The Shape of Political Participation

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Abstract

Although much voting is habitual and education may be a "universal solvent"(324) (Converse, 1972), neither habit nor education explains the moments when a person decides to send a letter, join or organize a protest, or work together with others on some community project. Nor can these more or less static characteristics of people they predict how long a person will spend as an active participant before redirecting her energies away from politics. Nor would they tell us much about what kinds of events or conditions might interrupt such spells of concentrated action. Are all such dynamics explained by mobilization? Many are but many are not.

This paper has three simple aims: (1) to present evidence to make vivid and compelling the fact that political participation occurs as a sparse series of episodes in the lives of people in addition to a line dividing the ruled and the rulers; (2) propose an analytical and conceptual distinction between potentiating and precipitating factors in the etiology of political participation to help guide those who will produce a unifying theory; and (3) highlight some of the implications of the descriptions presented for questions we might ask about political participation and democracy and future research on these topics.

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1 What is called political participation?

Political participation is an object of study. We theorize about it, observe it, and, in general, worry about it. The ways that we describe political participation suggest plausible explanations and theories. For example, concerns about changing aggregate participation over time focus on differences between cross-sections of the public over time. Plausible explanations for such changes focus on differences across moments in time (say, the changing structure of the macro-economy or macro-polity) and/or perhaps changing compositions of the aggregates (say, via generational replacement) (Putnam, 2000; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). Perhaps the most common way we consider of political participation is as a set of differences in behavior of individuals at one point in time. Plausible explanations for such participatory inequalities are attributes of individuals which otherwise define social, political, and economic divisions: education, for example, has proven to be particularly powerful at distinguishing the active from the inactive (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Berry, 1996). An older literature focused more attention on differences in the character and amount of participation between places: Key (1949) explained the proportion of whites voting using the proportion of blacks in counties, and Pollock (1944) explained support for Hitler by comparing the characteristics of electoral districts (region of the country, composition of religious adherents). If the question is about what distinguishes places, we consider aspects of the places, and we start to think of aspects of people (race, religion, etc...) as aspects of places. If the question is about what distinguishes moments in time across the nation, we consider large-scale historical processes. If the question is about what distinguishes people from each other at one moment in time, large-scale historical processes are not plausible explanations except as providing a kind of static context or an unobserved counter-factual, but differences across people become plausible explanations. How we represent the object of study makes certain kinds of causal stories more or less plausible or useful. And the availability of data and tools often determines how we define political participation as an object of study.

This article reminds us about another way that we could consider political participation: as a series of episodes or spells within the life of a person. Adding this alternative manifestation to the others raises questions and proposes new understandings of past results—plausible explanations for

other manifestations of political participation are not prima facie plausible for participation when understood as a stochastic process. We do not propose a new theory here. Instead, we begin to develop the implications of adding a new description to the study of political participation. The main goal of this article is to show a picture of political activity that reveals new aspects of it in order to encourage new theory and thought on how political involvement seen as a trajectory or series over time may relate to political involvement seen as a difference between people at one moment in time.

2 A Picture of Political Participation as Episodes

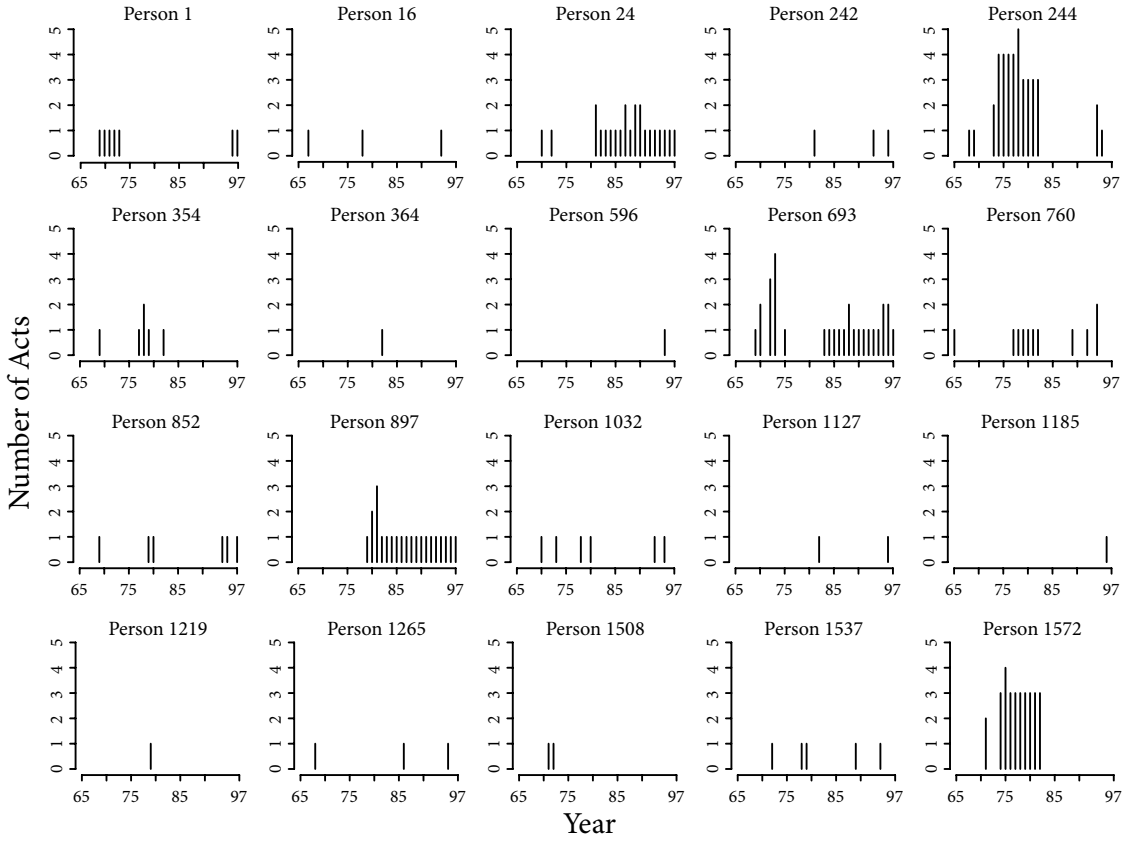


Figure 1: Profiles of individual participation beyond voting for a random sample of participators from the 935 members of the High School Class of 1965, age 18–50. At each point in time, each person may report from 0 to 6 acts of non-electoral participation: working with others in the community, contacting elected officials, attending protests or rallies, and writing letters to the editor. Vertical lines show the number of acts reported by a given person in each year.

Figure 1 shows raw data on non-electoral participation reported by a random sample of 20 respondents from among all of those individuals who did any of these types of activities over a

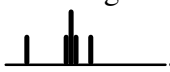
32 year study period using data from the Political Socialization Study 1965 to 1997 (Jennings and Stoker, 1997).[1] Each panel of the figure shows the data for a particular person, and the height of each line represents the number of activities reported by that person in a particular year considering only the following four types of political activity: Working with others in the community, Contacting elected officials, Attending protests or rallies, and Writing letters to the editor.[2] For example, Person 354's participation trajectory looks like this:  . He reported attending a protest or demonstration in 1969. Then, in 1977, 1978, and 1979, he contacted an elected official. Also in 1978, he did some work with others in his community, and in 1982, he did some community work again. This shows up as "spikes" of height 1 for each of 1969, 1977, 1979, and 1982, and a spike of height 2 for 1978.

Figure 1 is not the only piece of information suggesting that intermittency is the dominant feature of political participation since 1950 in the USA. We will show more evidence across the whole Socialization dataset and across multiple American National Election Studies (ANES) panels (and historical periods) that this sporadic nature of political participation is the predominant pattern. Before showing more pictures, however, in the next section we motivate and contextualize our analyses; we discuss whether what we currently know about political participation helps us understand the kinds of questions that arise from describing participation as a stochastic process. The most extensively articulated explanations for political participation focus on explaining variation across people at a single moment of time, and these explanations are well-equipped and developed for this task; they are not, however able to help us understand most of the variation in individual-level political activity within a given place because such variation is largely within people over time. That is, plausible explanations for when participation starts, stops, and continues throughout the life-span cannot, prima facie, rely on attributes of people that tend to be static over time. Building on the past literature that has taught us so much about who participates, this article proposes that we

[1] These individuals are part of a panel study that began with a random national sample of 1669 members of the High School Class of 1965. The data presented here rely on the 935 respondents who were interviewed in-person in 1965, 1973, 1982, and 1997. The annual data presented here result from individuals' retrospective reports at each of the interviews in 1973, 1982, and 1997.

[2] See Appendix A for the complete question wording for all of the political participation questions in the Political Socialization study.

understand such work as telling us about the *potential* of a person to engage in civic activity, but that a fuller story of political participation in the lives of individuals requires attention to the *events* that *precipitate* actual moments of activity. We consider how scholars might engage with these questions using the effects of education and parenthood on political participation as examples. Finally, we point out some new questions about participation and democracy raised by these new descriptions.

3 Bases for expectations about political participation.

On what basis ought we to develop expectations about data like that shown in Figure 1? What would past work lead us to believe if we hadn't seen that figure?

Survey Research Most of what social scientists understand about political participation has relied on cross-sectional survey data. Based on such data, the most comprehensive theory of political participation to date is the "resource mobilization theory" proposed and tested by Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995), which built on previous work emphasizing resources such as Verba and Nie (1972) and Verba, Nie and Kim (1978). According to this theory, those individuals who participate are likely to be those who have resources such as money, time, and skills. Verba, Schlozman and Brady's book also accounts for the importance of mobilization—that is, people (usually acting as part of organizations) asking other people to do some particular political act —thus reinforcing and confirming the findings of Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) and setting the stage for the recent growth in field experiments about turnout. In addition, Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Berry (1996) have shown that, beyond resources or mobilization, social status also matters: individuals who know the mayor, for example, are much more likely to call the mayor than those individuals who are not part of the mayor's social circle. Put together, these and other recent works have explained much about exactly why education has been found to correlate strongly with participation across both time and place since the beginning of quantitative social science. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) summarize the state of the art succinctly:

> . . . When political participation requires that knowledge and cognitive skills be brought to bear, people with more education are more likely to participate than people with less education. Participation, that is, requires resources that are appropriate to the task.
>
> On the other hand, education also indicates both the likelihood that people will be

> contacted by political leaders and the likelihood that they will respond. Educated people travel in social circles that make them targets of both direct and indirect mobilization. Politicians and interest groups try to activate people they know personally and professionally (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993, 76).

