Events into Action:
A Framework For Studying Political Participation as a Dynamic Process

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Abstract

Political action is driven by events. Although the effects of particularly dramatic events on social movements is well documented, the effects of events, quotidian or exceptional, on the behavior of individuals are significantly less well understood. This paper proposes a framework for understanding how a moment of political action may occur in the life of an ordinary person. It synthesizes past literature and theories that explain variation among people at a single point in time on the basis of largely time-constant attributes of people and elaborates on this literature to suggest when we might expect the poor and disadvantaged to surmount such resource, skills, and status barriers to get involved in politics. Furthermore, this framework suggests a way for future syntheses, theory-building, and empirical studies to coordinate such that all of our disparate findings about political participation cumulate more effectively.

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Two facts about political participation demand attention: (1) Many highly educated people do not get involved in politics, while many people who have little education participate regularly. (2) Most of the people who get involved in politics at one point in time are not the same people who are involved at another point in time. 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 well-equipped to help us understand most of the variation in political activity because variation is largely within people over time. Consider education: it matters by providing resources and skills and social status. None of these attributes of people change appreciably from year to year. Yet many people without such attributes manage to go to meetings, attend protests, or to otherwise work with others to try to make the world (or their neighborhood) a better place. Building on the past literature that has taught us so much about who participates, this paper presents a framework to help political scientists understand what stimulates and inhibits episodes of political activity in the lives of ordinary Americans. I hope that this paper will add a new dimension to the etiology, or causal story, of political participation and will thus expand the agenda for scholars in this field. In the end, I suggest that a research program on political participation must include scrutiny of two kinds of factors: those that affect the *potential* of a person to engage in civic activity and those that *precipitate* actual moments of activity.

In the next section of the paper, I quickly describe the state of the art when it comes to research on political participation. After developing a series of expectations for participation as a dynamic process based on these past findings and theory, I then show that these expectations are not borne out by the best available data on political participation as it changes over the lives of individual Americans. The following section explains why the strong findings of the past 50 years do not appear to provide much purchase on this phenomenon when seen from a dynamic perspective, and I describe what features a framework for studying political participation as a dynamic process needs to have to be at least credible on its face. I then propose a framework that has these attributes, a framework both to help us understand features of political participation heretofore unexplained, and to help us more deeply understand past findings.

1 A Very Quick Overview of What We Know

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). 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 nearly encyclopedæic 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). 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 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, page 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); and people who have patient and/or altruistic personalities are also more likely to get involved in politics (Fowler and Kam, 2007, 2006). 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 even of the psychology of fear and threat all 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).

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.[2] 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 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.[3] These studies add great clarity to our understanding of voter turnout efforts in the contemporary United States. The proposed framework has added benefits for this literature as well, which I elaborate in § 5.4.1 after I explain the details of the framework.

The literature which 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 move-

[2] It is worth pointing to a few other articles which are concerned with the temporal characteristics of political participation, but not of 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); and Hansen and Bowers (2009) also suggest that mobilization in-person helps those who have already voted rather than encouraging new voters to join the electorate.

[3] See for example, (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). See Green and Gerber (2002) for a review of this work.

ment 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) (McAdam and Tilly, 2001; Tarrow, 1989; McAdam, 1982; Piven and Cloward, 1978; Mccarthy and Zald, 1977) and cultural (Benford and Snow, 2000) ways before a set of otherwise frustrated or relatively deprived (Gurr, 1970) people can be predicted to come together to rebel or otherwise act, not all deprived individuals get involved all the time. 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 promise unspecified future 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) (Chong, 1991; Lichbach, 1995; Olson, 1965) ought to add something to our understanding of how action is spurred or inhibited. 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 particular local policy). What I hope to accomplish in this paper is to weave together these strands of research on the dynamics of political participation — from sociology, psychology, and political science — and to strengthen the resulting cloth with an approach that will help us generalize beyond the particular cases so far examined and help stimulate and organize future research in this area.

What would theories of individual action based on resources, mobilization, and 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 I 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 moral 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).

2 Puzzling Empirical Regularities

In fact, these expectations are not borne out when they are matched against the best (and, to my knowledge, only) currently available data on political participation as it changes over time within the lives of individuals. 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 with 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 life-time of political activity within a person actually looks like.

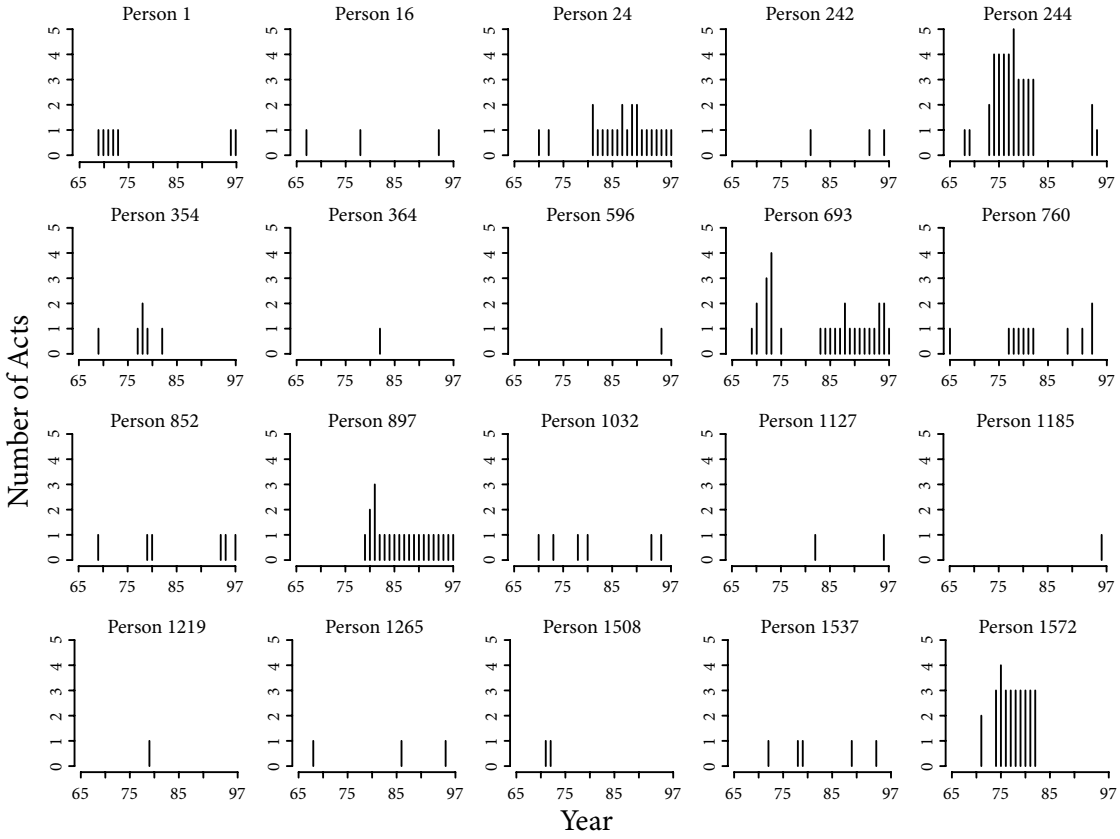

Figure 1: Profiles of individual participation beyond voting for The Class of 1965, age 18–50. At each point in time, each person may report from 0 to 6 acts of electoral or non-electoral participation (other than voting). Vertical lines show the number of acts reported by a given person in each year.

Figure 1 shows raw data on participation in non-electoral activities 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)).[4] 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

[4]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 are the result of the individuals' retrospective reports at each of the interviews in 1973, 1982, and 1997.

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.[5] For example, Person 354 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. Using data such as that shown in Figure 1 or other panel studies, we know that (1) that participation occurs sporadically across the lives of many individuals Bowers (2003); Sigelman et al. (1985); Dahl (1961), and (2) that spells of participation tend to last only one year, which is the minimum temporal resolution of this dataset (Bowers, 2003).

