

The Dynamics of Political Participation in the Lives of Ordinary Americans

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This dissertation is an attempt to understand the dynamics of political participation within the lives of ordinary Americans. By *political participation*, I mean actions taken by individuals to influence the selection of officials and the choice and/or implementation of policies.¹ By *dynamics*, I mean:

- The *changing rates* at which people participate over the course of their lives.
- The *timing* of participation episodes in the life-course of the individual.
- The *persistence* of spells of activity and inactivity.
- The *sequences* of activities and issues pursued by individuals.

A rate of participation is just like a rate of travel. People who travel quickly cover more distance in less time. People who participate at a high rate end up having done more in less time — and presumably have more influence on the political process. Of course, just as most runners cannot sprint over long distances, most people cannot maintain high rates of participation over their whole lives. If this is so (and I will show that it is) then students of political participation will want to know what might catalyze a person into a high rate of action — or what might inhibit a person from acting at all. Thinking about participation as a dynamic process also means that we need to ask about when in the life-span people choose to engage in political activity. In fact, one of the best known findings of the literature on political participation to date is the parabolic curve relating age to vote turnout (Highton, 2000) (and to other forms of participation). Although most analysis of dynamic processes tends to see time as merely a way of recording the order of and distance between events, in the case of political participation, time represents the lives of individual humans. High rates of activity early in life may have different consequences both on the future participation of the individual and on political outcomes than high rates late in life. If a person is participating at a high rate, one might assume that they are also persistent in their spells of participation — i.e. that they continue to participate year after year. However, this is not necessarily the case. Two people, for example, can “travel the distance” of 10 acts after 10 years by doing all 10 acts in a single year or by doing one act per year. In the first case, the changes in the rate of participation (measured on a time interval smaller than 10 years) would be quite abrupt, and the predominant pattern in that 10 year period in that person’s life would be persistent inactivity. In the second case, the rate of participation would be constant and the predominant pattern would be persistent activity. It is possible

¹The main indicators of such activity utilized here will include acts such as writing letters, email, or making phone calls; going to meetings, rallies or protests; donating money; or otherwise getting involved in community and/or campaign activities.

to observe both styles of participation among individuals, and it is as important to know what situations may spur or interrupt spells of persistent participation as it is to know what situations may catalyze or inhibit dramatic (yet short) episodes of participation. In addition to the speed and steadiness of activity, we know that all types of participatory activities are not the same. One could imagine that the person who did 10 acts in a single year started by going to a meeting and ended with attending several protests while the person who did 1 act per year for 10 years might have been a specialist in letter writing. The first sequence of acts may indicate successful recruitment and mobilization by a social movement on a specific campaign while the second, coupled with a history of moving from town to town and state to state every year, might suggest how political participation can continue in the absence of strong, face-to-face community interaction. The changing rates, timing, persistence, and sequences that characterize the dynamics of political participation are not well understood. However it is important that we try to understand these aspects of the dynamic process of political participation in order to gain a better sense for how Americans relate to, and attempt to influence, their political system.

Contributions

Asking new questions

Most previous research has not focused on political participation as a dynamic process within individuals, but rather has pursued an understanding of the variations in political participation across individuals studied at a single moment in time. Because of this static focus, it has been enough to say, for example, that “Education facilitates participation.” Although it has certainly been important to know *who* participates, this kind of general statement about the relationship between education and political participation leaves open several questions, the answers to which are essential for understanding what it is that education does to encourage participation. Considering participation as a dynamic process forces one to ask new questions like: “Education *when*, predicts participation *when*? In what way, if at all, does education enable people to continue participating despite interruptions such as residential mobility or having a new baby?” These questions show that education may relate to an evolving process of political participation in several ways. For example, education may act as an initial condition determining nearly the entire future trajectory of participation — i.e. early education may prepare a person to leap into action when necessary, even if the opportunity/necessity doesn’t occur for years into the future. Or perhaps education may function as a time-varying influence such that when education changes, so does participation. This simple example using “education” reveals that even well-established cross-sectional findings leave open many important questions. In fact, a single static theory may have many different implications in the context of a dynamic process. As I study the changing rates, timing, persistence, and sequence of political participation within the lives of individuals, I shall be forced to grapple with questions about how to specify and articulate the relationship between political participation and time — questions about which the past literature does not offer much help. I hope that this struggle to ask the unasked questions (and the attempt to answer them) will expand how we think about the participation process.

