# *The Shape of Participation*

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> What was observed by us is the nature or matter of the milky way itself. Which, with the aid of the spyglass, may be observed so well that all the disputes that for so many generations have vexed philosophers are destroyed by visible arguments.
>
> Galilei (1989) in Tufte (2006, frontpiece and page 101).

**Abstract**

Although 50 years of excellent scholarship have taught us a great deal about how political participation varies across individuals within one point in time, scholars do not know much about how political participation changes over time within the lives of individuals. By focusing predominantly on the *preconditions* for participation, the literature has largely ignored the *precipitants* of it (Bowers, 2004). In this paper, I endeavor to show what political participation looks like if we think of it as a process evolving year-by-year across the lives of ordinary people. The new description offered here provides some evidence that challenges the basis for extant theories of why individuals participate in politics. The purpose of this paper is not to offer new theories or frameworks for understanding, but merely to offer a new vision of what political participation *is*; a vision which differs from and, I hope, complements that currently assumed by scholars in this field; a vision that, I hope, spurs new theories and new modes of research in this area.

## Overview

This paper aims to **describe** the **shape** of political participation within the lives of two groups of individual Americans: one group is defined by having graduated from high school in 1965, the other group is defined by virtue of being the parents of the Class of 1965 (Jennings and Stoker, 1997).

*What does it mean to describe the shape of some process?* It means that I will show how the political activities of people change over their lives, how individuals write a letter to a member of Congress one year, but not the next (or perhaps for five years running), how most people vote at least once between the ages of 18 and 55, how, even though in any given year as few as 5% of these nearly 1000 people may be involved in politics, looked at over 30 years, around 60% get involved at least once. I will be offering a series of pictures of what political participation looks like when one views it as a process evolving over time within the lives of people rather than as a series of comparisons within one moment of time across different groups of people — which is the predominant way in which we have looked at political partiipcation in the past.

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**So what?: A Defense of Mere Description**

Edward Tufte included that quote from Galileo Galilei at the beginning of *Beautiful Evidence* (Tufte, 2006) to make a particular point. As he says,

> Before 1610 astronomy had largely been verbal gymnastics, speculation, philosophizing, disputation. In contrast, these new telescopic images are the direct, visible, decisive testimony of Nature herself. . . . And that is the grand, forever consequence of *Sidereus Nuncius*: from then on, all science, to be credible had to be based on publicly displayed evidence of seeing and reasoning, and not merely on wordy arguments. (101)

That is, Galileo Galilei changed how we understand the solar system and astronomy in general because of description.

Now, of course, Galilei might have also described his socks, or what he felt looking up at the night sky, or something else which might not have mattered to scientists. He also might have done a bad job of describing something that is important. However, an unimportant causal theory, or a causal theory expounded or assessed badly, is equally useless to science as would be unimportant new data, or new data described badly.

Here, in the first part of the paper, I will try to argue that new information about how political participation ebbs and flows over time within the lives of individuals is an important thing to look at. Why should these yet unseen descriptions be credible (Tufte, 2006) [expand on Tufte's idea about what it means to make a description credible]

But, I also think that a credible description has the same roots as a credible causal analysis: transparency and intelligibility of method. That is, I should explain to you how the data were collected and coded such that it makes sense that I can actually observe something (however murky) about how political activity has changed over the lives of individuals. And, my displays of this data should be clear as well — the ways in which I process the data for summary should be sensible and intelligible and replicable.[2] So, now let me argue the case for why a new view on political participation is worth having.

[2] All of the code to replicate this paper will be available on my website in an Sweave file (Leisch, 2005) `http://www.umich.edu/~jwbowers`

*Implications for Understanding Political Participation* 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 understanding what divides the "haves" from the "have nots" ought to help liberals build a more egalitarian society and conservatives to ensure regime stability.

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.[3] 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 resources like 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)

All of these studies (which are merely the most recent and comprehensive of hundreds), rely on comparisons between people at a single point in time to understand political involvement. A few scholars have also recently begun to study what stimulates political action. One strong result of research over the last decade is that if people are asked to participate, they are more apt to do so than if they are not asked (Brady, Schlozman and Verba, 1999; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995) — this is the "mobilization" finding referenced above.[4] The findings about mobilization have been further explored using field experiments in the case of vote turnout (see Green and Gerber, 2002, for a review of this work) as well as other recent work such as Bowers and Hansen (2005*a*,*b*) and Gerber and Green (2005); Imai (2005); and donations to interest groups (Miller, 2002; Miller, Krosnick and Lowe, 2000). 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.

[*Note:* Add more on the political science and sociological work on social movements and collective action (e.g Kaplan and Brady, 2004; Klandermans, 1984, 1996; McAdam and Tilly, 2001; Olson, 1965; Piven and Cloward, 1978; Tarrow, 1989) and a brief literature review of psychological work on helping behavior and fear appeals (e.g. Beck and Frankel, 1981; Darley and Latané, 1968; Susan A. Darley Howard Penn Krisher and Darley, 1973; Witte and Allen, 2000).]

What would theories based on resources, mobilization, and status 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

[3] Mobilization as a cause of political activity was argued and examined in-depth by Rosenstone and Hansen (1993).

[4] It is worth noting that two other articles have been recently published which are concerned with the dynamics of political participation, but not on the stimulation of episodes of action. Plutzer (2002) shows that vote turnout becomes a habit over time, and 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).

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 political 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 (Plutzer, 2002) and can be made more so by making voting easier (Berinsky, Burns and Traugott, 2001).

*Puzzling Empirical Regularities* In fact, these expectations are not borne out when they are matched against the best (and only) currently available data on political participation as it changes over time within the lives of individuals. Figure 1 on the following page 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)).[5] Each panel of the figure shows the data for a particular person, and the height of each line represents the number of activities reported by that person in a particular year considering only the following four types of political activity: Working with others in the community, Contacting elected officials, Attending protests or rallies, and Writing letters to the editor.[6] 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, my research shows (1) that participation occurs sporadically across the lives of many individuals, and (2) that spells of participation tend to last only one year, which is the minimum temporal resolution of this dataset (Bowers, 2003).

Past work, summarized very briefly above, would rest much of the theory of political participation relatively unchanging resources with education being perhaps the most powerful such resource. The description in figure 1 immediately suggests that there must be more to the story than resources. After, person 345 did

[5] 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.

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

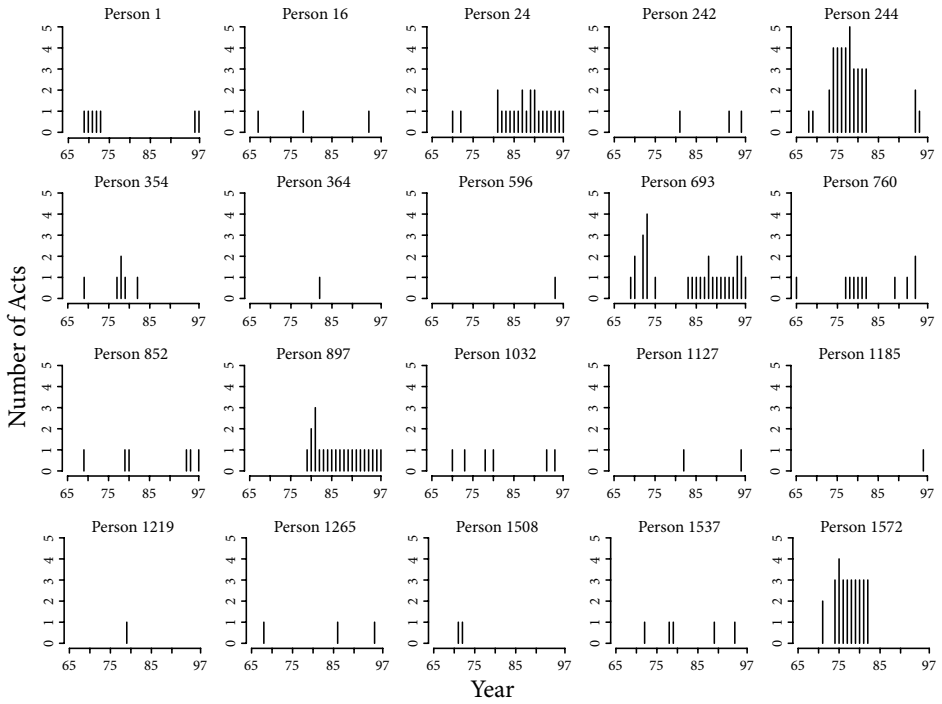


Figure 1: Profiles of Individual Participation Beyond Voting: The Class of 1965, age 18 to 50

not both gain and lose education in between the spikes — education just does not change fast enough, nor can it be subtracted from a person quickly enough, to explain the spikes in this figure.

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: that political participation in the US 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).

The point of this paper is to add another perspective to the current one —

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 — knowing *who* participates suggests *when* people might participate. I also hope that understanding when individuals are apt to participate will reflect back on the work which has concerned itself with inequalities across individuals — in essence to fill in a part of the picture that has been, until now, largely unexamined. In some sense, the new data on political participation provided to us from the Political Socialization study is about a new and different phenomenon even though the types of activities studied are the same. 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? 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*. This is one reason that is it important to have a description of this process made public — at the very least to spur debate about whether the pictures I have offered are reasonable, and at the very most to provide the new material for the machinery of explanation.

Each question is a different window looking out onto the same phenomenon. At first thought it might appear a trivial exercise: take political participation and vary it over time within peoples' lives. What should become clear from this section is that adding a single dimension to a well known phenomenon adds much more than one dimension of complexity to the enterprise of studying it. That is, when I say "political participation" in the cross sectional context, I mean "differences between people in their participation", but when I say "political participation" in the longitudinal context, I may mean "how many total acts do people tend to do?", or "on average, how many people tend to participate when they are 30?" or "how does amount of participation in the present and future relate to amount of participation in the past"? or even "how long do people spend participating before they stop? how persistent are spells of continuous participation"? The rest of this paper will be organized by those questions, each of which provides a different view about what political participation is, and the results of these descriptions have different implications for how we should think about past understandings of political participation, and how we should go about developing new understandings in the future.