Of course, Figure 1 is only a small sample from the Political Socialization study. It is possible that, if one could somehow look directly at all 935 graphs, we would draw other conclusions. For this reason, in the next section I will show a series of results using all of the Political Socialization respondents, as well as three of the NES panel studies, to emphasize what I 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 individuals. I am not alone in thinking that this is so. 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). 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).

2.1 Is Participation Really Sporadic in General?

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

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

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.[6] If past participation is not highly associated with present participation, then something else that changes over time must be stimulating the activity.

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):

Table 1: Transitions From One Period to the Next in Amount of Community Work Among the Class of 1965

		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

Note: Table contains 30855 person-years (935 respondents $\times$ 33 years).

Out of all 30855 person-years (935 respondents $\times$ 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 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 $\mathbf{T}$.

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

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 —

[6]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.

at least across adjacent periods.[7]

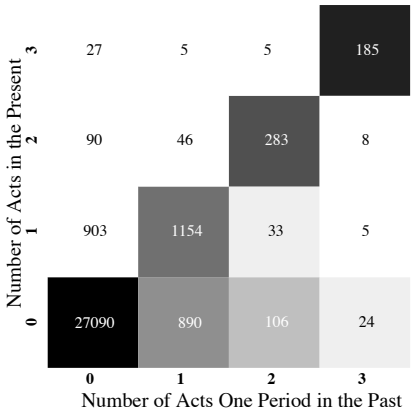

Figure 2: Transitions into and out of participation in Community Work from one year to the next for the Class of 1965 over the period from 1965 to 1997. Darker squares denote show more frequently observed past-to-present transitions.

Figure 2 summarizes the information in $\mathbf{T}$ 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. And, 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, $\mathbf{T}$ 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

[7] About 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); Bowers (2003); Jennings (1979); Beck and Jennings (1979, 1982); Jennings (1987).

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.

Of course, working with others in the community is merely one kind of political activity. The Political Socialization Study measured 8 kinds of activities other than voting.[8] Voting itself is much less interesting as regards transitions between action and inaction. Both in the Political Socialization Study (Bowers, 2003) 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 over-time (meaning that all of the transitions would be from 0 to 0 or 1 to 1 act). In addition, measures of voting in the Political Socialization Study only capture voting in Presidential elections — meaning that the amount of information available becomes, at maximum, 8 elections rather than 33 years. Due to a paucity of data I focus attention on non-voting participation in this paper. That said, among types non-voting participation perhaps community work is particularly sporadic as compared to the others (certainly it would be as compared to voting). To assess the evidence in favor of the claim that most people do not participate most of the time, but many people participate at least once or twice in a decade, Figure 3 presents information transition plots for each of the acts of participation measured in the Political Socialization dataset. The transition matrix $\mathbf{T}$ 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

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

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 (rather than "ramping up" and "tapering off" their level of activity over the years).

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. 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 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.

This pattern of sporadic participation from year to year is not merely an artifact of the particular cohorts in the Political Socialization study. The panel studies conducted by the National Election Studies (Campbell et al., 1999; The Political Behavior Program of the Survey Research Center, Institute for Social Research, Univeristy of Michigan and the National Election Studies, 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 and so ask 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

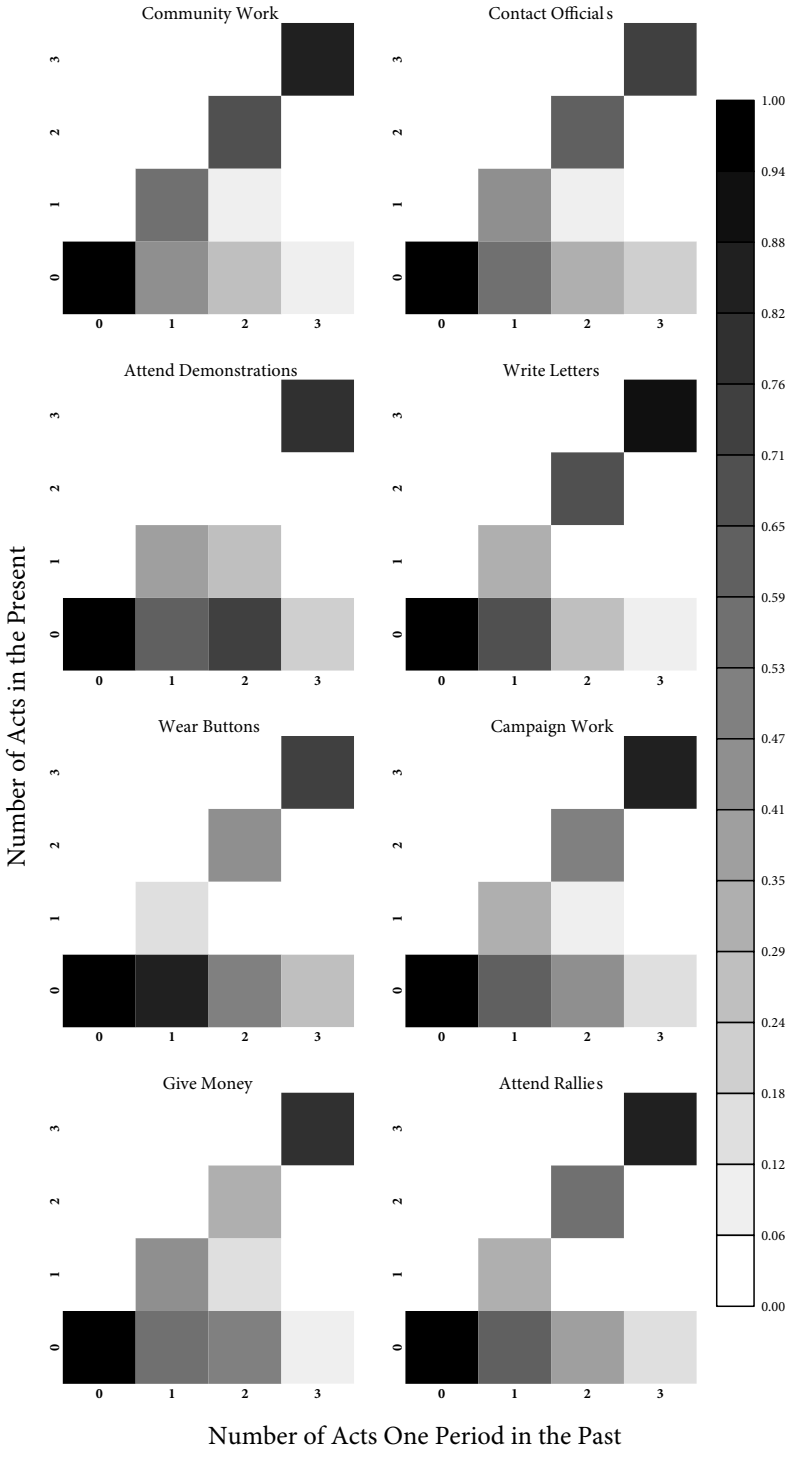

Figure 3: Transitions into and out of participation from one year to the next for the Class of 1965 over the period from 1965–1997 for non-electoral activities, and over 1965–1982 for electoral activities. The colors show the proportion of person-years where activity in the present (shown on the y-axes)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

Socialization study.

Figure 4 shows the kinds of information about participation available from three of these datasets. The information for the 1956–1960 NES Panel Study is in the left column of figures, the information for the 1972–1976 NES Panel Study is in the middle column, and the 1990–1992 NES Panel Study is on the right. Rather than 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 NES 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).[9] However, among people who participated at all, a pattern of participation in only one of 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– to 1960 panel. 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. Of the NES respondents who reported donating money in the 1956 campaign, about 51% (n=63) did not give money in the 1960 campaign, but about 49% (n=60) did it again. 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 provides a quick bit of corroboration for Figure 1, that 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 the same across historical periods.

