were distributed and collected through the five agency settings. Written permission to conduct the study at each of the agency settings was attained through face-to-face interviews with agency staff and administration (see Appendix B). Each agency was introduced to the researcher who explained the study, its purpose, procedures and the agency’s role. A written proposal detailing all methods and procedures to be used was submitted to the U. B. C. Behavioural Sciences Screening Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects for ethical review, and approval was granted.

Further interviews were conducted with agency staff to recruit pretest participants and to determine the best time and day to attend each agency for purposes of subject recruitment and data collection. Pretests and data collection both took place at the agencies.

At three of the settings (The Dugout, First United Church, and Carnegie Centre), the study was introduced and explained orally to each subject before s/he was asked to participate in the study. The introduction approximated, in lay terms, the explanation contained in the introductory letter attached to each questionnaire and followed the criteria for ethical research set by the U. B. C. Behavioural Sciences Screening Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects (see Appendix C). Each participant was given the option of self-administering the questionnaire or having it administered orally by the researcher or another person. At the other two agencies, the study was introduced in writing through the introductory letter attached to each questionnaire.

Questionnaires were confidential and in most cases anonymous. Participants' names did not appear anywhere on the questionnaire. Most of the questionnaires were self-administered except where assistance was requested due to low levels of literacy or other difficulties. In these cases, the questionnaires were administered orally. The researcher was present at three of the agencies while the while the questionnaires were being completed to answer questions, offer assistance, and collect completed questionnaires. For other participants, the researcher was available by phone. Confidentiality was ensured by asking participants not
to write their names anywhere on the questionnaire. Where the questionnaires were not mailed in, the participants were asked to place the completed questionnaires in a designated box rather than handing them to the researcher.

**Data Analysis**

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive, nonparametric statistical tests. Demographics variables were crosstabulated with sociopolitical control and with the political participation items to investigate differences in SPC and political participation associated with demographic characteristics. Sociopolitical control was crosstabulated with political participation to find differences in political participation associated with SPC. Correlations were run for ordinal (Spearman rho) and interval level variables (Pearson’s r).

Qualitative data were analyzed along with the data collected in Part II of the study (see page 9).

**Part II: The Focus Groups**

**Agency Settings**

The objective of the focus groups was to supplement the survey with qualitative data on the political attitudes and behaviors of low-income people. Two focus groups were used for collecting qualitative data, one at the Dugout and one at Carnegie Centre. These two agencies were chosen for convenience, feasibility and because both had been sites used for the survey. It was felt that by using the same sites and thereby drawing a sample from the same population as the survey sample, qualitative findings could more accurately be compared to quantitative findings. Also, because Part I was conducted at these settings, written approval to conduct the study at those agencies had already been attained, and contacts had already been established.

**Participants**

Participants for the focus groups were recruited from the staff and clientele of the two agency settings through convenience sampling. To participate in the focus groups, participants had to be self-identified as low-income and had to live or work (paid or unpaid) in the Downtown Eastside. Participants were recruited in a number of ways: though face to face contact with the researcher, through telephone contact with the researcher, or through word of
The first focus group consisted of one woman and five men. The second consisted of one man and three women. No other demographic characteristics were recorded.

The Photographs

Three black and white photographs were used for discussion in the focus groups (see appendix D). All three photographs were enlarged to approximately eight and a half inches by eleven inches. Photographs were chosen to depict types of political participation that (1) are commonly used and commonly cited in the literature about political participation and (2) were also included in the questionnaire in Part I. In order to understand the nonparticipation of low-income people documented in the literature, it was important to explore attitudes and experiences regarding the forms of participation that low-income people are said not to participate in. Also, by using some of the forms of political participation that had been included in the questionnaire, it will be possible to confirm, raise questions about, and elaborate on the findings of Part I. At least three types of political participation are represented by the photographs: voting, protest action and meeting with others.

The first photograph is a of a hand placing a ballot in a ballot box. It was chosen because it presents a contradiction in electoral politics that is consistent with the theoretical discussion above. On the one hand, the photograph, by showing only a hand and few other contextual clues, depicts a superficial neutrality to voting by minimizing who is voting and the conditions surrounding the vote, and focuses on the act of voting itself. Conversely, however, because the hand depicted in the photograph is that of a white male who is wearing a suit and is therefore presumably middle class, the photograph alludes to the inequalities that underlie the political system. This depiction fits with the theoretical discussion above which argued that electoral politics conceal inequality by focusing on the act of voting in which there is formal equality. This photograph, it was hoped, would elicit reactions not only to voting itself, but to the illusion of equality that electoral politics create.

The second photograph is a picture of a farm workers' protest march. This photograph was chosen because it was the most alive, visually appealing, and generic of the available photographs. Most of the available photographs of protest actions depicted demonstrators as

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20 In fact, I received a great deal of help from several people at The Dugout and at Carnegie Centre who spread the word about the focus groups and got interested people in contact with me.
either violent or subdued and passive. Others portrayed demonstrations on specific, often outdated issues such as the war in Vietnam. Photographs of demonstrations in the Downtown Eastside were also discarded since many of the focus group participants have been politically active in the Downtown Eastside for many years and thus were likely to have been active in the actions depicted or familiar with the actions, if not actually depicted in the photographs. There was some fear, therefore, that such photographs would either lead to discussion of that particular action, a silencing of those participants who were not familiar with the action, or both. The photograph that was selected, while clearly a farm workers' union march, does not depict a particular issue or objective and seems to focus more on the action than on who is doing it. Nor was discussion likely to centre around the history and experiences surrounding that particular action. It was therefore chosen as the best of the available photographs.

The third photograph is more ambiguous than the others but appears to be a meeting or discussion between three people. As a depiction of a meeting, this photograph contains a number of elements that other images of meetings do not. First, the meeting depicted here is small and informal and therefore more like the meetings of most committees and organizations in the Downtown Eastside than were images depicting large, highly structured meetings. Second, the image in this photograph has less of a class and gender bias than many of the other available images. Most other images of meetings depicted formal meetings of men in business suits. Third, the image in this photograph is ambiguous in terms of the nature or objectives of the meeting. It is unclear, in fact, who is meeting and whether this is meeting has any political purpose at all. This photograph, therefore, is useful for introducing the idea of meetings as a type of political participation, but is ambiguous enough to allow focus group participants to interpret it in terms of their own experiences with meetings.

Procedures

Part II of this study is an exploratory study using two informal focus groups. The time and date of each group was set according to the availability of the participants. At the beginning of each group, the researcher introduced the study, explaining its purpose and procedures, its relationship to the questionnaire in Part I, the procedures to guarantee confidentiality and the participants' right to refuse to participate or withdraw at any time.

The groups each met once. At the Dugout, the discussion lasted approximately one hour and twenty minutes. The Carnegie Centre group lasted slightly longer, about one hour and forty minutes. The members of the groups were shown three photographs depicting different
forms of political participation and were asked to discuss their reactions to and feelings about the images and the type of participation they depicted. Photographs were presented to the group one at a time. After presenting a photograph to the group, group members were encouraged to pick up the photograph and study it individually. When discussion regarding that photograph appeared to be exhausted, the next photograph was introduced. Participants were invited to comment on that photograph or to draw comparisons with other photographs that had already been presented. Discussion was encouraged and loosely guided by open-ended questions about the images, about the findings of Part I, and about various other issues related to political participation that arose during the discussion. Intervention by the researcher was kept to a minimum so that participants could define, within the parameters established by the purpose of the study, what was relevant to the discussion.

The photographs were introduced in the same order in both focus groups. The order of the photographs was somewhat arbitrary, but it was assumed that each photograph and the discussion surrounding it could influence reactions to the subsequent photographs. Since this study aimed to use a critique of conventional means of political participation as a basis for exploring political attitudes and behaviors, the first photograph to be introduced was the ballot box. Since the photograph of the meeting was less defined than the other photographs, it was the most likely of the three to lead into a discussion of forms of political participation that had not yet been discussed. It was therefore introduced last.

Photographs were used for two reasons. First, it was felt that visual images would be more effective than verbal messages in eliciting an immediate, emotional reaction and invoking discussion based not only in rational thought, but in experience and feeling as well. In fact, as was argued above, rationality can be viewed as a mechanism for silencing dissent. While this study looked to verbal (perhaps rational) responses as its source for data, it was felt that using photographs to invoke discussion would help to mitigate, to some extent, an emphasis on rationality. People’s experiences, after all, are not confined to verbal messages, but include also visual images and the meanings they attach to those images. Second, using photographs allowed participants to interpret the form of political participation the photos depicted in ways that were relevant to their experience. For example, a question such as “What thoughts or feelings do you have on protest marches as a form of political participation?” presents protest marches as a single, homogeneous and generic form of political participation. Presenting a
photograph of a protest march and asking for thoughts and feelings, conversely, allow greater latitude for acknowledging variations within that type of participation that are relevant to low-income people and which the researcher did not anticipate. In fact, the photographs did elicit many insights that the researcher did not anticipate and while many of these insights might have been elicited without the photographs, there were a number of instances where information would have been lost had photographs not been used. Furthermore, the photographs proved to be extremely effective in generating discussion. Interventions by the researcher were minimal and the photographs were referred to frequently and at all stages of the discussions for elaborating on and comparing ideas.