## Cumulative Participation

In previous research, the question "How much do people participate?" tended to be answered with "At this moment, X% reported doing some form of political participation." However, that question might also be asking about the quantity of participation individuals can be expected to engage in over time — or over large portions of their lives. That is, there is a distinction between "How much are people participating now?" and "How much do people tend to participate over their lives?"

Figure 2 on the next page shows an answer to the first question for each year that the National Election Studies (NES)(Sapiro, Rosenstone and The National Election Studies, 2001) asked individuals about their non-voting campaign participation. To allow for some comparability with the Political Socialization data, I have restricted the analyses of the NES to individuals who roughly match the age cohorts of the Parent and Youth Samples. Since about 50% of the Parent Sample in the Political Socialization Study was born between 1915 and 1923, I used the birth years of 1913 to 1925 for the approximately equivalent NES Cohort. Since 96% of the Youth Sample was born in 1947 or 1948, I chose an NES Cohort born between 1947 and 1949. The height of each black bar shows the proportion of NES respondents in the age cohort of the Political Socialization parents (labeled "G1" for "Generation 1") in that particular year who reported engaging in the participation types displayed: Attending campaign rallies or meetings, displaying political buttons or signs, contributing "other work" to a campaign, or donating money. The height of each gray bar shows the same information, this time for the second generation ("G2"), of people born in 1947-1949.

These plots suggest that non-voting, campaign oriented participation is highly variable across years in the aggregate (each plot has a few years in which the proportion reporting participation in the past year is much higher than surrounding years); that the most common of these acts (among these two cohorts) is donating money (on average, across, all years, 11% of G1 and 10% of G2 donated money); followed by displaying buttons and signs (which were very popular among the G1 cohort in the 1950s and early 1960s) (on average, over all years, 10% of G1 and 11% of G2 did this); attending campaign rallies and meetings (cross year averages: 7% and 9% for G1 and G2 respectively); and finally "other" campaign work (cross year averages: 4% and 5% for G1 and G2).

Figures 3 on page 9 and 4 on page 10 show the distribution of activity within people's lives for each of 8 types of political participation over 33 years for the non-campaign activities and 18 years for the campaign oriented activities of the Political Socialization data.[7] The NES didn't collect information about non-electoral activities (such as those shown in Figure 4 on page 10). Also, the Political Socialization study did not collect detailed timing information about electoral activities in 1997. In each case, the height of the bars shows the proportions in the two samples reporting 0,1,2... acts of each type over the years.[8] The gray bars show the proportions for the Parent sample, and the white bars show depict the Youth sample. Notice that the x-axes for electoral and non-electoral activities run from 0 to 20 acts. Individuals were allowed to report multiple acts

[7] The question wording for these questions is described in the Appendix.

[8] The first generation, or Parent sample (born around 1920), is labeled "G1", and the second generation, or Youth sample (born in 1947 and 1948), is labeled, "G2".

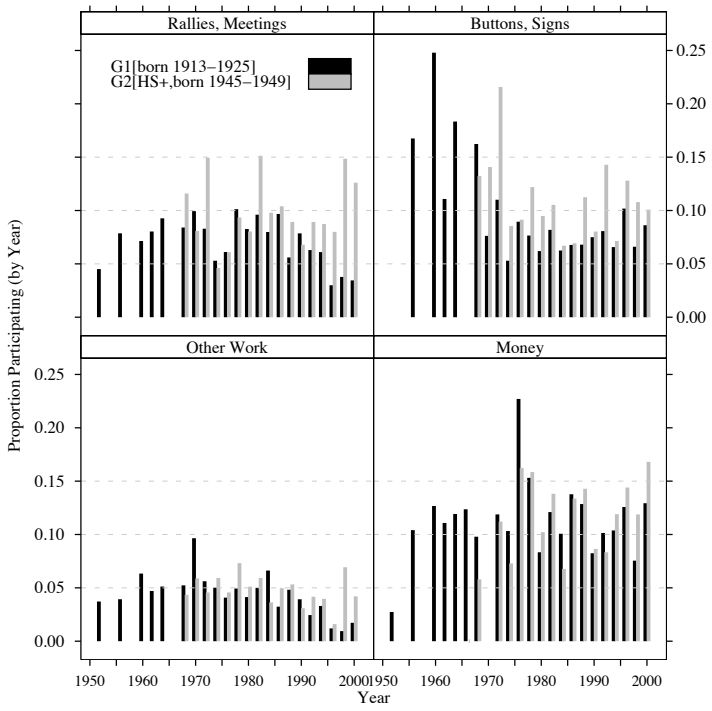


Figure 2: Proportion Participating in Each Cross-Section: Two Cohorts from the NES

of a given type in a year (up to three or four acts). For ease of presentation, I limited the number of acts shown to a maximum of 20. However, at least one person reported doing as many as 70 acts of Community Work, 49 acts of Contacting Officials, 47 acts of Letter Writing, 26 acts of Demonstrations, 28 acts of Rallies/Meetings, 29 acts of Buttons/Signs, 20 acts of Other Work, and 28 acts of Donating Money. So few people engaged in more than 20 acts (or even more than 1 or 2 acts as the graphs show), that allowing the axes to stretch to the limits of the data hindered comparison and interpretation.

Figure 3 on the next page shows that over 60% of the respondents (in both groups) never reported participating in any of the four campaign oriented types of activities over the period of the study.[9] Like the NES respondents, the types of electoral activities chosen by the Political Socialization respondents for their political activity were, in order of frequency, donating money (28% of G1 and 30% of G2 reported doing this at least one time), wearing buttons/displaying signs (26% of G1 and 37% of G2 reported doing this at least one time), attending rallies and meetings (25% of G1 and 33% of G2 reported attending at least one campaign related rally or meeting), and finally doing "other" campaign work (15% of G1 and 21% of G2 reported doing this at least once). It is sensible that many more Political Socialization respondents reported participating in these acts than did NES respondents — the Political Socialization respondents had many more opportunities (3 interviews over 18 years) than did the NES respondents (1 interview and 1 year). However, the comparison of the information from the NES and the Political Socialization survey provides yet another hint that the phenomenon of political participation examined within the lives of ordinary

[9] Members of the Parent generation were allowed to report activities from before 1965. The earliest reported activity among that group occurred in 1951. Members of the Youth generation were asked these questions first in 1973, and the question referred to activities done since 1965.

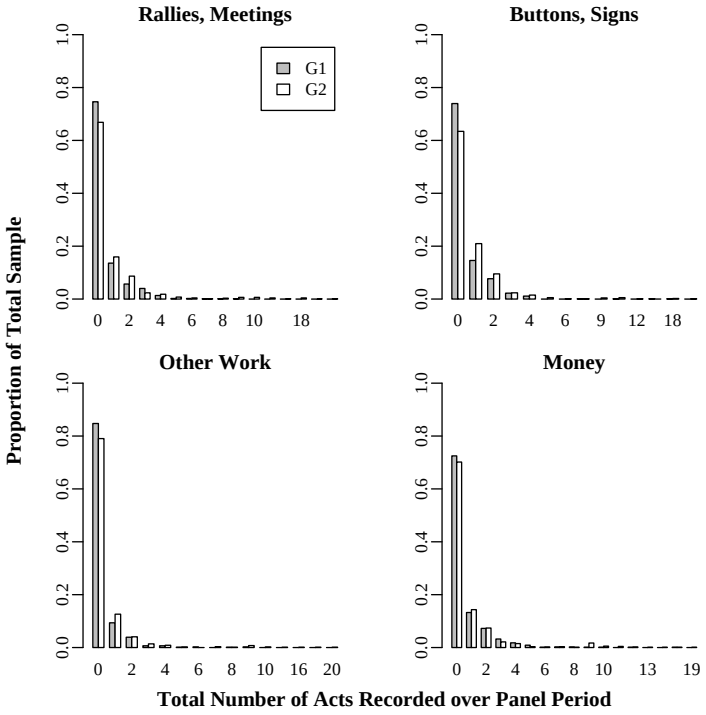


Figure 3: Cumulative Acts of Electoral Activity

Americans may be quite different from the phenomenon examined across Americans at a single point in time — more common over the life-span than within a single year.

Figure 4 on the following page provides similar information about the Political Socialization respondents, this time for non-electoral activities. The NES did not ask questions about these kinds of activities more than 3 times over the 1952 to 2000 period. So I do not know if the amount of participation shown here over 33 year periods within people compares to the amount that would be expected from questions asked of a single cross-section.[10] This set of activities includes two that are very rare compared to the electoral acts (at least among G1): only 5% of G1 and 14% of G2 wrote any Letters to the Editor and only 3% of G1 and 24% of G2 engaged in demonstrations or protests over this period. This set also includes two that are very common compared to the electoral activities: 36% of G1 and 65% of G2 did some work with others in their community and 38% of G1 and 68% of G2 contacted a public official in some way over this period. This shows that the two generations have very different repertoires of political behavior when it comes to demonstrations and protests and letters to the editor (probably accounted for by some of G2 attending college in the late 1960s and by the fact the G2 are better educated than their parents). It also shows that members of G2 tend to be more participatory than their parents in all other kinds of activities — electoral and non-electoral. In fact, majorities of G2 engaged in contacting and community work, and the figure shows that at least 1% of G2 did such activities more than 2 times — 1.5% reported doing 6 acts of community work and 7 acts of contacting as they aged from 18 to 50.

[10] [It may be possible to use single NES cross-sections and the American Citizen Participation Study (Verba et al., 1995) to make these kind of comparisons in the future.]

