Political Participation As a Dynamic Sporadic Process in the Lives of Ordinary Americans

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Abstract

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

This paper does not propose a unifying theory of political action. Instead, it has three simple aims: (1) to present evidence to make vivid and compelling the fact that political participation occurs as a sparse series of episodes in the lives of people in addition to a line between the ruled and the rulers; (2) propose an analytical and conceptual distinction between potentiating and precipitating factors in the etiology of political participation to help guide those who will produce a unifying theory; and (3) explore some of the implications of the descriptions presented for questions we might ask about political participation and democracy and future research on these topics.

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1 A Picture of Political Participation

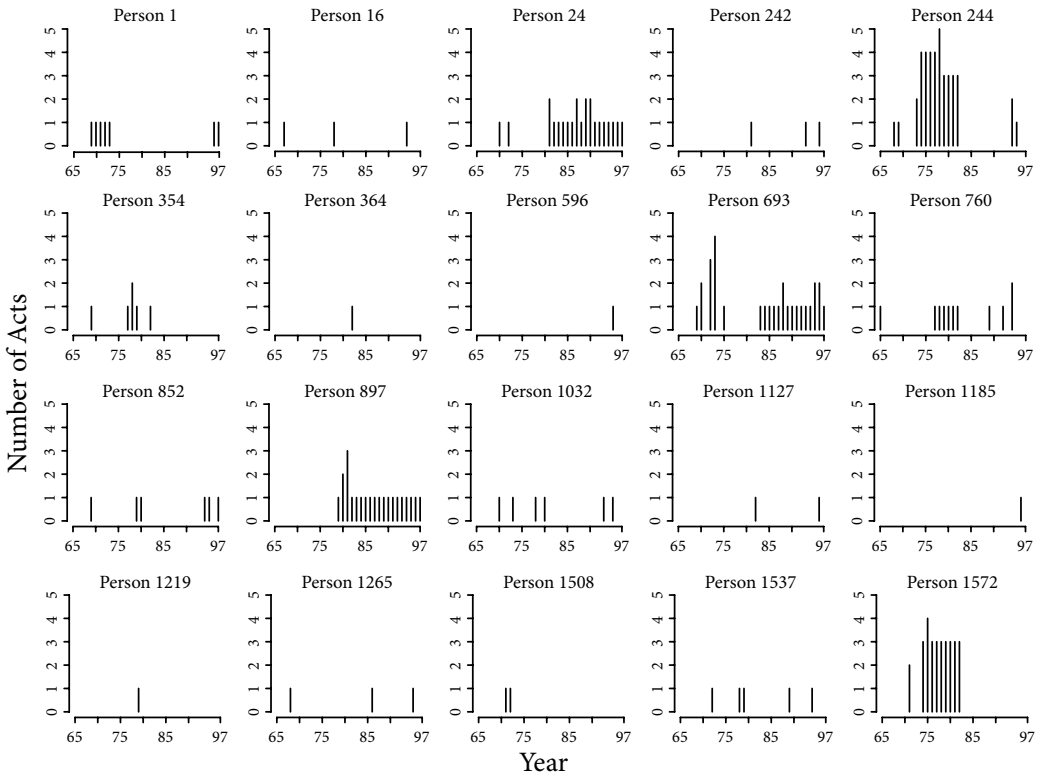
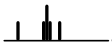


Figure 1: Profiles of individual participation beyond voting for a random sample of participators from the 935 members of the High SchoolClass of 1965, age 18–50. At each point in time, each person may report from 0 to 6 acts of non-electoral participation: working with others in the community, contacting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

Figure 1 shows raw data on non-electoral participation reported by a random sample of 20 respondents from among all of those individuals who did any of these types of activities over a 32 year study period (using data from the Political Socialization Study 1965 to 1997 (Jennings and Stoker, 1997)).[2] 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,

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

and Writing letters to the editor.[3] For example, Person 354's participation trajectory looks like this:  . He reported attending a protest or demonstration in 1969. Then, in 1977, 1978, and 1979, he contacted an elected official. Also in 1978, he did some work with others in his community, and in 1982, he did some community work again. This shows up as "spikes" of height 1 for each of 1969, 1977, 1979, and 1982, and a spike of height 2 for 1978. Later in this paper I will show that Figure 1 is not the only piece of information suggesting that a dominant feature of political participation since 1950 in the USA intermittentness. What ought this fact to mean for those of us who want to understand, explain, and interpret political activity?