Yet more recent work on genetics and personality continues to add to the cross-sectional story: even controlling for education and thus for attributes like skills, politically relevant social network position, and socio-economic status, turnout is more similar between genetically identical twins than it is between twins who are not genetically the same (Fowler, Baker and Dawes, 2008). Similarly, scholars have found not only that certain personality traits, like extraversion and being open to new experiences, are associated with higher levels of participation, but also that these effects are most often conditional on other environmental and dispositional factors (Mondak, 2010; Mondak et al., 2010; Gerber et al., 2011). And, people who have patient and/or altruistic personalities are also more likely to get involved in politics (Fowler and Kam, 2007, 2006).[3] All of these major studies (which are merely some of the most recent, well-cited and comprehensive of hundreds) rely on comparisons between people at a single point in time to understand political involvement.

Of course, political scientists have not entirely ignored catalysts. Studies of mobilization, social movements, and of human psychology more generally contribute important pieces to what we know about when individuals are apt to act and when they are apt to stop acting (or refuse to start acting).

Mobilization One strong result of research over the last decade and a half is that if people are asked to participate, they are more apt to do so than if they are not asked (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Brady, Schlozman and Verba, 1999); this is the "mobilization" finding referenced above.[4] In addition, Campbell (2003*a*,*b*) has shown that the aggregate participation of older people rises during moments when social security policies are attacked in Congress, and

[3] Also aiming to understand why education divides those who participate from those who do not, some suggest that education itself is not a *cause* but rather a "*proxy* for other, often unobserved, preadult experiences and predispositions." (Kam and Palmer (2008, 612) and Henderson and Chatfield (2011)).

[4] It is worth pointing to a few other articles concerned with the temporal characteristics of political participation, but not with the stimulation of episodes of action. Gerber, Green and Shachar (2003), Plutzer (2002), and Green and Shachar (2000) show that vote turnout becomes a habit over time. Berinsky, Burns and Traugott (2001) show that people who are already voters can be induced to continue voting in subsequent years if the act of voting is made easier (by using mail-in ballots).

that, thus, the threat of policy change itself (within the context of organized groups) can stimulate letter-writing and other protest.

A recent and exciting body of research has tackled the problem of disentangling the causal effects of mobilization from those of skills, status, and resources using field experiments.[5] These studies add great clarity to our understanding of voter turnout efforts in the contemporary United States, although they tend to address the same main theoretical concerns animating the rest of the literature: (1) the authors worry that the poor and otherwise economically or socially disadvantaged seem less likely to exercise their rights as democratic citizens (thereby, perhaps, perpetuating disadvantage by adding political disadvantage to the low status mix), and (2) political scientists would like to know how to increase voting for both normative and practical reasons (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980).[6]

Social Movements The literature that investigates when large social movements begin and end is very relevant to the study of political participation but is not, in itself, enough to guide future work on the movement and non-movement (and electoral and non-electoral) activities by which ordinary individuals engage in the public sphere. That is, even if the historic moment must be propitious in many structural (political, institutional) and cultural ways before a set of otherwise frustrated or relatively deprived people can be predicted to come together to rebel or otherwise act, not all deprived individuals get involved all the time(McAdam and Tilly, 2001; Tarrow, 1989; McAdam, 1982; Piven and Cloward, 1978; Mccarthy and Zald, 1977; Benford and Snow, 2000; Gurr, 1970). Moreover, joining a movement is merely one way for an individual to participate in politics; joining itself is an act that represents a promise or expectation of more future actions, but understanding why a movement member acts at one time and not another (or continues acting over a long period time and suddenly stops) is not the same as understanding the decision to promise unspecified future

[5]See for examples, Krasno and Green (2008); Gerber, Green and Larimer (2008); Addonizio, Green and Glaser (2007); Michelson (2003); Smith, Gerber and Orlich (2003); Clinton and Lapinski (2004); Arceneaux (2005); Wong (2005); Mcnulty (2005); Nickerson, Friedrichs and King (2006); Niven (2006); Nickerson (2006); Miller (2002); Miller, Krosnick and Lowe (2000); Gerber and Green (2000). Green and Gerber (2002) review some of this and other work done before 2002.

[6]Of course, many of these studies have other theoretical aims (such as the importance of social networks in political campaigns, source effects, information effects, partisanship effects, etc..), but the main motivations are the same.

activity. That said, knowing about the process by which movements recruit and retain rebels (and the process by which states attempt to foil such action) ought to add something to our understanding of how action is spurred or inhibited (Chong, 1991; Lichbach, 1995; Olson, 1965). For example, Chong (1991) teaches us about how joining can translate into sustained, high cost, activity by the ways in which individuals value their reputations; Olson (1965) reminds us about the free-rider problem and the importance of selective incentives; and Klandermans (1996, 1984) and Klandermans and Oegema (1987) show us how individuals can both value the common good (rather than narrow material utility) but also act rationally and even strategically as movement participants toward such ends. None of these types of work, however, addresses directly the question: "How should we organize our research so as to understand the political activity of ordinary individuals?" Nor do they address it in the generality required to understand individual activity *both* during historical moments of great turmoil (say, deciding to join the march from Selma to Montgomery in March of 1965) *and* when the greater historical import of one's actions is less clear (say, going to a city council meeting to support or oppose a local policy proposal).

3.1 Summary of Expectations

What would theories of individual action based on resources, mobilization, status or theories of movements (or group action) suggest we ought to see if we could observe political participation over time within the lives of ordinary Americans? Most of the cross-sectional research that we described above is predominantly concerned about inequality between those who participate and those who do not. This concern is echoed in the title of Robert Dahl's seminal book "Who Governs?" (1961), and Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) focus explicitly on this problem as they develop resource mobilization theory: "Since democracy implies not only governmental responsiveness to citizen interests but also equal consideration of the interests of each citizen, democratic participation must also be equal" (1). The problem is, as they see it, that the reality is far from this ideal. The few people who participate at any given time in a democracy are quite different from those who do not, and so, "...the voice of the people as expressed through participation comes from a limited and unrepresentative set of citizens" (2). This quote is representative of the main normative concern animating the research on political participation. This focus on inequality, and the consistent findings

that the educated, rich, and socially connected are much more likely to participate in politics than the uneducated, the poor, and socially disconnected, all paint a picture in which a small subset of the population engage actively, and more or less constantly, in politics —essentially ruling the large mass of the people who do not get involved. In the dynamic context, this would suggest that we ought to see some few individuals nearly constantly involved, with most of the rest of people nearly completely inactive. The few studies that have examined participation over time, focusing only on voting, support this expectation since these early results suggest that voting is quite habitual (Gerber, Green and Shachar, 2003; Plutzer, 2002; Green and Shachar, 2000) and can be made more so by making voting easier (Berinsky, Burns and Traugott, 2001). Even the most critical engagements with time-constant attributes like education reinforce this picture, for example, by suggesting that it is not education that matters but pre-adult socialization (and thus, the social status of parents) (Kam and Palmer, 2008; Henderson and Chatfield, 2011).

4 Puzzling Empirical Regularities

In fact, these expectations are not borne out when they are matched against the best (and, to our knowledge, only) currently available data on political participation beyond voting as it changes over time within the lives of individuals as dramatized in Figure 1. That is, although the operational interpretations of past cross-sectional work are sensible ("A person with a college degree ought to be more likely to call an elected official/protest/vote than a person with only a high school degree"), extrapolations of these theories to generate expectations about how moments when a person with a college degree participates compare to moments when such a person does not act are not grounded in systematic observation. Even if such extrapolations are intuitive and possible in theory, they run against the best available evidence on what a person's life-time of political activity actually looks like as shown in Figure 1.

There is some evidence in past research that (1) participation occurs sporadically across the lives of many individuals (Sigelman et al., 1985; Dahl, 1961), and (2) spells of participation tend to last only one year if not less —a finding constrained by the fact that the year is the minimum temporal resolution of the Socialization dataset. Dahl (1961) notes several times in his landmark study of governance in New Haven that most ordinary people move into and out of the political sphere over

time. He says that the use of "resources" (like money, skills, and status) varies

> . . . [a]s different events take place and different issues are generated in the political system. Most people employ their resources sporadically, if at all. For many citizens, resource use rises to a peak during periods of campaigns and elections. Some citizens are aroused by a particular issue . . . and then lapse into inactivity (page 273).

"Participation" as shown in Figure 1 refers to the range of non-voting activities that our large scale surveys have tended to measure over time. Voting may be a counter-example to the evidence about political participation more generally as a sporadic process. Both in the Political Socialization Study (Bowers, 2003; Jennings, Stoker and Bowers, 2009) and elsewhere (Gerber, Green and Shachar, 2003; Plutzer, 2002; Green and Shachar, 2000) it is clear that most people in the U.S. become relatively steady voters or steady non-voters after age 35 or so. Yet, "relatively" is an important qualifier. For example, in their study of voting by mail in Oregon, Berinsky, Burns and Traugott (2001) found that making voting easier mainly served to motivate the relatively steady voters to skip fewer elections. Furthermore, Sigelman et al. (1985) showed that, out of 10 elections (1978-1982), only 5.5% of registered voters in Kentucky voted in all 10, while 28.2% voted in one or two elections out of the 10 recorded in the state administrative database (from their Table 1, page 752).

We will make the case in the following sections that in the U.S. since 1950, (1) most people do not participate most of the time although many participate once in a while, and (2) vanishingly few people participate all of the time. We will show a series of results using all of the Political Socialization respondents— since Figure 1 is only a small sample from the survey—to emphasize what we take to be a fact: political participation in the U.S. is a dynamic process that occurs as short, sparse moments of activity in the lives of many, if not most, individuals. We will then replicate our findings using three of the NES panel studies, which cover much shorter time spans than the Socialization study but much wider cross-sections of the population interviewed during three different historical periods.

