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VOTING AND THE EXPANDING REPERTOIRE OF PARTICIPATION

Jan W. van Deth

Introduction: expanding repertoires

Since elections are the hallmark of democracy voting occupies a unique position among the many ways people can be engaged in politics. Only elections have formal consequences for the distribution of political power and the legitimacy of political decisions and decision-making procedures. Democracy, therefore, cannot exist without general suffrage. The widely recognized significance and uniqueness of voting and elections for the quality of democracy have been challenged by two seemingly related developments: whereas citizens in many countries are staying away from the polls in record numbers, other forms of political participation have become increasingly popular. By now, the repertoire of participation is virtually endless covering forms as different as casting a vote, signing petitions, demonstrating, donating money, attending flash mobs, contacting public officials, buying fair-trade products, signing petitions, boycotting, guerrilla gardening, volunteering, organizing blogs, and suicide protests.

The downward trends in voting turnout in many countries and the continued rise of new forms of engagement attracted the attention of many scholars and pundits. Do these processes imply a transformation “From Voters to Participants” (Gundelach and Siune 1992) and is voting crowded out by the evident appeal of these new modes in “Zero Sum Democracy” (Peters 2016)? Can the spread of new modes of participation be seen as a kind of “compensation” for declining turnout? Are we confronted with parallel but causally unrelated developments or with flip sides of the same coin? At first sight, these questions can be easily answered by referring to broad processes of societal, social, and political change implying the weakening of the nation-state in a globalized world. As the scope of government activities and responsibilities expanded considerably since the 1960s, the domain of political participation grew too; that is, political participation became relevant in areas that would be considered private, social, or economic only a few decades ago. Furthermore, with the rapidly increasing interdependencies and complexities in a globalized world “nongovernmental politics” and non-state actors are becoming increasingly important (Feher 2007; Hutter 2014; Sloam 2007; Walker et al. 2008), especially to deal with the immense ecological, socioeconomic, and demographic challenges facing mankind (Bauman 1998). Consequently, the decline of voting and the rise of new forms of participation are both stimulated by the expansion of government interventions and especially by the rise of non-state actors.
Voting and participation

Plausible and enticing as these broad interpretations might be they usually avoid offering explanations for the exact mechanisms that would enforce people to withdraw from conventional government activities or nation-state politics. In his seminal article on profound political changes in democratic societies, Ronald Inglehart (1971) probably presented the most famous and widely used approach to explain these developments comprehensively. In his view, declining voter turnout and the rise of new modes of participation are clearly connected because they both rely on the combined effects of the spread of postmaterialist value orientations and the rise of cognitive competences among the populations of advanced democracies. According to Inglehart, this mainly generationally driven change will increasingly result in a decline of support for authorities, conventions, and material advantages as well as a downward trend in voting turnout.

In this chapter, four aspects of these debates are considered. First, the main developments in political participation in the last decades – declining electoral participation and expansions of the repertoire – are depicted. Second, the distinctions between the various modes of participation are explored in order to see whether casting a vote has lost its initial uniqueness with the growth of all-embracing repertoires of political participation. Third, the empirical soundness of the widely accepted idea of a generationally based process of value change counting for both declining turnout and increasing popularity of newer modes of participation is evaluated. Finally, the evidence for a direct relationship between casting a vote and other forms of participation is considered: do protest and voting strengthen or exclude each other? The findings all suggest that voting and other modes of participation should neither be studied separately nor should they be considered simply as substitutable specimen of political engagement: “When we conceptualize political engagement only as periodic voting we miss the richness and dynamic potential of democratic citizenship” (Berger 2011: 41).

Changing participation

As can be easily illustrated with the publication of a few landmark studies in empirical political participation research, a continuous expansion of the repertoire of participation is hard to overlook. More specifically, the introduction of new forms and modes of participation gradually lessened the initial strong focus on elections as the main arena for democratic participation. This emphasis is evident in the seminal voting studies of the 1940s and 1950s that restricted political participation mainly to casting a vote, campaigning, and further party- or election-related activities (Berelson et al. 1954; Lazarsfeld et al. 1948). For the authors of “The American Voter,” political participation was broadly understood as activities concerned with constitutional political institutions – mainly related to electoral activities by politicians and parties – but also included public contacts between citizens and government officials (Campbell et al. 1960). Because of the growing relevance of community politics these forms of participation were expanded with direct contacts between citizens, public officials, and politicians in empirical studies in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Verba and Nie 1972; Verba et al. 1978). The repertoire of political participation covered by these seminal works in the first post-war decades includes all accepted activities in representative democracies which later became known as conventional or institutionalized modes of participation.