Understanding past findings

In addition to conceptualizing the dynamics of political participation, and in order to build on past literature, this dissertation articulates (and tests) the many different dynamic processes that grow from cross-sectional findings. For example, if education in the form of

“civic skills” (such as writing letters, attending meetings, speaking in public, or organizing groups) is the main driver of participation (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995), then dynamic implications would include: (1) that past participation should increase the likelihood of participation (since past participation should provide experience and skills) and (2) that gaining any education (degree oriented or not) should increase the likelihood of participation (again, via acquisition of civic skills). If education mainly acts to confer status in a social network (Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Barry, 1996), then the dynamic implications would include: (1) that early degree-granting education should matter much more than late; (2) that vocational or non-degree granting education should not matter; (3) that different education degrees should function differently in different generations (since position relative to others in a cohort is what determines network position); and (4) that past participation should increase the likelihood of future participation (since past participation should create relationships between politicians and participators) but only in the kind of participation or issue-area experienced in the past. The move to study political participation over time thus provides many opportunities to assess, extend and more deeply understand past findings.

**Understanding
dynamic
processes**

Studying dynamic processes requires understanding causality in ways that are different from those employed and operationalized in cross-sectional analyses. For example, as I described above, a single causal agent can influence the overall trajectory of a dynamic process by occurring early, late, or throughout the process — and the trajectory may be altered by changes in rate of occurrence (i.e. increasing or decreasing the number of moments in which people participate), changes in intensity of occurrence at each moment in time (i.e. changes in the number of participatory acts in a single moment), or changes in the patterns of occurrence (e.g. increasing or decreasing the length of spells of participation in a given activity). Although this dissertation is about political participation in the lives of individuals, the questions I ask are in fact the major questions that one must ask about dynamic processes in general.

Some political scientists have begun thinking carefully about dynamic processes. For example, Carpenter has used the probability theory of stochastic processes (i.e. dynamic processes with a probabilistic or random component) in deriving theoretical understandings about the behavior of bureaucrats and government agencies (See, for example, Carpenter, N.d.). The most comprehensive attempt to clarify the concepts that confront students of empirical dynamic processes has been Pierson (2000). Pierson’s article, however, focuses only on one characteristic of dynamic processes, namely, path dependence. Although path dependence is one important way that processes may evolve over time, my preceding comments show that there are several other aspects of dynamic processes which are important to recognize and understand. In this dissertation I articulate and illuminate major conceptual questions about evolution and causality in the context of dynamic processes in a way that I hope will help scholars interested in the many different ways that politics evolves over time within many different types of units.

**Analyzing
stochastic
processes**

Dynamic processes not only require different, more nuanced articulations about causal relationships, but more nuanced mathematical and statistical formulations as well. The techniques for analyzing stochastic processes have developed quite rapidly over the past 20 years although their heritage stretches back to the first investigations of life-tables and “Brownian” motion. These techniques have not been widely used in political science, and

thus, another contribution of this dissertation is to introduce and explain these techniques in an accessible manner so that scholars interested in a wide variety of stochastic processes will be able to use them. In this way, I also complement the work of Pierson and Carpenter that I cited above: in addition to clear conceptualization about processes, it is also important to be able to display and analyze data generated from such processes.²

Understanding the political life-cycle

Although examining the rate, timing, persistence and sequence of political participation as a dynamic process is a new perspective, the study of political socialization has long been concerned about the dynamics of political behavior over the life-span. By providing a detailed explanation of the development of political participation over the lives of individuals, I hope to help scholars of political socialization develop a more complete account of life-span development in general.

In summary, this dissertation contributes to current knowledge in five ways. First, by carefully conceptualizing the dynamics of political participation, this work provides a nuanced and complex view of what the over-time questions really are — questions left open by the cross-sectional literature. Second, by articulating and testing the many different dynamic implications of the cross-sectional literature, this project adds new evidence and perspectives to the current literature on political participation. Third, I show that the shift from analysis of cross-sections to analysis of dynamic processes implies a shift in the objects of analysis and the possible causal relations among them — thereby helping social scientists in general study dynamic processes more effectively. Fourth, I introduce and explain a variety of statistical methods that have been developed to analyze and understand dynamic (stochastic) processes. Fifth, I provide a detailed account of the development of political participation over the life-spans of individual Americans — thereby adding a significant piece to accounts of political socialization in general.