In this paper, I go to some lengths to suggest that the kinds of patterns shown for the 20 people in Figure 1 are typical of the kinds of patterns shown by other people in other decades, in other surveys, for other kinds of political activity. To motivate and contextualize this task, I first ask whether what we currently know about political participation helps us understand the kinds of questions that arise from staring at Figure 1 and the like. The most extensively articulated explanations for political participation focus on explaining variation across people at a single moment of time, and these explanations are well-equipped and developed for this task; they are not, however well-equipped to help us understand most of the variation in individual-level political activity within a given place because variation is largely within people over time. Then I present evidence that most people are not steady participators, but rather the norm is for people to move into and out of political activity over their lives. The final questions of this paper are "What next?" and "What does this mean?" Building on the past literature that has taught us so much about who participates, this paper proposes that we understand that work as telling us about the *potential* of a person to engage in civic activity, but that a fuller story of political participation in the lives of individuals requires attention to the *events* that *precipitate* actual moments of activity. Finally, I point out some new questions about participation and democracy raised by these new descriptions.

2 Bases for expectations about political participation.

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

2.1 Survey Research

Most of what social scientists understand about political participation has relied on cross-sectional survey data. Based on such data, the most comprehensive theory of political participation to date is the "resource mobilization theory" proposed and tested by Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995), which built on previous

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

work emphasizing resources such as Verba and Nie (1972) and Verba, Nie and Kim (1978). According to this theory, those individuals who participate are likely to be those who have "resources" such as money, time, and skills. Verba, Schlozman and Brady's nearly encyclopedæic book also accounts for the importance of "mobilization" — that is, people (usually acting as part of organizations) asking other people to do some particular political act — thus reinforcing and confirming the findings of Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) and setting the stage for an ever refined understanding of such asking in the many field experiments referenced below. In addition, Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Berry (1996) have shown that, beyond resources or mobilization, social status also matters: individuals who know the mayor, for example, are much more likely to call the mayor than those individuals who are not part of the mayor's social circle. Put together, these and other recent works have explained much about exactly why education has been found to correlate strongly with participation across both time and place since the beginning of quantitative social science. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) summarize the state of the art succinctly:

> ... When political participation requires that knowledge and cognitive skills be brought to bear, people with more education are more likely to participate than people with less education. Participation, that is, requires resources that are appropriate to the task.
>
> On the other hand, education also indicates both the likelihood that people will be contacted by political leaders and the likelihood that they will respond. Educated people travel in social circles that make them targets of both direct and indirect mobilization. Politicians and interest groups try to activate people they know personally and professionally. (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993, page 76)

Yet more recent work on genetics and personality continues to add to the cross-sectional story: even controlling for education and thus for attributes like skills, politically relevant social network position, and socio-economic status, turnout is more similar between genetically identical twins than it is between twins who are not genetically the same (Fowler, Baker and Dawes, 2008); and people who have patient and/or altruistic personalities are also more likely to get involved in politics (Fowler and Kam, 2007, 2006).[4] All of these major studies (which are merely some of the most recent, well-cited and comprehensive of hundreds) rely on comparisons between people at a single point in time to understand political involvement.

[4]Also aiming to understand why education divides those who participate from those who do not, Kam and Palmer (2008) suggest that education itself is not a *cause* but rather a "*proxy* for other, often unobserved, preadult experiences and predispositions."(612). Although Henderson and Chatfield (2009) have cast some doubt on the details of that analaysis, the main idea of comparing the educated with the less- or un-educated remains in line with the aims of the bulk of research in this field.

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

2.2 Mobilization

One strong result of research over the last decade and a half is that if people are asked to participate, they are more apt to do so than if they are not asked (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Brady, Schlozman and Verba, 1999) — this is the "mobilization" finding referenced above.[5] In addition, Campbell (2003*a*,*b*) has shown that the aggregate participation of older people rises during moments when social security policies are attacked in Congress, and that, thus, the threat of policy change itself (within the context of organized groups) can stimulate letter-writing and other protest.

A recent and exciting body of research has tackled the problem of disentangling the causal effects of mobilization from those of skills, status, and resources using field experiments.[6] These studies add great clarity to our understanding of voter turnout efforts in the contemporary United States, although they tend to be motivated by the same main theoretical concerns animating the rest of the literature: (1) the authors worry the idea that the poor and otherwise economically or socially disadvantaged seem less likely to exercise their rights as democratic citizens (thereby, perhaps, perpetuating disadvantage by adding political disadvantage to the low status mix), and (2) political scientists interested in helping campaigns would like to know how to increase voting.[7]

[5]It is worth pointing to a few other articles concerned with the temporal characteristics of political participation, but not with the stimulation of episodes of action. Gerber, Green and Shachar (2003),Plutzer (2002), and Green and Shachar (2000) show that vote turnout becomes a habit over time, Berinsky, Burns and Traugott (2001) show that people who are already voters can be induced to continue voting in subsequent years if the act of voting is made easier (by using mail-in ballots); and Hansen and Bowers (2009) also suggest that mobilization in-person helps those who have already voted rather than encouraging new voters to join the electorate.