**Qualitative Data Analysis**

Focus group discussions were recorded on audio tape and transcribed verbatim. Qualitative comments from the questionnaire were also transcribed to facilitate analysis and were treated as one set of data. The raw data were then put through three stages of analysis. In the first stage, the transcripts of each group were used to extract comments made during the discussions. These comments were then organized on matrices as common themes arose. In the second stage, the themes from each group were reorganized and further condensed into the minimum number of themes possible without losing information. Five or six major themes emerged from each of the groups, each with a number of sub-themes. In the final stage, the emergent themes from the three groups were analyzed together to find the over-riding themes emerging from qualitative data as a whole.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

Part I: Quantitative Results

Sociopolitical Control

Some interesting findings emerged from the policy control subscale of the SPC Scale. The responses to items on this subscale are presented on Figures 1-8. Most of the participants of this study said they understand "the major issues which confront our society" (Fig. 1) and believed they are qualified to take part in political activity and decision making in Canada (Fig. 2).

Figure 1. Responses to Item #11: "I feel like I have a pretty good understanding of the important issues which confront our society." (n=161)
Figure 2. Responses to Item #10: "People like me are well qualified to participate in the political activity and decision making in our country." (n=161)

Most participants (71%) felt that it is important to get involved in local issues even if many other people are already working on those issues (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. Responses to Item #18: "So many other people are active in local issues and organizations that it doesn't matter much to me whether I participate or not." (n=161)

Many of them (56%) said they also like to have as much say in government as they can and therefore enjoy taking part in political activities (Fig. 4).
Nonetheless, not everyone was optimistic that people can have a say in government. Half of the participants did not believe that there are many ways for people to have a say in government (Fig. 5), and while half still believed that elections are important (Fig. 6), most (69%) agreed that it does not really matter who they vote for because whoever gets elected "does whatever she or he wants to do anyway" (Fig. 7).
Figure 6. Responses to Item #17: "A good many elections aren't important enough to bother with." (n=161)

Furthermore, two out of three participants said they did not think most public officials would listen to them (Fig. 8).
Figure 8. Responses to Item #20: "Most public officials wouldn't listen to me no matter what I did." (n=161)

It seems, therefore, that while most of the participants like the idea of political participation, they do not believe that conventional political processes—particularly, elections and the system of local representatives—are very effective.

**Demographics and Sociopolitical Control**

Very few differences in sociopolitical control were found in demographic characteristics. People with jobs had slightly higher SPC scores on average than people on fixed incomes ($\bar{x}=67$ for people with jobs versus $\bar{x}=64$ for people with fixed incomes). The average score of welfare recipients was equal to the overall average ($\bar{x}=64$). U.I. beneficiaries had the lowest mean SPC score ($\bar{x}=54$). However, the mean scores for all sources of income were within one standard deviation of the overall mean. Family type showed greater variance in SPC scores than all other demographic categories, with parents scoring higher than people with no children, and couples with children scoring higher than single parents. Figure 9 presents a breakdown of mean SPC score by family type.
Figure 9. Mean Sociopolitical Control (SPC) Score by Family Type. (n=161)

Political Participation

Despite some apparent skepticism, the participants as a whole were quite politically active. The political behavior of the participants was summarized using frequency distributions. Over half (54%) reported involvement in some type of volunteer activity at a community-based service agency. Slightly fewer said they were involved in community-based political activity (39%). Only 12% said they never talked about politics with other people. However, even this figure may be exaggerated as a number of people omitted this question and many others were unclear on what constitutes “talking about politics.” Had politics been clearly defined to include broad social and political issues as well as party politics, many more people likely would have reported that they talk about politics and that they talk about politics more frequently. Most people who completed the questionnaire (about two-thirds) voted in the most recent federal and provincial elections. Fewer reported voting at the municipal level (about one third). Frequency of voting at the federal, provincial and municipal levels is presented on Table 1.
Table 1.

Distribution of Sample by Voting Behavior in Most Recent Elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Voting Behavior</th>
<th>Election</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Federal^a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>voted</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>number of participants</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>did not vote</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>number of participants</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n^a=114
n^b=113
n^c=113

Half of the people surveyed had contacted an elected politician at least once either as a group of people registering a community concern or as an individual registering a personal concern. Slightly more than half (59%) said they, as individuals, had contacted an elected official due to a community concern at least once. One in three participants had participated in some sort of protest action (demonstration, sit-in, etc.) in the last two years; a quarter of them reported participating in more than one action in the last two years. Almost three quarters of the participants said they had joined others to work on a common problem. Those surveyed, therefore, were active in all kinds of political actions.

Demographics and Political Participation

A number of researchers have found that demographic characteristics are associated
with how people participate in politics. The crosstabulation of demographics by political participation in this study similarly revealed a number of differences based on demographics. Older participants were more likely to vote in provincial and federal elections, but less likely to participate in protest activities (Table 2).

Table 2.

Significant Associations between Demographic and Political Participation Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Political Participation</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>voting in last elections</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>federal election</td>
<td>0.29&lt;sup&gt;***&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>provincial election</td>
<td>0.29&lt;sup&gt;**&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>municipal</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participation in protest action</td>
<td>-0.22&lt;sup&gt;**&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 117
ns No significant association

<sup>a</sup> Pearson's R
<sup>b</sup> Spearman's correlation

* p < .05
** p < .01

Women and men were equally likely to be involved in community-base service organizations. However, women were more likely to be involved in community-based political organizations (51% of women versus 37% of men).
Results

Education also appeared to be a factor in a person's political behavior. The more formal education a person had, the more likely they were to be involved in a service-based community organization ($r=0.19; p < 0.05$), to contact an elected politician as part of a group ($r=0.32; p < 0.001$), and to participate in protest actions ($r=0.26; p < 0.01$). A higher level of formal education also seemed to be associated with joining others to work on a common problem, although this association did not reach statistical significance ($r=0.19; p < 0.10$).

Source of income appeared as a significant factor in people's political participation. Table 3 presents the significant associations that were found between source of income and political participation. Being on GAIN was found to be negatively associated with involvement in a service-based community organization, with contacting an elected official as part of a group, and with voting. Receiving a pension was positively associated with voting, but negatively associated with joining others to work on a common problem. Positive associations were found between having a job and working in service-based community organizations, contacting elected officials, participating in protest actions, joining others to work on a group problem and voting, although the associations found with voting at the provincial and municipal levels were not statistically significant.
Table 3.

Significant Associations Between Main Source of Income and Political Participation Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Political Participation</th>
<th>Main Source of Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GAIN or GAIN-H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>working in community organizations</td>
<td>0.17&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.18&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>service-based</td>
<td>0.17&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hours per week</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>politically-based</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hours per week</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>voting in most recent elections</td>
<td>0.19&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.22&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.19&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>federal</td>
<td>0.16&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.33&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.20&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>provincial</td>
<td>0.17&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.27&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.24&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>municipal</td>
<td>0.22&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contacting elected officials</td>
<td>0.22&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as an individual, for a personal concern</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as an individual for a community concern</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a member of a group</td>
<td>0.21&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participating in protest action</td>
<td>0.20&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>joining others to work on common problem</td>
<td>0.19&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.22&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> Pearson's R

<sup>b</sup> Spearman Correlation

* p < .10

** p < .05

*** p < .01

**** p < .001
Crosstabulating these variables revealed similar results. People on fixed incomes (U.I., GAIN, GAIN-Handicap, and pensions) seemed to be much less likely than people with jobs to be involved in service-based community organizations, to vote and to join others to work on a common problem (Fig. 10).

Figure 10. Political Participation: People with Jobs (n=11) Vs. People with Fixed Incomes (n=100).

However, only 11 of the 117 participants reported work as their main source of income, and most of those who did were employed at community organizations. These results, therefore, must be considered with caution. Among people with fixed incomes, pensioners were the most likely be involved in service-based community organizations and to vote at all levels of government, but least likely to participate in protest actions or to join others to work on a common problem. Recipients of GAIN-Handicap were slightly more involved in the political activities measured than were recipients of GAIN. Recipients of GAIN, in fact, were less likely than all others to be involved in both service-based and politically-based community
organizations, less likely than all others except U.I. recipients to vote, but more likely than pensioners and recipients of GAIN-Handicap to join others to work on a common problem (Fig. 11).\textsuperscript{21}

Figure 11. Political Participation by Main Source of Income.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{political_participation_graph.png}
\caption{Political Participation by Main Source of Income.}
\end{figure}

Some of the findings of this study appear to be inconsistent with the literature on political participation. It was anticipated that parents of young children, particularly single parents, would have less time and energy to devote to political activities. However, no differences were found between parents and people with no children on most political participation items. In many cases, in fact, parents were more active (Fig. 12). Among the people surveyed, parents were less likely to vote than were people with no children but were

\textsuperscript{21} I use \textit{GAIN} to refer to the regular benefits of British Columbia's income security program (Guaranteed Allowable Income for Need). \textit{Gain-Handicap} refers to special benefits given to those receiving GAIN benefits due to a permanent disability or impairment of some kind. \textit{U.I.} refers to benefits under the federal Unemployment Insurance program. \textit{Pension} refers to public retirement pension programs.
more likely to be involved in service-based community organizations, to be active in politically-based committees, and to join others to work on a common problems. Parents with school-age children reported participating slightly more in these activities than parents of younger children, but were still more active proportionately than people with no children.

Figure 12. Political Participation by Family Type

In order to investigate how political participation is associated with how much a person feels her/his efforts will accomplish, political participation items were correlated with SPC scores. The results are summarized on Table 4.
Table 4.