Even if one does not buy the romantic and exaggerated depictions of the late 1960s as a revolutionary area, it is clear that the waves of protest in many countries established a major shift in political engagement. Obviously, political participation could no longer be restricted to broadly accepted forms or “proper” activities. Protest, opposition, and rejection are clear expressions of citizens’ interests and opinions and therefore should be included in the repertoire of political participation.
participation (Barnes et al. 1979; Marsh 1977). Because these protest forms of participation were not in line with social norms of the early 1970s they have been labeled unconventional modes of participation – a depiction that continued to be used long after social norms changed in favor of these activities. New social movements such as women’s or pacifists’ groups also belong to this category (Dalton and Küchler 1990). Many protest actions and activities by new social movements challenge the conventional understanding of the scope and nature of politics and stress political struggles. To underline this character labels such as contentious politics (Tarrow 1998) or elite-challenging modes of participation (Inglehart 1990; Inglehart and Catterberg 2002) are used.

The rise of new social movements in the early 1970s already indicated that the traditional understanding of politics as being limited to governments, politicians, and electoral processes rapidly vanished. Recent expansions of the repertoire of political participation all show the further dissolution of the borderline between political and non-political spheres in many countries. First, in the early 1990s the revival of Tocquevillian and communitarian approaches lead to an expansion of the repertoire with civil activities such as volunteering and social engagement in all kinds of voluntary associations (Verba et al. 1995). In these approaches, the quality of democracy is directly related to the existence of a vibrant civil society (Putnam 1993). Second, many citizens detected that their power as consumers could be used successfully to achieve social or political goals by boycotting or “buycotting” certain products or firms (Micheletti 2003). In a relatively short period of time political consumerism became one of the most popular forms of participation (Stolle and Micheletti 2013). A third major development concerns the spread of internet-based technologies – especially social media – as means for political participation. Because of their extremely low opportunity costs, these technologies appear to be efficient ways to raise public awareness and the visibility of all kind of causes and issues almost instantly (Shirky 2008). Moreover, the production and dissemination of political news on the internet hardly can be restricted or manipulated by authorities. Several authors argue that these implications and consequences of the use of internet technologies already gave rise to a new type of “connective action” replacing “collective action” (Bennett and Segerberg 2013).

With these recent expansions of the repertoire, the nature of political activities changed. Whereas older forms of participation such as voting or demonstrating are specific activities mainly devised and used to influence political decision-making processes, newer modes such as political consumption or guerrilla gardening are non-political activities used for political aims (van Deth 2010). These activities do not require any organization or collective action and establish what Micheletti (2003: 25; see c.f. Stolle and Micheletti 2013: 36–39) nicely depicted as “individualized collective action”: to be effective, a large number of people should behave in a similar way, but they can all act individually, separately, and with distinct aims and motivations. Usually these activities have an unmistakable emphasis on the expression of moral and ethical standpoints, which gradually seem to replace the older, more instrumentally based motivations for political engagement. The spread of internet-based technologies strongly facilitates these non-private, individualized, and expressively motivated actions.