It is also possible that previous work can completely explain the patterns shown here — after all, mobilization is a prominent current 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. In fact, mobilization will be a part of the framework that I propose in the next section, but mobilization cannot explain it all. Table 2 shows that many of the people

[9]The focus here is on the first and last years of the panels because these questions were not all uniformly asked during middle years of the panels.

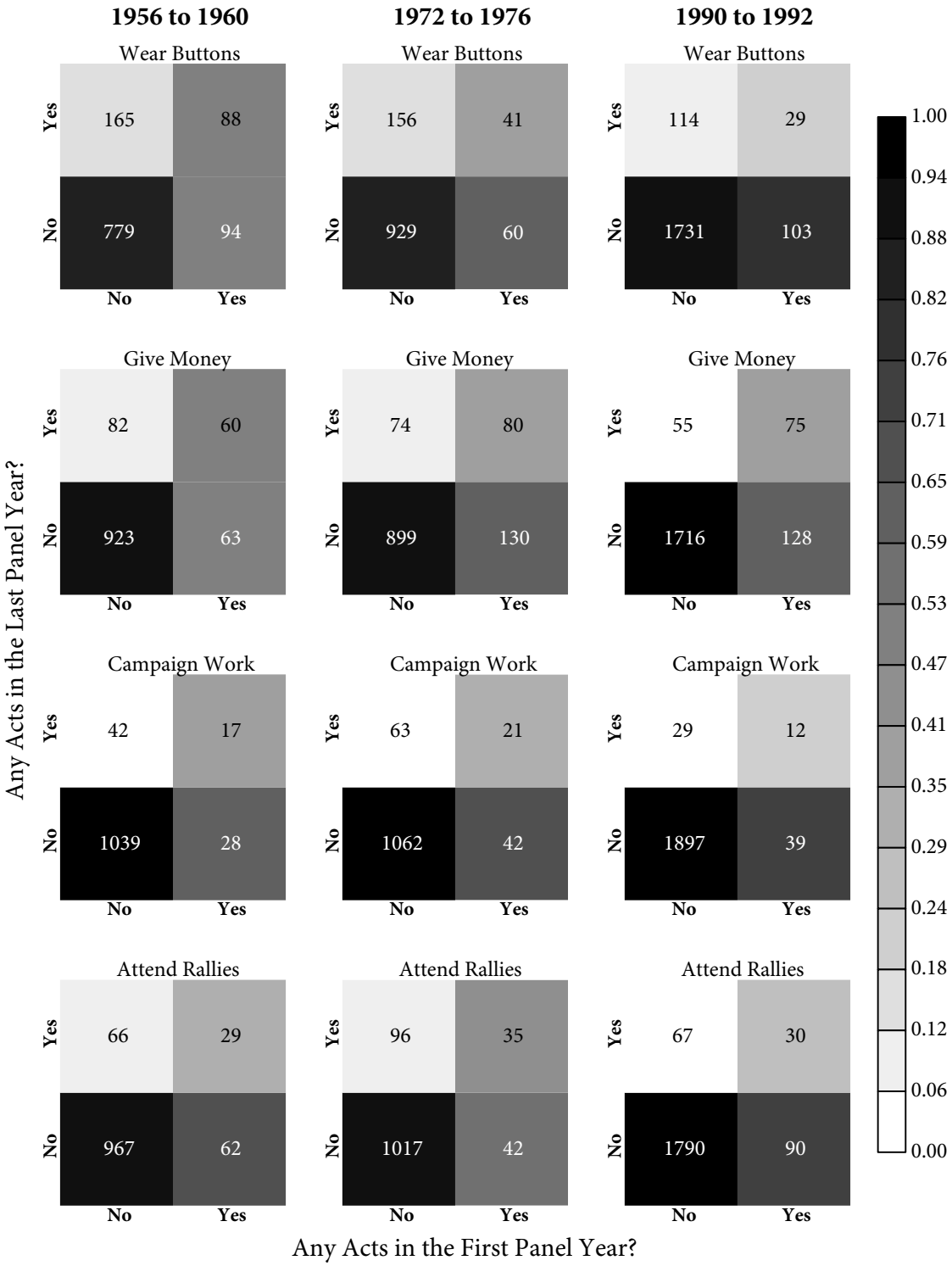

Figure 4: Transitions into and out of participation across National Election Study panel years. The colors show the proportion of respondents whose activity in the *last* panel year (1960, 1976, or 1992) (shown on the y-axes) followed activity in the *first* panel year (1956, 1972 or 1990) (shown on the x-axes). The key at right shows the proportions represented by the colors.

who reported engaging in electoral activities in 1990 and 1992, did not remember being contacted by someone urging them to get involved.[10]

Table 2: Percent Participating Without Mobilization

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

Note: Based on the NES 1990–1992 Panel Study.

Table 2 suggests that mobilization is relevant, but it is merely one of many events that provide the crucial input to make political activity possible. In addition, mobilization is not usually an event that *prevents* people from participating — and 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 (and not an event that inhibits it), then we will also understand 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.[11]

So far I have shown that what previous theory would lead us to expect is not found in the best available data on the dynamics of political participation. For example, previous work emphasizes the importance of education for political participation, but people do not gain and lose education from year to year while they do enter and exit from political involvement from year to year. The findings focused on interventions in the lives of citizens to stimulate vote turnout has so far not

[10]Tragically, the Political Socialization data do not contain measures of mobilization.

[11]Miller (2002) and Miller, Krosnick and Lowe (2000) suggest that feelings of "threat" or "opportunity" might motivate political activity. This idea is pursued and developed below as a piece of the mechanism by which events might be turned into action. And 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.

focused on political participation more broadly, and more importantly, as I will elaborate below in § 5.4.1, cumulation of knowledge from those studies is hampered by the lack of a framework to tie together the many distinct findings. In addition, the forces at work to encourage or discourage protest or letters to members of Congress are qualitatively different from the forces engaged in stimulating or surpressing turnout: organized groups, the law, and the media all relate to campaigns differently from they way that they relate to non-voting and non-election related turnout. Of course the general problem is that a theory that relies on time-constant attributes of individuals cannot plausibly explain the sporadic, time-varying patterns that represent the "facts" about political participation. And many isolated yet clear and confident findings from experiments require theoretical synthesis in order to tell us where, when and what to manipulate as we design new experiments and how to apply the findings of these experiments beyond their laboratories (in the field or on a college campus or online).

3 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? I 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 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 do with mobilization. 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.[12] 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.

4 A Framework for Understanding the Dynamics of Political Participation

The best available evidence shows that political participation beyond voting ought to be thought of as a series of short moments of activity that occurs over the lifetimes of individuals. This evidence creates a puzzle for students of political involvement: current understanding is grounded quite firmly in attributes of individuals that do not change much (often called "resources"), if at all, within the adulthoods of people and thus seemingly cannot account for political participation as a dynamic process that changes from one year to the next. What would a compelling explanation of what precipitates (or inhibits) episodes of political participation have to have in order to be persuasive? First and foremost, it must involve factors that change over time. Second, it must also involve the fact that resources do matter — given the massive amount of research that has shown this to be so.

Figure 5 depicts a framework for understanding political participation that brings the cross-sectional account into the dynamic context, while adding some essential pieces of the puzzle that have been previously overlooked. The path to participation represented here slopes sharply upward, representing a hill that must be climbed before action is possible. There are five stages in this process, each offering the individual a chance to stop the climb. Thus, the output of this approach will be that participation is relatively rare in so far as it depends on a conjunction of factors all lining up.

[12] 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.