Our analyses show that the participators and voters in one panel period are rarely identical to the participators and voters in other panel periods. While voting is an important comparison to other kinds of activity because it is so highly institutionalized and imposes relatively low costs, we pay more attention to non-voting activity; there were only 8 measured moments of voting in the

Political Socialization survey compared to 33 moments of other kinds of activity. Nevertheless, voting still does show similar, if more attenuated, patterns of people acting and then stopping even if the baseline levels are much higher than they are for the other kinds of activities.

4.1 Irregular Participation in the Political Socialization Study

One way to discover whether participation is really sporadic in some overall sense is to ask: To what extent does participation at one moment relate to activity in the previous moment? If people who participated last year also tend to participate this year and in subsequent years, then participation cannot be seen as sporadic, and explanations of dynamics based on time-constant attributes of people (like education) are plausible.[7] If past participation is not highly associated with present participation, then something else that changes over time must be stimulating the activity. This is not to say that education may not play an important role; whether as a proxy or in other ways, education definitely matters. It is just that it is not obvious to suppose that changing education should cause a moment of participation to occur in the way flipping a light switch causes light to turn on in a room (education, in that example, might be more like the flow of electricity to the house—intermittent electricity makes it harder for the light switch to work).

Consider, for example, the cross-tabulation of community work one period in the past by community work in the "present" from the Political Socialization Study (Table 1):

		Number of Past Acts			
		0	1	2	3
Number of Present Acts	3	27	5	5	185
	2	90	46	283	8
	1	903	1154	33	5
	0	27090	890	106	24

Table 1: Transitions from one period to the next in amount of community work among the Class of 1965. Table contains 30855 person-years (935 respondents × 33 years).

Out of all 30855 person-years (935 respondents × 33 years), 27090 included 0 acts of community work followed by 0 acts of community work, 903 included 0 acts followed by 1 act, and 890 included 1 act followed by 0 acts. It is usually easier to look at this kind of table as a "transition matrix" which

[7]Note that education is an attribute of a person that can be gained or increased but not lost —at least as currently measured by most political scientists.

uses the column percentages of Table 1 as an estimate of the probabilities of observing the different types of movements between states. This matrix is shown as **T**.

$$\mathbf{T} = \begin{pmatrix} .001 & .002 & .012 & .833 \\ .003 & .022 & .663 & .036 \\ .032 & .551 & .077 & .023 \\ .968 & .425 & .248 & .108 \end{pmatrix}$$

Of the people who did 0 acts of community work in the past year, 3.2% did one act in the current year. Of the people who did 1 act in the past, 42.5% of them did 0 acts in the present. Notice the large numbers on the main diagonal. These numbers imply that among the few people who manage to start participating at a certain rate (say doing 1, 2, or 3 acts in a year), many are apt to continue—at least across adjacent periods. Note that overall, about 65% of the Class of 1965 reported doing at least one act of Community Work across the 33 years of the study – although the amount of participation in that group in any single year ranged from 1% (at age 19) to 19% (at age 31) with a mean of 9% engaged in any given year.[8]

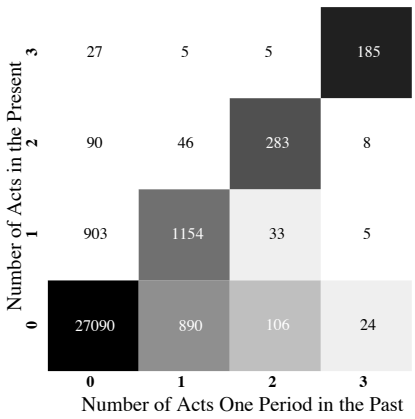


Figure 2: Transitions into and out of participation in Community Work from one year to the next for the Class of 1965 over the period from 1965 to 1997. Darker squares denote show more frequently observed past-to-present transitions.

[8] 35% of this generation reported no community work over the study period, 20% reported only one act of community work, about 13% reported doing two acts, 7% reported three acts, and about 20% reported anywhere from 4 to 19 acts. For more detailed information about participation over the lives of the individuals in the Political Socialization Study see Jennings and Stoker (2004); Jennings (1979); Beck and Jennings (1979, 1982); Jennings (1987).

Figure 2 summarizes the information in **T** and Table 1 graphically—using shaded squares to provide a quick sense of which kinds of transitions are most common. The shading of the squares is proportional to the number of person-years in that transition-category. The area above the diagonal represents movements from less activity one period in the past to more activity in the present. The diagonal represents continuance of the same level of activity across adjacent periods. The area below the diagonal represents transitions from more to less activity. The actual numbers of person-years in each square is printed on the plot. This figure shows that movements from less activity to more activity do happen—there were 903 moments of 1 action that followed a moment of no action. However, **T** shows that these 903 moments only represent 3% of the possible transitions from a moment of no action—the vast majority of inactive moments were followed by other inactive moments. Thus, this square is white. That is, the fact that a square has color (or not) only has to do with the proportion of the activity observed in the present conditioned on a past value. For example, of those years where people did 3 acts of community work, 185 were followed by years where people continued to do 3 acts (this is about .05% of the total number of person-years in the dataset—this is very rare behavior). This is about 88% of the total number of years in which people did 3 acts, and so it is colored in nearly as dark as the square representing the 27,090 person-years where no activity followed no activity.

So, figure 2 suggests that (1) most of the time people do nothing; (2) second most frequently, people do one act followed by no acts; and (3) that there are some people engaging in many acts relatively consistently. Does the pattern of dark squares on the diagonal argue against the characterization of political activity as sporadic? Let us take the 185 moments of 3 acts followed by 3 acts for example. What does 185 mean? It could mean roughly 60 people (180/2) who do 3 acts followed by 3 acts and only that (i.e. 60 people each doing 1 two-year spell). It could also mean roughly 10 people (180/18) who do 18 years of 3 acts each year. This matches our intuitions: there are some really highly participatory people (even some public officials or lobbyists who do these activities for their jobs). Most moments, however, in most people lives do not include political activity.

Of course, working with others in the community is merely one kind of political activity. The

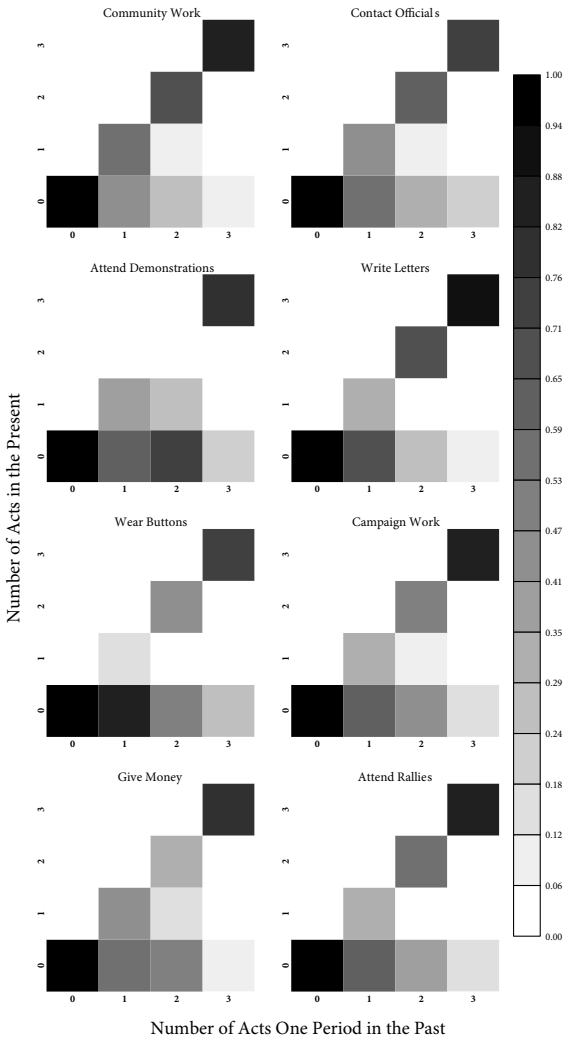


Figure 3: Transitions into and out of participation from one year to the next for the Class of 1965 over the period from 1965–1997 for non-electoral activities (left column), and over 1965–1982 for electoral activities (right column). The colors show the proportion of person-years where activity in the present (shown on the y-axes) followed activity one period in the past (shown on the x-axes). The key at right shows the proportions represented by the colors.

Political Socialization Study measured 8 kinds of activities in addition to voting. Among types of non-voting participation, perhaps community work is particularly sporadic as compared to the others.[9] To assess the evidence in favor of the claim that most people do not participate most of the

[9]On the one hand, one could imagine community work arising infrequently as a result of irregular stimuli like a pothole, while elections (and their accompanying activities) occur at regularly repeated intervals. On the other hand, one could imagine electoral activities being more sporadic since elections do not occur every year in many locales, and community work could entail steady participation in a PTA.

time, but many people participate at least once or twice in a decade, Figure 3 presents transition plots for each of the non-voting acts of participation measured in the Political Socialization dataset. The transition matrix **T** for *Community Work* maps onto the panel in the upper left corner of the Figure 3. The highest value (.96) is colored black and occurs at "present participation"= 0 following "past participation"= 0. As the legend shows, the darkness of color is proportional to the values in the squares, so the dark black squares contain values near 1 and the light gray (and white) squares contain values nearer to 0.

One general pattern that is evident from these plots is stability across adjacent periods—especially for 0 and 3 acts. Periods that contain zero acts are more apt to be followed by "empty" periods than by moments full of activity; persons engaging in 3 acts are more apt to do 3 acts in the next year than otherwise. Doing 1 or 2 acts in the past year is also strongly related to continuing to do 1 or 2 acts in the present, but not quite as strongly as 0 and 3 acts—and larger proportions of 1 and 2 act years are followed by decreases than increases. In fact, for all types of activity except for *Community Work*, 1 act in the past is more likely to be followed by 0 acts in the present than by 1 or more acts.