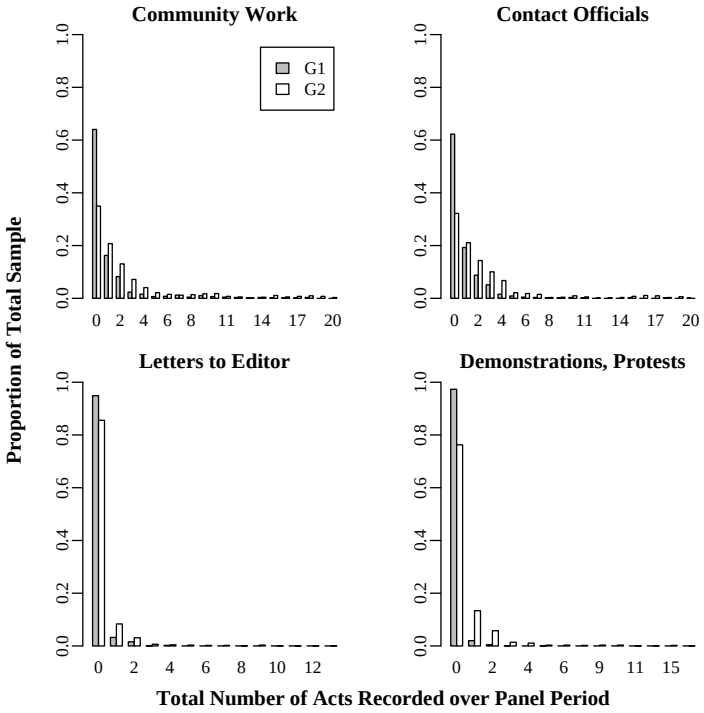


Figure 4: Cumulative Acts of Non-Electoral Activity

The pattern of participation for voting is very different from that displayed in Figures 3 and 4. Most respondents reported voting in multiple presidential elections (as can be seen in Figure 5). The Parent Generation were only asked about 5 presidential elections (64,68,70,72,76,80) and G2 were asked about 8 presidential elections (68,72,76,80,84,88,92,96). About 68% of G1 reported voting in all 5 presidential elections, with only about 6% reporting that they had not voted in any. The analogous figure representing steady turnout for G2 is 38% voting in all 8 presidential elections that occurred between 1965 and 1997, but only 1.7% reported never voting. It makes sense that fewer of G2 should appear to be habitual voters than their parents in this figure. First, the members of G2 are younger than G1 by about 20 years, and younger people are supposed to be less likely to vote that older people for a number of reasons (See Highton and Wolfinger, 2001, for example). Second, the members of G2 have more opportunities to not-vote than the members of G1 — thus their pattern of voting is more apt to be sporadic across the 8 periods. It is an open question whether, by age 70, if the members of G2 will be more likely vote in every election, or will still vote in most, but not all of them.[11]

So we've seen two answers to the question "How much do people participate." In general, when allowed to look back over multiple years, it appears that people participate much more than when allowed to look back over a single year. This is sensible, since one can imagine that each moment in time provides some chance for a person to participate. And even if at any one moment few individuals take advantage of this opportunity, the group of participators does not consist of the same people moment to moment. Thus, more people get involved (at some point

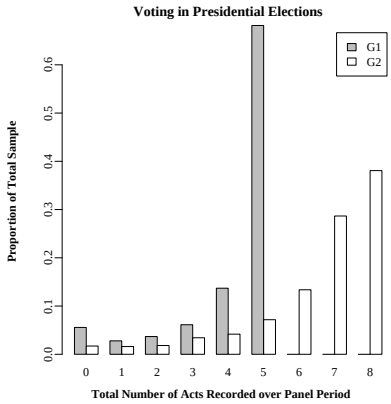


Figure 5: Cumulative Number of Acts of Voting

[11] The fact that the members of G1 showed higher voting participation than G2, but that the members of G2 displayed higher non-voting participation that G1 is interesting, and given the current debates about the decline in "social capital" and the "greatest generation" probably deserves further study. Could the "greatest generation" only be "great" when it comes to voting but not other participation?

in their lives) in the political system than we had previously thought given the cross-sectional data.

**Participation Bundles**

When people do choose to get involved, it appears that community work and contacting officials are the most common types of non-voting activities. So which kinds of acts are the "easiest" or most common? One way to answer this question is to ask another, "Among people who only do one act, which act is it? Among people who do many acts, which acts do they choose to do?" Figure 6 shows the answer to this question for both G1 and G2. Each line shows a smoothed version of what proportion of the sample reported doing a given act among those who reported doing 0,1,...20 acts over the study periods.[12] This tells us that, for G1, contacting officials was the most common type of activity among those who did few acts (of those who only did one act over the period, around 30% chose contacting officials as that act, about 25% chose community work, around 10% of this single-act group wore buttons, displayed signs, or donated money). The black lines on each panel refer to the non-electoral activities, and the gray lines show the electoral activities. If the lines on these plots stacked up and did not cross, this would suggest that certain acts are always easier (or at least more common) than others — regardless of whether a person has been an active participator (engaging in many acts over time), or has only done one thing ever. This is not the case here. Certain acts seem to be chosen by individuals who participate rarely (namely contacting officials and community work among G2 and G1) and other acts are more common among those individuals who participate more often (namely donating money, attending meetings and rallies, and "other" campaign work (among both G1 and G2)).

[12] Without smoothing these graphs became unreadable in their complexity. The point of smoothing here was to look at the overall relationships without getting caught up in the details of each point. I choose 70% as the bandwidth after comparing plots of the raw data with a variety of other bandwidths (from 35% to 70%). No substantively important details are lost with the current choice of bandwidth.

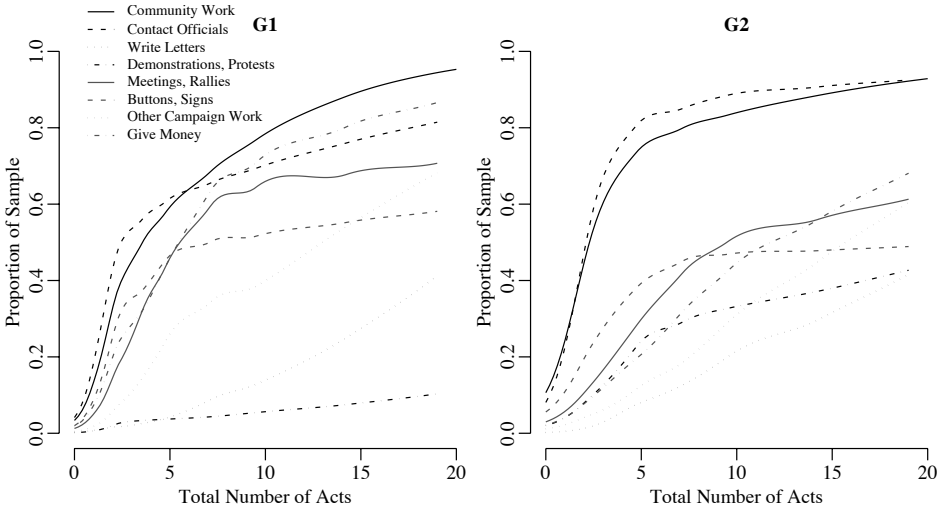


Figure 6: Frequency of "Lifetime" participation in certain actions

*Note:* The curves were generated with a local linear binomial scatterplot smoothing algorithm with a bandwidth of 70% of the nearest neighbors of each point included in the smoothed estimates.(see Loader, 1999, for more details about this smoothing method)

Although the two generations are not very different in terms of the rank

of activities among the infrequent and frequent participators, there are large differences in the proportions involved in different activities. Among members of G2, there appears to be a clear distinction between two non-electoral activities (contacting officials and community work) and all the rest of the activities. Working with others in one's community appears to be nearly a ubiquitous ingredient of the participation bundle of both generations especially as the frequency of activity increases: nearly 90% of people in both generations who engage in over 15 acts have community work as one of the acts that they do. However, among the older generation, donating money surpasses contacting officials in frequency among the most participatory members of that generation and over 60% of high participators in G1 attend campaign meetings and rallies. The fact that the older people are more apt to donate money shouldn't be that surprising given that they have had more time to earn money over their lives — and probably earn more in general — than their children. The frequent participators among the younger generation are more apt to do campaign activities than the infrequent participators (with donating money and campaign meetings and rallies as the most common types of electoral activities). However, even the most participatory members of G2 do not appear to engage in electoral activities as much as the frequent participators of G1.

**Summary**

These descriptive analyses have shown that members of the Class of 1965 are, in some ways, more participatory than their parents: they are more likely to get involved at all, and are more likely to do more activities (from age 18 to 35 and 50, for electoral and non-electoral activities respectively) than their parents (from age roughly 50 to roughly 70). However, their voting patterns appear more sporadic (although this could be an artifact of asking them about 8 elections and their parents about 5 elections). And, the frequent participators among them appear to eschew electoral activities in favor of two activities not tied to campaign cycles — work with others in the community to solve local problems, and contacting elected officials — whereas the most participatory of their parents appear to have a more "balanced" bundle of activities, including community work and contacting (and donating money) as well as other activities tied to campaign cycles. What we'll see in the next section is that G2 also tends to be more participatory than G1 if we look at the proportion participating at any one year over the study period.

[insert paragraph summarizing implications of this description for extant theories]

## Average Trajectories

Since this paper is a first step toward understanding this phenomenon, it seemed sensible to choose a feature of this dynamic process which is akin to that studied in the cross-sections — the probability of participation at a given moment in time. Figures 7 and 8 show proportions of respondents in both generations reporting participation in each of the activities over the years.[13] There are five main features of these plots that I want to note:

[13] I omit confidence intervals from these figures to avoid clutter and because statistical comparison between the two generations is not my main intent here.

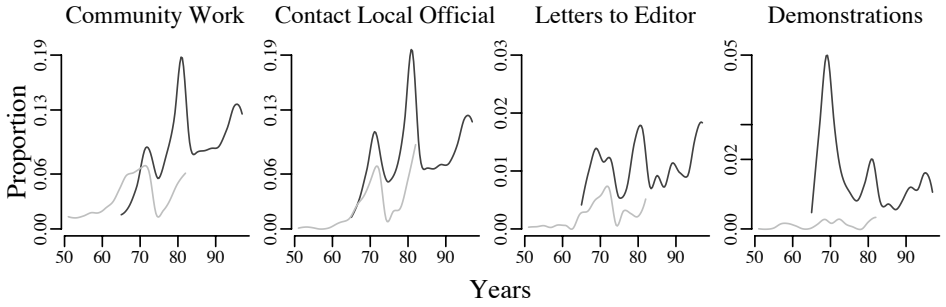


Figure 7: Overall Non-Electoral Participation by Generation

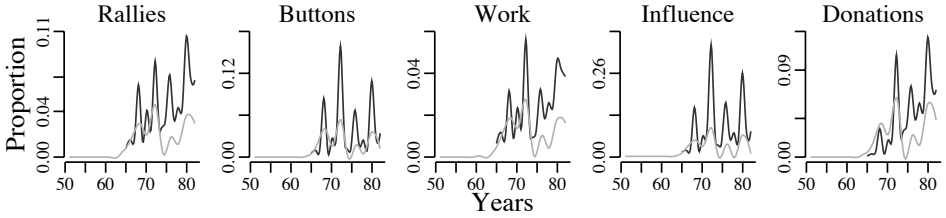


Figure 8: Overall Electoral Participation by Generation

*Note:* Light gray lines represent the "parent" generation (born around 1920) and the dark gray lines represent the "youth" generation (born in 1947-48). Smooth lines are locally quadratic Gaussian fits using a neighborhood of 20% the nearest points.