Data

I am using two datasets in this dissertation. The first is the Political Socialization Study (Jennings and Stoker, 1997). This dataset has the strength that it allows me to reconstruct annual participation histories over long periods for two generations of Americans (from roughly 1951-1982 for the older “parent” generation and from 1965-1997 for the younger “child” generation). In fact, this is the *only* source for histories of participation that last beyond 6 years; and it is also the *only* source which allows the recovery of annual information and descriptions of the issues and candidates motivating involvement. Despite these unique strengths, this dataset has the weakness that it was not specifically designed to elicit accurate recall of the years of political participation, so that the data are probably missing acts of participation that actually happened, and the years for some acts are probably mis-reported (Tourangeau, Rips and Rasinski, 2000).³

²The data analysis in this dissertation involves generalizations of types of analysis that are currently well-known in political science under the labels of “survival analysis” or “duration analysis” or “multilevel analysis”. The generalizations involve extensions to the analysis of durations to deal with multiple events, and extensions to the analysis of event-counts across individuals known as generalized linear mixed models (glmm’s) with dynamic components. It is these generalizations that are relatively rare in political science.

³It also has the weakness that 1) the initial cohorts sampled had better education and SES than the population and 2) that panel attrition has exacerbated this divide between the sample generation and that cohort in the population.

The second source of data are the panel studies conducted by the National Election Studies (NES) at 4 different times over the past 50 years: 1956-1960, 1972-1976, 1990-1992, and 1992-1997. These datasets have the strength that the respondents were only asked about their participation in the past 12 months, thus forgetting is probably quite a minor problem and dating the participation to the year is quite easy. The weakness of these panel studies, however, is that they cover short periods with only 3 waves, usually 2 years apart. Thus, they can shed only limited light on questions such as those raised above. That said, they will be useful for checking and corroborating the longer term longitudinal data from the political socialization study and for studying short-term patterns of transitions in activity.

Organization

The first three empirical chapters of the dissertation analyze the consequences of education, residential mobility, and parenthood on the long-term dynamics of non-voting political participation. Education, residential mobility, and parenthood (as it intersects especially with gender) have all been identified in previous research as major aspects of people which influence who participates.⁴ By choosing variables identified as important in the cross-sectional research, I can assess and expand on previous findings. Since these variables are also seemingly well-understood, it will be all the more useful to the scholarly community for me to articulate new questions about their relationships to participation, and to show how the cross-sectional theories create many different implications for their functioning in a dynamic process. Another benefit of focusing on these three concepts is that they manifest themselves in time in three different ways. After an initial burst of activity, formal education tends not to change much as individuals age. This is not to say that people stop learning, instead I expect that politically relevant experience ought to build steadily throughout life — with perhaps more rapid accumulation during moments of political participation. Residential mobility occurs as rapid interruptions. Although children usually spend around 20 years living with their parents, their influence on political participation probably occurs over a discrete range of time, roughly coinciding with the school-years.⁵

The data I use for the examination of the long-term dynamics of political participation record the participation trajectories of two generations of individuals as they age from 18 to 50 over the period 1965 to 1997 or from about 35 to about 70 over the period 1951 to 1982.

The fourth empirical chapter examines the patterns of transitions among activities that occur over shorter periods of time — although the temporal unit will still be no shorter than the year. The data I use to explore the short-term dynamics of political participation record the patterns of transitions into and out of participation in a variety of political activities for individuals of many different generations at 4 points in time: the late 1950s, the early 1970s, and the early and late 1990s. The short-term chapter is an opportunity to synthesize and confirm findings from the previous chapters without the memory problems

⁴As I explain in the “Limitations” section below, although previous literature also suggests a number of other important influences on participation I cannot pursue them all in this dissertation.

⁵Highton and Wolfinger (2001) have also shown that vote turnout differs between young adults who remain in their parents’ houses during their 20s and young adults who leave home. Thus, both parents and children influence the political participation of each other while they live together [and probably also when they no longer live together as well].

of the long-term data. Furthermore, short-term changes are politically consequential and deserve examination on their own.