The other general pattern concerns the paucity of shaded squares above the 45 degree line and the row of shaded squares at the bottom of each chart: people are much more likely to transition *to* 0 acts than *from* 0 acts. It seems as if people are likely to either continue participation at the same level as they did in the previous period *or* stop altogether. Figure 3 tells a story where one generation's participation appears sporadic. And, most of the person-years in the dataset contain zeros followed by zeros—that is, non-voting political participation is rare.[10]

Voting, however, is common. But, being common, is the world divided into always voters and never voters? Figure 4 suggests that the division is not so stark. Almost 40% of the class of 1965

[10]It is possible that the appearance of dark squares on the diagonal is an artifact of the survey procedure. Respondents were allowed to name ranges of dates as they remembered their past activities: some respondents may have used ranges to mean "every year between X and Y dates," other respondents probably used ranges to mean "some year in between X and Y dates, I don't remember exactly." Unfortunately, given the data, there is no way to distinguish between these two possibilities. In the end, the fact that some very few people, over very few years, engaged in rather intense multi-year episodes of participation does not affect the overall conclusion that participation is not even close to constant over the lifespan, but instead occurs overwhelmingly as short bursts separated by long periods of inactivity.

reports voting in every presidential election between 1968 and 1996, but 60% report some other one of the $2^8 - 1 = 255$ possible combinations of voting and non-voting that obtain over this period. In this cohort, at least, the world does involve some always voters, but mostly consists of sometimes voters.

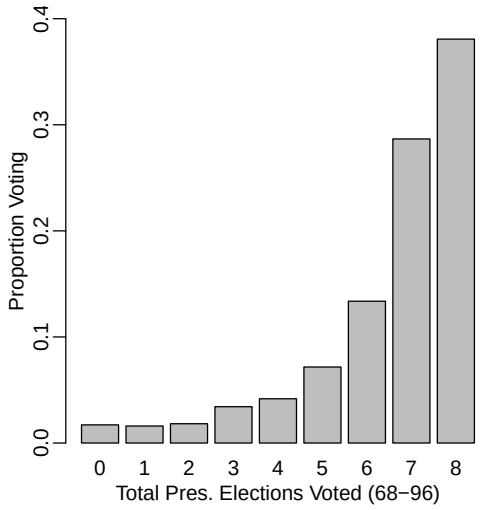


Figure 4: Almost 40% of the Class of 1965 reported voting in all 8 presidential elections held between 1968 and 1996. Only 16 people (2%) admitted never voting in a presidential election.

4.2 Irregular Participation in the American National Election Studies

This pattern of sporadic participation from year to year is not merely an artifact of the particular cohort in the Political Socialization study. The 1956-1960, 1972-1976, and 1990-1992 ANES panel studies (Campbell et al., 1999; Miller, Miller and Kline, 1999; Miller et al., 1999) show similar patterns over the short-term. These datasets have the strength that the respondents were only asked about their participation in the past 12 months, thus forgetting is probably a minor problem and dating the participation to a particular year is easier than in the Political Socialization Study. The weakness of these panel studies, however, is that they only cover 3 waves, usually 2 years apart, asking about participation only every other year rather than yearly. That said, they are still useful for checking and corroborating the longer term longitudinal data from the Political Socialization study.

Figure 5 shows the kinds of information about participation available from three of these datasets. The 1956–1960 ANES Panel Study is in the left column of figures, the 1972–1976 ANES Panel Study is in the middle column, and the 1990–1992 ANES Panel Study is on the right. Rather than

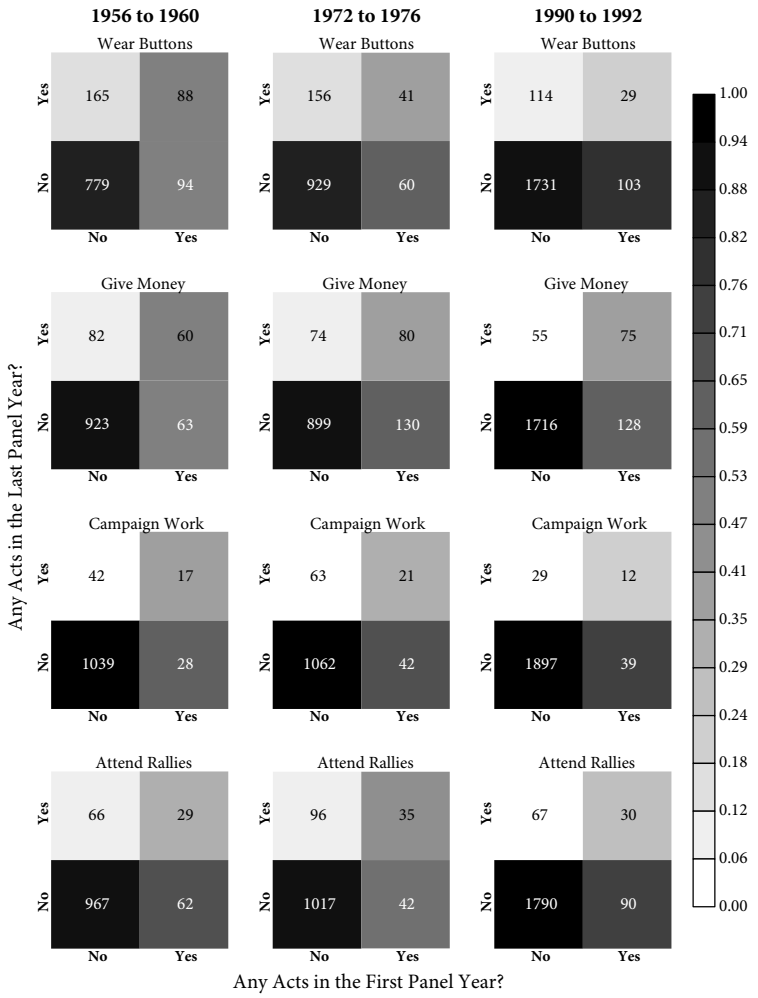


Figure 5: Transitions into and out of electoral activity participation across ANES panel years. The colors show the proportion of respondents whose activity in the *last* panel year (1960, 1976, or 1992) (shown on the y-axes) followed activity in the *first* panel year (1956, 1972 or 1990) (shown on the x-axes). The key at right shows the proportions represented by the colors. Numbers of respondents shown in each square. Of the NES respondents who reported wearing buttons in the 1956 campaign, about 52% (n=94) did not wear them in the 1960 campaign, but about 48% (n=88) did it again.

person-years, these figures are based on persons—and the numbers of persons in each cell of the transition table is shown in each block. These figures show that most respondents in the ANES Panel Studies did not engage in electoral participation in either the first or the last years in the studies (shown by the dark black boxes at (no, no) for each activity). We focus here on the first and last years of the panels because these questions were not always asked during middle years of the panels.[11] However, among people who participated at all, a pattern of participation in only one of

[11]We would expect more participation—and therefore greater continuity—during presidential

the two panel-years is more common than participation in both. That is, the blocks at (no, yes) and (yes, no) tend to have more people in them than (yes, yes). The two exceptions to this rule of rare activity are *Wear Buttons* and *Give Money* in the 1956–1960 panel. Of the NES respondents who reported wearing buttons in the 1956 campaign, about 48% (n=88) did it again in 1960. Of the NES respondents who reported donating money in the 1956 campaign, about 49% (n=60) did it again in 1960. Comparing within rows of this figure, one sees differences between historical periods for button wearing and money giving, but not for campaign work or rally attendance. Overall, this figure corroborates Figure 1: non-voting participation in the USA seems both rare in any one cross-section of the public (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995), but also is sporadic within people across time—a finding that is similar across historical periods, whether one looks at 2- or 4-year time spans (with large samples across the ANES panels) or across 3 decades (with the relatively smaller Socialization study).

Each ANES panel only involves three presidential elections (if we include the 1996 extension to the 1990–1992 panel), and, averaging across people regardless of age, Figure 6 shows that the majority of those in these samples report voting in all three elections (these reports are retrospective within a month or so of the election). Yet, here we also show all the possible trajectories ($2^3 = 8$). All of possible sequences combining voting and non-voting over time are represented, even if only 1% report voting only in the middle panel years of 1956 and 1972. The turnout decline from the 1950s to the 1990s is also evident here—but notice that although the size of the never-voting group expands (from about 4% to about 10%) the largest qualitative changes is to distribute about 20 percentage points of turnout from the always voters to the sometimes voters.

It is also possible that previous work can completely explain the patterns shown here—mobilization is a prominent explanation for participation. And, although changes in socio-economic status and skills occur too rarely to explain these patterns, changes in mobilization can be plausible causal factors.[12] For example, Table 2 shows that many of the people who reported engaging in electoral

elections, so at least for the earlier two ANES panels in Figure 5, we assume there would be even less continuity if the middle years were added.

[12]We will engage more directly with what makes a causal factor or variable more or less plausible a priori in the next section.