The uniqueness of the vote

The continued expansions of the repertoire of political participation since the Second World War have increasingly dissolved the distinctions between political and non-political activities and by now almost every conceivable form of non-private activity can be understood as a mode of political participation sometimes (van Deth 2001, 2014). As mentioned, the initial strong focus on elections as the main arena for democratic participation gradually diminished with the
introduction of new forms of participation. Although the rise of each new activity implies the expansion of the general repertoire of political participation, it does not mean that we simply observe the addition of new forms of participation to available ones. In fact, empirical research consistently shows that the repertoire of political participation encompasses distinct forms – or actions – grouped into several modes of participation. More importantly, empirical analyses of these (latent) structures largely show similar results in many countries. After Milbrath (1965: 18) had suggested a pyramid-shaped distribution of active and passive forms of participation, already Milbrath and Goel (1977: 20f.) and Verba and Nie (1972: 60–75) applied advanced statistical methods to distinguish four major modes of political participation in the US: “voting,” “campaign activity,” “communal activity,” and “particularized contacting.” The distinction between conventional and unconventional modes was also based on the application of data reduction techniques (Barnes et al. 1979: 540–550). Parry et al. (1992: 50–62) found six modes of participation in Britain: “voting,” “party campaigning,” “collective action,” “contacting,” “direct action,” and “political violence.” In a similar vein, Verba et al. (1995) expanded the list of four modes of participation developed by Verba and Nie more than twenty years earlier with “protest” and divided campaign activities and contacting further into subcategories. Moreover, they added activities in voluntary associations and volunteering to the repertoire of participation. These last-mentioned activities also show up in Norris’ three-dimensional space distinguishing “civic activism,” “protest activism,” and “voting turnout” (2002: 196). In the most extensive empirical study in Europe, Teorell et al. (2007: 344–345) grouped the many forms of participation they found into five modes: “voting,” “contacting,” “party activity,” “protest activity,” and “consumer participation.” Recent analyses of the structure of the repertoire of participation also report five modes: “voting,” “conventional participation,” “protest,” “consumer participation,” and “digitally networked participation” (Theocharis and van Deth 2016).

The specific number and depictions of the various dimensions reflect the forms of participation considered relevant for these studies – obviously this relevance varies by time and place. Yet, if we look behind the different labels used, probably the most remarkable and consistent empirical result is the fact that casting a vote is not only the most widely used form of engagement, but always arises as a distinct mode of participation. No matter how many other forms of participation are included in the analyses voting apparently cannot be combined with other forms of participation into a more general mode of participation. Besides, casting a vote is the only form of participation that requires such an exclusive position; all other forms of participation can be combined to establish specific modes of participation. It should be noticed, however, that these conclusions are all based on the application of data reduction procedures aiming to find independent dimensions of the latent spaces constructed. The use of item response models (especially stochastic cumulative scaling techniques) allowing for multiple instead of independent scales suggests that voting is related to several other forms of participation. In a unique and very extensive study, García-Albacete (2014) reviewed all cross-national surveys since the 1970s and painstakingly developed equivalent instruments for political participation in various countries based on the use of item response models (Mokken scaling). These analyses show that “voting” is included in an identical scale for “institutional participation” together with “contacting politicians” and “working for a political party.” For the construction of equivalent measures this scale can be expanded with “membership in a traditional organization” and “donating money” in several countries. The inclusion of casting a vote in these scales causes several minor problems – especially in Denmark and Italy – but does not challenge the idea that voting can be considered to be a specimen of an “institutional” mode of participation (García-Albacete 2014: 25–39). The use of scale models instead of dimensional analyses, then, shows that, on the one
hand, casting a vote is associated with a few forms of participation directly related to the main actors in the electoral process. On the other hand, it is clear that voting definitely does not belong to the larger “non-institutional” mode of participation, which includes forms such as demonstrating or signing petitions.

A second way to explore the relationships between voting and other forms of participation is to compare their respective antecedents. The study by Parry et al. in Britain follows this design and shows that the “pattern” of individual resources determining participation is very similar for all modes of participation, but “only voting shows a different pattern” (1992: 84). Using sophisticated models, Oser (2016) is able to show that predictors of being a “high-voting engaged participant” differ clearly from those for other groups. The seminal study of Verba and his colleagues (1995) on political and social involvement in the US covers many forms of participation and a large number of antecedents. Summarizing the huge amounts of information they collected the authors strongly stress the “uniqueness of the vote” and conclude their empirical analyses with a clear warning:

with respect to every single aspect of participation we scrutinize, voting is fundamentally different from other acts. (…) To repeat, on every dimension along which we consider participatory acts, voting is sui generis. For this reason, it is a mistake to generalize from our extensive knowledge about voting to all forms of participation.

(Verba et al. 1995: 23–24; emphasis original)

This “uniqueness of the vote” probably stimulated the separate development of voting studies and participation research in the last decades and the spread of terms such as “non-institutional” or “non-electoral” participation.