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

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

2.3 Social Movements

The literature that investigates when large social movements begin and end is very relevant to the study of political participation but is not, in itself, enough to guide future work on the movement and non-movement (and electoral and non-electoral) activities by which ordinary individuals engage in the public sphere. That is, even if the historic moment must be propitious in many structural (political, institutional) (McAdam and Tilly, 2001; Tarrow, 1989; McAdam, 1982; Piven and Cloward, 1978; Mccarthy and Zald, 1977) and cultural (Benford and Snow, 2000) ways before a set of otherwise frustrated or relatively deprived (Gurr, 1970) people can be predicted to come together to rebel or otherwise act, not all deprived individuals get involved all the time. Moreover, joining a movement is merely one way for an individual to participate in politics; joining itself is an act that represents a promise or expectation of more future actions, but understanding why a movement member acts at one time and not another (or continues acting over a long period time and suddenly stops) is not the same as understanding the decision to promise unspecified future activity. That said, knowing about the process by which movements recruit and retain rebels (and the process by which states attempt to foil such action) (Chong, 1991; Lichbach, 1995; Olson, 1965) ought to add something to our understanding of how action is spurred or inhibited. For example, Chong (1991) teaches us about how joining can translate into sustained, high cost, activity by the ways in which individuals value their reputations; Olson (1965) reminds us about the free-rider problem and the importance of selective incentives; and Klandermans (1996, 1984) and Klandermans and Oegema (1987) show us how individuals can both value the common good (rather than narrow material utility) but also act rationally and even strategically as movement participants toward such ends. None of these types of work, however, addresses directly the question: "How should we organize our research so as to understand the political activity of ordinary individuals?" Nor do they address it in the generality required to understand individual activity *both* during historical moments of great turmoil (say, deciding to join the march from Selma to Montgomery in March of 1965) *and* when the greater historical import of one's actions is less clear (say, going to a city council meeting to support or oppose a particular local policy).

2.4 Personality Psychology

Lewin's equation of $B = f(P, E)$ (Lewin, 2008, 166) seems well suited in a general way to the problem of understanding when people might be apt to begin and end moments of activity. Walter Mischel has particularly elaborated the implications of Lewin's work and directly addresses the dynamics of behavior over time within individuals:

> ...behavior depends on stimulus situations and is specific to the situation...Individuals show far less cross- situational consistency in their behavior than has been assumed by trait-state theories. Behavior de-

> pends on stimulus situation and is specific to the situation (Mischel, 1968, 177).

and

> We may predict best if we know what each situation means to the individual, and consider the interaction of the person and the situation, rather than concentrating either on the situation itself or on the individual in an environmental and social vacuum (Mischel, 1971, 149).

Mischel (2004) has recently also proposed that we think about people as exhibiting more or less regular collections of "if-then" behaviors — so that one can think of a kind of taxonomy of dynamics. The dilemma with both Mischel and Lewin for our purposes, however, is that they can be boiled down to (in an overly blithe way), "every person in every moment is different" or a categorization of people into types reminiscent of the "Big Five" common personality types (See, for a recent example, Mondak and Halperin, 2008). Perhaps this approach of categorizing collections of dynamic trajectories into types will be of use in future research on political activity — yet, it is not clear how such work directly applies now.

2.5 Summary of Expectations

What would theories of individual action based on resources, mobilization, status or theories of movements (or group action) suggest we ought to see if we could observe political participation over time within the lives of ordinary Americans? Most of the cross-sectional research that I described above is predominantly concerned about inequality between those who participate and those who do not. This concern is echoed in the title of Robert Dahl's seminal book "Who Governs?" (1961), and Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) focus explicitly on this problem as they develop resource mobilization theory: "Since democracy implies not only governmental responsiveness to citizen interests but also equal consideration of the interests of each citizen, democratic participation must also be equal." (1). The problem is, as they see it, that the reality is far from this ideal. The few people who participate at any given time in a democracy are quite different from those who do not, and so, "...the voice of the people as expressed through participation comes from a limited and unrepresentative set of citizens" (2). This quote is representative of the main moral concern animating the research on political participation. This focus on inequality, and the consistent findings that the educated, rich, and socially connected are much more likely to participate in politics than the uneducated, the poor, and socially disconnected, all paint a picture in which a small subset of the population engage actively, and more or less constantly, in politics — essentially ruling the large mass of the people who do not get involved. In the dynamic context, this would suggest that we ought to see some few individuals nearly constantly involved, with most of the rest of people nearly completely inactive. The few studies that have examined participation over time, focusing only on voting, support this expectation since these early results suggest that voting is quite habitual (Gerber, Green and Shachar, 2003; Plutzer,

2002; Green and Shachar, 2000) and can be made more so by making voting easier (Berinsky, Burns and Traugott, 2001). And even the most critical engagements with time-constant attributes like education reinforce this picture, for example, by suggesting that it is not education that matters but pre-adult socialization (and thus, the social status of parents) (Kam and Palmer, 2008).