All empirical research involves measurement in which scholars strive to map the domain of content of a concept to observable phenomena. “Political participation” as a concept refers to any activity done in an effort to influence politics. From my point of view, an adequate yet pragmatic measure of “political participation” must therefore capture information about activities which can be easily recognized as aiming to influence the “politics.” “Attempting to contact elected officials”, “attending rallies”, “working with other in the community”, and the other survey questions that I analyze in this dissertation seem to me pragmatic yet adequate representations of the idea of political participation.⁶ That is, most people would agree that these questions do ask about activities aimed to influence politics. These questions are also particularly useful given my interest in “ordinary” Americans since they represent what “political participation” means for the non-elite majority of the country better than what this concept might mean for other types of political actors, like senators, political parties or social movements.

Since I am also interested in the dynamics of the participation process, I must also be clear about how I expect the rates, timing, persistence, and sequence to change over the long- and short-term and in response to education, residential mobility, and parenthood. There are many possibilities for the shape that these dynamic relationships can take. An adequate account of these shapes should consider (1) the influence of initial conditions (such as having children as a teen); (2) the possibilities for feedback (such as the influence of past participation on future participation)⁷; (3) shocks and interruptions (such as moving to a new city); and (4) growth (such as the accumulation of social contacts the longer a person lives in one place).⁸

In each of the chapters of this dissertation, I examine different representations of the domain of content of the concepts (for example, in the case of education, skills and status) and different representations of the dynamic relationship (for example, as an initial condition, as feedback and as growth).

Education and Learning

This chapter engages with the predominant finding in the political participation literature to date: that individuals who have more formal education are more likely to get involved in politics than those who have less. Like many theories built on cross-sectional data, the

⁶An “adequate” measure is one that most people would agree represents enough of the meaning of the concept to be empirically useful. It is usually futile to attempt to exhaustively represent the domain of content of a concept in observable terms since (1) most analytically powerful and important concepts have expansive domains of content and (2) the domain of content can change with the context and purpose of the inquiry. Most empirical work aims to use what I’d call “adequate yet pragmatic” measures that represent some part of the meaning of a concept without representing much of the meaning of other, related and possibly conflicting, concepts.

⁷Path dependence can be thought of as resulting from a specific kind of feedback in which “increasing returns” predominate (Pierson, 2000).

⁸Another interesting dynamic relationship is a threshold-firing-exhaustion process such as that used to model the firing patterns of neurons. Furthermore, there is definitely a spatial component to political participation since we know that people mobilize one another. However, neither of these aspects of political participation can be examined using the currently available data.

theories about the relationship between education and political participation are stated in general terms, and ought to have dynamic implications. I spelled out several of those implications as examples above and noted how different conceptions about the influence of education led to different dynamic implications. Furthermore, I specified above that certain questions about the influence of education on participation have not yet been asked. This chapter contributes to the current debates in this area by articulating and testing the dynamic implications of current cross-sectional findings and by asking new questions (and providing new answers) about the relationships between education and political participation.

In this chapter, education is conceived of as driving the process of participation in two ways: as a way to acquire skills which decrease the costs of participation, and/or as a way to acquire a social network status which increases exposure to mobilization. The acquisition of skills and status may occur via experience with formal, degree-granting educational institutions or with acts of participation itself. Education may drive the process either as an initial condition and/or a slowly varying dynamic process.

Skills Previous literature suggests one major way in which education influences participation is via the provision of “civic skills” (Verba, Scholzman and Brady, 1995). If education works primarily as an initial condition, the skills one possesses at the beginning of one’s adult life ought to be the ones that matter most. If educational changes continue to increase or decrease the rate of participation (or the persistence of spells of participation) throughout life, then as skills are gained, I’d expect increasing participation as well. It is not clear, however, how much time occurs, on average, before the benefits of increased education are realized by individuals. Do the benefits of skills die away? Or are skills cumulative in the lives of individuals (and cumulative in their effects on participation)? Are skills learned from “experience” (on the job or in organizations) more durable in their influence on participation than skills learned in school? It is also possible that, if participatory acts tend to occur in sequence (from, say, “easy” acts, which require less time, energy, or money, to “hard” ones, which require more resources), that early skill acquisition could increase the odds that individuals eventually participate in the “hard” acts.