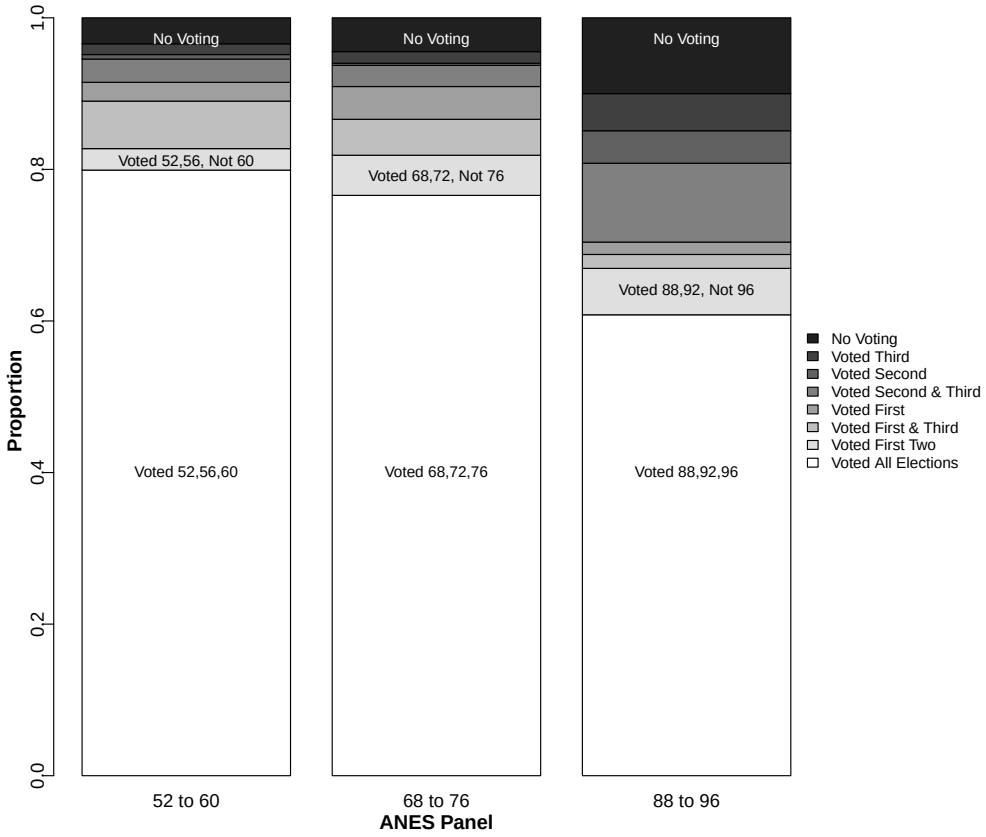


Figure 6: The composition of voting trajectories across ANES panels. Most panel respondents reported voting in every presidential election over the panel period (shown in the white box at the bottom of each stacked bar). The shaded boxes show the breakdown of voting sequences within panel: so, we see that about 3% reported voting in 1952 and 1956 but not in 1960 or that about 10% reported voting in only 1992 and 1996 but not in 1988.

activities in 1990 and 1992, did not remember being contacted by someone urging them to get involved.[13]

Table 2: Percent Participating Without Mobilization (ANES 1990–1992)

Type of Participation	**Percent Acting Without Mobilization**
Donations (in 1992)	31
Dinners/Rallies (in 1992)	47
Other Campaign Work (in 1992)	44
Any Participation (in 1990)	52

Table 2 suggests that mobilization is relevant, but it is merely one of many events that provide the

[13]Unfortunately, the Political Socialization data do not contain measures of mobilization.

crucial input to make political activity possible. In addition, mobilization is not usually an event that *prevents* people from participating. An approach to participation that takes seriously the sporadic nature of this phenomenon needs to account for both catalysts and inhibitors. If mobilization is seen as just one of a variety of events that stimulate political participation), then we may also learn more about mobilization itself. At the moment, both Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) and Fiorina (2002) note that we do not have a good understanding about why some people refuse calls to action, and when they might tend to accept rather than refuse them.[14]

5 Precipitating versus Potentiating Factors:

How can we make sense of the strong findings from past research at the same time as confronting the fact that participation is a sporadic, irregular phenomenon? We think the answer lies in understanding that any etiology about this phenomenon requires two kinds of factors: potentiating factors and precipitating factors. Potentiating factors are those aspects of individuals that enable them to be *ready to act* when an opportunity arises. Take heart disease as an example. We know that people who eat vegetables and exercise regularly are less likely to have heart attacks than people who eat only hamburgers and do not exercise. In theories of heart failure, healthy eating is a potentiating factor, which helps explain the potential for heart failure for a given person. However, when a person has a heart attack, the paramedics do not arrive carrying carrots. They carry equipment that uses electricity to restart a stopped heart. In other words, the precipitating factor for a heart attack is disruption to the electrical system of the heart. The theory of heart failure thus must include *both* information about healthy eating *and* information about electricity—and ideally come to an understanding of how healthy eating and the electrical system of the heart interact to produce heart health.

In the case of political participation, nearly all of the attention has been on potentiating factors with only recent attention to precipitating factors of voting, and those factors having mostly to

[14] Miller (2002) and Miller, Krosnick and Lowe (2000) suggest that feelings of "threat" or "opportunity" might motivate political activity. The burgeoning literature using field experiments to explore hypotheses about voter turnout provide yet more support for the idea that there is a kind of social calculus relevant to understanding reactions to different kinds of mobilization attempts. After all, mobilization attempts by people within social networks seem to work more effectively than mobilization attempts by strangers.

do with mobilizationi of voting. The focus on time-constant factors has been so overwhelming and the set of findings from field experiments are so new that "theories of political participation" almost exclusively refer to the potentiating side.[15] That is, education increases the potential for a person to get involved in politics at any one time, but education itself cannot catalyse a moment of action. A knock on the door by a campaign canvasser is a good candidate for a precipitant, as would be some other event understood by the person to be of political import. Other events might matter not by being understood as politically relevant but by changing preconditions; for example, the pervasive effects of residential mobility on vote turnout and other types of participation might be understood in this way (above and beyond the relationship to the need to re-register). Thus, a compelling explanation of what precipitates (or inhibits) episodes of political participation must involve factors that change over time —events versus conditions. Second, it must also involve the fact that resources do matter—given the massive amount of research that has shown this to be so.

The most plausible account for the sporadic patterns in Figure 1 arises from an approach that is based on events that precipitate political participation. That is, moments of political participation must have precipitating factors associated with them, just as we know that they have potentiating factors associated with them. If political participation does occur in short, sporadic bursts, what might provide the stimuli for such actions? It is hard to imagine that individuals would generate these stimuli themselves in a static environment. Rather, we suggest that we see these spikes of activity as reactions to a changing environment; furthermore, the changes in the environment are discrete and abrupt, not smooth or slow. Following common usage we call such exogenous shocks "events." An event occurs whenever something in the environment of a person changes. Thus, a pothole forming in the road is such an event, as is the arrival of a mobilizing neighbor, election day, the publication of a dramatic story in the media, or a cross-burning on one's lawn. Events can also inhibit participation. And social movement-caused events, such as protests, can be their own impetus to individual action (Kaplan and Brady, 2004; Lohmann, 1994). We suspect that the sequence of participation for any given person depends crucially on the supply of events in his or

[15] In fact, it takes an appreciation that political participation is a dynamic, sporadic process to even recognize that there might be a distinction between the two types of causal theories.

her environment and life, given extant conditions like historical period or political campaigns.

Events and conditions obviously can blur into one another: is a campaign an event? is an authoritarian regime an event? It is not the place of this article to offer a theory of events—especially given the attention paid to the confusing nature of "event" as a philosophical concept (see for example Davidson, 2001)— although such philosophical sources might provide useful next steps in clarifying and elaborating this framework. For our purposes here, an event is short and a condition is long. Conditions might be seen as the mean-function about which a function of event-production might fluctuate. Thus, during a campaign, many more mobilization events might occur, on average, than might occur for a person when candidates are not running for office.

As the example of heart disease indicates, one must have both sides of the causal story in order to intervene effectively. At the moment, however, if called upon to design a policy to change the political participation of a person beyond voting, political scientists would look a lot like paramedics carrying carrots rather than shock-paddles —good for healthy people, but a disaster for those in need.

The longitudinal data force closer attention to precipitating factors which, once we begin to understand more about them, may appear idiosyncratic—there are many reasons to participate. Recall that the social movements literature has evolved from an appreciation that movements arise to address grievances, to an understanding about the ubiquity of grievances but the scarcity of resources and opportunities, yet further to focus on how messages about deprivation and opportunities crucially enhance or perhaps even inhibit the success of movements. These kinds of explanations can be used to understand the non-movement participation of people as well; the kinds of events which stimulate or inhibit action are ill-understood, but one imagines that individuals and communities vary by (1) how different events are seen as political or not, or requiring collective action or not and (2) the nature of causes of action. In some places a lost soccer match requires fighting in the street, while in other places sports spur action less violent.

This new perspective demands a change in orientation and raises new questions. Once those questions are answered, the answers will be in a different form. Attention to precipitants emphasizes mechanisms: even, for example, when cross-sectional studies look at the importance of contact,

merely comparing the contacted to the not-contacted (or randomly assigning contact) leaves much about mechanism unexplained.

6 Two Examples: Education and Childbirth

What would it mean to ask new questions about existing mechanisms? What kinds of new understandings might await us if we thought about political participation in a new light? Here we present two short data analyses to sketch, in more concrete ways, how a new perspective can change, and suggest new places to search for answers. The purpose of this paper is to describe a different perspective on an existing phenomenon of study, so it is beyond the scope of the paper to include a full theoretical development for these cases here.

We first engage with the question about the effect of education on political participation. We analyze the data as a series of trajectories organized by the moment in the life-span when a person received a college degree. The second sketch asks a relatively new question about the effect of childbirth on the short term activity of parents. Rather than focus on trajectories, we focus on the disjunctures that might be caused by childbirth, comparing new parents with respondents who are not yet parents. So, we present two different ways to engage with longitudinal data in pursuit of answers to these questions. The question about education arises from the history of work on the topic where most of the attention has been on differences between types of people at a given moment in time. The question about childbirth arises as a result of attending to events and precipitating factors which leads to a search for events and other life disjunctures. We hope these examples provide more ideas for future theory, design, observation, and analysis.

6.1 College Education and Participation

When we consider education in the longitudinal context, we have to ask, "How do the educated compared to the uneducated?" We also have to consider that "the educated" became educated at some point in their lives, before which they were less or not educated. For example, in the Political Socialization data, 34% received a BA by age 25, 4% received a BA between age 25 and 35, 3% received a BA between age 35 and 55, and 58% had not received a BA by age 55. Should receipt of a college degree offer the same boost in political participation regardless of when it occurs in the

life-span? Figure 7 shows that this is not the case.