**Associations between Sociopolitical Control Scale (SPC) Score and Political Participation Variables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Political Participation</th>
<th>SPC Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>participating community organizations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>service-based hours per week</td>
<td>0.38 * ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>politically-based hours per week</td>
<td>0.29 * a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>discussing politics with others</td>
<td>0.40 a ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>voting in most recent elections</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>federal</td>
<td>0.31 * a ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>provincial</td>
<td>0.29 * a ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>municipal</td>
<td>0.38 a ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contacting an elected politician</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for an individual problem</td>
<td>0.45 b * ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for a community problem</td>
<td>0.44 a ** ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as part of a group</td>
<td>0.39 b * ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participating in demonstration or other protest action</td>
<td>0.21 b *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>joining others to work on a common problem</td>
<td>0.32 a **</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a* Pearson's R

*b* Spearman Correlation

* p < .05

** p < .01

*** p < .001
Crosstabulations revealed significant associations (p < .05) between high SPC scores and all types of political participation measured except the number of hours spent working in politically-based community organizations. The strongest correlations were found between SPC and contacting elected politicians. The weakest were between SPC and participation in protest activities.

**Part II: Qualitative Results**

Part II of this study aimed to explore the political attitudes and behaviors of low-income people in the Downtown Eastside, in order to account for the low participation rates of low-income people that are cited in the literature. Three major themes which explain this emerged from an analysis of the qualitative data. Table 5 lists these themes and the major subthemes.

Table 5.

**Main Themes Emerging from Qualitative Data Analysis**

1. **Political Cynicism Rooted in Experience**
   
   A. Been shafted too many times.
   
   B. Political processes are ineffective
      1. Lack of accountability
      2. Part of a larger system
      3. Suppression of dissenting voice
   
   C. Political processes do not serve the DES
   
   D. Manipulation.

2. **Constraints on Political Participation Associated with the DES**
   
   A. High illiteracy and many people for whom English is not the first language.
   
   B. Poverty
      1. Constraints of time, energy and resources
      2. Chaos
      3. The right to participate

---

22 In order to protect the accuracy and authenticity of the participants' ideas, I have tried as much as possible, to present them in the participants' own words. In some cases, some editing was necessary due to meaning that was lost by taking the quotes out of their original context, or because English was not the first language of the speaker. Brackets indicate where original quotes have been edited.
Table 5 continued

C. Fear
   1. Physical safety
   2. Vulnerability

III. Nonparticipation of Low-Income People is Exaggerated

   A. Change can come through proper use of conventional channels
   B. Some people are extremely active
   C. People are involved in many unconventional ways.
      1. Specific actions
      2. Nonparticipation as a political statement

---

**Political Skepticism Rooted in Experience**

The most dominant theme which emerged from the qualitative data is that people in the Downtown Eastside do not feel that participation in the established political processes makes any difference:

> *I personally feel there is virtually no point in involving oneself as it inevitably has no effect.... Why do politicians seem completely deaf when hearing anything they don’t absolutely agree with? Aren’t they there to represent the people? And why is an extremely thick wall placed up at every turn to make life more difficult?*

> *I’ve been involved intensively for 20 years with many forms of participation. I believe there is no point with the current political forum and process. Sold out and used!*

Many people have given up voting because of experiences they have had with unresponsive government and a betrayal of the trust people once had in elected officials:

First participant: *People are just... too many times they feel they got ripped off or something...*

Second participant: *“Shafted” is the word!*

First participant: *Yes, same thing... Every time I talk to somebody that said they didn’t vote, they said they got ripped off in one way or another.*

Another participant articulated the same point in the following way:

*If you’re asking us questions like “What do we think of voting,” okay, well our experience is that voting hasn’t helped us. It’s kind of like you get jaded in that federal elections don’t seem to matter who you vote for, provincial elections sometimes yes and...*
sometimes no, municipal elections not for a long time because of the way the system works.

Many people pointed to broken election promises as a way politicians betray the trust of the people who elected them:

First participant: No, they seem to make a lot of promises: “Vote for me, vote for me, vote for me.”

Second participant: They don’t keep them!

Others cited similar experiences with politicians that they contacted at their constituency offices:

No response to little response; no satisfaction; refers problems on—passes the buck.

Many people, therefore, do not see any point in contacting politicians at their constituency offices:

Even if I were to call anyone you have mentioned above, I have little faith that they would do anything positive.

According to the qualitative data, then, many people have simply given up on established political processes because, in their experience, politicians are unreliable and political processes are ineffective. One person summed up this sentiment in this way:

All politicians are painted with the same brush. They always forget who elected them.

The lack of confidence in the political system that participants expressed, however, was not limited to their own experience or to local issues, and was not attributed entirely to the politicians per se. There was a strong sentiment that the political system itself constrains the power and political will of politicians. Part of the problem, according to the participants, is that elected politicians are not held accountable to their constituents. One reason cited was that elections are not held frequently enough to hold politicians accountable for their actions:

This [election] is once every four or five years.... Once the person’s in, they do anything they want for the next four or five years. And they rely on people to forget. You do the worst things first. And it’s with that nonaccountability that this can misrepresent itself.

Another reason for a lack of accountability has to do with the limitations that party politics place on politicians:

I don’t like this voting for a party nonsense. You know party politics, you know, it’s obvious. You’re not representing the constituents you were elected to represent, you’re representing the party you’re associated with.
Moreover, many of the participants questioned how much power any party or politician has in the political system. One common sentiment among the participants of this study was that national politics are only a part of a much larger system:

I think [voting in federal elections is] pretty irrelevant now.... I think the multinationals hold more power than elected officials.

I'm talking about the foundation of this country and this political system. I think it's a machinery that has create[d] the reality that exists right now; that [reality] doesn't change... it doesn’t matter who’s in power.

In fact, many of the participants felt that the “larger system” not only limits the role of politicians and political parties, but also stifles dissent:

I feel we have a lack of choice, that, uh, for some of us those [candidates] are not the choice. You know, some of us do not want to be New Democrat, Liberal, this party in power right now. Or some of us do not believe in the structure of the system that it is right now and I believe that, fine if you support some of these ideas; if you don’t support those ideas, you have no voice whatsoever.

The media, in particular, was commonly seen as part of that system, and its role in suppressing dissenting voices was a theme that emerged frequently and in a number of contexts. First, the perception was that the media disempowers protesters by discrediting them or by minimizing the strength of their voice:

You don’t want to get up and just have one talking head opposed to another talking head. The way the media seems to work is that unless, um, you either do something totally bizarre [to get the media’s attention]. If you do that, it’s too easy for them to portray you as people who have nothing important to say.

Last year, or two years ago there was a repeat of the On to Ottawa [March] where there were 75000 people on Parliament Hill in Ottawa.... They had a huge rally that was reported as “Hohum” the next day in the press, it was given four or five seconds. They said there was a “disappointing turnout.” Those words. It was like to say “it didn’t work, it was a waste of time.” The people at the rally think “Yeah, it was. Nothing happened, we didn’t change anything.”

Other participants commented on similar reports which underestimated the turnout at a student rally in January 25, 1995 and how the media then used those underestimates as evidence for a lack of consensus among students:

First participant: [According to news reports] not that many people agree with the students, that’s why there are only 5000 or 2000. Other students agree with the government.

Second participant: And they got equal weight on the news. Those who
disagreed with them [the protesters] got equal weight. Well what’s fair about that? You go and you find somebody who happens to agree with the status quo and give them a prominent display: “Here’s a spokesperson for the students that weren’t there.” Or “There must be 200000 students and only 50000 rallied so there must be four to one against us.”

Also, the media disempowers the voice of Downtown Eastside residents by portraying them as incompetent or immoral and by feeding the negative stereotypes that people have about those who live in the Downtown Eastside:

I feel people that live and work in the DES get treated like crap by people that have no knowledge or understanding of this community. Some of the businesses and banks in the area tend to lump all DES residents into the category of either low-life, junkie, or prostitute. These attitudes are disrespectful, dehumanizing and degrading.

...the media and a total saturation of propaganda that’s going on right now: this area is the pits, it’s sleazy people, it’s discards, it’s losers.... So the chalk outside says this community is full of people who are talented, who are knowledgeable, who have the skills for; who are intelligent.

A related subtheme that emerged from the data was that government and the political system are detached from or irrelevant to the DES community:

As a member of the community, I feel a distinct separation from our political members.

My government SUCKS! They don’t do nothing for the low-income people.

Since politics and government are perceived as detached from the lives of many DES residents, the powers that be are often seen as irrelevant:

For an example, for myself, six years ago when I was living downtown here I never wanted to vote because I didn’t think it would ever affect me. That’s the way I personally felt.

85% of people down here are alcoholic, drug addicted; they don’t give a shit about what political party gets in... as long as they can drown out their sorrows so they don’t have to think about it.

According to some participants, however, when politics do affect their lives directly, DES residents get very involved:

I believe a lot of people down here on skid row don’t vote only when; say for an example, Vander Zalm was screwing around with welfare people. 90% of the people down here then voted to get him out.... Hey! He’s screwing around with us! We’ll get him out. I’ll bet more people vote to get people out than to get people in.

Another subtheme in keeping with the notion that politicians are detached from the DES was
that politicians are unlikely to listen to people simply because they are from the Downtown Eastside:

*I feel my opinion doesn’t count if I was to speak with any government official.*

Quietly writing a letter to your M.P.; he’s going to throw it in the garbage. They’ll look at the address on it and say you’re from such and such a neighbourhood so it ain’t worth reading.