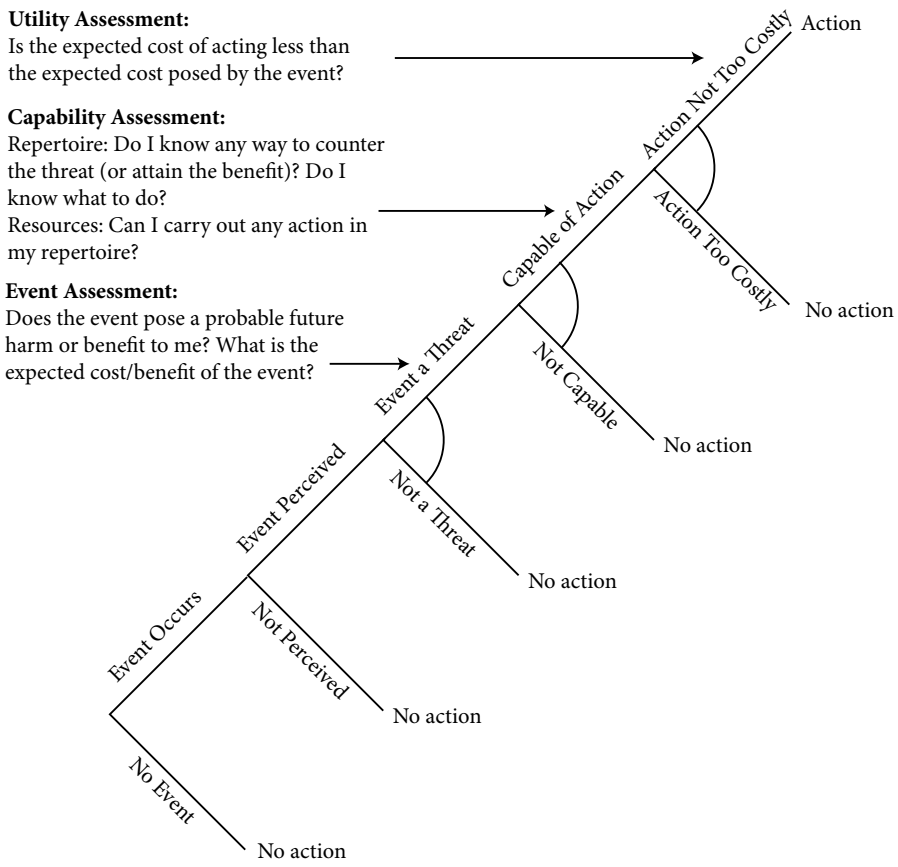

Figure 5: Events into Action. This figure illustrates the process by which an individual may choose to get involved in a political action. Each stage offers an opportunity to either move toward eventual action or to defer/avoid acting.

4.1 Stage 1: Event Occurrence.

The most plausible account for the sporadic patterns in Figure 1 is 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, I 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 I call such exogenous shocks, "events". Thus, the first stage of this framework begins with the occurrence of an event in the world. There is no arc connecting the branches of this segment of the path, indicating that either an event occurs or it does

not, with no "almost occurrence".[13] 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, or the publication of a dramatic story in the media, or a cross-burning on one's lawn. Events can also inhibit participation. In preliminary work, I have shown that crossburnings can both stimulate *and* depress political activity among African-Americans (Bowers, 1997), and that childbearing inhibits participation in the short term among women but spurs it among men (Bowers, 2003).[14] And social movement-caused events, such as protests, can be their own impetus to individual action (Kaplan and Brady, 2004; Lohmann, 1994). Whether an event turns out to be a catalyst or inhibitor (or an irrelevant factor) depends crucially on the later stages of this process, especially perception. I have separated perception from event occurrence to make explicit that *the sequence of participation for any given person depends crucially on the supply of events in his or her environment and life, given extant conditions like historical period or political campaigns.*[15]

Events must occur before any participation can occur — regardless of resources. Thus, all things being equal, we should observe more participation in places, during times, and in conditions where more events occur; participation is an output that depends on the existence of inputs to occur.

[13]It would be tempting to write "Nature" at the crux of this segment of the graph, and it is plausible that politically relevant events might be somehow produced at some identifiable rate (constant or otherwise) within an environment. I have resisted adding this label to the graph, leaving open the possibility that actions themselves create events and that resources can help determine what kinds of events one is exposed to. For example, elections themselves are events (on the day of the election itself) and are collections of events which stimulate and inhibit each other. In addition, assumptions about the form of the particular stochastic process that generates these events would not further illuminate the general mechanism although such assumptions (or findings) would significantly improve the predictive ability of this framework in specific contexts.

[14]For similar cross-sectional findings on parenthood, see Burns, Schlozman and Verba (2001).

[15]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 short 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 the purposes of this article, 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.

4.2 Stage 2: Perception.

Of course, a pothole in the road will not matter much to a person who never drives. Nor will events reported in the media spur action if they do not somehow make it into the consciousness of the individual (either via direct exposure to the media or word of mouth). It has long been found that political interest helps differentiate those who participate from those who do not, above and beyond resources, status, and mobilization (see Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995, for evidence of this). The approach presented here locates the effect of political interest in the perception stage of the climb up the slope toward participation. Those individuals who are attentive to their political environment, who are actively scanning the temporal horizon for harm or benefit, are those who are more likely to move up the path at this early stage than those who are not attentive and thus drop out. Of course, attention can fluctuate over time. There are moments when one cannot spare attention for anything other than, say, a new baby, an ill parent, or the details of moving into a new town — both moving and having a baby can be seen as events that inhibit participation at least in part by blocking the perceptions of events that would otherwise catalyze action. The fact that previous literature has found that "political interest" seems to matter, "controlling for" so many other factors, also suggests that resources and attentiveness do not go exactly hand in hand. *Thus, lack of perception can block a moment of participation well before resources even come into play (Stage 4).*[16]

When people ignore their environments (because of other pressing concerns or lack of interest), they will not participate (or even go through the steps of asking if participation is worth doing).

4.3 Stage 3: Threat/Opportunity Assessment.

A single pothole may not matter that much to a person, even during the brief moment when the car bounces and the morning coffee nearly hits the windshield. This part of the path has a smooth arc connecting the two branches, indicating that the output of this part of the process is a continuous measure. The path leading toward participation is labeled "Event a Threat" to indicate that the

[16] I will elaborate later on how this simple framework ought to be complicated, perhaps most importantly, by thinking about how resources themselves come to influence nearly every stage in this process. For now, however, the simple model is worth elucidating because it highlights the central drivers toward action — that is, the role of resources in perception is secondary while perception itself is the cause of a movement past Stage 2 up the tree toward action.

person perceiving the event has assigned it some non-negligible expected cost (i.e. considers it a threat) or some non-negligible benefit (i.e. considers it an opportunity).[17] "Probable" is important in this context. For example, if I drive a military tank, then I may not see a pothole as a threat since there is no possibility that it would harm me.

In this context, however, I would consider "harm" or "benefit" to be very loosely defined. However individuals understand the event, I argue that they must see it as a potential source of change to their utility (either negatively as a threat or positively as an opportunity) before they can continue to climb the slope toward eventual action. This is not an argument for "homo-economicus" narrowly defined. However, there is ample evidence that individuals do engage in some cost/benefit calculus (perhaps in some very bounded and "irrational" way) when it comes to expending resources on action. For example, Green and Cowden (1992) found that those individuals most active in protesting busing in Louisville, KY were those people who had children they expected would be harmed by the busing.[18]

The idea that a "threat" or an "opportunity" might provide impetus for action is an old one in social science. For example, Key (1949) explained the antipathy of Southern whites toward blacks based on the idea that whites living near many blacks perceived blacks to be a threat.[19] More recently, Miller (2002) and Miller, Krosnick and Lowe (2000) have suggested that *either* threat *or* opportunity could spur donations to political organizations. Campbell (2003*a*,*b*) shows that aggregate participation among senior citizens closely tracks changes in public policy that pose harm to this group, i.e. "policy threats" against social security. Huddy et al. (2002) show that perception of personal threat due to terrorism has weaker effects on attitudes about terrorism than perceptions of

[17] I use the words "threat" and "opportunity" here in a technical sense: an event is a threat if it poses a probable future harm, and an event is an opportunity if it poses a probable future benefit. Here I am following the conceptual analysis of "threat" that elaborated in Bowers (1998*a*,*b*, 1997).