Status Another set of scholars suggests that the decline in aggregate participation over the past 40 decades has occurred despite significant aggregate gains in education because education acts primarily as a “brand” or a mechanism for sorting individuals into social networks — and it is one’s network position which influences one’s exposure to mobilization by activists and politicians, and one’s inclination to get politically involved (Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Barry, 1996). If education works primarily as an initial condition, then one would expect to see that early status (measured, say, by parents’ education level) would largely determine the subsequent shape of the participation trajectory of the individual. It is not clear if this is the case, or if one can gain “higher” network status by obtaining higher formal educational degrees. Does it matter, for example, whether one attains a college degree at age 21 versus later in life?

Learning There is significant evidence that points both to the importance of pre-adult political socialization for the life-time political development of individuals (See, e.g. Jennings, Stoker and Bowers, 2001) and to the large potential for political orientations to change in adulthood

(See, e.g. Jennings and Niemi, 1981). There is also some evidence that having participated in protests leads to increasing participation in many other kinds of more conventional political participation (Jennings and Niemi, 1981, page 343). How good an education is participation itself? Does participation as a youth moderate the effects of early formal education or the initial conditions of early social status? Can individuals who begin adult life without significant civic skills or politically well-connected social network position eventually achieve high rates of participation (or long spells of activity) via merely getting involved in politics?

**Synthesis and
Moderators**

How do skills, status, and learning interact as drivers of political participation? Do they amplify one another? Or are they substitute routes to participation? Perhaps status will turn out to be most powerful as an initial condition, but that skills and learning interact to push rates of participation higher as people move through the life-cycle and, presumably, become exposed to more sources of mobilization.

Residential Mobility

Another major factor in cross-sectional studies of political participation is length of residency in a geographic location. Studies of the relationship between residential mobility and vote turnout show that the difficulty of registering to vote in a new place is a major factor impeding the voting participation of many Americans (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). Although the various formulations of “education” in the previous chapter allowed for a few time-varying operationalizations, the analysis mainly focused on explaining the long-term dynamics of political participation within the life-span with slow moving, or static characteristics of individuals. This chapter focuses on relationships between two different stochastic processes: participation and mobility. This raises a series of new questions that are applicable to the study of dynamic processes in general, and which also add new dimensions to our understanding about the relationships between residential mobility and non-voting political participation. Thus, one must not only ask about *when* in life *how much* residential mobility might matter for life-time trajectories but also about the action of residential mobility as a time-varying causal agent itself. For example, the fact that mobility occurs in seemingly sudden moments throughout life raises questions about *how long after* (or even before) a move ought we to see effects on participation. If participation is depressed after a move, how long does it stay depressed? Is there a critical number of moves in a short period of time that effectively shuts down participation for extended periods?

**Early
Residential
Mobility**

One of the major general questions about dynamic processes is about the importance of initial conditions for the later evolution of the process. In this case, the initial conditions are represented by the extent to which respondents moved during their youth. Do “early movers” develop coping strategies by which they more quickly connect with communities into which they move? Or do they seem to give up on local politics, and instead focus on national and global issues? Or does their lack of early community connection ensure that the early movers never develop “participation habits” at all?

**Mobility
Dynamics**

People change houses throughout their lives. Another set of general questions about dynamic processes concerns the “coherence” between multiple processes — i.e. the extent to which two processes are related contemporaneously or at some time lag. Two processes may

be so tightly related as to seem to occur in a coordinated manner simultaneously. However, it is also possible for events of one process to precede, and perhaps catalyze, the arrival of events in another process. Similarly there can exist feedback between two processes. In the case of residential mobility, I presume that most of the relationship will either appear simultaneous — as the move interrupts previously occurring spells of participation — or as mobility leading participation — as people take time to adjust to new surrounding before re-engaging in politics. Of course, one could also imagine a situation in which parents decide to move rather than engage in the civic activities which would be necessary to make changes in their children’s school or neighborhood. In this way, residential mobility would itself be an act of participation, but would be an “exit” act rather than a “voice” or “loyalty” act (Hirschman, 1970).

More specifically, one might expect to see a *decrease* in non-voting participation in the period immediately following a move since non-voting participation is often dependent on (1) mobilization by friends and acquaintances (the circle of which gets smaller in a move to a new place); (2) mobilization within institutions such as unions, churches, and other organizations (which people may delay in (re)joining).; (3) network status — personal contacts with local activists and politicians may be lost after a move; (4) available time — moving is very stressful and takes a lot of time. The literature on registration laws also implies that moves from state to state might be more consequential than moves between towns within a state. However, one might also see *increases* in participation as people try to build and create new social ties; and as mobilizing institutions realize that newcomers who do not already have many time commitments may represent sources of new activists or membership.