Another common sentiment that emerged from the data was that political processes are not only irrelevant and unresponsive to the DES, but are manipulative and self-serving. Elections, for example, mask inequalities and allow those who are elected to claim some legitimacy for their authority:

*I think the picture [of the ballot box] itself shows a fairness in the political system, but my feelings really are offended by it a little bit. At a certain point, uh, it represents something false to me.... I feel like many people are not heard in the system. I know all political people in power get money from certain corporations to do what they do and I think that people are being used as pawns to put these people in power. I see all kinds of deceit and things, and I see that the picture itself represents that I should believe that this represents a fair system.*

Community consultation processes are often seen as only giving the impression that the community is being consulted:

*If it’s a total façade of pretending to get community input; like if they want to have a public meeting about this issue, but before you get to the meeting, they already have their own agenda. By the time you get to the meeting, you might as well not be there anyway.*

Well, we've had some bad examples of that in our neighbourhood here.... I mean we've had an alcohol and drug advisory group that solicited our opinions and then six months later they renewed everybody's budget after we had all said these agencies aren't doing their jobs here, they're not listening to the community. And then they pay the money, you know, to the same groups to do the same things! How long are you going to go and sit in meetings?

Even social service agencies, community organizations and organized protests are viewed with suspicion and contempt by some people in the DES:

*There are too many people here who are after money, power and control. Low-income people are getting paid off with money etc. in exchange for co-opting and playing the game. It would be a good idea to remove most agency funding and see how many people would be left doing the work. It would be good riddance to opportunists and co-opters. We are sick of them!*

*I feel that the people that organize these rallies on different small issues are doing so for their own self-interest. That, uh, people are getting used as pawns for them to get paid positions that they know better what’s best for the people that are in poverty.*
Among those who are seen as co-opters and opportunists are researchers. In fact, it is difficult to estimate how many people refused to participate in this study for this reason. A number of people who chose not to participate in this study expressed the view that, while researchers get salaries or degrees by soliciting the input of DES residents, the residents rarely derive any benefit for their time and effort and, in fact, are often reduced to lifeless objects of study:

*Your questions are only statistics—I hope you will include an awareness of the powerless feelings of the poor which in turn manifests itself in rage, pain and despair. The dominant culture oppressed indigenous populations throughout the world, as well as the poor who are part of the dominant culture. It is my sincere hope that you know this and are not simply using the poor to get a degree without understanding (1) they are not meant to be free of poverty and (2) individuals and organizations need the poor to remain in this painful state.*

**Constraints on Political Participation Associated with the Downtown Eastside**

The second major theme that emerged from the qualitative data was that certain factors associated with living in the DES constrain political participation. Among these factors are two themes discussed earlier: the irrelevance and unresponsiveness of politics to the lives of many DES residents, and the disempowering images of the DES that are often portrayed in the media. However, a number of other factors also emerged as significant. High illiteracy rates and the number of people for whom English is not the first language, for example, raise special concerns for political participation in the DES:

*You know, maybe if we had a communal garden they’d take part in that, but as far as; because everything is so based on English language. So there’s a huge amount of people who are very poor, you know, and who don’t participate, but because everything is so blooming [English].*

*The literacy level is much lower [in the DES]. You can’t understand what it is you have to do. The municipal ballot is like 140 names, three wards and all these parties and just, like, you look at it, you can’t understand what you’re doing.*

Poverty was also raised by a number of the participants as constraining political participation in a number of ways. First, people with low-incomes face constraints of time and energy which make participation in elections and protests more difficult:

*They’re hungry. It takes a lot of energy to stand there for a couple of hours.*

*And low-income is not specifically government assistance. A lot of people out here are working poor. They’re working at a job and you’ve only got so much time. Plus, if you’re working poor, you’ve gotta work 70 hours a week in order to basically get the poverty line.*
Second, activities like voting that are taken for granted in some communities are more difficult in communities where people have fewer resources or live in a chaotic environment:

As an example, in the West End traditionally more people go out and vote.... The Eastside is lower incomes, lower voter turnout.... There's one person... she was an observer at a polling station in the West End. You could see people pulling up in their cars, everyone gets out, well dressed, goes and votes, gets back in their cars and drives away. In the Eastside, you've got people lining up—basically you walk in off the street. You may know where the polling station is, you may not.

The vote is based on people going out and casting their vote which demands that they're well-informed and able to travel. A lot of parties provide rides for people to get out, but that doesn't mean that people for whom English is a second language, have low literacy rates, or have chaotic lives—and that's why a lot of people from this kind of neighbourhood don't get represented because they may not even know it's election day so their voice is never heard. That's why I think that old form—one vote, one voice) doesn't really apply. It applies for a certain class of people.

A number of participants also explained a more subtle way in which poverty constrains political participation:

I think by the time you get down here you've probably lost your voice. You don't know you have the right to an opinion. If you do you're really gifted. It takes a long time for people because they live in shame. Most people are ashamed because that's the way society is set up. It really immobilizes you. And you're not supposed to know anything, let alone have an opinion about anything, let alone about government. Once you're in poverty it's really, really hard to motivate yourself to do the action.

That's the basic attitude because... a lot of poor people, they don't feel like they're worthy. They don't feel it's worth it, they don't feel that anybody's going to listen to me. "Who's going to listen to me? I'm just a poor person. Who the hell's going to listen to me? I don't deserve."

Fear also came up as a significant factor in restricting political participation in the DES. Concerns about personal safety means that people are not always free to participate in meetings and other actions:

It's dangerous to go out at night, especially around here. Um, there's too many ways you can be threatened, just by being on the street when it's dark out. And you've really got no safe place next door or down the street.

However, fear also operates through poverty and the vulnerability poverty creates by putting people at the mercy of landlords or the welfare office:

I feel poor people generally think something terrible is going to happen to them if they speak up and it is better for them to shut up (eg. the idea that welfare people do not have the same rights as respectable people).
I can control you if I can instil fear in you.... The fear, the fear of not having food, clothing and shelter.

People are poor down here and fear of poverty is a form of control, that if you feel; the government can make you so afraid of becoming poor that you won’t open your mouth. The people down here are poor and really have nothing to depend on except the government in order to stay alive and if you open your mouth, could they cut me off? That’s a scary scenario! If your whole life, all the income you have is one cheque originating from one place, if that person or those people there decide that I don’t get it, I starve. I freeze. You know, like that’s the subconscious, but it’s scary!

Nonparticipation of Low-Income People is Exaggerated

The third major theme that emerged from the data was that low-income people are more politically active than they are often given credit for. Many of the participants are active themselves and see a great deal of participation among others in the DES:

You’re getting a myth more than anything about low-income people not participating. I think that myth was given to you by somebody else that’s probably never been poor.... We participate. I mean, I personally do and I know he does, and I know lots of people that are unemployed that participate. They vote and they have their say.

I have a hard time believing that people down here don’t participate because I’ve been too involved here for a long time as a volunteer. You should see the amount of participation that goes on here.... I mean, I think people are more politically activated now than they’ve ever been.

There was also a general recognition that there are some people who are extremely politically active in the DES:

There are a small number of people who are incredibly active in the community, who spend their whole time being involved.

A lot of people who live on a fixed income—that have been a veteran of they have a disability pension or something—they do the majority of the work, certainly in this community. They’re on lots and lots of boards, I mean, they do all kinds of work.

One subtheme related to how people in the DES participate politically was the belief that the established political channels can work if they are made accessible to residents of the DES, and should be made use of:

Like it’s easy to be sitting here and be cynical about everything that happens. Like, it’s not going to help change things. When it comes to an election, like we’re going to go out and say “you should vote.” We’re not saying “don’t vote, it’s useless, you’re wasting your time.” We’d just be shooting ourselves in the foot.
If everybody voted and everybody had their say, there’d be—a lot more would get done.

I think... the coroner’s hearings were really, really important because [the coroner] came out to the community and came right here to Carnegie and it was the, you know... the commission on the heroin overdoses. A lot happened out of that because the users came. They felt comfortable to come and say what their concerns were. And as far as anything being successful in the last number of years, I think this has really, really prompted a heck of a lot of response all over.

Others had a more pessimistic view of the changes that can be achieved through the established channels:

Like the only one thing that will be gained is... to try and get the lesser evil, to try and get somebody off. That might make the wheel go round easier.

Many participants explained that the established processes often need a push to make them more responsive:

When Justice Opal was doing that whole thing on the Vancouver Police, he wasn’t going anywhere. We were supposed to go down to some hotel... and we put pressure on him and he actually came out to the community. And that was a direct response to people putting pressure on him.

Let’s take Carnegie as an example. The Carnegie got going because people started a petition, people got a chance to say what they thought, and it kept going until one of the people who voted for—had the vote to decide if this should happen or not. It passed by one vote! Carnegie might not be here if one person had not changed their mind.

When the established political channels do not seem responsive, however, people turn to other forms of participation. The participants listed numerous ways in which DES residents participate politically besides going through the established channels:

One of the ways that I think that happens a lot around here is for people to do their own research. Like, rather than accept the research that the city does on housing or whatever... is for people here through the association to do their own research to present their own facts, to have their own position papers.

There’s ongoing work in the different organizations or agencies or groups that you’re involved in. There are our newsletters, our publications.

Protest tactics may also occur in response to the ineffectiveness of using the established channels or as an alternative:

You get your voice heard, the media coverage that you need, it brings public knowledge to the issues, it brings everything forward, that’s my opinion. So protest is a healthy way [to participate], a healthy way.

Sometimes protest, instead of quietly going to your room and writing a letter to your M.P. or something that doesn’t get your voice heard.... But a protest:
people are going to get their voices heard. That is the only way they are going to listen.