[18] Green and Cowden (1992) also found that anti-busing attitudes were *not* predicted by a cost/benefit calculus. Thus, this argument for assessing an event as a future harm or benefit only holds plausibly when people are being asked to put money or time on the line, not when they are able to provide "cheap talk" to a survey interviewer.

[19] A large line of research on "power threat theory" emerged from observations by Key (1949) and Blalock (1967). Critical reviews of this literature can been found in Wong (2002); Bowers (1998*b*,*a*, 1997).

national level threats.[20] And Gerber, Green and Larimer (2008) suggest that the embarrassment of having one's voting record shown to neighbors is costly enough to enhance turnout.[21]

Thus, this stage in the process is based on several groups of literature, all of which use the word "threat" (and some of which use the word "opportunity") to denote politically relevant events that might motivate changes in political behavior or attitudes. I think it adds another important part to the story of participation. For example, when people who are poor, not socially well connected, or relatively uninterested in politics suddenly appear at a march, a meeting, or elsewhere, political scientists are tempted to say, "These people shouldn't be here" (not as a normative statement, but as an empirical implication of extant theories). It is quite intuitive, however, that even a person with few resources is likely to act in the face of a large threat. Thus, this part of the framework can help us understand the instances where the poor and disadvantaged do get involved in politics, and it can help us understand why many people in a democracy stay home, too. In the end, even if an event happens and it is perceived, unless a person understands the event as a threat or an opportunity, participation will be blocked even before resources are considered.

Events that are assessed as very mild threats or opportunities can still spur participation if (1) a person has a very low cost of action for that particular kind of event (Stage 4) or (2) the threat is part of a sequence of low cost events for which the costs cumulate to create a high overall cost in the mind of the individuals — thus allowing for "last straw" phenomena. Even people with very few resources may participate if the cost or benefit expected from an event is high enough.

4.4 Stage 4: Capability Assessment.

Once a person predicts that the event she perceived is apt to cost or gain her some utility, the next question is whether the person either knows how to avoid the costs (or attain the gains) and whether

[20] A related body of literature focuses on how intolerance and other seemingly anti-democratic personality characteristics may be activated, intensified, and made salient parts of attitude formation among people with certain personality predispositions (for examples of this work, see Feldman and Stenner, 1997; Feldman, 2003).

[21] A related literature on health behavior also finds that fear is a powerful stimulus for behavioral change (Beck and Frankel, 1981; Witte and Allen, 2000). Yet, we also know that the social circumstances of potentially harmful events crucially mediate reactions to them (Darley and Latané, 1968; Howard Penn Krisher, Darley and Darley, 1973).

the person is able to execute the plan.

The first sub-stage of this segment of the path to participation is called "Repertoire" to indicate that different kinds of activities are cognitively available to a person facing a threat or opportunity.[22] For example, protests were a more common mode of political activity in the late 1960s than they are now in this country, and this type of activity was especially popular among people under the age of 35 (Bowers, 2003; Jennings and Markus, 1988; Jennings, 1987). Structural conditions and fashion largely determine the repertoire of activity available to an individual in any given place in the world and moment in time. For example, during Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile, opposition to certain government policies was often expressed by individuals coordinating the banging of pots and pans outside their kitchen windows, by whistling certain tunes en masse at soccer games, and by anonymous leaflets scattered around the roads and the central plazas after midnight (Schneider, 1995; Bowers, 1992). In Argentina between 1955 and 1972, mass strikes gave way to covert bombings, kidnapings and assassinations after the week-long riot/strike in the city of Cordoba in May of 1969 (Santella, 2008; Moyano, 1995; Bowers, 1995). I use these examples only because they are ones that I have studied. However, these examples show that any given threat or benefit must be matched with some kind of appropriate response within a given political and historical context — that is, events occur and must be reacted to within contexts. The participation research that focuses on voting has made great strides precisely because of its focus on the repertoire part of the participation path. Registration is a crucial structural constraint on voting (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980), to the extent that if individuals do not think of registering to vote, they cannot vote (in most states), even if they have the resources available to do so, and even if the appropriate response to a perceived threat is to vote.

The second sub-stage of this segment is called "Resources" to indicate that, even if a person can think of an appropriate action to take to stave off a threat or take advantage of an opportunity, resources are a crucial constraint on the ability of an individual to take this action. It is here that most of the research on non-voting participation has provided ample evidence. For example, we

[22] I borrow this concept of a "repertoire" from Tilly (1986), who first developed it to explain why different social movements in France used different forms of protest over time.

have learned that individuals who know how to write letters, speak in public, and hold meetings are much more likely to do those things when it comes to politics (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). We have also learned that social networks are crucial in differentiating those who participate from those who do not; people who know political leaders personally in some senses face lower costs in calling those leaders to express an opinion (Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Berry, 1996), and the social status of individuals interacts with the status of others around them to either incite or depress participation (Huckfeldt, 1979). We have also learned that small inequalities in resources can cumulate over a lifetime to create serious inequalities in participation between men and women, and presumably between any other groups who have similar experiences to women when it comes to wages, time, socialization, etc. (Burns, Schlozman and Verba, 2001). Thus, if we compare two people who have seen an event and understand it in the same way, and who both can think of how to act to prevent the threat or seize the opportunity, we would assume that the person with more resources will be better able to act. Thus, this approach takes advantage of the ground-breaking work done over the past 5 decades; it helps us understand where in the process of participation resources matter, and how they could produce inequality as observed in cross-sectional surveys. However, the theories based on cross-sectional surveys do not deal with (in any synthetic way) all of the steps leading up to the point where resources come to matter. If we do not understand the steps involved in the climb toward participation—placing all of our understanding on part of one stage— then, when people with low resources participate, or people with high resources do not (and if mobilization is nowhere to be found), we are like the doctors who say, "I don't understand why this person had a heart attack — we gave him plenty of carrots." Thus, although this framework builds admiringly and gratefully on the previous research in this field, it also represents a major step toward understanding this phenomenon, above and beyond previous research. [23]

Even if an individual is exposed to an event, perceives it as politically relevant, and assesses it as a threat, a lack of resources and/or a lack of knowledge about an appropriate response can prevent political participation in the end.

[23] Of course, resources as understood here probably change the probabilities of all of the stages in this framework as I discuss in § 5.

4.5 Stage 5: Putting it All Together.

I have drawn a fifth stage on this mountain and called it "Utility Assessment" because this is the moment where the costs posed by the event and the available resources are compared. I depict it as a separate stage merely for clarity of exposition. I suspect that most individuals do not in fact engage in a clearly separate moment of cost/benefit analysis on the route to participation. Nonetheless, some rough comparison of the costs posed by the event perceived, and the costs involved in taking appropriate action must occur before an individual acts. If the costs portended by the threat are higher than the costs expected from the action, then this framework predicts that the individual will act. If the costs of action are too high compared to the threat (or benefit) then the individual will not act.[24]

This segmented path allows different individuals to react to events in their surroundings differently depending on attentiveness, threat/benefit assessment, repertoire, and resources. If all of the segments except for resources were to be held constant across people, then we have the situation commonly assumed in cross-sectional surveys. However, this framework allows for participation by those who "should not be participating" from the point of view of other theories.