If residential mobility either increases or decreases participation, it is not clear what kind of time lag exists for the “residential mobility effect” on political participation. Nor is it clear whether residential mobility ought to cause any shifts in repertoires of participation that might exist — e.g. from letter writing about racial issues to going to meetings about the environment. Finally, it is not clear whether residential mobility ought to have the same effect on participation among the young (for whom moving may be a quite frequent, and thus ordinary, part of life) as it does among the old (who are often moving after decades of residential stability).

**Synthesis and
Moderators**

It is well-established that residential mobility depresses vote turnout and there is ample evidence suggesting that those who move more frequently are less likely to be those who participate in other forms of political activity. Yet, it should be clear that many questions about residential mobility and education have not been asked and even the dynamic implications that follow directly from the cross-sectional findings need clarification. In addition to the simple relationships described above, one must also ask about what kinds of factors may compensate for the presumably inhibiting effects of mobility. For example, can adulthood residential stability compensate for the inhibiting effects of early mobility? How long would such compensation take? Does organizational membership or education help prevent interruptions in participation spells during years in which individuals move?

Parenthood

Parenthood is an excellent example of a case in which the stakes for participation change dramatically in response to an easily definable event in the lives of individuals. The association at the individual level within a cross-section was observed by Jennings in his article on parenthood and political participation (Jennings, 1979) and the influence of parenthood on aggregate civic participation was recognized by Rosenstone and Hansen:

As the baby boom generation graduated from high school in the late 1970s, parents lost many of the concerns and social involvements that had motivated their participation in meetings at the local level. The removal of education issues from citizens' personal agendas caused participation in local politics to decline. (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993, page 126)

These articles focused on either aggregate changes (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993) or differences between people (Jennings, 1979). In this chapter I focus on the influence of child bearing and rearing within the lives of individuals, over time. There seem to be three main ways to conceive of "parenthood" as influencing political participation. First, the mere change of state from non-parent to parent occasioned by the birth of a child may be enough to change the stakes of political participation perceived by an individual and to decrease the amount of time and money available for non-family use. Second, growing children tend to create new connections between parents and local communities, thus increasing the odds of exposure to mobilization [a process which presumably stops when children "grow up"]. Third, the influence of multiple children on the political participation of parents may not change the stakes of participation much but may significantly decrease available resources. Thus, in this chapter I will look at the influence of a change of state, of children aging, and of multiple children on parental participation.

The process of parenting is certainly dynamic, but it is a dynamic process that looks neither like the sudden shifts that appear from recording moments of residential mobility nor the early life burst of formal education. Instead, children appear more suddenly than a college degree but exert an effect on a life more steady and enduring than a move to a new city or state. In addition, a person may parent multiple children at one time. Also, the impact of parenting on the lives of men and women is clearly different and therefore gender must be an integral part of all of the analyses of this section (Burns, Schlozman and Verba, 2001). One would also assume that the time demands of child rearing without a partner would inhibit participation even more severely than otherwise. Thus, marital status must be a part of the story in this chapter.

Each child ages year by year, most of them passing through school and eventually leaving home. Following the pattern of the previous chapters, this chapter examines whether the timing of parenthood within the life-cycle matters — i.e. whether early parenthood acts as a path-defining initial condition or whether the timing of parenthood within the life matters little for the participation trajectories of individuals. Furthermore, just as I examined educational skills, degrees, and experiences (in the form of participation itself) and I explored the importance of residential mobility within and across state lines, here I also contrast the impact of having any child at all to the differential impact that may occur as new children are added to a family and to the changing impacts of children as they age.