*Generational Differences* 80% of the "parent" generation (G1) were born between 1910 and 1926, with 50% born between 1915 and 1923. These people tended to enter adulthood during a period that spanned both the Great Depression and World War II. Previous literature would suggest that these people should be the most active in civic life (See, e.g. Putnam, 2000), however, it is clear that the Youth generation participates in political activities over this period at higher rates than their parents despite the fact that some of their parents are from the "Greatest Generation." Of course, these differences might be explained by the fact that G2 happen to be more educated than G1 — and that the particular sample of G2 here happens to be better educated than their birth cohort in the population (since they were a sample of high school seniors and some of their cohort didn't make it that far in high school).

*Trend* Community work, contacting, letters to the editor, attending campaign rallies/dinners, campaign work, and campaign donations all display increasing proportions over time for G2. There appears to be much less trend for G1. This makes sense since the life-stages that G2 pass through (age 18-50) tend to involve much more political and personal change, in general, than the life-stages passed through by their parents over this study (age 50-70).[14].

[14] Although children leaving home, retirement, and aging also ought to be personally consequential for members of G1.

*Electoral Cycles* Campaign oriented activities display clear links to a presidential year cycle – with much less activity during congressional election years and years without national elections.

*Period Effects* The most dramatic period effect visible in these displays is that for attendance at protests and demonstrations during among G2 in the late 60s/early 70s.[15]

[15] We will see in later sections that this effect is largely driven by those members of G2 who went to college during this period. That is, that members of the "Protest Generation" mainly tended to participate directly in protests if they happened to be in college during that period.

*Peaks over Interview Years* The community work and contacting officials series show high peaks in the proportions of respondents reporting participation during those years, and the immediately preceding years. This evidence that people are more likely to report more activity the closer the year is to the interview date indicates that respondents are probably forgetting to report acts that they engaged in further away from the interview date. This evidence implies that causal analyses of these data will need to account for this memory problem.[16]

[16] In studies of voting turnout, the main concern is about people reporting more turnout than they had really engaged in. In this study, it appears, that the main problem will be under-reporting — i.e. forgetting to report the occurrence of events that actually happened — and a possible correlation between time since the interview date and rate of forgetting.

[insert summary]

[insert implications]

## Transitions: Is Participation Really Sporadic in General?

One way to find if participation is really sporadic, in some overall sense, is to ask: To what extent does participation at one moment relate to activity in the previous moment? If people who participated last year also tend to participate this year and in subsequent years, then participation cannot be seen as sporadic, and extant explanations based on time-constant attributes of people (like education) are plausible. If past participation is not highly associated with present participation, then something else that changes over time must be stimulating the activity and we need a new theory.

Consider, for example, the cross-tabulation of community work one period in the past by community work in the present for respondents Political Socialization Study:

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

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 |

types of movements between states. This matrix is shown as $\mathbf{T}$.

$$\mathbf{T} = \begin{pmatrix} .001 & .002 & .012 & .833 \\ .003 & .022 & .663 & .036 \\ .032 & .551 & .077 & .023 \\ .964 & .425 & .248 & .108 \end{pmatrix}$$

Of the people who did 0 acts of community work in the past year, 3.2% did one act in the current year. Of the people who did 1 act in the past, 42.5% of them did 0 acts in the present. Notice the large numbers on the main diagonal. These numbers imply that among the few people who manage to start participating at a certain rate (say doing 1, 2, or 3 acts in a year), many are apt to continue — at least across adjacent periods.[17]

Figure 9 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 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.

[17] 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. See the Appendix for more detailed information about participation over the lives of the individuals in the Political Socialization Study.

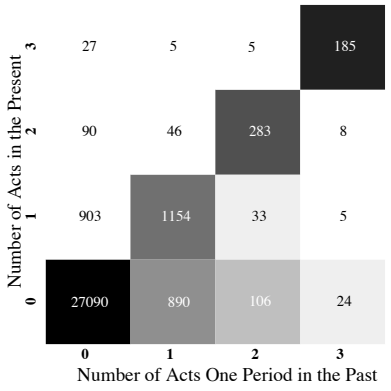


Figure 9: *Community Work* — Transitions from One Year to the Next: Youth

To avoid presenting 8 different matrices like **T**, Figure 10a on the following page presents transition plots for each of the acts of participation measured in the Political Socialization dataset. You can see how the transition matrix **T** for *Community Work* maps onto the panel in the upper left corner of the Figure 10a on the next page. The highest value (.96) is colored black and occurs at x=0 and y=0 (i.e. present participation is 0 following 0 past participation). As the legend shows, the darkness of color is proportional to the values in the squares, so the dark black squares contain values near 1 and the light gray (and white) squares contain values nearer to 0.

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

The other general pattern concerns the paucity of shaded squares above the 45 degree line and the row of shaded squares at the bottom of each chart: people are much more likely to transition *to* 0 acts than *from* 0 acts. It seems as if people are likely to either continue participation at the same level as they did in the previous period OR stop altogether (rather than "ramping up" and "tapering off" their level of activity over the years).

Figure 10b on the following page shows the same kind of information, this time for the Parent Generation (G1). The transitions here are predominantly those involving movements back to no activity (this is shown by the heavily shaded bottom row of each graph). It is much less common among this group to follow moments of action by other moments of action, even moments of relatively high activity (such as doing 2 or 3 acts of a single type in a year). It is only for Community Work that we see much evidence of years of activity following one another (and also for Donating Money for a very small number of years (7 out of 9!)).

Figures 10a on the next page and 10b on the following page tell a story where two generations' 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 doesn't materially affect the overall conclusion that participation is not even close to constant over the lifespan, but occurs overwhelmingly as short bursts separated by

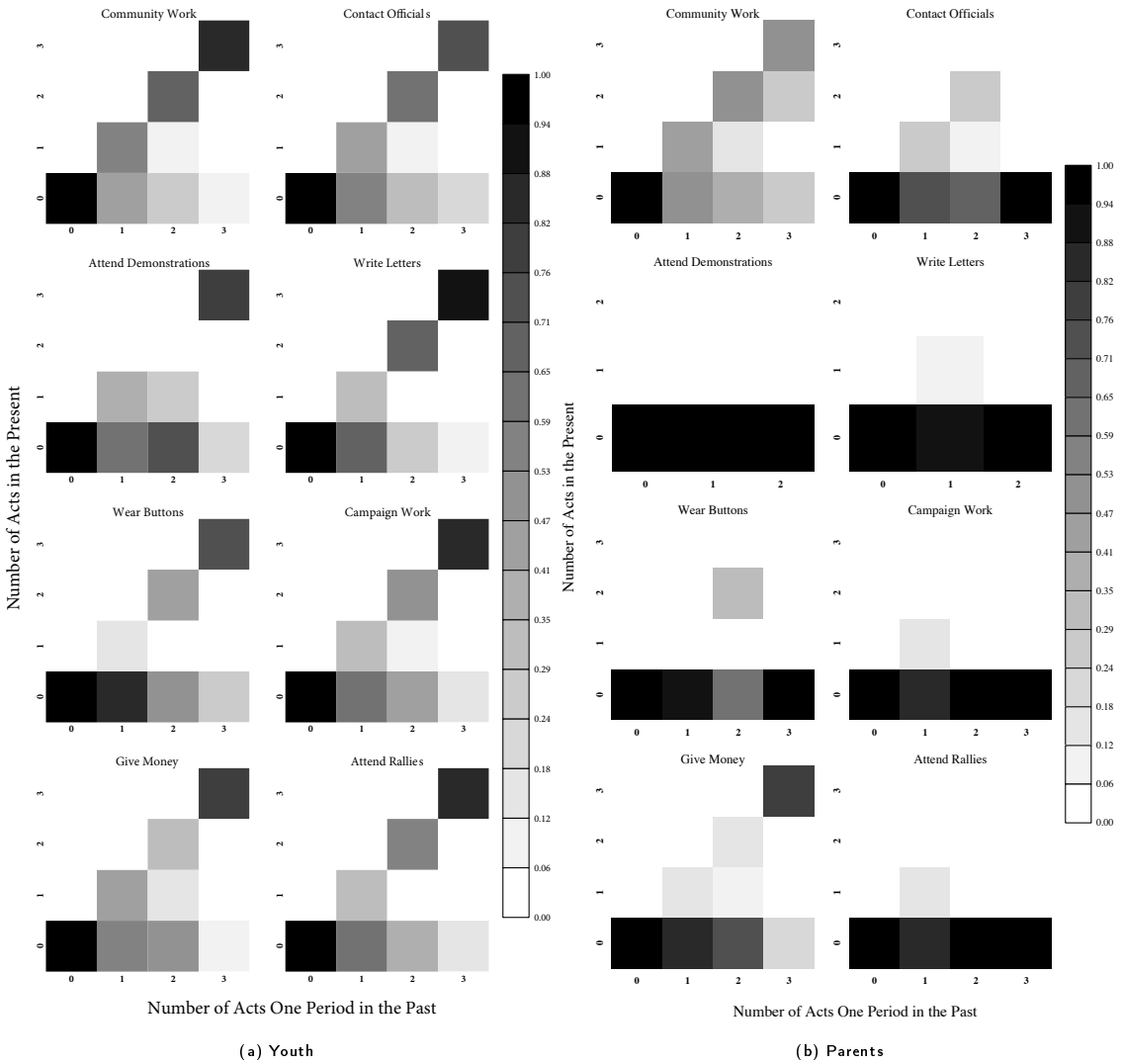


Figure 10: Participation Transitions from One Year to the Next

*Note:* 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.