Looking at contextual impacts provides a third way to study differences and similarities between casting a vote and other modes of participation. A growing number of studies argue that voting and these other modes of participation are essentially different because they depend on the institutional and political contexts in different ways. Although these studies are usually based on a rather limited number of actions – five or six forms of participation typically being the maximum amount available – the conclusions consistently underline the need to distinguish between casting a vote on the one hand and all other forms of participation on the other (Bolzendahl and Coffé 2013: 72; Brunton-Smith and Barrett 2015: 203). Typical specimens of this work are the cross-national analyses of Weldon and Dalton (2013) of the impact of the degree of “consensualism” – the attempts to integrate various interests instead of applying major- ity rule – in advanced democracies on participation. Confirming very similar findings from other studies (Peters 2016; van der Meer et al. 2009; Vráblíková 2013, 2016; Vráblíková and van Deth 2017), they report contrary effects for different actions: “Consensual party-based electoral systems may stimulate turnout in elections – but they also appear to discourage an active and more robust democratic citizenship” (Weldon and Dalton 2013: 127).

These three distinct approaches of the relationships and (dis)similarities between voting and other forms of participation – (i) dimensional analyses, and exploratory analyses of (ii) antecedents and (iii) contextual impacts – do not have much in common. Nonetheless each of the analyses concerned corroborates the idea that casting a vote is not only a distinct form but also a distinct mode of political participation. Only incidentally voting is shown to be associated with a few forms of participation directly related to the electoral process, together establishing an “electoral” or “institutionalized” mode of participation. Even if casting a vote is not considered to be “the holy grail of political engagement” (Berger 2011: 164), it certainly is a unique specimen of being involved.
Voting and participation

The impact of values and institutions

The parallel developments of declining voter turnout and expansions of the participatory repertoire can be seen as different phenomena to be explained by different theoretical approaches. For instance, Mair (2013) strongly argued that the “failures of contemporary parties” are mainly responsible for much of the problems representative democracies face today, including growing political indifference among the populations. As with globalization theories focusing on the decline of the nation-state and the implied move toward non-governmental politics to explain waning turnout (see above), Mair’s explanation emphasizes the relevance of supply-side factors for the explanation of political participation. In these approaches, the rise of new modes of participation is simply implied by assuming that, in a rapidly changing world, people will move from the nation-state to other areas and targets that are considered to be more relevant to express their political demands and opinions.

Despite their intuitive plausibility, supply-side approaches to explain political participation have a modest empirical record. Therefore, explanations take situational and contextual factors into account increasingly, but emphasize demand-side factors; that is, circumstantial factors and characteristics of individual citizens and their micro-contexts are combined in integrated multi-level models. For the study of changing political participation, probably the most influential approach following this recommendation is Ronald Inglehart’s theory of a “Silent Revolution” (1971). According to this theory, unprecedented economic prosperity and a lack of social turmoil after the Second World War triggered a process of value change in many countries. Especially among young people the satisfaction of existential needs gradually was taken for granted; consequently they increasingly attached priority to self-fulfillment and the satisfaction of social needs. According to Inglehart, this generationally based transformation from “materialist” to “post-materialist” value orientations affects all aspects of life ranging from changes in religious beliefs, work motivation, parental goals, and attitudes toward divorce and homosexuality, to changes in the nature of political conflicts, the rise of Green parties, and the spread of cosmopolitan attitudes in a globalizing world. On average, these younger generations will also be much higher educated and will have much easier access to information than their predecessors. Postmaterialist value orientations, therefore, will be articulated by young citizens with a relatively high level of cognitive skills, which enable them to deal with political abstractions and phenomena that are remote in time and space. In this way, value change and “cognitive mobilization” are very closely interrelated (Inglehart, 1971, 1977, 1981, 1990; Inglehart and Catterberg, 2002).

Already in the first extensive presentation of his theory, Inglehart dealt with the “apparent contradiction” (1977: 314) that the predicted increase in social and political engagement among postmaterialists very clearly does not hold for voting turnout, which is notoriously low among young people. According to Inglehart, the postmaterialist desire to move from “elite-directed” to “elite-challenging” modes of participation is strongly stimulated by the process of “cognitive mobilization” – together they provide the key to solve the “contradiction”:

This change does not imply that mass publics will simply show higher rates of participation in traditional activities such as voting but that they may intervene in the political process on a qualitatively different level. Increasingly, they are likely to demand participation in making major decisions, not just a voice in selecting the decision-makers.