The Timing of Parenthood

One of the most pervasive stereotypes of poverty in current decades has been the teenage mother. Although part of the political rhetoric sees early child bearing (which tends to be out of wedlock) as morally wrong, another, perhaps larger group of commentators have been concerned about the extent to which early child bearing effects the future income and career possibilities of young women. Although having children early is highly related to socio-economic status, it will be important to see if early parenthood also acts as a powerful initial condition establishing the future path of political involvement for both young men and women, married or not. More generally, it is possible that bearing a child in one's 20s may exert a different effect on a participation trajectory than child-bearing (and rearing) in one's 30s, 40s or 50s and beyond.⁹

Children Aging

One dynamic implication of the statement by Rosenstone and Hansen (cited above) is that the main influence of children on the political activity of parents is to get parents involved in local education related activities. Thinking about the dynamic process of political participation and parenthood urges a more complex and nuanced story. The first few years after having a child, I expect that the time-demands of parenting a baby ought to pull parents out of any participation in which they had been engaging. However, as children grow to school age, and begin to attend school and other local activities, I expect that parental participation in school and other local venues should increase due to both the increased stake in school and local governance and because of exposure to mobilization attempts by other parents. Once children leave school, it is sensible that parents should stop their school-based political involvement. Parents can either start to phase out school-oriented participation slowly as children begin to take responsibility for their own lives during high school or the end of high school may signal an abrupt end to such participation. It is not clear, however, if children leaving school ought to decrease overall involvement by parents, or ought to cause the parents to redistribute the contents of their "participation bundle" away from schools and toward other issues. That is, it is possible that the onset of parenthood would first decrease rate of participation (to nearly zero), but would then increase participation as children enter and participate in schools, and the parents would continue participating into the future due to the learning of civic skills and establishing of local contacts stimulated by their children. However, it is not clear if these same patterns would be the same for men and women.

When people have multiple children, it is possible that the expected school-based activities would continue for a longer time — and provide more opportunities for parents to learn skills and establish contacts and be mobilized by others to engage in non-school oriented activities. Thus, although more children probably also means less time to spare, it is also possible that parents of multiple children may not display decreasing participation due to their increased opportunities for participation. Again, it is also possible more children means less time mainly for women but not for men. Thus, having children might increase participation opportunities for one partner while decreasing them for the other.

Synthesis and Moderators

Building on the other two chapters, it is important to ask whether education or residential mobility exacerbate the ways in which parenthood decreases participation and the ways in which education and residential mobility may amplify the influence of the opportunities

⁹For example, Plutzer and Wiefek (2001) shows early parenthood depresses future income and vote-turnout among a cohort of African-American women.

afforded parents via the addition of another connection to the local community via their children.

Short-Term Dynamics

An examination of the patterns of transitions into and out of participation among respondents to the NES panel surveys shows that, even in the short run, participation is episodic. A minority of respondents report participating in all of the panel years. Instead, the predominant pattern (other than lack of activity) involves participation in only one type of act during one year. These findings have been confirmed for the pre-1990's panel studies by Rosenstone and Hansen (1993).¹⁰

This chapter departs from the patterns of the previous three in that initial conditions are not available in the NES data. The analysis in this chapter will instead examine the extent to which the variables previously analyzed determine differences in the patterns of transition among acts of participation (and into and out of participation at all).¹¹ This chapter also extends the previous analysis because of the great variation in age of respondent available in the NES. Thus, findings of generational differences in the previous chapters can, to some extent, be checked and extended in the context of the NES panel data.

Furthermore, data on contact by activists and politicians enables a series of new dynamic analyses. For example, if we expect that exposure to mobilization attempts by friends, activists, or politicians spurs participation, then we would also expect that those respondents who were contacted in the first panel period would exhibit greater persistence in their participation patterns across the subsequent two waves. It is also possible that people who are already participating (in the first wave), but who are contacted in the second wave, would be more likely to continue participating in the third wave than respondents who had previously not participated but who also had been contacted. This last expectation arises from the work by Berinsky, Burns and Traugott which suggested that the vote-by-mail system in Oregon mainly functioned to enable previously habitual voters to continue to vote and did not significantly enable previous non-voters to begin voting (Berinsky, Burns and Traugott, 2001).

Limitations

The limitations of this project are perhaps those inherent in any initial exploration of an area: the use of tools and/or data that were not initially meant to carry the burden of the questions posed to them.

First, ample psychological evidence suggests that (1) people are fairly competent at remembering the times at which significant life events occurred; and (2) people are not very competent in remembering the times at which life events occurred that were not somehow

¹⁰Voting participation is much more habitual than any of the non-voting forms of political participation analyzed in this dissertation. A series of studies of vote turnout has shown that, in addition to the mass of people who vote in every election and those who never vote, there exists a substantial body of citizen who vote sporadically (Woodward and Roper, 1950; Campbell, 1960; Sigelman et al., 1985; Sigelman and Jewell, 1986; Plutzer, 2002).