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 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 years 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 Socialization study.

Figure 11 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, and 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.

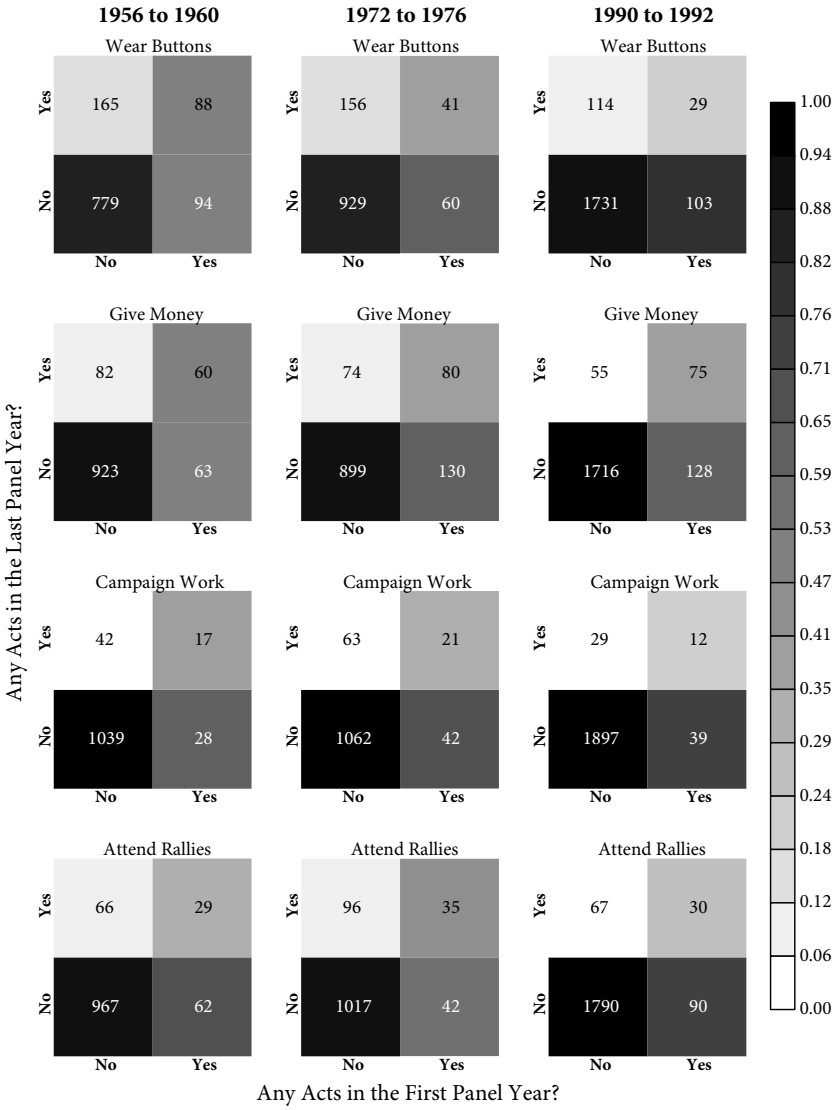


Figure 11: Participation Transitions across Panel Years: National Election Study Panels

*Note:* 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.

These figures show that most respondents in the NES Panel Studies did not engage in electoral participation in either of the years in the studies (shown by the dark black boxes at (no, no) for each activity). 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 more 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 on page 5, 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 education occur too rarely to explain these patterns shown in 1 on page 5, changes in mobilization can be plausible causal factors. In fact, mobilization is probably part of the explanation. Table 2 shows that many of the people who reported engaging in electoral activities in 1990 and 1992, did not remember being contacted by someone urging them to get involved.[18]

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.[19]

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 don't gain and lose education from year to year while they do enter and exit from political involvement from year to year (and probably day to day). The 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.

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

Table 2: Percent Participating *Without* Mobilization (NES 1990-1992 Panel)

| **Type of Participation** | % |
|---|---|
| Donations (in 1992) | 31 |
| Dinners/Rallies (in 1992) | 47 |
| Other Campaign Work (in 1992) | 44 |
| Any Participation (in 1990) | 52 |

[19] 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 in Bowers (2004) as a piece of the mechanism by which events might be turned into action.

## The Persistence of the Effects of Past Activity on the Present

While the previous section does show us how participation in one period is related to participation in adjacent periods, it does not take into account that present participation may be related to participation further in the past. Of course, the past may be related to the present in many different ways: (1) one may see lagged effects of, say, early childhood exposure to politics; (2) or only relatively short memory, such that participation, once spurred, has effects which die off relatively quickly in the future; (3) or even more complicated relationships across different periods of time (elections, campaigns, life-stages, etc...). In this section, I take on the relatively simple task of asking about how far into the past ought we to look to predict the present.

The technique I use here is to think of the string of possible moments of activity within a person's life as a Markov chain. In a Markov chain model, the present response depends on all available information about the previous states (for order 2, for example, it takes into account both the independent effects of the lagged 1 and 2 period states plus their interaction. In an autoregressive model, the present response only depends on previous states additively (so that, for any given order of past dependence, an autoregressive model in contrast involves fewer parameters and a simpler and more restrictive conceptual model of time dependence). In order to test for the presence of such relationships, I estimated models of such relations up to order 6 (i.e. having each present time point depend on up to the six preceding time points).[20] To this end I fitted models in which the present state depended only on the previous past state for a given individual, on the two previous, on the three previous, etc... I did this for each type of participation. The likelihood ratio tests on these nested models for G2 showed that adding up to 4 previous states significantly increases the explanatory power of all of the models for G2, and that going up to 5 previous states was justified for community work, contacting, and donating money. The tests for G1 showed reason to believe that up to 3 previous states mattered for all acts but for demonstrations (which doesn't appear to have much temporal structure for G1 at all). None of the acts for G1 appeared to have relationships beyond 4 previous states — and only the electoral activities, sensibly enough, had strong relationships at that lag. However, when I looked at another measure of the goodness of fit of these models, the Akaike Information Criteria(AIC), for these models, the story of temporal dependence is a bit different, as shown by Figures 12a on the following page and 12b on the next page.[21]

[20] I stopped at six because of the complexity of the model (which, is estimated using a fully saturated 6-way interaction in a generalized linear poisson model).

These figures show that the biggest improvement in model fit is from the null model (with only a constant) to the model with 1 lag for all acts.[22] Roughly, after about 4 lags, the number of parameters that must be added to the model start to count more than the decrease in log-likelihood, and so the AIC begins to increase slightly for most of the acts. Others of the acts, like letter writing and demonstration attendance among the Parent generation have so little temporal structure since they are so rare among this group, that the AICs begin to rise quite quickly and the likelihood ratio tests also cease to justify the addition of more lags to the model (after 2 lags for letter writing, and even at 1 lag for demonstrations). So, the AICs imply that these processes, in general, have at most a four period

[21] The Akaike Information Criteria for a model is a trade-off between goodness of fit as measured by reduction in log-likelihood and the number of parameters needed to achieve this reduction. Since the number of parameters required to allow each of the preceding 6 years to affect one another as they predict the present period is large 64 given the sparsity of information in the dataset, I decided that AICs were the appropriately conservative measure of goodness of fit in order to assess the order of the best Markov chain model for this data.

[22] Each plot is done on a different scale and the changes in AIC are not comparable between models. What matters here is the relative size of the changes for the different models of a given variable.

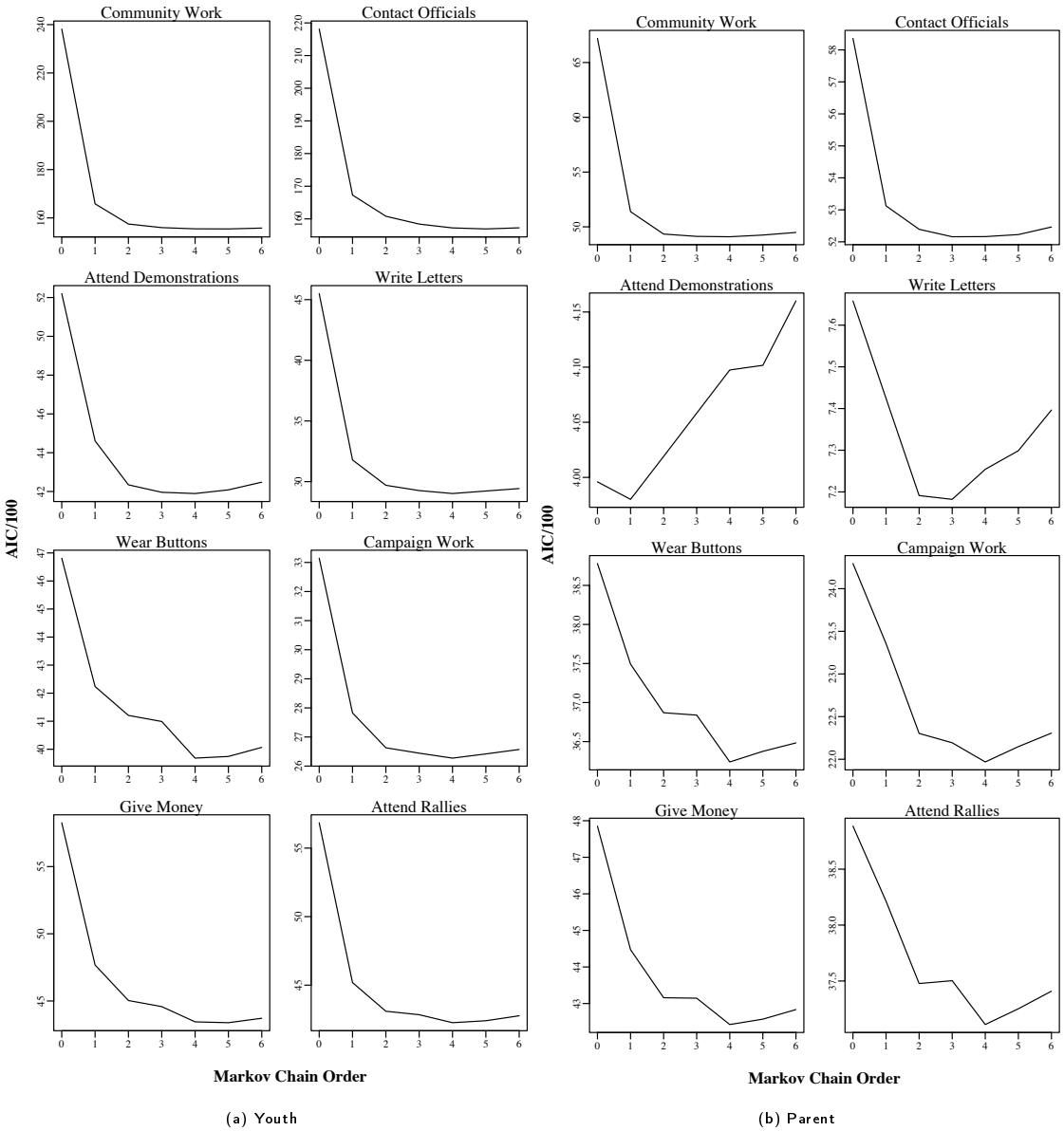


Figure 12: AICs for Markov Chains of Increasing Order

memory — but that the first period in the past is the most important component of this memory.