If you’re getting screwed around, what are you going to do? Voice your opinion. How are you going to do it? There [pointing to the picture of the protest march].

Even when protest tactics effect no political change, however, they do have a positive function according to some of the participants:

This [picture of a protest march] shows people that they do have, that there is commonalities among other people. This [photo of the ballot box] shows me nothing. The rally shows me that there are other people who agree with me on this issue. Maybe not exactly, but... we do have a commonality. Here [ballot box] I’m all alone and a voice in the wilderness.

Participation in the DES is often spontaneous and difficult to assess in terms of the amount of participation:

I was thinking of the Women’s March in February which was basically for the memory of women killed in the DES. Like Cheryl Ann Jones was killed four years ago. That was just a reaction—outrage—that somebody would be killed here and then so little action to it. So one of the questions is why don’t more people come out to that? I think a lot of people do, and then when you’re walking down the street, people will come over and they’ll say they’d like to be part of it and they’ll join for a little bit.

Many forms of political participation used by DES residents, in fact, may not be overtly political or may not have an explicit political goal:

A lot of it is talking to people that you know. Talking amongst yourselves where you can exchange ideas... that’s doing political work.

Some may not directly; the chalk outside23. It’s a political statement...

[Referring to the Women's March in February:] We haven’t included any demands. We’ve just done it as a silent memorial. It’s a little bit different [from other types of protest actions]. Maybe more people might come out for that.

Even those who do not appear to be doing anything political may be getting their voices heard:

Some people do participate by telling those of us who are active what their views are or what their needs are. And I think that’s a way they participate.

There is some views that I think I can point at and say “Well, I’m speaking about this and it’s not only my view, but behind me is another 50 people who have come, or 40 or 30—occasionally 100.... So it’s like you are the cable. You know, you are just relaying the message.

23 Advertised as a “Downtown Eastside community expression project”, Speaking in Chalks invited DES residents to speak their minds on the sidewalks of Carnegie Centre and share their experiences of their neighbourhood with chalk drawings, stories and poetry.
Moreover, in many cases, people who are seen as nonparticipants may actually be living their dissent by refusing to participate in a political system or a social order they do not perceive as just:

Many times there is total disgust with the order as it is. And they have chosen somewhere along the line to step out of it... to the point where they don't even; they live by their wits, they don't even receive welfare anymore. If they did once upon a time, they don’t want any part of it... they’re living their dissent in a way and paying dearly for it.

Many poor people probably see what I see—[a system based on deceit, manipulation, greed and power]—and that’s probably the reason why they don’t participate.... I think they see what I see, maybe they cannot necessarily word it, and, uh, since they have a feeling about it, they just know, right? You know, they accept their suffering.... They know that if the opportunity would come, the abuse would just go to other people, so they’d rather just accept what it is than [become part of the system responsible for it].

To summarize, the qualitative data seems to highlight two apparently conflicting messages: (1) that the political participation of low-income people is constrained in a number of ways, and (2) that low-income people are active in politics in a number of ways. While the dominant subthemes which emerged in relation to the these points were very critical of the political system and the status quo, there were a number of comments which were not as cynical. Some people, for example, felt that they really do not have much to complain about and that others have more of a right to complain about government:

The way I feel... I don’t really feel poor because when I, uh, I mean my handicap gives me enough, it pays my rent. I’m quite happy with my lifestyle now, myself personally.... My opinion is, I think that single mothers on welfare that have children have more of a reason to complain.

We’re living in a country, the way I feel, we’re living in a country where we’re given so many things so freely.... I feel that we are very fortunate people to be living in this country.

Similarly, many felt Canadians are fortunate to have a say in government and that they should not complain if they do not exercise their right to vote:

As far as I’m concerned, people have sacrificed their lives so that we in this country and in other countries, people have the right to [vote]. I feel that we should all do this.

That’s a privilege in this country. To vote. It is a privilege... Beyond anything else, that is the number one thing in Canada that makes a change, makes a difference....

“Who did you vote for” is the proper question. “I didn’t vote for nobody.”
Results

Well what the hell are you bitching about then?

Nonetheless, more dominant was skepticism of many of the participants which cannot be understated:

Yes, we have been sold out by a process where “justice is seen to be done”—window dressing and political form and appearance precedes political integrity and respectful content. Self-interest prevails in the current political climate with new individuals (on our side—the “good” guys) going through the same ethically distorted motions while our safety net is being torn apart and the highest risk slip through to die on our inner city streets. A silent genocide—a passive genocide—enacted by “good” people who spout philosophy I once believed in. Disillusionment and disgust watching a holocaust in the making.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

This study has approached the question "why are low-income people not more active in political actions than they are?" from the perspective that, while their participation is impeded in many ways, to say that low-income people are passive or acquiescent is both an oversimplification and an overgeneralization. Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, where most of the research for this study was conducted, for example, has a rich history of political activism despite its abject poverty. In fact, most of those who participated in this study reported being politically active in some way. Nonetheless, there is some evidence that suggests that many low-income people do not participate politically. A number of factors emerged in this study as related to political participation and may provide some further understanding of the political behavior of low-income people in the Downtown Eastside.

First, there are a number of limitations of this study which need to be addressed. First, the design of the study and the sampling procedures are such that the results cannot be generalized. Furthermore, since subjects were recruited through convenience sampling techniques which included a certain degree of self-selection, there is no doubt that the sample was not only unrepresentative but biased in at least one important way. Participating in a research project, especially one which solicits opinions regarding politics and political processes, can be regarded as a political act. As such, the participants of this study, by participating, represent only one broad type of political actor: participators. While there is a great deal of variability within this broad category in terms of what they participate in and to what degree, this study failed to reach not only those who did not participate in it, but also those who rarely participate politically and those who most adamantly refuse to participate. Second, innumerable mediating variables were ignored by this study. For example, this study did not address how political participation is mediated by gender, race and culture. Nor was any attention paid to the ways in which personal histories or the political histories of entire races and
cultures might affect political participation. Relatedly, the Downtown Eastside has a political history which makes it unique and which predisposes it toward political activism. Caution must therefore be taken in extrapolating results of research conducted in the Downtown Eastside to other communities.

The limitations of this study, especially since the results cannot be generalized with any certainty, are such that it cannot provide any definitive answers about the political participation of low-income people. However, the results of this study do provide insight into significant trends in political behavior in the Downtown Eastside which may apply more broadly and raise a number of important issues which warrant further research and theoretical development.

Demographics and Political Participation

A number of studies have related demographic characteristics such as gender, age, marital status, number of children, education, and length of residence in a neighbourhood to political participation (Wandersman et al. 1987; Smith 1975). In this study, the results of analyzing demographic variables and political participation suggest that some demographic characteristics may be related to specific forms of political participation. For example, older people were more likely to engage in individual-oriented political actions such as voting than they were to engage in more radical, collective actions such as mass demonstrations. Conversely, the more formal education a person had, the more likely they were to participate in collective political behaviors such as working in community organizations, participating in protest actions, or joining a group to work on a common problem or take a concern to an elected politician.

Source of Income

A person's main source of income was found in this study to be related to participation in all types of political actions. People with jobs, for instance, were more politically active than people receiving fixed incomes from the government. The reason for this finding may be sampling error. Only 11 people reported work as their main source of income, and since many of them were employed at community organizations, they may have been politically active because of their jobs. Nonetheless, this finding does have some theoretical significance. It may be that this finding is evidence of material cooptation at work. By providing those excluded
from the job market with material assistance in the form of a welfare cheque or a pension, government simultaneously provides them with sustenance and takes away their right to complain. This conclusion is substantiated by the remarks of one of the study’s participants:

The way I feel... I don’t really feel poor because when I, uh, I mean my handicap gives me enough, it pays my rent. I’m quite happy with my lifestyle now, myself personally.... My opinion is, I think that single mothers on welfare that have children have more of a reason to complain.

A related explanation has to do with shame and the stigma attached to unemployment and the receipt of government aid. In a liberal democratic society where material success is believed to depend on an individual’s efforts and capabilities, environmental damage done to low-income people tends to be displaced through moralism about how it can be avoided through personal effort, the work ethic and moral decency (Smail 1993, 47). Poverty is thus often equated with degradation and shame. By internalizing the ideology of rugged individualism, impoverished people blame themselves for their poverty and internalize this sense of shame24 (Ryan 1976). Consistent with this explanation, shame and feeling unworthy of an opinion emerged from the qualitative data as an explanation for the low participation of low-income people. Also consistent with this explanation is the finding low-income people who have sufficiently demonstrated that their unemployment is due to an inability to work rather than an unwillingness (the so-called deserving poor25), and who presumably would therefore experience less shame associated with their unemployment, are more politically active than others. Recipients of GAIN for handicap, who by definition have been recognized by the state as having physical limitations in their ability to work, were found to be more active on a variety of political participation measures than were recipients of regular GAIN. Pensioners, who for the most part cannot work regardless of how badly they would like to and who are therefore unlikely to experience shame associated with their unemployment, were even more active.

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24 Smail (1993, 51), in fact, argues that many low-income people, because of the association of degradation and shame with poverty, vote for political parties that are hostile to their interests as a way of separating themselves morally from that degradation.