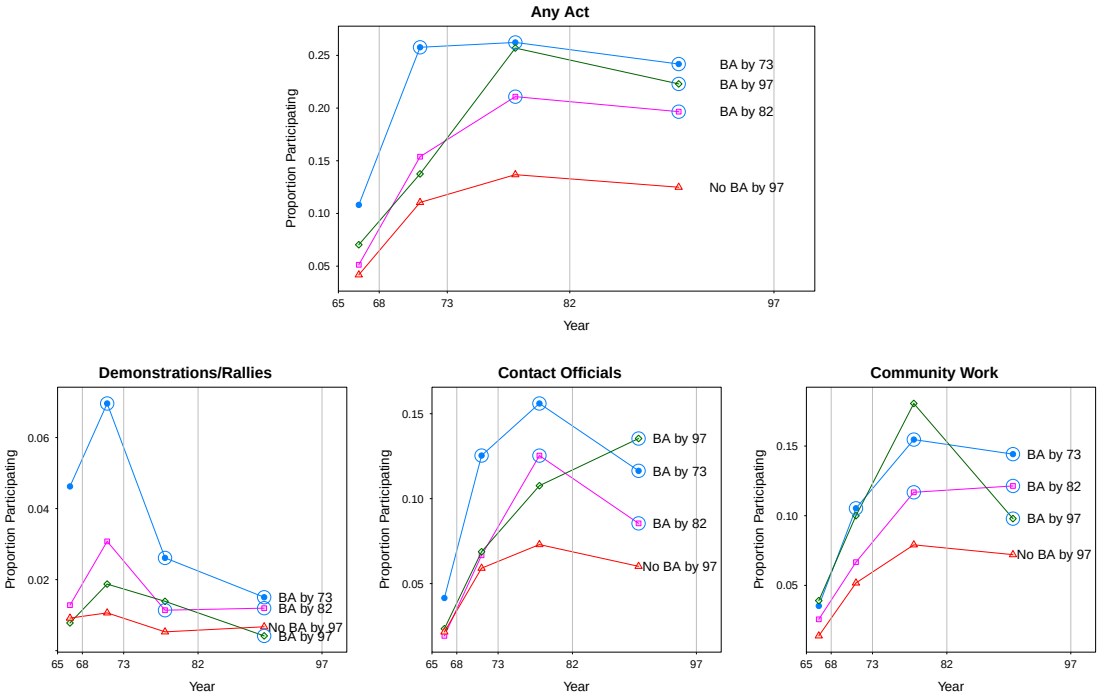


Figure 7: Proportion reporting some activity by timing of college degree attainment (shown using different colored lines), and life-span period (delineated by gray vertical lines). Proportions representing people who have college degrees are shown with circles. The y-axis differs between plots to enable comparisons of trajectories.

The top panel of Figure 7 shows four aggregated participation trajectories over time: the top line represents the proportion participating among people who received a BA by age 25. The points represent the proportion reporting any Community Work, Contacting of Officials, or participation in Demonstrations in that period of time (where the period of time is delineated by the gray vertical lines). So, for example, we see that around 11% of those who would eventually receive a college degree by 1973 did at least one of those three acts between graduating from high school in 1965 and 1968 (when, we presume, many of them had not yet graduated from college), while around 25% of this group reported at least one of these acts in the 1968 to 1973 period as well as the 1973 to 1982 period (when we have circled their dots to indicate that these are people who have a college degree). The top plot shows that the timing of college seems to matter, but also that aspects of people that must predate college matter as well. Consider, for example, the green line, which captures the information for the respondents who reported no BA until 1997. These people participated at

the same rate as the early college group by the 1973–1982 interval, continuing, more or less, until the 1982–1997 interval. Of course, these estimates are very noisy (only based on the 32 people compared with the 319 people who received a BA by 1973 or the 545 who never received a degree). Yet, we get the sense from this plot that the way in which education relates to participation is not simply that education changes the person, changing the payoffs or utility function of the person herself. But, rather, timing of education may as determined by the person as the person's future trajectory may be determined by education.

The three plots on the bottom of the panel show the components of the top plot. Here we get some sense for the different ways that education might operate. For example, education is an institutional or contextual experience—we see this in the divergence in the demontrations/protest/rally behavior of the early college group. Although some of these people may have gone to college specifically to engage in protests (having graduated from high school in 1965), many more just happened to be in a place where they were mobilized (by peers, by faculty, by administrators, by others who came to college campuses as loci of activism). Yet, these people were no longer in college by age 35 (in 1982), and we see that they still engaged in more protest behavior than others, across their whole lives. So, education not only placed these people in the path of mobilizers, but it also changed something about their repertoire (i.e. their self-understanding of what it means to act in politics). Or perhaps it kept them in the path of mobilizers even as they moved away from the college campuses. Notice here that the people who were to get a degree after 1982 (when they were 35) still reported more demontration activity than those who had not received a BA by age 55. Did demonstrations make them want to get a BA later in life? Did the type of person determine both choices?

The center panel showing the proportion reporting some contact with elected officials tells a somewhat different story. Here, those who get a college degree eventually (as of 1982 or 1997, let alone 1973) are much more likely to report some kind of contact than those who never get a college degree (although the trajectories of the No Degree group and the groups who only receive degrees late (in 1982 or 1997) run together until the two other groups begin to go to college). So, we see some lifecycle effects (everyone is increasing up to a point, and, perhaps peaking around the childbearing and PTA-involvement or business-founding years in their 30s to 40s). Yet, we also see

that those groups who do gain college degrees do more contacting.[16]

The rightmost bottom panel shows the people who do not receive a degree until sometime between 1982 and 1997 are the most participatory early on, on par with those who receive degrees early. Again, those who will never receive a degree (at least by age 55) are the ones who work with others in their community systematically less than the other groups. Could the story here involve residential mobility of the early college goers counteracting the advantages that they may otherwise have? After all, it is hard to work with people in a physical location unless you are part of the social network of that place. In contrast, the people who will get a BA late in life may not have moved as much, but yet they are somehow of a type to be open to participation while those who do not get a BA by 1997 are never so open.

This description of the data is very simple. Yet, it raises many questions about theoretical frameworks: how should institutional structures (like educational institutions) be understood to operate on the trajectories of behavior of those who choose to participate in them? How should we think about the interplay of social status (social network location), skills and techniques learned, mobilization experienced, and simple type (or personality)?

What these plots suggest is that the cross-sectional comparisons of the past, comparing those with and without a college degree, are comparisons involving many interlocking moving parts. Viewing educational attainment as both an attribute and an event can provide added insights into how we frame our theories. First, if education were just a proxy for pre-adult experiences and dispositions we would not expect such dramatic effects associated with achieving a bachelor's degree later in life. Second, asking individuals about both the level and timing of their educational attainment may provide added insights into ongoing debates about the civic skills and civic status conveyed by education. It may be that education, regardless of timing, conveys certain skills and resources that make it more likely an individual participates. Similarly, the social, political and economic connections associated with attaining one's degree early may differ systematically from obtaining one's degree later in life, and such differences may have consequences for some forms of participation

[16]The fact that those who get a BA between 1982 and 1997 become the most active by 1997 is quite interesting, but not something we should over interpret, given the small sample sizes of the two late BA groups.

but not others.

6.2 The Effects of Childbirth on Political Participation

Cross-sectional approaches to the study of political participation force us to think about the act of raising children as an attribute (i.e. parents vs. non-parents) instead of as a state or condition whose effects may vary over time. Yet, we can imagine that the moment of becoming a parent can have multiple kinds of effects on the political participation of the people going through such a transition. It may have short-term effects to depress participation by redirecting time and money from outside to inside the home. It may also, however, increase participation in the short run by forcing at least one partner to enter full-time employment (and thereby earn more money, enter new social networks in new ways, learn civic skills, and/or become a target of mobilization efforts). Parents of school age children may be more involved in the public sphere than they would have been had they not become parents: they have more at stake in the public sphere as their children attend schools or use parks and libraries. Some of these intuitions have been suggested and examined by past work using cross-sectional comparisons: Raising a child takes time and money, potentially reducing the resources one can devote to participating in politics, although the empirical evidence is mixed (Burns, Schlozman and Verba, 2001; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). The act of raising a child also expand's one's social networks, leading to potentially higher interest and levels of more community-focused acts of participation (Jennings, 1979). [17] We explore this question by again using data from the Political Socialization Study. In this data about 83 % reported a birth of a first child at some point between ages 18 and 55.[18] We observe the acts of participation of these people in the five years just after their first child was born (and before the birth of a second child for those who had more than one child). Yet, we know that older people participate more than younger people, so a comparison of activity after-versus-before childbirth will confuse the effects of the event with the effects of aging. To counteract this confound, we adjust the within-person comparison using a

[17] We use first child here to focus attention on the civic consequences of the event of childbirth and the transition to parenthood. An examination of the cumulative effects of more children, or the delayed effects of any children, are beyond the scope of this paper.

[18] We have no way to know whether this child was a step-child, or an adopted child, where the birth might not have been directly experienced by the responder. This means that the results here probably understate the effects of the transition to parenthood.

matched pair to represent the expected short-term trajectory of participation without a transition to parenthood.

We matched women to women and men to men. Within pairs we required that years in which a person transitioned to parenthood be matched with a year from another person who (1) would not have a child within 5 years, (2) was no more than one year younger or older, (3) participated the same amount in the preceding year, (4) differed by no more than 1 act of cumulative participation up until the year before the child was born, and (5) differed very little in terms of parents educational status, church attendance, high school activity, high school civics classes.[19] Of the 775 respondents who became a parent at some point during the study, we are able to find matches for 481 within our requirements. Individuals for whom we could not find matches for tended to be more educated and had a large number of cumlative acts up until the moment of the birth of a first child. So, in what follows we are looking at the effect of child bearing on people in the moments of their lives when they are not very involved in politics in general nor had they completed higher degrees beyond college. Figure 8 summarizes the success of this matching. The pairs are nearly identical on this set of observed characteristics at the time that a child in born.