Taken together, the descriptive analyses presented here suggests that future analyses ought to take care to model the temporal dependence in these data paying careful attention to the dependence among adjacent years, and worrying less about direct long run relationships.[23] These analyses also remind us, again, that participation as a dynamic process raises new questions, which I will not answer in this paper: What predicts transitions between the number of acts, as depicted in Figures 10a on page 17 and 10b on page 17? In addition to electoral mobilization campaigns, what drives the longer term transitions (out to 4 years) explored in Figures 12a and 12b? Are these patterns of dependence constant across the life-cycle? Or across genders and socio-economic status?

[23] This is, for example, what I did in my dissertation Bowers (2003), specifically using mixed effects model containing a Continuous Auto-regressive structure at lag 1 (CAR1) for the within person errors which accounts for auto-correlation at lag 1 and then dies out exponentially over more distant lags.

**Implications**

The relatively short memory shown here casts doubt on theories which suggest that participation early in one's life ought to have long lasting consequences. Rather, perhaps the theory of political participation should be more attuned to individuals reacting in relatively short term manners to immediate demands in their environment rather than becoming socialized to be the "type" who is always active.

[more on implications]

**Cumulative History**

Another way that the past may influence the present is via the cumulation of experience, networks, and other resources as people participate over their lives. For example, it is well known that older people tend to participate in politics more than younger people (See, e.g., Highton and Wolfinger, 2001).[24] So far we've seen that the amount of participation occurring in the immediate past has a strong relationship with the amount of participation occurring in the present. However, the behavior of human beings is not simply a Markov process — in which the present only depends on the single period in the past. It is possible that the entire history of political participation of a person matters for present action. Public (and private) policies such as civic education or Service Learning are premised on the idea that early experience with political participation has later consequences (either via the expectation of some cumulative positive effect of acts of participation on future participation; or via the expectation that early initiation of participation will have a larger effect than beginning to participate later in life).

[24] Of course, we know that "age" has no causal effect in and of itself. As a variable it is merely a placeholder for a host of other attributes of individuals and their environments that appear to change in regular ways over the life-cycle.

Figures 13a and 13b on the following page show one look at the relationship between the total number of acts that a person has done in the past, and their propensity to do that act again in the present. In this case, I present data showing what proportion of the sample report engaging in an act at every value of the total number of past acts.

For example, the panel for Community Work among the Youth generation is shown in Figure 14. It shows that the proportion of people doing any acts of Community Work in a given year is nearly zero for those moments when nearly no acts have been done in the past (of those years for which individuals have done no past acts, 3% contain at least one act). However, this proportion rises quickly — of those years that occur after 1 act has occurred sometime in the past, 7% contain some acts of Community Work; after 10 acts have occurred in the past, the proportion of moments of participation is 29%. The total number of acts possible for the non-electoral types is 99 (maximum of 3 acts per year recorded over 33 years in the study period); and the total number possible for electoral types is 3 acts per year over 18 years = 54 acts. Only for Community Work do any respondents even approach these limits. And, once 30 acts have been done in the past, those few individuals are virtually guaranteed to continue participating (this suggests that those few highly participatory folks do so steadily at relatively lower rates over the years rather than packing all of their participation into a few short years at higher levels).[25] The information presented here is different from

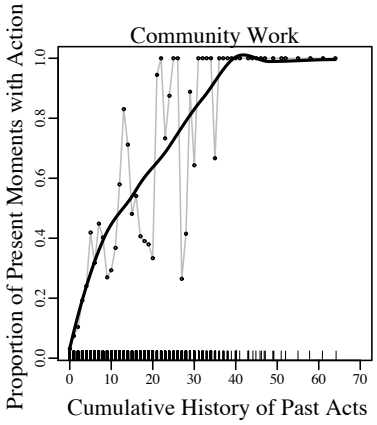


Figure 14: Influence of Past History on Present Participation: Youth

[25] Only 15 members of G2 ever had more than 30 acts over the study period.

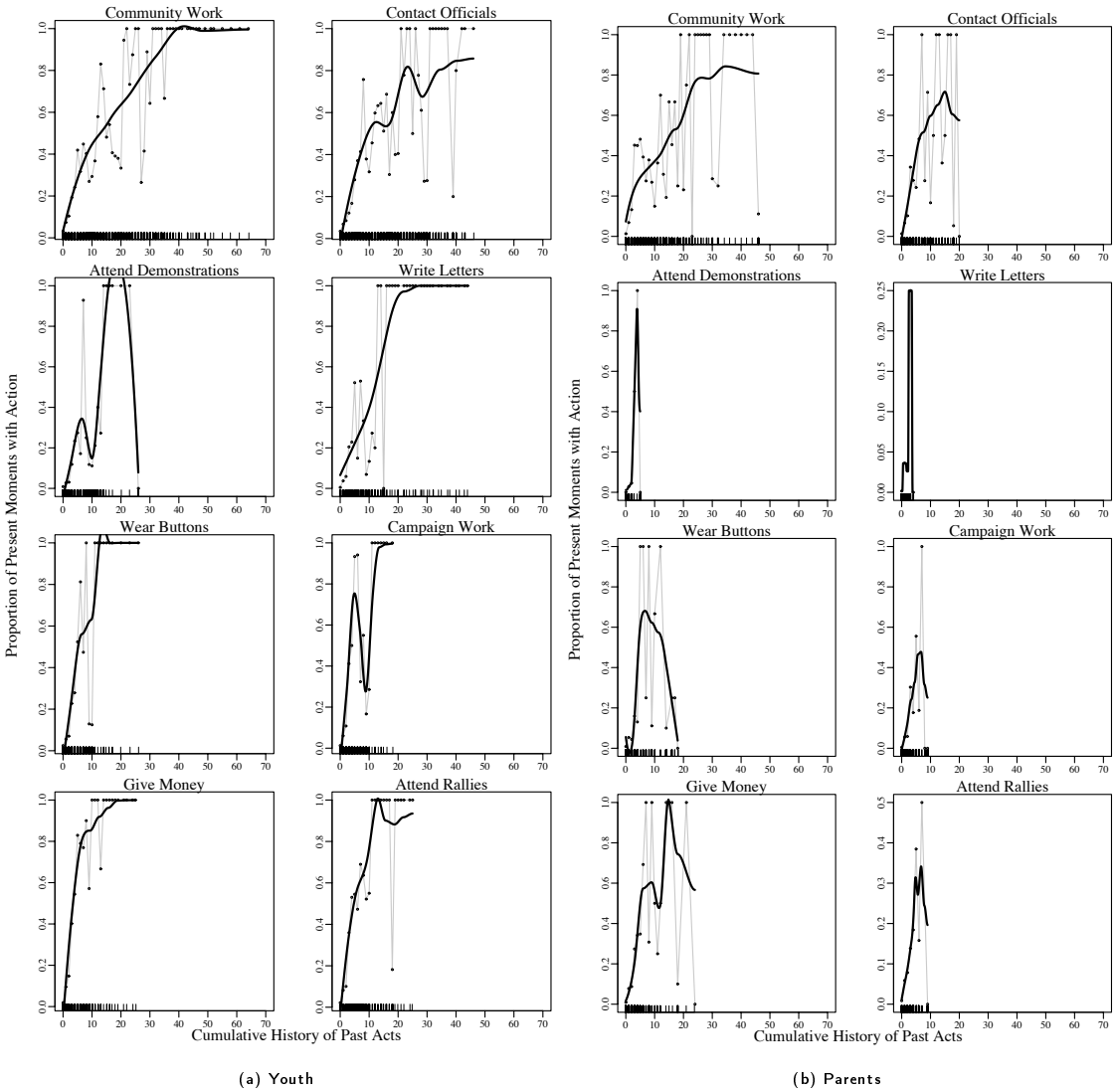


Figure 13: Influence of Past History on Present Participation

*Note:* The gray lines represent the proportion of the sample reporting present participation given the number of acts of that type that have occurred in the past. The thick black lines smooth over the jaggedness of the proportions (using a local regression of degree varying from 0 to 2 with a bandwidth of 50% of the nearest neighbors). Confidence bands for the smooth lines are omitted since the smoothing is not directly of the data but of means. The rug plot on the bottom of each graph shows the density of points on the x-axes.

that shown previously in Figure 4 on page 10. In those figures the data displayed were the total number of acts that the respondents had reported across the entire study period (and the displays were truncated at 20 acts for ease of interpretation). These charts here show the influence of the past on the present, such that someone who eventually did 10 acts is part of the proportions for the acts between 0 and 10 (and the time difference between that person's 1st and 10th act is ignored).

The overall story here is clear, however. The proportion of individuals acting in a given year increases as the number of past acts increases. This increasing relationship is quite sharp for the first few acts (up to about 10), and then it appears to slow and flatten into a habitual-looking pattern as the data become

more sparse.

The story for the Parent generation shown in Figure 13b is similar, but with fewer individuals participating. Very few of G1 engaged in demonstrations or wrote letters, and so there appears to be little interpretable relationship here (only 6 members of that generation engaged in more than 1 demonstration or protest over the study period, only 13 wrote more than 1 letter to the editor). However, for those acts where some of G1 participated, having done more acts in the past increases the proportions of individuals who do any acts in the present.