Figure 6 depicts a very simple example of how event and resource assessment can work together to produce different outcomes. In this case, I have assumed the very simple case where the expected costs accruing from an event (i.e. "amount of threat") are compared one-to-one with the expected costs of ameliatory action. The area shaded in grey is the area in which the perceived costs of the event are more than the cost of acting — and thus is the area in which people are predicted to act. The letters represent two different individuals, and the subscripts represent two different situations. In the first situation (denoted by subscript "1"), both person A and person B perceive the same cost emanating from an event. Let us assume that both people would like to take the same kind of action to counter the threat. Person B knows the appropriate action is to attend a city council meeting. It is easy for her to attend such a meeting because she has done so before, and she went to college with the mayor of the town. That is, she does not have much uncertainty about a council meeting (either in terms of when and where they are held, how to get on the speakers list, how to dress and

[24]Of course, this cost/benefit calculus allows for the decisions and actions of an altruist, as well.

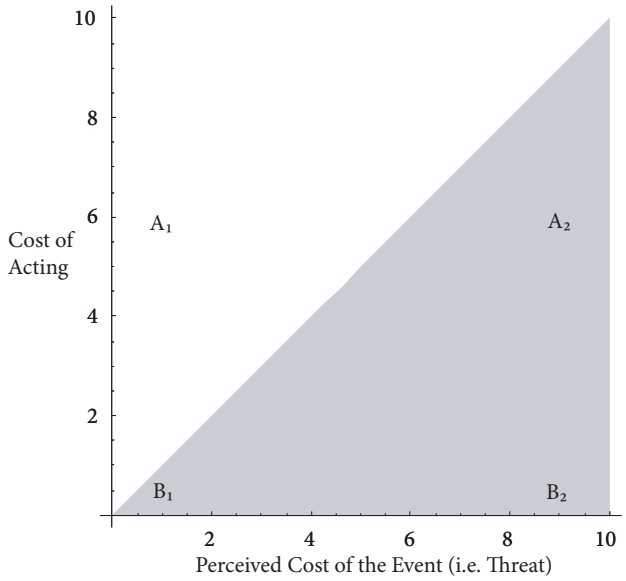

Figure 6: The trade-off between threat and resources is illustrated in two situations (1 and 2) with two people (A and B). (1) Persons A_1 and B_1 both perceive the same utility change from a given politically relevant event (Cost=1). It is more difficult for Person A_1 to act to respond to the cost-inducing event than Person B_1 (6 units of utility versus 1 unit). Person A_1 does not act while Person B_1 does act. (2) Persons A_2 and B_2 both perceive the same utility change from a given politically relevant event (Cost=9). It is more difficult for Person A_2 to act to respond to the cost-inducing event than Person B_2 (6 units of utility versus 1 unit). Since the cost imposed by the event is higher than the costs of responding (even though they are relatively high) both Persons A_2 and B_2 act.

act, etc.), nor is she afraid to speak in front of the mayor, an old friend. Since person B has such low costs of action compared to the costs of the threat, the framework predicts that she would go to the meeting. Person A has only a high school education and does not know what to do in response. She works at night (when council meetings are held), and has never been to a council meeting in the past. Thus, in order to act, she must search for a variety of information, change her schedule, and also deal with the uncertainty of speaking in public in front of a bunch of strangers. Since the impact of the event on her is only about 1 unit of utility, but the cost of acting is about 6 units for her, she does not attend the meeting.

The outcome of the first situation could be predicted easily from previous theory — the inequality in participation can be understood mainly as stemming from a disparity in resources. The second situation (shown by the subscripts of "2" for the two people in this example), however, shows how this new, dynamic approach helps us understand phenomena that are currently not covered by previous theories. In this situation, both person A and B perceive an event and assess the threat at the same level. This time the threat posed by the event is high (utility cost of 9). This event also re-

quires attendance at a city council meeting, and the costs of acting remain the same for both people (easy for person B and hard for person A). However, the costs of the event are so high that it now becomes worthwhile for person A to find the required information about the city council meeting and to screw up her courage to speak in public. Of course, if this person were even more disadvantaged (say, the cost of acting was 10), then even a very costly event might not stimulate action from her. Thus, this approach does not take attention away from the problems of inequality that concern many students of political participation, but instead helps us understand more about how resource inequality comes to matter for political participation — and how, in some circumstances, it can be overcome.

4.6 The Framework At Work

Figure 5 on page 18 tells a story that makes sense of the sporadic patterns of participation shown in Figure 1 on page 6. The sequence of steps that are part of the climb towards participation also includes pieces that rely directly on a half century of past findings about who participates. It shows that participation depends crucially on the provision of opportunities to do so, in the form of events occurring *and* being perceived by the individual. By adding a step that requires an individual to assess the costs and benefits expected from an event, it shows how people with relatively low resources can become involved in politics, and it also suggests how we can use the current set of cross-sectional findings as an important piece of the puzzle of participation dynamics. If an individual does not perceive any politically relevant events, if she does not know how to react toward such events once perceived, or if the cost of reacting is too high, then we should not expect that individual to participate.

If we assigned probabilities to each stage of the process, then we can see how it makes sense that participation ought to be rare in the lives of people. As depicted in Figure 5 on page 18, an actor may not get involved in politics without passing through each of the five stages in turn. Of course, this one-way climb overly simplifies reality. That said, let us work within its strictures for a moment, just to see what kinds of participation patterns they might produce.

Say, politically relevant events occur relatively rarely, such that only 10% of time does such an

event occur in the perceptual vicinity of a person.[25] This event has no chance of causing action if it is not perceived. Say, only 10% of the politically relevant events which occur are perceived:

$$p(\text{perceived}|\text{event occurs}) = .1.$$

That is, the probability of perceiving an event given that it occurs is .1. Now, an event cannot be judged a threat (or opportunity) and thus worthy of reaction if it is not perceived. And let us say that only 10% of those events perceived are judged as worthy of reaction:

$$p(\text{worthy of action}|\text{perceived}, \text{event occurs}) = .1.$$

And, for only 10% of these events would the comparison of utility versus capability lead a person to judge that this threat can be countered, and that countering it is worth trying:

$$p(\text{action cost} \leq \text{cost of inaction}|\text{worthy of action}, \text{perceived}, \text{event occurs}) = .1.$$

Given these posited conditional probabilities, what then is the probability of passing through all of these steps to eventually act? What is

$$p(\text{action cost} \leq \text{cost of inaction}, \text{worthy of action}, \text{perceived}, \text{event occurs})?$$

[25] The idea of the "political relevance" of an event highlights the interplay between this current framework and extant understandings both in terms of the pre-conditions for action for an individual (like their education), but also in terms of the political opportunity structure (Tarrow, 1994) the campaign environment (Iyengar and Simon, 2000; Brady and Johnston, 2006) and other features of the cultural, social, and political environment which "politicize" some kinds of events and "depoliticize" others (Benford and Snow, 2000; Snow et al., 1986; Tilly, 1986, 2004, 2002; McAdam and Tilly, 2001; Winter, 2008).

We can factor this joint probability into the conditional probabilities that we just described:

$$\begin{aligned} &p(\text{action cost} \leq \text{cost of inaction}, \text{worthy of action}, \text{perceived}, \text{event occurs}) = \\ &\qquad p(\text{event occurs}) \\ &\qquad p(\text{perceived}|\text{event occurs}) \\ &\qquad p(\text{worthy of action}|\text{perceived}, \text{event occurs}) \\ &p(\text{action cost} \leq \text{cost of inaction}|\text{worthy of action}, \text{perceived}, \text{event occurs}), \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

and I have just declared, for the sake of argument, that each of these conditional probabilities have a 10% chance of producing a positive outcome, so the joint probability is $.1 \times .1 \times .1 \times .1 = .0001$. In this world of relatively rare but constant event occurrence, if the unit of time is, say one day, then, under this model, we would expect the person caricatured here to act about 1 in every 10,000 days, or about once every 27 years. Coincidentally, this participation rate is not dissimilar from the rates of non-voting participation observed in the Political Socialization survey.