Figure 9 shows the results of adjusting post-vs-pre participation for the expected participation given by the matched controls. Points above zero suggest that individuals became more likely to participate in the years following the birth of their first child than in the years before. The top panel considers the question of how having a child alters trajectories of participation in general. The bottom three panels present the effects of becoming a parent on specific forms of participation. The effects of becoming a parent are clearly not constant over time. Furthermore, we know that these changes are not simply an artifact of growing older because our comparisons are based on matched pairs whose ages differ at most by one year. It seems likely that there are periods in our lives when having a child can lead us to withdraw from politics and other moments where becoming a parent stimulates greater engagement in politics.

[19] We used a combination of direct calipers on different distance matrices, a rank-based Mahalanobis distance matrix, and a propensity score distance matrix (from a multilevel model) to make our pairs so closely matched. Scholars interested in our approach to using matching with longitudinal data to create a difference-in-differences type of design can reproduce all of our analyses here using the provided reproduction archive.

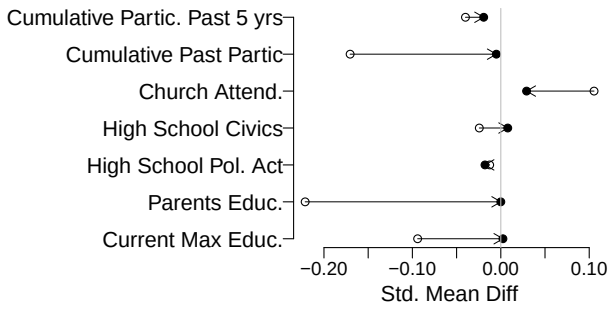


Figure 8: Standardized mean differences of characteristics of parents and matched controls as measured before a transition to parenthood. The open circles show that, without matching, the groups differ by no more than about .2sds (on parents' education level). The closed circles show that matching ensure near identicality within pair on these observed characteristics. Pairs are matched exactly on sex and within 1 year of age and 1 act of participation in the year before having a child (with vast majority exact on age and baseline activity). Arrows show the improvement in balance from unmatched to matched. The d^2 omnibus test of balance (Hansen and Bowers, 2008) casts no doubt on the hypothesis of balance ($p = 0.83$)

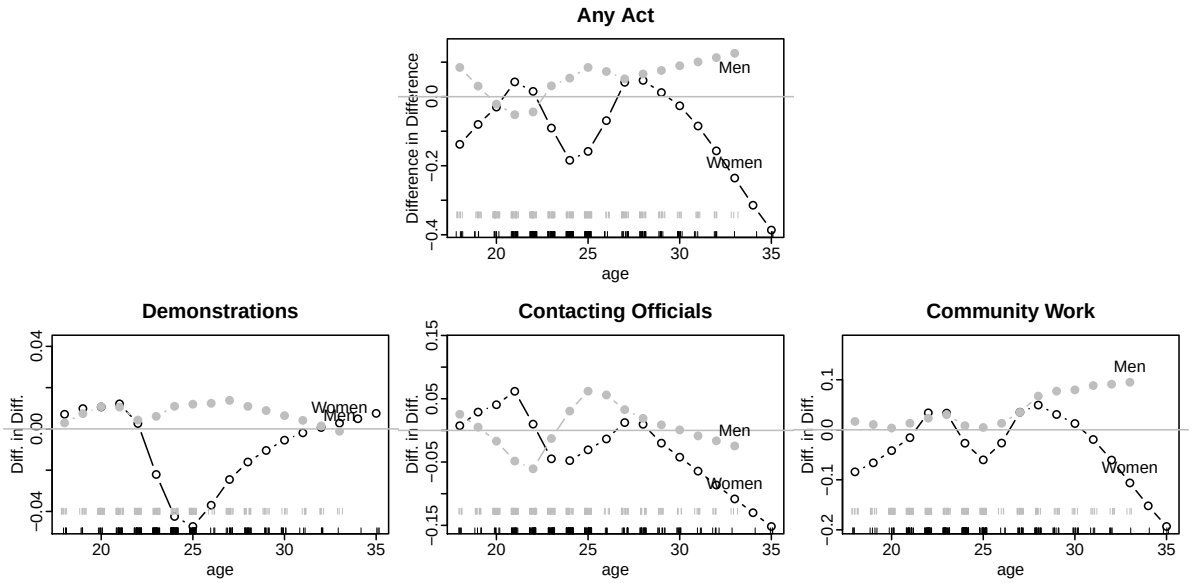


Figure 9: Within-matched-pair, difference-in-difference for participation by age for new mothers (black lines, open circles) and new fathers (gray lines, closed circles). Points above zero suggest that, on average, new parents are more likely to participate after the birth of their first child than they were in the past, and points below zero suggest that they participate less.

Second, as we might expect from past research, the effects of becoming a parent are considerably different for men and for women. We might conclude that men who become fathers tend to participate somewhat more than they would have done without having children, while women who become mothers tend to participate less. What is perhaps more interesting, and worthy of further study, is the extent to which the size of these differences varies across our analyses.

There are clearly periods of time where, and/or types of individuals for whom the effects of becoming a parent will have very different effects on men and women, but also moments and types for whom no differences will emerge. Consider briefly, the bottom left panel, which shows the effects of having a child on individual's likelihood of attending a demonstration. For men the effects of becoming a parent are marginal and perhaps slightly positive. For women however, becoming a mother appears to dramatically reduce the likelihood that they will attend a demonstration in years after the birth of their first child compared to women of nearly identical education (from families with the same education level) at the same age and moment in history. There are several possible patterns of participation that could produce this result. New mothers may stop attending demonstrations while the control comparisons continue doing what they were doing, or it may be that new mothers remain unchanged but our matched controls began participating at much higher rates at the same moments of their lives. Probably both explanations are credible given the experiences of these young people in the early 1970s.

The purpose of this example is not to provide a definitive answer to the question of what are the effects of having a child on political participation. As should be clear by now, that question can be framed and answered in a variety of ways, Hopefully, however, the analyses above have illustrated the value of conceptualizing political participation as a dynamic, stochastic process that will change the way we ask and answer questions as political scientists. For example, future work might consider the effects of additional children or consider a longer time-frame of analysis. Furthermore, our work has focused primarily on providing descriptive inferences from the data, while future work might consider ways of drawing statistical inferences from this kind of matched design for longitudinal analyses.

In this section we have considered the effects of education and childbirth on political participation. In each, we have shown that a new perspective provides insights into old questions and suggests new avenues for future research. But the benefits of our approach are not limited to new empirical strategies. Viewing political participation as a dynamic stochastic process has important normative and policy implications that we consider in the conclusion of this paper.

7 Normative and Policy Implications

This evidence about political activity over the life-span helps direct attention to a few questions that have not received much attention in the cross-sectional literature.

7.1 Participation, Equality, and Democracy

A concern for inequality of representation (via inequality of opportunity or of outcomes) has animated much of the literature on political participation. Of course, one question rarely asked in the empirical literature has been, "How much participation is ideal?" Perhaps such a question seems irrelevant under circumstances in which political inequalities are so vivid. Yet, although such a question may be irrelevant for activists striving to help the disadvantaged participate, it is exactly this type of question that ought to concern scholars. In the limit, these kinds of concerns amount to questions about the health of democracy in America. And, the idea that political participation is a dynamic process over the lives of people perhaps enriches answers to this question.

Imagine that we discovered that 50% of people participated using many cross-sectional surveys over many years—that is, we were very confident that 50% of people got involved and 50% did not. What does this information mean about the health of the democracy within which the research occurred? Figure 10 shows three of the longitudinal patterns consistent with this finding. The top row suggests a kind of oligarchy of the active: only one kind of person ever participates and that person participates constantly—the 50% finding reveals merely that half of the population consists of this group. The middle row would also tell survey researchers that 50% participate in any one survey, but now the entire population is involved 10 years out of 20. The bottom row merely makes the selection of 10 years out of 20 random—thus allowing some people to participate in multi-year spells. And, of course, one could imagine many other scenarios: for example, if each person acted based on a coin-flip, this might lead to more or fewer participatory years than strictly 10 out of 20.

Which scenario seems best? Of course it depends on the purposes of this participation and the theory of politics and life guiding one's answers. Manin's (1997) discussion of the importance of lot over election in Athens suggests that Aristotle and other Athenians would have seen either of the sporadically participating scenarios as best for government. However, Manin also highlights that concern for stability and competence led many subsequent democracies (Venice, Florence, Rome)

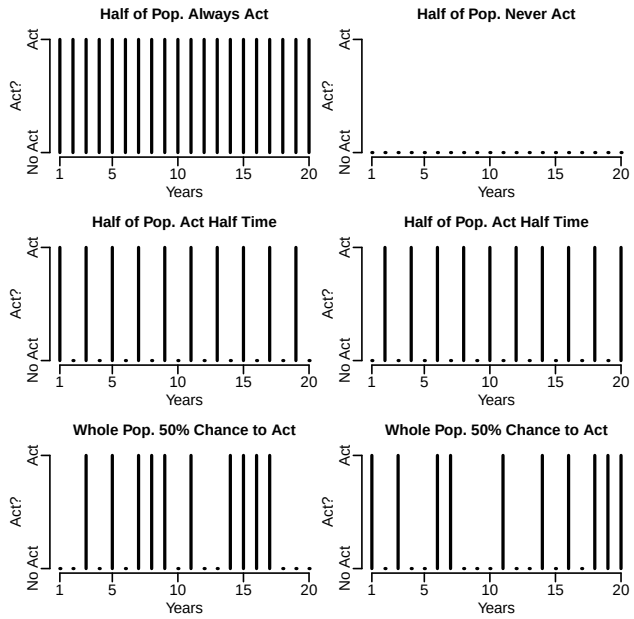


Figure 10: Three democracies from one cross-sectional finding that 50% of the sample was involved in politics assuming two equal sized groups.

to combine institutions like lot — encouraging a flow of people into and out of public service—with institutions like elections, which helped ensure that highly competent or otherwise high status people run the government. To the extent that the half of the population acting is somehow the best governors then one may worry about the cross-sectional finding hiding the middle or bottom scenarios. Of course, other points of view, such as those argued by Pateman (1972), might argue that the best government as well as the best individual life is the life lived in constant political action.[20]

7.2 Policy Implications

Although the question of how much participation is best remains unanswered, civic groups and campaigns aiming to increase the extent to which the electorate represents the citizenry will continue to try to improve turnout (or other kinds of participation). A focus on cross-sectional indicators, however, can cause such mobilization efforts to exacerbate inequalities.