Of course, these analyses are not meant to sustain a rigorous causal story. Instead, they are meant to provide just one final description of how participation at one point in time in a person's life may be related to participation at past points. And we've seen some hints that participation is related both to the amount done in immediately adjacent periods, and to the total quantity done in the past (whenever in the past it occurs).

**Implications**

So, there are some few people who are the type who are nearly constantly active. However, these people are very few — and a more common pattern of participation is neither complete inactivity nor constant activity. Even if many more people are active than one would guess from the cross-sectional research, it is still possible that these very few constitute the rulers and the others, the ruled. It may just be the case that the ruled have a bit more "voice" than one would have thought given past research. What are the implications of findings like these for assessments of the health of our democracy? That is a question I leave to the future.

## Durations

Although little has been written on the persistence of spells of participation, it is clearly an important aspect of the phenomenon.[26] A spell of political participation is a set of one or more years in which every year a person reports involvement in the same activity. Studying the durability or fragility of these spells — the ease with which they may be interrupted, their robustness in the fact of otherwise disruptive life-events — can show us whether public policies have effects related to bringing new people into the public sphere versus maintaining and sustaining the participation of those who are already involved.[27] For example, Berinsky, Burns and Traugott (2001) showed that making voting easier in fact increased inequality in the electorate — precisely by helping sustain multi-year spells of activity among those with high resources and not so much by bringing new individuals into the electorate.

[26] See Berinsky, Burns and Traugott (2001) for the only other study that I know of to examine the durability, or fragility, or participation over multiple opportunities for action (in their case, vote turnout over 5 elections).

[27] For some exploration of the compositional effects of get out the vote efforts see (Berinsky, 2005; Bowers and Hansen, 2006).

Figure 15 on the following page shows the durations of spells of participation in the Political Socialization data — excluding the spells of duration 0 since the great majority of years do not include any action (i.e. a duration of 0). In general, the Parent generation not only engaged in fewer activities (as shown elsewhere in this section), but their engagements tended to last less time per spell as well. We also see here that most spells of participation lasted a single year. For example,

32% of the spells of button wearing and sign displaying done by G2 occurred for a single year, and less than 1% were spread across multiple years (meaning that the individual did this activity every year for more than one year). The only activities for which there appears to be appreciable persistence are community work and contacting officials among G2, where about 4% of the spells last 2 years for each of those types of activity. It is no surprise that campaign-oriented activities such as donating money, "other" campaign work, attending campaign meetings and rallies, and wearing buttons or displaying signs should occur largely as single-year spells since elections very rarely occur in adjacent years (and since this kind of activity does appear linked to elections, as it should, given what we saw in Figure 8 on page 13). That most non-electoral activities should appear as single events, distributed sporadically across a person's life, however, is a different picture of participation than one in which either individuals are apathetic non-participators or they are habitual generators of social capital.

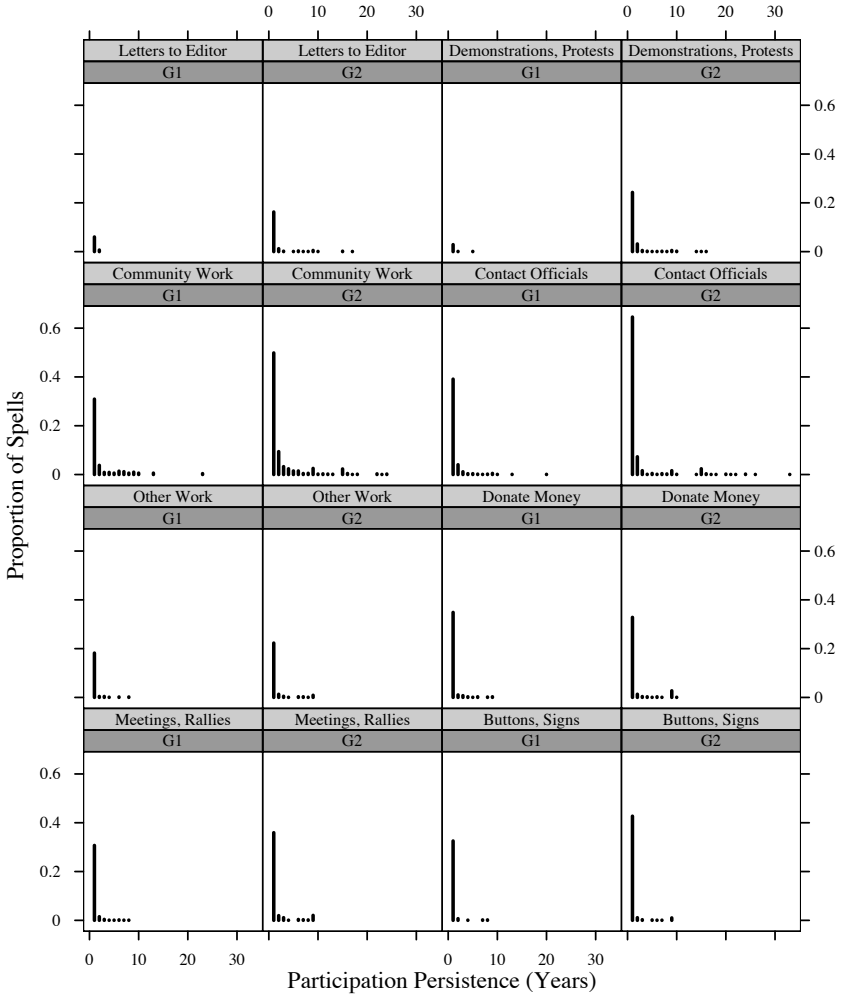


Figure 15: Persistence of Spells of Participation

*Note:* Spells of duration 0 were excluded from this figure.

The other kind of durations that are relevant for understanding participation as a dynamic process are (1) the time it takes a person to engage in their first act of

participation (especially interesting if time can start when they enter adulthood); and (2) the time people wait in between acts (for those people who do more than 1 act of a given kind). This data is the inverse of the information on persistence of acts presented above — which essentially showed the time between moments of inactivity. Now, I'll be interested in the time until and between moments of activity.

Figure 16 on the following page shows the distribution of the time individuals spend before engaging in their first act (among those who do any acts of a given type). For G1 time=0 is 1951 (which is the earliest that any of them remembered doing any acts when they were asked the questions in 1965). For G2 time=0 is 1965. The data for G2 are perhaps more interesting here, since nearly all of them were age 18 at time 0 — thus we can interpret their data as beginning roughly at the beginning of adulthood for them. The members of G1 were born at different times clustered around 1920, and so, the length of time since they did their first act does not map so cleanly onto the lifecycle.

What is clear, here, however, is that people wait varying amounts of time before doing their first act. The electoral activities display more spikes — and these spikes are 4 years apart — signifying that people tend to engage in their first campaign-oriented act during presidential election years.[28] Age does not seem to be as strong a factor as campaigns when it comes to first entry into campaign oriented participation — both G1 and G2 had large, and similar, numbers wear buttons or display signs for the first time in the 1968 and 1972 presidential election campaigns, while fewer wore buttons in 1976 and 1980. A similar pattern of first involvement tied to presidential elections occurs for campaign work and donations of money — with 1968 and 1972 being elections in which larger proportions did their first act than 1976 and 1980 for both generations (although, for the first generation this probably is not the first act in their adult life, but merely the first such act recorded in this study).

[28] These spikes are labeled with the years in which they occurred, and we can see that they occur largely in presidential election years. Also, it is worth remembering that the survey did not ask detailed timing questions about campaign-oriented activities in the 1997 wave — thus the blank spaces after 1982 for these activities in this graph and others throughout this paper.

The non-electoral activities (shown in the top two rows of the figure) do not show as clear a relationship with electoral cycles. They do display spikes around the interview dates of 1973 and 1982 (both sets of interviews occurred half way through those years, so it would be sensible for people to remember more activity in 1972 than 1973, and 1981 than 1982). What these rows also show is that the individuals in this dataset did different political acts for the first time all through their lives (within the study period). For example, there is no evidence here that most people did community work for the first time while very young or waited until they were older to do it. Rather, with some variations, people did their first (and often only) act of community work from ages 18 to 50 (for G2) and from about age 35 to about age 70 (for G1). The one act that appeared to be more the province of the young than the old (and of one particular generation) was demonstrations and protests, where the late 60s brought the most individuals to this type of activity for the first time among the Youth generation, and where very few of the Parent generation did this at all.

Figure 17 on page 28 shows the durations that are missing from the previous plot — the amount of time people tend to wait between acts after their first act. Since most people who do more than 1 act only do 2 acts, most of the pattern