Say we believed that this linear progression is a reasonable model of political participation, what values (and more importantly distributions) ought we to assume for these stages? Unfortunately, we do not know what kind of values are reasonable for any of these terms. If we knew even ranges for these values, or could approximate them with well known probability distributions (or mixtures thereof), then we would begin to be able to refine, test, and use this theory to understand the dynamics of political participation. So far, however, to my knowledge there is no information that provides much reliable purchase on these values (or on the quite strong assumptions of constant probability of events and conditional independence used above).

Even more important is the fact that these stages, to the extent that they reasonably represent a process by which events turn into actions, probably are not cleanly and linear interrelated as I have assumed. In fact, almost certainly the relevant weight of the different stages differs by the individual-level pre-conditions — thus, we can understand more about how education comes to matter for political participation by appreciating that education will change the distribution of values at all of the stages — and national and local political campaigns and institutions. For example, during the

Jim Crow era, the cost of political participation was incredibly high for African-Americans in the American South (as well as other places) regardless of the education and social class of these people. At the same time there were many more potentially political relevant events occurring in their environments. Similar arguments can be made for most repressive authoritarian and totalitarian regimes.

This structure, whether it is really linear and unidirectional or not, does allow us to talk in a focused way about what we should expect from different people with different pre-conditions — a discussion that has so far been a bit muddied by the lack of appreciation of the difference between precipitants and preconditions. Thus, for example, a highly educated person may be more active than one with less education because the skills and status provided by the education change the cost-benefit analysis at the end of the chain, because this person may pay more attention to politics for a number of reasons (e.g. because within her social networks political and current events knowledge is highly valued; because it is very easy for this person to quickly read many pages of written language; because the kinds of jobs taken by highly educated individuals may have more to do directly with politics and policies — say, if this person is a lawyer or a business person). However, the high social class of this person may make her neighborhood safer in general, and her life more comfortable — her large new car may insulate her from potholes, her job may not be as contingent on small fluctuations in the economy, her business may be less likely to be outsourced to another country, etc. Thus, perhaps there are fewer events that really threaten her, and events that pose opportunity may be less worth pursuing given how good her life is. So, say, she participates once every 4 years — triggered more by mobilization efforts by campaigns of people in her social network than by big worries and threats in her environment.

Meanwhile imagine a person with less education. This person is exposed to more potentially troubling facets of life (more politically relevant events), but her politically relevant skills and social networks are depressed. Thus, her ability to respond to the many causes of suffering in her life is low, but the benefits from getting the city to pressure the landlord to prevent leaking into her house or from striking to prevent a job loss are high. Thus, this person participates about once every 4 years, perhaps not during elections, since campaigns are less relevant to her social networks and her

concerns.

In these two scenarios we can explain how persons with very different education levels — and thus facing possibly different streams of politically relevant events and having different barriers to surmount to effectively respond to such events — could have the same pattern of participation over time by rough recourse to the events-based framework proposed here.

5 Discussion and Future Directions

One of the strongest findings from cross-sectional research on political activity is that individuals who have more formal education are more likely to get involved in politics than those who have less. Although there is no doubt about this finding, the best available data on political participation over time show that political activity starts and stops in episodically within the lives of ordinary Americans. Since formal education does not rise and fall from one year to the next, it cannot easily drive the sparse series of discrete events that depicts political participation over the lives of citizens. This project proposes an approach for studying political participation that can account for the irregular and episodic nature of the phenomenon as well as the divisions among people at a single point in time, and thus adds a new perspective to the field. In addition, understanding the mechanism by which events spur or inhibit action can change how we understand past findings. For example, the framework proposed here explains how education may function within the mechanism by which events are turned into action; it both accounts for the persistent education-based inequalities in participation found in cross-sectional studies and makes sense of the dynamic patterns of participation shown here using four different panel surveys and multiple generations of Americans.

5.1 Why does education so powerfully distinguish active from passive citizens?

The framework proposed here helps us situate past findings and understand why resources like education are so powerful at distinguishing among participators and non-participators: they act on nearly all stages of the process. People who have such resources are exposed to different kinds of events (and perhaps different numbers of events); they may be more apt to perceive them; they may have more sophisticated event assessment abilities, so they may be able to recognize threats and opportunities more quickly; they clearly have more civic-skills and civic-status and probably have

larger repertoires; and they may even have more facility calculating whether the costs of inaction outweigh the costs of action. Nevertheless, not all of these things would necessarily make a person with more resources more likely to participate — such a person may live in a very sedate neighborhood with few events, and she may not perceive many events to be very potentially harmful.[26]

5.2 Why do the poor and disadvantaged get involved at all?

This perspective also helps us understand those moments not easily explained by previous theories, such as when people with low resources do get involved.[27] A large enough threat or opportunity ought to make it worthwhile for low-resource individuals to make great sacrifices (over possibly many years) to surmount the many barriers that tend to block their participation in politics. And these moments tend to be the ones that produce the most political change, and, although they may be rare in the United States, they have caused much dramatic political change around the world. Of course, many scholars of social movements are actively working to explain mass uprisings and revolutions, but to my knowledge the empirical side of this work has focused nearly entirely on aggregated units of analysis rather than the individual humans who are the component parts.[28] And, the poor and disenfranchised are not restricted to massive rebellions and protests in their activity. Thus, I hope this approach helps us understand the many ways and moments in which those who "ought not to participate" from the perspective of previous theory actually do so.

[26] That said, threats to diminish a good life ought to stimulate more action than opportunities to improve a difficult life because of risk aversion to loss (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979).

[27] As I noted above in § 1, previous work helps us understand when social movements of the disadvantaged may occur. However, although the findings from that literature explain the conditions under which groups coalesce and perhaps succeed in improving the lives of their constituents, they do not bear directly on the question of whether a given disadvantaged individual will act (whether in the context of a social movement, or not).

[28] A notable exception includes the work such as Klandermans (1996); Klandermans and Oegema (1987); Klandermans (1984) which allows us to include "the collective good" as a part of the costs and benefits to be weighed in the utility assessment part of the events-based framework herein proposed. And any rational-actor based theory of social movements must engage with individuals as the basis of the theory of the movement (see, for example, three different sets of approaches in Lichbach (1998*b*,*a*, 1996, 1995) and Hardin (1995) and Olson (1965)).

5.3 Why does mobilization work?

Asking people to vote enhances turnout and appears to matter most when appeals are in-person, personal, and/or partisan. That is, mobilization appears to work best when requests to act come from within the social network of a person or when the social costs of inaction are otherwise high. Moments when a person arrives at the door requesting political action are *both* moments where attention is drawn to events that may have been overlooked in the life of the targeted voter *and* are events themselves — it does not work if the potential voter does not answer the door or does not otherwise experience the encounter. The variation in the effectiveness of mobilization by strength of social connection (from no effect of anonymous phone calls at one extreme (Gerber and Green, 2005) to the distinguishably positive effects of festivals and sharing voting records with neighbors (Gerber, Green and Larimer, 2008; Addonizio, Green and Glaser, 2007)) suggests that people weigh social costs strongly when it comes to voting in the contemporary U.S.[29] Voting is a particularly good act to study from the perspective of research design since (1) repertoire is held constant and (2) resources ought to matter little relative to other types of action (but not zero, for example see Brady and McNulty (2004) on the effects of distance to the poll on voting). This means that field experiments can effectively manipulate costs and benefits and perceptions.