25 The distinction between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor is, for many people (myself included), a very troublesome concept. By adopting the concept of “willingness to work” as the criterion on which this distinction is made, I do not wish to validate it. A strong argument can be made that most unemployed people do wish to work but cannot due to the limitations of the job market. However, a strong argument can also be made that the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor is nonetheless often made on the basis of assumptions about a “willingness to work,” and that the stigma and shame associated with poverty are the consequence of such assumptions whether those assumptions are accurate or not.
Discussion

Parents versus People with no Children

Other demographic characteristics cited in the literature as relevant to political participation showed little significance in this study. Living in the same neighbourhood for a longer period of time did not appear to be related to any type of political participation and gender only emerged as a significant factor on one political participation item where women were more likely than men to be involved in politically-based community organizations and committees.

Other findings seem to contradict both intuitive logic and the literature on political participation. Parents, particularly single parents, face more barriers to participation than people with no children because of child care responsibilities and the amount of energy child-rearing demands. In this study, however, parents—even single parents—were just as likely as people with no children to participate in most types of political action measured. In fact, in some types of political participation, parents were more active. One reason for this finding may have to do with qualitative data which suggest that many Downtown Eastside residents view government and politics as irrelevant to their lives and thus do not participate. It may be that government and politics are more relevant when people have children to protect and care for who will be affected by long-term changes brought about by government action or inaction. Another explanation may have to do with the development of sociopolitical control. Parents in this study were found to be more optimistic than people with no children about the amount of control they have over politics and community. Moreover, parents of older children scored higher than parents of younger children on sociopolitical control. The explanation may be that there is something about childrearing that increases a person’s perception that s/he can effect sociopolitical change. Further research may provide insights into the validity of this notion.

An alternative explanation has to do with the particular population of study. Among low-income people, the constraints placed on participation by childrearing may be superseded by factors such as income, housing, support services and stability which are conducive to both political participation and starting a family. Among low-income people, those who have the most disposable income, the most stable and affordable housing, the most adequate support services, and the most stable lifestyle relative to others may be the most likely both to have children and to participate politically. Alternatively, becoming a parent may provoke a change in lifestyle to one that is more conducive to political participation and the presence of children.
attract more support from social service agencies and the community.

Despite this study's finding that parents are more politically active than people without children, childrearing demands should not be completely discounted as a barrier to political participation. Parents of children under school age participated less in nearly every type of political activity measured than did parents of older children. Further research will be required in order to better understand the relationship found in this study between having children and political participation among low-income people, and to test the validity of the explanations offered.

**Barriers to Political Participation**

*Poverty and Inequality*

A number of factors emerged as significant obstacles to the political participation of low-income people in the Downtown Eastside. The results of this study suggest that participation in the Downtown Eastside is constrained by language, low literacy, concern for safety and poverty itself. Participation is much more feasible in communities where there are fewer people for whom English is not the first language, where literacy rates are higher, where the streets are safer and where travel, substitute care for dependents, and the energy needed to participate are not restricted by poverty. In the Downtown Eastside, even voting is more difficult than in other communities. The implication of this is that while each individual may have equal power through casting a vote, not every individual has equal opportunity to vote. Nor does each individual appear to have equal opportunity to voice a political opinion beyond casting a vote. The residents of communities like the Downtown Eastside, it therefore seems, are at a disadvantage both in terms expressing their collective concerns and, consequently, in terms of voicing their individual opinions. While this insight is not a new one\(^{26}\), it nevertheless has profound implications for the notion that the right to vote signifies political equality.

*Political Skepticism*

Another factor which emerged from this study as a fundamental component of the political behavior of low-income people was political skepticism. Many people in the

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\(^{26}\) The idea that some communities have more political influence than others has been quite commonly acknowledged by numerous authors ranging from C. Wright Mills’ (1956) *The Power Elite* to Hasson & Ley’s (1994) discussion of neighbourhood organizations.
Downtown Eastside, it seems, do not believe that many political processes make any difference and are therefore not motivated to participate in them. Results of both qualitative and quantitative data analysis confirm that there is a high degree of skepticism among Downtown Eastside residents in regard to politics and government. The participants of this study expressed their skepticism in a variety of ways. Some felt that government and politics are irrelevant to the lives of many Downtown Eastside residents and often to the community as a whole. Others expressed a perception that most politicians and many established political processes are unreliable and ineffective regardless of where one lives. Most, in fact, agreed that it makes little difference which politician is in power. Analysis of sociopolitical control seems to confirm both the conclusion that many Downtown Eastside residents have little faith in politicians and political processes, and the hypothesis that political participation will be lower as a consequence. Significant associations were found between SPC score and all political participation items indicating that the more an individual felt s/he could effect sociopolitical change, the more s/he participated in various political activities.

The political skepticism expressed by the participants of this study is not devoid of theoretical and historical validity. Most participants, including those who exhibited some optimism about the merit of established political processes, stressed that it was their experience that politicians and political processes rarely prove useful to residents of the Downtown Eastside. One participant conveyed this sentiment quite succinctly:

If you're asking us questions like "What do we think of voting," okay, well our experience is that voting hasn't helped us. It's kind of like you get jaded in that federal elections don't seem to matter who you vote for, provincial elections sometimes yes and sometimes no, municipal elections not for a long time because of the way the system works.

This sentiment, moreover, was not limited to electoral politics. Participants reported experiencing the same lack of response from a number of channels they had pursued in trying to voice their concerns. The predominant explanation which arose from the data to explain this experience was that politicians do not listen to their constituents. However, another explanation that emerged pertains to the amount of power that politicians have to act when they do hear their constituents' concerns. The power of politicians may be constrained in at least two ways. First, most politicians are accountable to a political party. When constituent demands conflict with party policy, the politician must tow the party line or risk stiff sanctions from the party. Second,
as trade barriers between countries are lifted and trade becomes increasingly globalized, economies transcend the nation state (Baum 1989). Consequently, as argued earlier, the power of the state and those elected to represent it withers. Who is in power on a national level, therefore, makes increasingly little difference. As one participant remarked: “I think [elections are] pretty irrelevant now.... I think the multinationals hold more power than the elected officials.” While not all participants explain government inaction in this way, their political skepticism is not merely an expression of general cynicism or a manifestation of personal disempowerment. Their skepticism reflects their experiences with the political system and how they interpret those experiences.

Manipulation and the Suppression of Dissent

It was not just the perceived ineffectiveness of politicians and political processes that the participants believed cause many Downtown Eastside residents to give up participating. Many felt that residents of the Downtown Eastside had been “shafted” too often by the actions or inaction of elected politicians to have any faith that participation will lead to any positive outcome. Additionally there was some sentiment among the participants that, whether intentionally or not, processes and organizations developed to promote the political participation of Downtown Eastside residents often serve the organizers and not the residents. Voting, for example, helps to put in power someone who likely will do little for the Downtown Eastside residents who voted for her/him. Participating in protest actions legitimates the organizer’s position, leadership and possibly her/his job, but may not lead to any significant change in the lives of the participants. Participating in research projects, likewise, provides researchers with valuable data which may fulfil the requirements of a job or a university degree, but seldom brings about any tangible improvement in the participants’ lives.

The question of who benefits from political processes, community forums and research projects has important implications. The participants who spoke most critically about endeavours like these were critical of them for two principal reasons. First, many of them saw so-called participatory or collaborative endeavours as self-serving in purpose as well as in outcome. Not only is benefiting the organizers seen as an outcome of many of these endeavours, it is seen as their primary purpose. The participation of the community, in this view, is only solicited as a necessary component in legitimating the organizers’ position or
Discussion

action. Cade et al. (1995) make a similar point arguing that, due to the current popularity of community consultation, “elected officials and planners are frequently forced to defend the legitimacy of their actions” by consulting with the constituents most affected by policies or plans that are being developed. The experience of some Downtown Eastside residents is that such consultation is often no more than a façade. Such endeavours are therefore seen by some as manipulative rather than collaborative or participatory.

Second, so-called participatory or collaborative endeavours may play a role in suppressing dissent. For example, community consultation processes, it could be argued, subvert dissent by channelling dissidence into manageable processes. Social research can also dilute dissident voices in the way it frames and reduces the subject of investigation. Consider the following quote by one of this study’s participants:

Your questions are only statistics—I hope you will include an awareness of the powerless feelings of the poor which in turn manifests itself in rage, pain and despair. The dominant culture oppressed indigenous populations throughout the world, as well as the poor who are part of the dominant culture. It is my sincere hope that you know this and are not simply using the poor to get a degree without understanding (1) they are not meant to be free of poverty and (2) individuals and organizations need the poor to remain in this painful state.

Additionally, as Foucault argues, research may quell dissidence both by refining the “technologies”²⁷ for the exercise of power and by creating the feeling in the subjects of study that their behavior is being observed and documented.²⁸ Even the institution of voting which is revered in liberal democratic theory as the foundation of democracy is seen by some as playing a role in the suppression of dissent. The experience of some of the participants of this study support the argument presented above that voting creates the illusion of equality and diverts voter attention away from the inequality that does exist:

I think the picture [of the ballot box] itself shows a fairness in the political system, but my feelings really are offended by it a little bit. At a certain point, uh, it represents something false to me.... I feel like many people are not heard in the system. I know all political people in power get money from certain corporations to do what they do and I think that people are being used as pawns to put these people in power. I see all kinds of deceit and things, and I see that the picture itself represents that I should believe that this represents a fair system.

²⁷ In other words, the manoeuvres, tactics and techniques of domination (Smart 1985, 77).