(Inglehart 1977: 293; emphasis original)

In combination with the weakening of party identification and the declining attractiveness of conventional mobilization agencies such as parties, churches, and unions, these emerging
demands drive the dual developments of decreasing voter turnout and the spread of new forms of participation (Dalton 2012). In fact, the generationally based nature of this process implies a continuously declining trend in voting as well as a parallel but continuously increasing tendency in the use of newer forms of participation. While almost each aspect of Inglehart’s theory of value change has been criticized (c.f. Abramson 2015; Davis et al. 1999; Scarbrough 1995) the initial idea of a “Silent Revolution” has been further developed and expanded into a general theory of human development (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Welzel 2013). Besides, it has been shown that values also have a substantial impact on political behavior as a(n) (aggregated) feature of a political culture and not just as individual properties (Jakobsen and Listhaug 2015; Welzel and Deutsch 2012).

The impact of values on political behavior has been empirically demonstrated in a number of studies. However, the effects on political participation outside the ballot box are much clearer than effects on voting. Whereas, for instance, Gundelach concludes that “…postmaterialism plays a notable role in stimulating grass-roots activity” (1995: 432), Borg found that “…postmaterialist values have little impact on turnout levels” (1995: 459). Unfortunately, most studies available focus on a single aspect of these processes, use a very limited number of determinants, or do not compare potential effects on various modes of participation systematically (Vráblíková and Cisář 2015). More importantly, most studies do not compare the impact of values with the impact of other, non-attitudinal determinants at both the micro and the macro level and, therefore, cannot be used for empirical evaluations of the idea that changes in participation are mainly driven by value change.

In a rare combined comparative analysis of individual and contextual determinants of various modes of participation, Vráblíková (2016) studies the relative effects of institutional arrangements and value orientations. Her main conclusion is that contextual factors need to be taken into account in combination with cultural aspects, but that institutional arrangements such as the separation of powers and the degree of competition frequently overshadow the impact of values. In other words: although the notion of a generationally based transformation of values and competences triggering changes in many areas of life in many countries is widely accepted by now, it is also clear that this transformation is not the only relevant, and probably not the most important, factor to explain changes and cross-national differences in political participation.

A different logic

The analyses presented by Vráblíková (2016) also allow for an important conclusion on the relationships between voting and other forms of participation. When country-specific effects – including differences in institutional arrangements and value orientations – are taken into account, it becomes clear that casting a vote and other modes of participation do not exclude each other:

In contrast to the notion of displacement, which theorizes that non-electoral activism is driving out electoral participation, the literature and results reviewed above suggest that the structure of people’s political action repertoire is cumulative. The vast majority of people who get involved in non-electoral activities also vote, and this repertoire composition holds regardless of the specific country context. (Vráblíková 2016: 169)

On this crucial point, however, other researchers are less positive. Whereas, for instance, Stolle and Micheletti conclude that “the rise of political consumerism does not necessarily compensate
for the decline in traditional participation” (2013: 265), other scholars report modest but negative correlations between voting and new modes of participation (Norris 2002: 205; Theocharis and van Deth 2016: 16) or no correlation at all when “radical protest” is considered (Bean 1991: 267). An extensive discussion of a “reciprocal relationship” is presented by McAdam and Tarrow (2010).

Moving the focus of the analyses from the participation repertoires of citizens toward the study of political actors in various societies, a different type of analysis has risen recently. In a highly original study of the relationships between “electoral politics” and “protest politics” in Western Europe, Hutter (2012, 2014) stresses that the saliency of issue positions for newly emerging issues related to globalization, migration, and European integration plays a key role in our understanding of the roles and positions of political actors. He distinguishes three possible interpretations of the relationships: the “congruence thesis” (postulating a positive correlation between electoral and protest politics), the “counterweight thesis” (postulating that salient issues in the electoral arena will be less salient in protest politics – and vice versa), and the “different logics thesis” (postulating that the direction of the relationship depends on the political orientations of the actors involved: left-wing actors will show a positive relationship, right-wing a negative one) (Hutter 2012: 189–191; 2014: Chapter 2; see also Cisař and Vráblíková 2015). The last interpretation is clearly corroborated by the empirical evidence available:

there are different logics at work with respect to the relationship between electoral and protest mobilization on the political left and right. The left can be expected to wax and wane at the same time in both arenas, while for the right, when its actors and issue positions become more salient in one arena their salience should decrease in the other.