Since the repertoire is restricted to voting itself (excluding for simplicity the often bundled appeals for voting, donations, and volunteer work), the more events to which voting can be seen as a worthy reaction, the higher the probability of raising the costs of inaction above the costs of action. That is, not only might voting be a low cost but low immediate benefit way of expressing policy or ideology, if a neighbor asks you to vote, now voting is *also* a way to avoid shame — a single event (like a policy passed by Congress that angered the citizen 2 years previously) may not be sufficient, but the policy event *plus* a social event make voting that much more worthwhile. Thus, this framework helps us understand the how appeals for action may be as powerful as they are: they change many features of the process by which events become actions, including the provision of new events.

What about mobilization to engage in activities not currently extensively studied by either obser-

[29]The current importance of social costs does not exclude the presence of material costs in the calculations of people: after all, loss of reputation can mean fewer customers, referrals, or even neighborly gifts.

vational or experimental methods? This framework and the past findings from field experiments might help us develop some expectations for how a person might come to engage in more costly and disruptive political action such as protest or other civil (or uncivil) disobedience. Mobilization ought to help alert individuals to events that the mobilizers would try to frame as morally outrageous — events that pose very high costs of inaction on a person (or at least on a group whose interests are part of the utility calculation of the individual (Klandermans and Oegema, 1987)). And mobilization in this case would have additional strength in so far as many people might not know how to respond to such transgressions (especially if they are by the committed by the state). But even if mobilization ought to be more powerful for non-voting participation at places in the framework before the cost-benefit calculus, even the costs of a diminished reputation and of personal, perhaps moral, discomfort in the face of injustice may not overcome the costs posed by the threat of violence by the state toward ones self or family.

This last bit of speculation and explanation raises many questions: How might campaigns to mobilize citizens most effectively intervene along the events-to-action process to get more people involved? How might organizations and movements change their strategies to enhance the probability of a sustained series of "yes" decisions by sympathizers? More generally, how can this framework help us design new studies to illuminate more fully the pieces of the process that have received comparatively little attention over the years?

5.4 What next?

Two general areas suggest themselves for elaboration, criticism and use of this framework: First, the existence of a structure of this kind may help us design new studies focused a deeper and more contextualized understanding of each piece of the process (changing perceptions, changing repertoires, changing execution of the cost/benefit calculus, and even perhaps changing the stream of politically relevant events). Second, it alerts us to the need for richer in-depth studies about the event-streams, perceptual horizons and processes, and interaction with social stratification that would determine the "steepness" of the hill in Figure 5 or the contours of its slope in different contexts, in ordinary electoral politics and during moment of social unrest, in the United States and elsewhere, now and in the past.

5.4.1 Focus on causal inference: experiments and observational studies Among the many benefits of the experimental paradigm is the requirement that a given experiment must be sharply focused on a few strictly defined manipulations. In addition, the field experiment literature on U.S. elections has cumulated knowledge in a certain sense: nearly all of the studies have focused on vote turnout in the United States and questions raised by previous studies have formed the basis for many of the subsequent interventions. While these characteristics add clarity and build knowledge within a particular research agenda, they leave broader theoretical synthesis to the side. This is understandable and required both by the exigencies of experimental design and by the structure of academic publishing. These characteristics, however, appear to have limited the theoretical range of these studies. Why only focus on vote turnout? Why choose to elaborate the effects of telephone calls rather than other modes (other than to follow the interesting puzzles posed by previous experiments)?

The fact that experiments provide clear, discrete morsels of confident knowledge but are not, in general, well-built to propose encompassing theory is well known. Merely two of many such comments articulated by Heckman and colleagues represent this common criticism of basing the knowledge of a field on experiments:[30]

> Moreover, the absence of explicit structural frameworks makes it difficult to cumulate knowledge across studies conducted within this framework. Many studies produced by this research program have a "stand alone" feature and neither inform nor are by the general body of empirical knowledge in economics. (Heckman, 2000, page 51)
>
> The lack of a theoretical framework makes it difficult to cumulate across studies, or to compare the findings of one study with another. (Heckman, 2000, page 85)

While Heckman refers to structural frameworks as formal deductive theory instantiated in assumption laden data fitting procedures, in this paper I speak about a framework differently and more generally as referring to an organizing principle for design and explanation. That is, I would hope that the framework herein proposed helps make simple mean-differences yet more meaningful without requiring or excluding either formal deduction of hypotheses or complex and highly structured statistical modelling. Nor do I think that "stand alone" experiments are a problem: clear comparisons from focused designs have the potential to raise more interesting and fruitful questions for future re-

[30] See also Heckman and Smith (1995, page 107–108).

search than tenuously justified coefficients from designs where a causal effect is ill-defined.[31] Rather this literature could benefit from a more general framework in two ways: (1) such a structure could help experimentalists choose new manipulations and contexts for their work in way that link their work yet more firmly to previous and contemporary observational work; (2) such a structure might suggest ways in which experiments based on political activity other than voting might shed yet more light on the general problem of political activity.

Voting is also only one type of act. In the U.S. alone, the enfranchisement of women and blacks has been followed by years of political activity other than voting that has proven crucial to increasingly egalitarian representation of these groups at the many different levels of government in this country. And, voting in the contemporary U.S. is different from voting as practiced currently in other countries or at other times: the same manipulation of social costs or perceptions of events or repertoires would probably have a different effect in a one-party regime (say, Mexico during the rule of the PRI) or a multi-party system (like Italy) or when the social cleavages represented by the parties were deeper and more salient and relationships between the parties often violent (like post-Civil War U.S. as depicted by McGerr (1986)).

This is not a call to stop studying vote turnout or otherwise making clever and wise choices about how to take advantage of fortuitous circumstances to design studies. But it suggests that, given a choice among designs and contexts, it might be nice to have at least a theoretical map of the area which contains both the areas where causal processes can be observed more clearly (such as voting here and now) and also areas where we know much less so as to enhance the knowledge generation of given research choices.

5.4.2 A new process requires new data 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. Moment-to-moment changes in participation require changing catalysts, or precipitants. Person-

[31] For some arguments in support of this perspective, see Rosenbaum (1999) and Rubin (2008).

to-person differences require differences in potentials to participate, in resources, civic skills, and civic status.

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. But, because it is a process occurring over time, new questions arise: How much do people tend to get involved over their lives (or at least over large parts of their lives)? Does participatory activity tend to occur in multi-year spells? Or as single, sporadic, moments of involvement? To what extent does the amount of participation in one year relate to the amount in another year? Does the history of participation as it cumulates over time have an impact on the probability of participation at a given moment in time? When people do get involved, for how many years do they tend to remain involved? How long do they tend to wait between moments of activity? "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.

The events-into-action framework, however, is about a causal process. There are parts of the process about which we know a lot (the distribution of resources like socio-economic status, skills, and politically relevant social network status) and there are parts about which we know very little (the process by which environments, institutions, actors produce politically relevant events; how people come to develop or know about a repertoire of action relevant to the kinds of events common in their context; how new repertoires emerge in the face of changing political environments; and how the more-or-less time-constant *potential* to act changes how different catalytic events operate for different people at different times and places. Thus, this paper raises many new questions that could guide the design of many kinds of studies, including experiments, in-depth explorations, and cross-national observations.

This paper presents a new etiology, or causal story, of political participation. Adding an emphasis on precipitating factors to the voluminous literature already existing on potentiating factors helps reorient the study of political participation from a focus on static inequalities (about which we know a great deal) to an emphasis on dynamics (about which we know little). It also adds to the research currently concerned with mobilization as a precipitant of vote turnout in the U.S. The very clarity of those experiments encourages confidence in using them as pieces of the puzzle of political participation, yet the requirements of journals and time restrict the ability of a given study to speak to all of the others. A framework such as the one proposed here might help suggest the areas in which new interventions might be most intellectually fruitful. And it also may help tie together disparate findings into a coherent explanatory framework along with the observational work on which so much of our current knowledge is based.

Focusing on political participation as a dynamic process opens up an exciting research agenda. 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 past 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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