²⁸ Foucault uses the idea of Pentham’s Panopticon to describe how power is exercised through punishing nonconformity and creating the consciousness in those being dominated that they are being observed. See *Two Lectures*, 202-203.
Moreover, electoral politics, by defining the choices available to the voter, silence those who do not consent to the system itself. One participant expressed this view in the following way:

I feel we have a lack of choice, that, uh, for some of us those [candidates] are not the choice. You know, some of us do not want to be New Democrat, Liberal, this party in power right now. Or some of us do not believe in the structure of the system that it is right now and I believe that, fine if you support some of these ideas; if you don’t support those ideas, you have no voice whatsoever.

Elections, therefore, are rejected by some as counterproductive.29

Abstention and Alternative Political Actions

While many of this study’s findings are consistent with the theoretical position outlined in Chapter 1, what is important to this study is not so much the validity of that theory, but the fact that the political behavior of many Downtown Eastside residents is the result of the experiences they have had with political processes and their reflections on those processes. Analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data suggest that the political nonparticipation of many Downtown Eastside residents reflects a rejection of political processes they see as unreliable, unresponsive, ineffective, manipulative and, in some cases, counterproductive. While not articulated as such by many of the study’s participants, nonparticipation might therefore be more accurately conceived of as abstention and thus a political act in itself.

This conclusion is further evidenced by the consensus among the participants of this study that low-income people participate more than the literature suggests and in a variety of ways. While analysis of the quantitative data failed to confirm the findings of Anisfeld (1981) that internal locus of control is related to participation in conventional political actions and external locus of control is related to participation in radical actions, there was some evidence in the qualitative data of a similar dynamic. Anisfeld argues that people who exhibit an internal locus of control are likely to feel that they have considerable influence over the extant political

29 There were some participants who adamantly disagreed with this view of elections arguing that Canadians are lucky to be able to vote, that Canadians should vote because people died in wars in order to protect our right to vote and that citizens should not complain if they do not vote. While it is not my intention to prove their views right or wrong, it is important to point out how the views of these participants might be interpreted as both a manifestation and an instrument of hegemony. If elections are perceived of as suppressing dissent by creating a myth that (1) all citizens have equal power and that (2) power can be effectively exercised through casting a vote, then socialization and social sanctions which stress the duty or the right to vote can be seen as devices which maintain that myth. A perfect example of how this might work is the idea that a citizen should not complain if s/he does not vote. The implication is that elections are not only a way in which dissent can be expressed, it is the primary way dissent should be expressed. Anyone who questions the validity of the electoral processes, therefore, is caught in a situation where the only legitimate means of expressing her/his dissent is through the system s/he questions. By not voting, s/he has no voice. By voting s/he acknowledges that the system s/he questions is valid.
order and are likely, therefore, to participate in the established political processes. Those who exhibit an external locus of control, on the other hand, feel their actions are constrained by the limitations of the system and thus are more likely to engage in processes that are less connected to the system or which aim to change the system. Many people in the Downtown Eastside, according to the participants, seem to fit into the latter category. Many Downtown Eastside residents engage in very unconventional political actions, often as a conscious response to the inadequacy of conventional processes. Participation of this sort, in fact, may not be overtly political and may take the form of not participating. That is, political participation may be expressed through abstention—a refusal to take part in processes perceived as counterproductive or unjust. At its most extreme are those who live their dissent by refusing to participate in the social order or any process which legitimates it. As one participant explained,

Many times there is total disgust with the order as it is. And they have chosen somewhere along the line to step out of it... to the point where they don’t even; they live by their wits, they don’t even receive welfare anymore. If they did once upon a time, they don’t want any part of it... they’re living their dissent in a way and paying dearly for it.

What these findings seem to indicate is that the low participation rates of low-income people reported in the literature reflects a conservative bias in how political participation is defined and measured. Much of what appears on the surface to be nonparticipation may actually be a refusal to participate or a rejection of the available processes and therefore a form of participation in itself. Similarly, many of the political activities Downtown Eastside residents engage in may be difficult to gauge or may not be recognized as political at all. As a result, much of the political participation in communities like the Downtown Eastside may be overlooked and the rates of political participation in low-income communities reported in the literature may be grossly underestimated.30 This proposition raises a disquieting point. By defining both what constitutes political participation and how it is to be measured, liberal democratic discourse and social research also set the parameters of what is considered as legitimate political participation. By defining political participation in a way that excludes abstention, Speaking in Chalks, and many of the other ways Downtown Eastside residents

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30 Consider, as an analogy, the results of this research. There were, of course, thousands of Downtown Eastside residents who did not participate in this study. However, there were also several who refused to take part in it, and no record was kept of them. In fact, in the final analysis, no difference is made between those who refused to participate and those who simply did not participate. In much the same way, many indicators of political participation are measured in terms of who participated and who did not and those who actively refused to participate consequently lose their voice.
express dissent, liberal democratic discourse minimizes and silences that dissent. In other words, the political participation of low-income people may be undermined by the very way it is defined and studied.

The results of this study, therefore, indicate clearly that the low rates of political participation among low-income people that have been cited in the literature are both an overgeneralization and an oversimplification. This study indicates that many low-income people are at once constrained from political participation and active in it and raises a number of interesting points which have implications for both social work and research.
CHAPTER 6
OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Why do low-income people in communities like the Downtown Eastside not participate more in political activities? The short answer, according to this study, is that they participate more than many people who are unaffiliated with that community realize. Many low-income people in communities like the Downtown Eastside express their political opinions in numerous ways and to varying degrees, often living their dissent daily and paying a high price for it. Their dissent may be expressed in various forms ranging from conventional party politics to abstention and refusal to participate. What this study clearly suggests, however, is that low-income people, at least in the Downtown Eastside, are more politically active than is commonly acknowledged.

At the same time, however, it must be recognized that there are many factors associated with impoverished communities like the Downtown Eastside which constrain participation in both conventional and more radical political activities. The conditions of the community may be such that political participation is restricted by threats to physical safety or simply by the often chaotic environment. Poverty also constrains the political participation of the individuals in these communities through the vulnerability it creates, through the shame and stigma associated with it, and through the limitations it places on time, resources and energy that is available for pursuing interests other than survival. At the same time, the experiences of many Downtown Eastside residents, according to this study, have led them to view many of the conventional processes available for voicing a political opinion as ineffective and irrelevant or counterproductive and manipulative. As a result, many of those who are politically active express their political dissent and their skepticism regarding established political processes in ways that are seldom acknowledged.

The findings of this study suggest that attempts which fail to organize or promote participation in low-income communities should not be dismissed as reflecting the apathy of
that community’s residents. What the perceptions expressed by the study’s participants suggest is that the adequacy of established participatory processes and democratic institutions must also be considered. Many so-called participatory processes may actually stultify the voice of those they purport to empower by undermining alternative forms of political expression, by channelling dissent into processes where it can be managed, or by diverting attention away from the real issues and onto the participatory process itself. Similarly, established participatory processes may operate against dissent by claiming the individual’s participation in these processes as support for the legitimacy of the very processes and institutions s/he questions, of systems and institutions s/he perceives as unjust, of decisions made “in consultation” with the community despite the community’s dissent, or of actions already taken.

Following from this premise, this study suggests that social workers interested in promoting political empowerment and democracy should occupy themselves less with encouraging low-income people to participate in established processes and institutions, and more with ensuring that the processes and institutions they promote as empowering and democratic are in fact democratic and empowering. Not only may social workers and others who ignore this assertion not be part of the solution, they may actually be part of the problem in a number of interrelated ways. First, practitioners who are successful in engaging low-income people in participatory processes without critically evaluating the merit of such processes may themselves be guilty of manipulation and the containment of dissent, despite their good intentions. Also, presuming the problem to reside in the apparently apathetic individual and not in the available political processes undermines the authentic participation of many low-income people by discrediting abstention and other political acts which take place outside of and in opposition to established political processes. Furthermore, by focusing attention primarily on the individual and her/his personal or proximal reasons for not participating in politics, the structural and societal barriers to participation are not identified as such and the processes available for participation are accepted as adequate and legitimate. David Smail (1993) argues an analogous point in reference to psychology’s emphasis on the individual: “The ideological enterprise of the psychologist and psychotherapist has been to detach person from world so that social exploitation can be represented as personal breakdown” (186). Addressing personal and proximal barriers to political participation, while extremely important, is not sufficient.

Both the theoretical discussion presented earlier and the experience of the study’s
participants illuminate a number of ways in which power functions in society to perpetuate poverty and contain dissent. The media, for example, were identified as a mechanism by which the social order is maintained and dissent is suppressed. Social workers may perform a similar function when they conduct research on low-income people, perpetuate the ideal of expert knowledge, or, as previously noted, when they promote participation in political processes that are ultimately ineffective or counterproductive. Social workers interested in promoting the political participation of low-income people need to consider the political behavior of low-income people within the context of the social forces that affect it. More to the point, social workers and the social work profession, if committed to the goals of political empowerment and meaningful community consultation, should endeavour to address those societal forces through, for example, public critique of media images of poverty and low-income people, through ongoing critical evaluation of social work itself, and through social work education which gives social workers the skills to critically evaluate the impact of sociopolitical context on the individual and the role of social work within that context.