(Hutter 2014: Introduction; see also Hutter 2012: 203)

The findings presented by Vráblíková and by Hutter suggest rather complex mechanisms relating voting to other modes of participation with conditional effects replacing simple direct impacts. Although dealing with political actors instead of individual citizens, the “distinct logic” stressed by Hutter (2012, 2014), however, once again shows that casting a vote should be distinguished from other activities if we want to understand political engagement in a globalizing world.

Conclusions and discussion

Elections establish the core of democracy and so voting should be at the center of discussions about political participation among mass publics. In this chapter, the seemingly related processes of downward trends in voting turnout and the increasing popularity of other forms of participation have been considered. Four conclusions can be based on the available evidence. First, it is clear that the repertoire of political participation rapidly expanded in the last few decades: by now, almost every non-private act can be used for political purposes and voting is only one of the many options available to citizens. Second, the repertoire of participation appears to be fairly similarly structured in many studies with voting always establishing a distinct mode of participation. This “uniqueness of the vote” (Verba et al. 1995) is corroborated by analyses of the antecedents of different modes of participation as well as their contextual determinants. Third, generationally based shifts in values play an important role in approaches advocating that declining turnout and the spread of other modes of participation are flip sides of the same coin. Yet extensive analyses taking into account both value orientations and institutional arrangements at
the micro and macro level show a relatively stronger impact of institutional arrangements than values. Finally, empirical evidence does not support displacement or crowding out effects: citizens using one or more of the available newer forms of participation are likely to visit the ballot box too, but a “distinct logic” (Hutter 2012, 2014) explains the relationships differently for left- and right-wing politics.

The popularity of new forms or participation clearly refutes the idea of a general decline in political involvement or a general shift away from social and political issues among the populations in many countries. Downward trends in voter turnout, however, suggest that also among activists electoral participation gradually becomes less important or attractive. The fact that voting apparently establishes a distinct mode of participation implies that a decline in turnout cannot be easily counteracted or compensated by the proliferation of other forms of participation. Even studies relying on a large number of different forms of participation do not reveal a reduction of the number of dimensions or the inclusion of voting into some broader range of forms of participation. On the other hand, it is clear that representative democracy without sizeable voter turnout and some party work cannot function. These findings all suggest that voting and other modes of participation should neither be studied separately nor should they be considered as substitutable specimen of political engagement.

This delicate relationship between voting and other modes of participation also indicates that terms such as “Zero Sum Democracy” or “Positive Sum Democracy” (Peters 2016) correctly point to inherent relationships between various modes of participation but are probably too broad to be used for evaluations of the challenges democracies face. A vibrant democracy clearly necessitates the widespread willingness to cast a vote as well as broad support for other forms of citizens’ involvement. What is required, therefore, is that at least a part of the other forms of participation are integrated into institutionalized democratic policy-making processes to avoid that the erosional trend in electoral participation challenges the legitimacy of representative democracy. Several authors called for a “second transformation” of democracy that should entail exactly this integration (Cain et al. 2003). The complicated interdependencies between voting and other forms of participation summarized in this chapter should be taken as an incitement and stimulus for further work in this direction.

### Notes

1. Whereas a “form” of participation is a specific activity, several forms sharing some feature are called a “mode” or “type” of participation. A “repertoire” of political participation unites all available forms (and modes) of participation.
2. That is, each form of participation can be depicted as a point in a latent space (the repertoire) defined by several directions or dimensions (the modes of participation).
3. Reducing data on participation using principal components analysis (PCA) with orthogonal rotation is standard praxis in the field. The use of orthogonal rotation procedures, however, is questionable because various modes of participation have shown to be correlated. For a different approach, see Oser (2016).
4. This split comes with distinct projects such as the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) vs. the Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy project (CID), and with distinct journals such as *Electoral Studies* or the *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* vs. more general journals such as *Comparative Political Studies* or *Political Behavior*.
5. Researchers using cluster-analytic or typological approaches instead of correlational analyses usually show that small numbers of voters are also engaged in other activities. See Oser (2016) for a very interesting study along these lines.
References