For example, Berinsky, Burns and Traugott (2001) suggest that the outcome of making the costs of voting lower (by allowing voting by mail) is to prevent people who already have histories of

[20]Of course, we have blurred some distinctions here between the exercise of "voice" by ordinary people and actual involvement in legislation or other functions of government by discussing the Athenian and Italian republic examples.

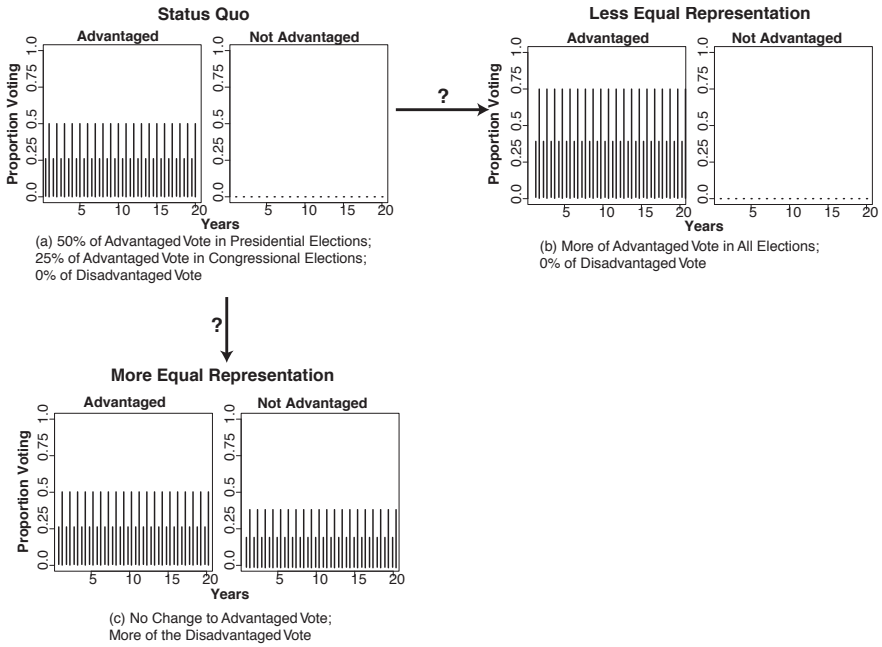


Figure 11: Get-out-the-vote efforts may either increase or decrease the representativeness of the electorate. Both would appear as increases in overall turnout in cross-sectional analyses.

voting from dropping out of the electorate—thus turnout overall increases, but the electorate is less representative. Figure 11 illustrates how voter mobilization occurs can increase overall turnout either by making the electorate less representative (the arrow to the right-hand panel) or by making the electorate more representative (the arrow to the lower-panel).

The concern for the compositional effects of voting reform or GOTV efforts is in line with concerns about equality of representation and/or results alluded to earlier, but it is only through an appreciation of political participation as a dynamic process that we can see and understand how attempts to improve representation could easily have unintended consequences.

7.3 Conclusion

Confronting the fact that political participation is a dynamic (and stochastic and sparse) process over the life-span (1) makes us realize that what we had previously understood as "theories of participation" are theories of the conditions which enable or prepare individuals to act and (2) encourages us to ask new questions about the catalysts and inhibitors of action. This simple taxonomy of causes also requires that we ask how the kinds of inequalities so often seen in cross-sections interact with the stream of events and/or other conditions that stimulate, maintain, interrupt, or inhibit spells of political activity by individuals. Of course, taxonomy for the sake of categorization

is useless. What we have shown here is that the longitudinal picture of participation is manifestly different from that in the cross-section: for example, given many years to participate, the proportion of the public (at least of this age cohort) involved in political activity is many times larger than ever reported in the cross-sectional literature. We have also shown that longitudinal data encourage new questions that help us more deeply understand important past findings: for example, receiving a college degree by age 25 has a different effect on political participation than does receiving a college degree after age 25. What does it then mean to include a dummy variable in a cross-sectional regression for "college degree"? It is an average over all ages and all moments of receiving the education; as such, it is not misleading, but it could easily be misinterpreted to suggest that education received at any age has the same effect. Finally, new theoretically-relevant questions can be asked, in particular, one wonders about the macro-implications (across countries, across historical periods) of systematic differences in the kinds of micro-dynamics that we describe here.

Political participation understood as a dynamic process within the lives of individuals is different from political participation thought of as a dividing line in society. Both perspectives on participation are important: political participation is an important way in which power and influence are distributed in a society at any given moment, and in any given moment some people tend to have disproportionate power and others tend to have much less.[21] Moment-to-moment changes in participation cannot be caused, in a proximate sense, by attributes of people that change slowly if at all over their lives—we require catalysts or precipitants to make sense of these dynamics. Of course, instead of precipitants, we might also appeal to some underlying stochastic process. For example, each emission of radioactive particles by chunks of Uranium tends to be explained as a random event—a Poisson process, for example, will produce series of spikes like those seen in Figure 1. But, such explanations tend to come very close to defining away the problem (i.e. calling it "noise" or "residual" or "random" is one way to call something "not interesting"). Of course, the study of radioactivity manages to make the randomness itself interesting, and perhaps that is another fruitful direction for social scientists interested in the study of political activity over the life-span. In fact, if we discovered

[21] For an argument that such divisions themselves ought to drive the aggregate shape of political activity in a citizenry as well as the moment to moment decisions of individual people, see Junn (2010).

that these patterns of participation over the life span looked as if they could have been generated from a random number generator, that in and of itself is politically and theoretically interesting: Should citizens not participating by lot behave as if they are?

The point of this paper is to add another perspective to the current ones—to think about what divides moments in individuals' lives during which they participate from those moments during which they do not. Previous work clearly has much to offer research in this area because knowing *who* participates suggests *when* people might participate. "Political participation" in the cross-sectional context tends to mean "differences between people in their participation", but "political participation" in the longitudinal context may refer to any of the following questions: "How many total acts do people tend to do?" "On average, how many people tend to participate when they are 30?" "How does amount of participation in the present and future relate to amount of participation in the past?" "How long do people spend participating before they stop? How persistent are spells of continuous participation?" Each question is a different window looking out onto the same phenomenon. Adding a single dimension to a well-known phenomenon adds much more than one dimension of complexity to the research enterprise. Each question is politically and theoretically relevant, yet each requires somewhat different data. At the most basic level many of these questions require more data like that provided by the Political Socialization Study—a history of political activity over many years for many people. Creative answers to these questions, however, might be able to make strategic use of time diary data (Kahneman et al., 2004*a*,*b*), or use the records of organizations to identify "cases" for case-referent studies (Breslow, 1982, 1996), or develop even more sophisticated ways to use smart phones, social networking sites, or even online games to follow the movements of people into and out of the public sphere. Clearly, there are as many questions about what this process *is* that are just as interesting as traditional questions about how this process is *caused*—and these phenomenological questions require new data and designs for answers.

Focusing on political participation as a dynamic process opens up an exciting research agenda. The longitudinal data make clear that there are many paths to action—the picture is not necessarily additive, and the emphasis must be on specification of mechanisms. The cross-sectional story is not incorrect, but it is further back in etiology. It provides a crucial foundation, but is not the whole

story. Thus, a theory of longitudinal participation needs to emphasize emphasize different things: dynamics versus attributes, catalysts versus conditions. As we add moving pictures to our library of snapshots, we may gain new perspectives about what political participation is and how we should understand what we think we already know. The question of "who participates" can be, and ought to be, expanded to address what stimulates, inhibits or sustains political participation over time within the lives of ordinary people.

Appendix A: Measures of Political Participation

The Study of Political Socialization includes a wide array of measures of political participation, based on closed- and open-ended questions.

Electoral Participation Questions about the occurrence, timing, and content of acts of this type were asked of the class of 1965 in 1973 and 1982. In 1997 detailed timing information was not asked for these items. The focus of the actions were collected as open-ended responses to the "what was it about" questions. These open-ended responses were then aggregated into very detailed numeric codes. I constructed the variables indicating school oriented participation using these codes. The questions were:

Campaign Influence First, did you talk to any people and try to show them why they should vote one way or the other? When was that? What issue/candidate was it about?

Campaign Rallies Have you gone to any political meetings, rallies, dinners, or other things like that since (1965/1973/1982)? When was that? What issue/candidate was it about?

Campaign Work Have you done any other work for a party, candidate or issue since (1965/1973/1982)? When was that? What issue/candidate was it about?

Campaign Button Have you worn a campaign button or put a campaign sticker on your car since (1965/1973/1982)? When was that? What issue/candidate was it about?

Campaign Donation Have you given money or bought any tickets to help a particular party, candidate, or group pay campaign expenses since (1965/1973/1982)? When was that? What issue/candidate was it about?

Non-electoral Participation Much political activity occurs outside the periodicity marking elections. These include contacting public officials, writing letters to the media, taking part in demonstrations, and working on local issues. The timing as well as the nature of these efforts are available.

The following questions were asked about such activities in the 1973, 1982, and 1997 waves of the Study of Political Socialization for the panel of respondents who were 18 years old in 1965:

"Aside from activities during election campaigns, there are other ways people can become involved in politics."

Contacting For example, since (1965/1973/1982) have you written a letter, sent a fax or e-mail message, or talked to any public officials, giving them your opinion about something? (IF YES) When was that and what was it about?

Letter to Editor Since (1965/1973/1982) , have you written a letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine giving any political opinions? (IF YES) When was that and what was it about?

Demonstration Since (1965/1973/1982), have you taken part in a demonstration, protest march, or sit-in? (IF YES) When was that and what was it about?

Community Work Since (1965/1973/1982), have you worked with others to try to solve some community problems? (IF YES) When was that and what was it about?

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