The implications of this study are not limited to the political empowerment of low-income people. This study’s findings may be applicable to all sectors of Canadian society. Although I would argue that they do enjoy substantially more political power than low-income people, people in the middle and upper classes are not immune to the technologies of power which suppress political dissidence. In fact, in some ways they may be especially susceptible to social pressures to behave according to the etiquette prescribed by their social class. Also, as capitalism globalizes, the power of capital to influence or even determine the decisions made by government increases. As a result, the political power of all of the nation’s citizens diminishes, as does the relevance of many political processes and institutions. Social workers and others interested in promoting participatory democracy, therefore, should not limit their efforts to promoting the political empowerment of low-income people. The development of innovative new ways to express political dissent and struggle for social change may be of benefit to all Canadians. Low-income people, in fact, may already be taking a leadership role in the development of participatory democratic processes. The findings of this study indicate clearly that many creative and subversive forms of political expression are emerging from communities like the Downtown Eastside, many of which may provide examples and lessons that can be applied more broadly.
Related to the need for alternative forms of political expression, the findings of this study also point to the virtue of communities like the Downtown Eastside having their own publications, conducting their own research, and organizing their own political organizations as alternatives to state institutions and established political processes. Many alternative political enclaves already exist in the Downtown Eastside, and the Paris Commune is testament to their potential success. Social workers, organizers and popular educators who are skilled at coordinating research, facilitating dialogue between community members and crystallizing ideas for political actions which emerge as a result of that dialogue may have a role to play in the development of such enclaves. However, social workers working in this capacity need to listen to what the community members are telling them, accept their perceptions of reality as valid, and initiate efforts that are appropriate to the experiences and reality of those community members. Unless people perceive political actions or participatory processes as useful and relevant given their experience, they will probably not participate. Social workers and others involved in promoting alternative forms of political participation in low-income communities, therefore, will benefit from ensuring that the ideas for political action and the leadership derive from the community members rather than from the social worker.

A further implication of this study's findings has to do with social work research in low-income communities like the Downtown Eastside. Researchers are distrusted by many people in communities like the Downtown Eastside, and for good reason. Conducting social research in low-income communities raises certain ethical issues. The expressed experience of many Downtown Eastside residents is that research rarely leads to any positive outcome for the subjects of study. In fact, the only benefits that are often perceived to be derived from research are those bestowed on the researcher. Furthermore, research may be perceived as a device for maintaining the status quo by (1) keeping track of dissidence and refining techniques for subverting it, and by (2) reinforcing the idea that only expert knowledge based on science and reason can be trusted as legitimate and credible. Researchers in communities like the Downtown Eastside therefore face two related dilemmas: one based on the ethics of conducting research in low-income communities and the other based on the feasibility of conducting research on people who do not wish to participate in it because of those ethical issues. In order to face both dilemmas, researchers conducting research in low-income communities must therefore strive to ensure the ethical integrity of their research by involving the participants in as
many stages of the research as possible, by employing methods which enable participants to express their thoughts as freely and completely as possible, by reflecting the sentiments of the study’s participants as authentically as possible, by making the completed research available to the community for their use and critique, and by representing a genuine commitment to compensating the community in some way. Ideally, social work research in communities like the Downtown Eastside should be designed and implemented in collaboration with the participants of the study and credit and compensation should be shared equally between all participants. Where this is not feasible, however, compromises may have to be made.

Given the methodological limitations of this study, further research will be needed in order to validate the findings of this study and to gauge their applicability to other communities. Also, research into the extent to which nonparticipation in communities like the Downtown Eastside reflects a rejection of established political processes as illegitimate (as opposed to simply ineffective) and how such resistance can best be geared toward social change would be helpful to activists and organizers. Further information will also be needed to better understand how systemic and societal institutions that suppress dissent can be mitigated and how organizations and political processes can be designed to more effectively express and amplify that dissent.

While there are limitations to this study, it does raise some interesting and important propositions about the expression of dissent in liberal democratic society. This study clearly suggests a number of societal forces interact to contain and limit the expression of dissent among low-income people. However, this study also clearly suggests the seemingly contradictory conclusion that many low-income people in communities like the Downtown Eastside are extremely politically active, and many are active in extremely dissident ways. Low-income people cannot be categorized as passive and apathetic political bystanders. They are active participants in the making of history, even if in circumstances not of their own choosing. The challenge for social workers and others who are interested in promoting the political participation of low-income people is to recognize and support the expression of dissent among low-income people, not to manipulate it or try to fit it into the parameters of liberal democratic discourse. Why do low-income people not participate more in political activities? This study indicates that many do participate, but in ways that authentically reflect their interests and their reality.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A
QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS

Introduction

"Sociopolitical Locus of Control" is how much you feel you can make a difference in political and social issues. The purpose of this study is to find out how "Sociopolitical Locus of Control" affects the ways that low-income people get involved in political and social issues. I will also be looking at how things like age, sex, the type of place you live in, etc. affect political participation.

Section A: Characteristics of the Participants

The questions in this section will help us to see similarities and differences among the people who participate in this study, and will help us to make sense of the results of the study. [After each question, please circle the correct answer or fill in the blank].

1. Are you male or female?
   Female  Male

2. How old were you on your birthday?

3. What level of education do you have?
   grades 1-8  college/university  training in a trade:
   grades 9-12  adult education  certified
   grade 12 completed  adult learning centre  self-taught

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31 The questionnaire was originally formatted on 8 1/2" X 14" paper. The format and layout here, therefore is slightly different from the original. However, the text itself is identical except where altered to fit the format as indicated with brackets.
4. Are you in school of taking any courses right now?
   No
   Yes
   If yes, what are you taking?__________________

5. What is your main source of income right now?
   Job
   U.I.
   social assistance (GAIN)
   GAIN-Handicap
   Old Age Security
   Other
   If other, what is it?__________________

6. What is the make-up of your family?
   single
   couple
   single with children 7-18
   who live at home
   couple with children 7-18
   who live at home
   single with children under 7
   couple with children under 7

7. What type of place do you live in?
   apartment
   shelter/hostel
   social housing
   hotel
   residence
   coop
   rooming house
   homeless
   house

8. How long have you lived in the neighbourhood you live in now?
   __________________ yrs.,__________________ mos.

Section B: Feelings of Control Over the Social and Political Environment

The questions in this section will help us to understand how much control you feel you have over social and political situations. [Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the following statements using the scale below]

1=strongly disagree
2=disagree
3=sort of disagree
4=sort of agree
5=agree
6=strongly agree

---

9. There are plenty of ways for people to have a say in what our government does.

10. People like me are well qualified to participate in the political activity and decision making in our country.

11. I feel like I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues which confront our society.

12. I enjoy political participation because I want to have as much say in running government as possible.

13. I am often a leader in groups.

14. I can usually organize people to get things done.

15. I would prefer to be a leader than a follower.

16. Other people usually follow my ideas.

17. A good many elections aren’t important enough to bother with.

18. So many other people are active in local issues that it doesn’t matter much to me whether I participate or not.

19. It hardly matters who I vote for because whoever gets elected does whatever she or he wants to do anyway.

20. Most public officials wouldn’t listen to me no matter what I did.

21. Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on.

22. I like to wait and see if someone else is going to solve a problem so I don’t have to be bothered by it.

23. I would rather not try something I’m not good at.

24. I find it hard to talk in front of a group.

25. I would rather someone else took over the leadership role when I’m involved in a group project.

Section C: Political Participation

The questions in this section are about how you participate and the organizations you are involved in.

26. Are you involved in any organizations whose main goal is to help people by providing services they need (such as food, clothing, shelter, counselling, etc.)?

   No                                                 Yes
   If no, go question 27 now  If yes, answer a, b, and c, before going on to #27
a) How many of these organizations are you involved in?

b) What positions do you hold at these organizations?

- guest/service user
- volunteer (completely unpaid)
- volunteer with some pay
- member
- board member
- member of executive
- member of other committee
- member of a collective
- paid staff
- other

c) On average, how many hours do you spend each week doing things related to these organizations?

27. Are you involved with any organizations or committees whose main goal is to change things by taking a stand on social issues, organizing people to work together, or advocating for change?

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<th>If no, go question 28 now</th>
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<th>Yes</th>
<th>If yes, answer a, b, and c, before going on to question 28.</th>
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a) How many of these organizations are you involved in?

b) What positions do you hold at these organizations?

- guest/service user
- volunteer (completely unpaid)
- volunteer with some pay
- member
- board member
- member of executive
- member of other committee
- member of a collective
- paid staff
- other

c) On average, how many hours do you spend each week doing things related to these organizations?

28. How often do you discuss politics with other people?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>never</th>
<th>hardly</th>
<th>once in</th>
<th>most of</th>
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<td>ever</td>
<td>a while</td>
<td>the time</td>
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29. Did you vote in the last federal election?
   No                                         Yes

30. Did you vote in the last provincial election?
   No                                         Yes

31. Did you vote in the last city election?
   No                                         Yes

32. How many times have you contacted an elected politician (city councillor, M.L.A., or M.P.) for help with a problem you were having?
   never                                      once or twice                   3-5 times                   more than 5 times

33. How many times have you, as part of a group, contacted an elected politician (city councillor, M.L.A., or M.P.) for help with a problem that affects your community?
   never                                      once or twice                   3-5 times                   more than 5 times

34. How many times have you, as an individual, contacted an elected politician (city councillor, M.L.A., or M.P.) for help with a problem that affects your community?
   never                                      once or twice                   3-5 times                   more than 5 times

35. In the last 2 years (24 months), how many times have you participated in a mass demonstration, sit-in, or other type of protest action?
   never                                      once or twice                   3-5 times                   more than 5 times

36. Have you ever joined others to work on a problem that you all were having?
   No                                         Yes

37. Is there anything you would like to say?
   __________________________________________
APPENDIX B
LETTERS OF AGENCY CONSENT
APPENDIX C
SAMPLE COVER LETTER
APPENDIX D
THE PHOTOGRAPHS

1. Ballot Box. Photographer, title and publication date unknown. Special collections, Vancouver and District Public Library.