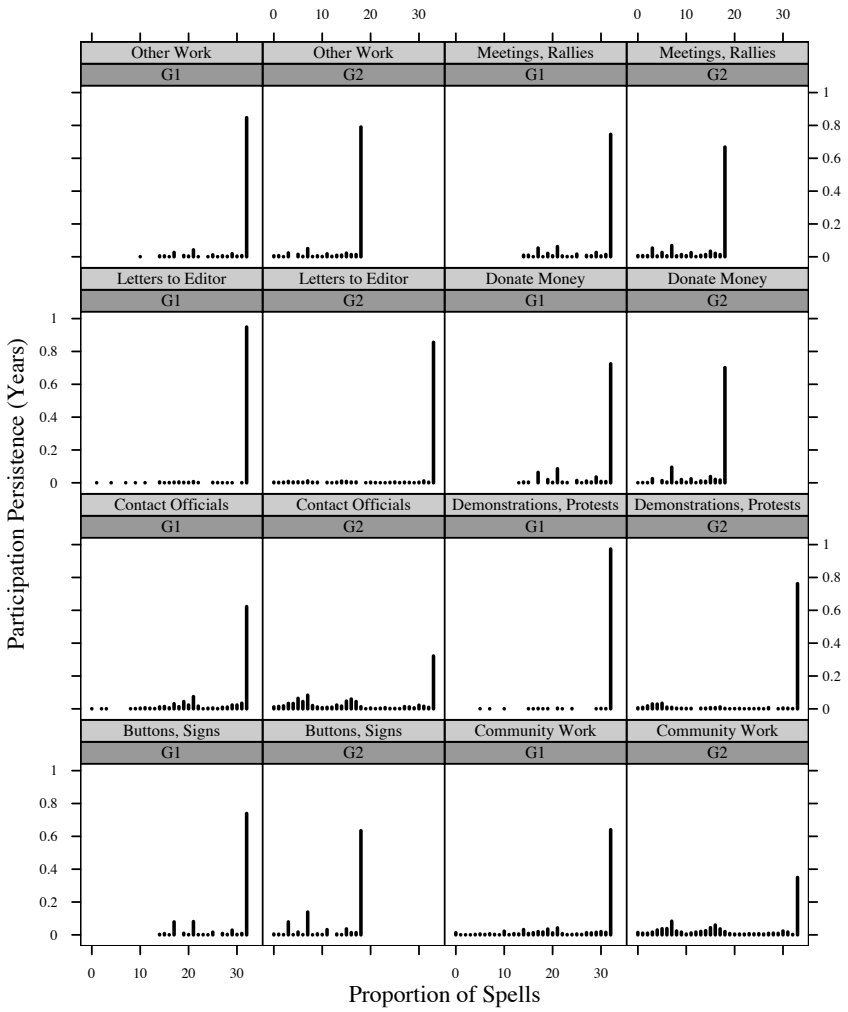


Figure 16: Time until First Act of Participation

*Note:* Durations that denote no participation are excluded from this graph. Peaks in this graph are labeled with the calendar year that they occurred. For example, nearly 10% of the members of G2 reported wearing a button or displaying a sign for the first time in 1972.

in this figure is the amount of time between the first and second acts of a given type (although there is no distinction here between the 1st-to-2nd act span and the durations between other acts). For this figure, there is no clear calendar date associated with the spikes — since different people did their first, or second, acts at different dates, the time until the next act can span different dates as well. However, most of these plots show a declining pattern from an inter-act duration of 1 year (there are no interact durations of 0 years since that would only occur within a spell) to about 10 years. Then a spike or increase again around 10 years, and a more or less steady decline to the end of the series (except for Demonstrations and Protests which shows a concentration of around 25 year durations between acts among the G2). The spike at 10 years may be an artifact of memory problems associated with the 9 years between the 1973 and 1982 interviews and the 7 years in between 1965 and 1973 interviews. However, these spikes may also occur because of the sparsity of the sample size at each point — remember that very few individuals did more than 1 act (and large majorities did no acts at all). However, this figure

does suggest individuals tend not to wait very long between spells of participation — although there is diversity and appreciable proportions (of the small number of participators) who wait anywhere from 1 to 30 (or 18) years between spells.

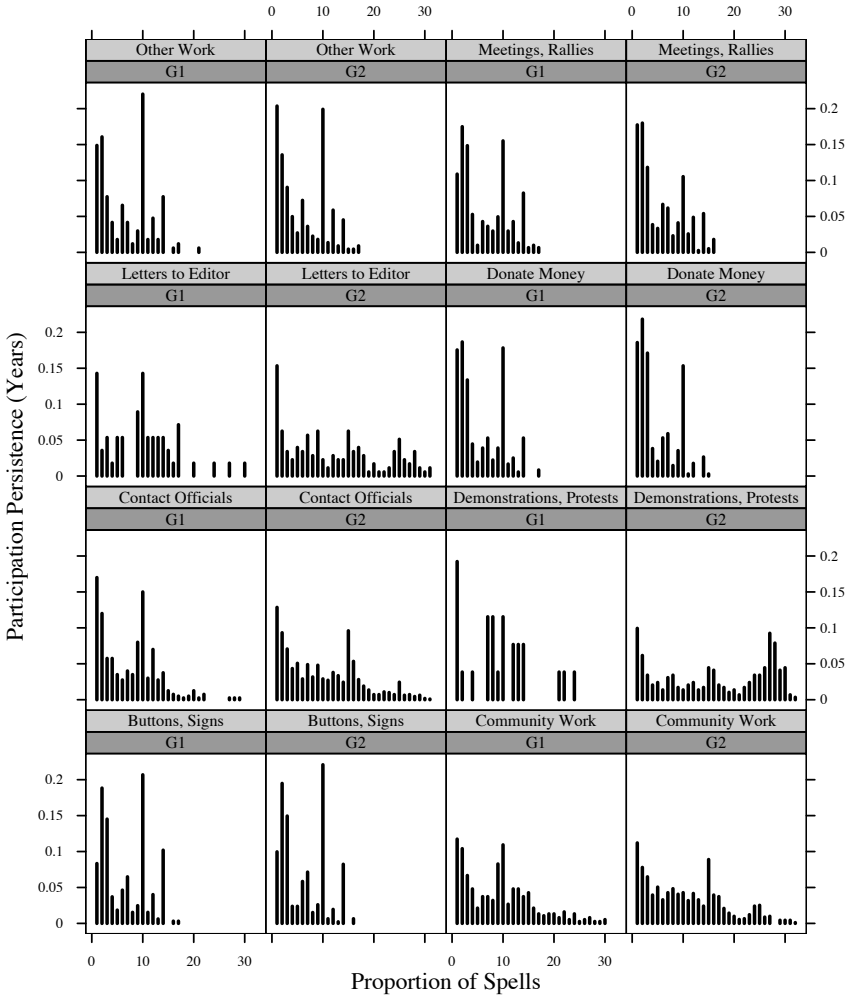


Figure 17: Time Between Acts (Starting with First Act)

[insert paragraph summarizing implications of this description for extant theories]

## Discussion and Future Directions

I should note here that I have not completed the task of describing this phenomenon. For example, I have not done any analysis bearing on sequence: Do individuals appear to engage in certain types of activities in sequence — perhaps starting with certain campaign-oriented activities and then moving onto other types (i.e. are certain activities "gateway actions" leading to more and more involvement or are certain types of activities inhibitatory, too difficult and apt to discourage novice participants from continuing)? Nor have I looked at the transitions, history, persistence, or duration *across* acts: How long after doing one type of act are individuals likely to do another of a different type (or the

same type)? Nor have I asked questions about short-term versus long-term patterns [which would allow me to use additional short-term panel datasets that currently exist]. And data on how individuals may react to their own evaluations and judgments of particular episodes of activity do not even exist. That is, one would like to know whether a given episode of activity was so disappointing as to discourage participation for another decade. Or whether it was so exhilarating that a person decided to add another kind of activity to their current bundle.

So, what have we learned from the different perspectives on the dynamics of political participation shown here? First, we've seen that the process among the older generation is different in many ways from the process within the lives of the younger generation. The older generation is less likely to engage in non-voting participation (although its members seem to have a more persistent pattern of voting (or of non-voting)). The younger generation appears more involved (more cumulative acts over the study period, higher proportions acting at any given moment, longer spells of activity) in nearly all of the activities measured here than the older generation. The only exception to this pattern is for voting, where the younger generation are less likely to vote in every available presidential election than the older generation (and they are less likely to be persistent non-voters than the older generation).

One implication of these findings so far is that discussion of the "greatest generation" as someone a special group of extremely active individuals may not be correct. Other work such as Jennings and Stoker (2001) suggests in fact that this generation participates in civic life at least, in ways that differ from their children — making direct comparisons between generations difficult.

Second, I've shown that participation in the present depends, to some extent, on participation in the past. And that the past matters both as defined as the amount of participation occurring immediately preceding the present, and also as the total history of participation up to each point in time. The more individuals participate in the past, the more they seem to do so in the present — but from moment to moment, more individuals appear to stop participating than to start or increase. Third, I've suggested that participation tends to occur in one year spells (rather than multi-year bursts) — but that the amount of time individuals tend to wait between one year spells tends to be shorter rather than longer (although there is great diversity in the amount of time individuals wait between activities, and the amount of time individuals wait before doing any activity at all after entering adulthood). These findings suggests that "sporadic" or "irregular" are apt descriptions of these mini-time-series within people's lives. That is, political participation does not seem to be a steady hobby for many people, but neither does it seem completely absent, or particularly restricted to any part of the life-cycle in particular.

I've also shown more Americans (at least of these two cohorts) are engaging in participation than one would think given the cross-sectional findings. This difference is sensible: people have more opportunities to participate over many years than over a single year. However, the findings that more than 20% or so of both G1 and G2 did some of this kind of participation over the periods of their lives studied here, suggests that an understanding of participation as a very rare

activity, engaged in by a small subset of dedicated activists is incorrect. Rather, it looks like many individuals do engage in politics at one time or another of their lives. The question that is then raised is what influences the occurrence of these participatory moments.

**Possibilities for Future Theorizing about Political Participation: Preconditions versus Precipitants**

In Bowers (2003, 2004) I have made some initial efforts to grapple with these questions — as have others such as Berinsky, Burns and Traugott (2001) and Sigelman and Jewell (1986). Briefly, I will suggest here that we ought to distinguish between theories about pre-conditions and theories about precipitants, and global theories which explain how pre-conditions and precipitants interact.

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 and to head off heart failure when it threatens.*

In the case of political participation, nearly all of the attention has been on potentiating factors. This focus has been so overwhelming that "theories of political participation" almost exclusively refer to the potentiating side.[29] 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.

[29] 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.

*Why does it matter how we look at something?* Shouldn't the causal theories be most important and our research design flow merely from our theories? I don't think so. What is missing from the view of causal theory supremacy is the simple fact that one must have something to theorize about. [Insert and discuss cite from Arendt in *Origins of Totalitarianism* on political theory as a process of changing how others see and understand the world.] If what one sees is the sun going around the earth and dots of light in the night sky, then one generates theories to explain what one sees (if one, is say, Ptolomy). If new data on the heavens reveals that some of those bit of light are not stars, but orbs with their own moons, then some of the previous theories must change. Perhaps the new data were gathered by people who had a hunch that previous theories didn't quite make sense, but they probably were not gathered as part of a rigorous causal explanation hypothesis testing framework. This paper is an attempt to provide a new *vision* or picture of what political participation *is* — and to thereby provide us with new material to explain, new stuff to theorize about, to generate causal theories about, and to eventual develop new research designs to assess such theories.

## 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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