¹¹The analysis of the data in this chapter will mainly proceed via an analysis of the differences between "Markov transition matrices" which summarize state-change patterns in dynamic process which have limited possible states.

important to them (Tourangeau, Rips and Rasinski, 2000). Furthermore, such literature, and others (Belli, Shay and Stafford, 2001) suggests that certain ways of asking questions about timing can increase accuracy of recall — and the Political Socialization study did not use those methods. Thus, to the extent that moments of participation are rare (which all evidence to date suggests) and important to the respondents, then the data I analyze here will be a reasonable representation of the participation histories of the two generations interviewed. To the extent that these events are not important, then I expect to have a misrepresentation — either because people are over-reporting due to social desirability bias (as they do to questions about vote turnout in the NES) or, more likely, are under-reporting due to forgetting.¹² This is a serious problem, and I will attempt to keep in mind how these kinds of systematic variations may be affecting the results. I will also make a few, rather simple, attempts to “adjust” for such memory problems. Despite such adjustment, however, this problem will persist and must be faced at each moment of the analysis and interpretation in this project.

Second, the datasets analyzed here do not contain several variables that have figured prominently in previous research, the most important being “mobilization” or the extent to which people are recruited to participate by others. To the extent that mobilization drives participation and is heavily correlated with say, education or lack of residential mobility, then we would expect that coefficients estimated to represent the influences of education and residential mobility would be capturing the effects of mobilization. To the extent that different individuals have different propensities to be recruited which are fixed over the life-span, I can deal with this problem via different crude measures of cross-sectional heterogeneity. However, to the extent that the characteristics of individuals that lead to mobilization are not available and mobilization itself is not available, then the coefficients estimated here will not be unbiased (even in the case of perfect memories).

Third, the Political Socialization data over-represent certain parts of the population and under-represent others. For example, the “youth” cohort consists only of those individuals who made it to their senior year of high school in 1965 — and about 24% of their cohort dropped out before that time (Jennings and Niemi, 1981). As time has progressed, individuals have dropped out of the panel study, such that by 1997 the sample was more female, wealthier, and more educated than the population of people in that age group at that time (Jennings, Stoker and Bowers, 2001). Thus, the histories collected and analyzed here will both probably under-represent the true amounts of participation done by the individuals due to forgetting and will over-represent the amount of participation in the nation due to the relatively higher SES of the cohort.

Finally, given theories about the motivations for political participation the temporal resolution of the data is not ideal. For example, if participation tends to be self-motivated, then people would need to perceive some reason to get involved before participating. If participation tends to be mobilized by others, then participation must be requested before it can occur. In either case, I would expect that the time frame over which such perception and recruitment occurs would be measured in weeks not years. The data that I generated

¹²It is highly likely that forgetting will be the dominant problem. For example, Pierce and Lovrich (1982) found that 44% of known signers of a petition in Idaho did not recall having signed it after a year. Of course, as Hansen and Rosenstone (1983) note, petition signing may be like telling a passerby the time, and thus unremarkable compared to other activities in which more resources must be expended.

from the Political Socialization dataset are, to my knowledge, the most temporally fine-grained information about political participation that currently exist, and they are annual quantities. So, despite the fact that this dissertation presents the most detailed information currently available, with respect to the phenomena under study, it is crude.

Although I might say that it is worth writing this dissertation on the simple grounds that some information is better than none, others might argue that any misleading information is worse than none. The rejoinder of course is that one can never know anything without attempting to do the knowing. I argue that this project is worthwhile as an attempt to discover something about the dynamics of political participation within the lives of individuals: that by keeping the limitations in the fore but also by using *the very best information on the dynamics of political participation ever available* I would hope to provide some knowledge, and to be able discern when the results may be misleading — and to articulate this. The limitations articulated here do not make the study of the dynamics of political participation a lost cause or fruitless. Rather, they remind me that we are at the frontier of new knowledge where we can hope to discern perhaps messy shapes that will guide further, more targeted, fine-tuned, and accurate, exploration.

In addition, this project is useful merely on the grounds of the questions it asks — about political participation in particular and about dynamic processes in general. Although political participation has been extensively studied, I hope to have shown how far we are from deeply understanding well-established findings let alone new hypotheses which emerge from considering political participation as a dynamic process.

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