3 Puzzling Empirical Regularities

In fact, these expectations are not borne out when they are matched against the best (and, to my knowledge, only) currently available data on political participation beyond voting as it changes over time within the lives of individuals. That is, although the operational interpretations of past cross-sectional work are sensible ("A person with a college degree ought to be more likely to call an elected official/protest/vote than a person with only a high school degree."), extrapolations of these theories to generate expectations about how moments when a person with a college degree participates compare to moments when such a person does not act are not grounded in systematic observation. Even if such extrapolations are intuitive and possible in theory, they run against the best available evidence on what a life-time of political activity within a person actually looks like as shown in Figure 1. Rather than repeat Figure 1 here, I include just a reminder in the form of a labeled version of the figure for Person 354, here, in figure 2.

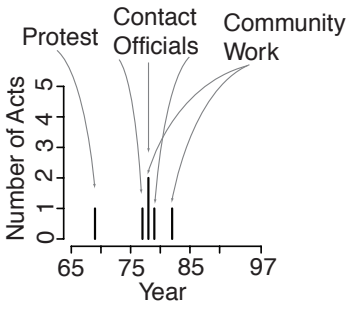


Figure 2: Non-electoral activity for person 354 from the Political Socialization Study (Jennings and Stoker, 1997).

Using data such as that shown in Figure 1 or other panel studies, we know that (1) that participation occurs sporadically across the lives of many individuals Sigelman et al. (1985); Dahl (1961), and (2) that spells of participation tend to last only one year if not less — a finding constrained by the fact that the year is the minimum temporal resolution of this dataset (Bowers, 2003).

Of course, Figure 1 is only a small sample from the Political Socialization study. It is possible that, if one could somehow look directly at all 935 graphs, we would draw other conclusions. For this reason, in the next section I will show a series of results using all of the Political Socialization respondents, as well as three of the NES panel studies, to emphasize what I take to be a fact: political participation in the U.S. is a dynamic process that occurs as short, sparse moments of activity in

the lives of many individuals. I am not alone in thinking that this is so. Sigelman et al. (1985) showed that, out of 10 elections (1978-1982), only 5.5% of registered voters in Kentucky voted in all 10, while 28.2% voted in one or two elections out of the 10 recorded in the state administrative database (from their Table 1, page 752). Dahl (1961) notes several times in his landmark study of governance in New Haven that most ordinary people move into and out of the political sphere over time. He says that the use of "resources" (like money, skills, and status) varies

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

I will propose a rough way to thinking about the etiology of participation in § 4. For now, however, let me make the case that in the USA since 1950, (1) most people do not participate most of the time although many participate once in a while, and (2) vanishingly few people participate all of the time. By "participate" I refer to the rather narrow range of non-voting activities that our large scale surveys have measured over time. Voting itself is much less interesting or is perhaps a counter-example to the evidence about political participation more generally as a sporadic process. Both in the Political Socialization Study (Bowers, 2003; Jennings, Stoker and Bowers, 2009) and elsewhere (Gerber, Green and Shachar, 2003; Plutzer, 2002; Green and Shachar, 2000) it is clear that most people in the U.S. become relatively steady voters or steady non-voters after age 35 or so. Yet, "relatively" is an important qualifier. For example, in their study of voting by mail in Oregon, Berinsky, Burns and Traugott (2001) found that making voting easier mainly served to remind the relatively steady voters to skip fewer elections. And analyses of the NES data similar to those I present below also show that the voters in one panel period are never identical to the voters in other panel periods. I do not engage deeply with voting here because there were only 8 measured moments of voting in the political socialization survey compared to 33 moments of other kinds of activity. Voting may well be an important comparison to these activities in that it is so highly institutionalized and relatively low cost but still does show similar, if more attenuated, patterns of people acting and then stopping even if the baseline levels are much higher than they are for the other kinds of activities.

3.1 Irregular Participation in the Political Socialization Study

One way to discover whether participation is really sporadic in some overall sense is to ask: To what extent does participation at one moment relate to activity in the previous moment? If people who participated last year also tend to participate this year and in subsequent years, then participation cannot be seen as sporadic, and explanations of dynamics based on time-constant attributes of peo-

ple (like education) are plausible.[8] If past participation is not highly associated with present participation, then something else that changes over time must be stimulating the activity. This is not to say that education may not play an important role: whether as a proxy or in other ways, education definitely matters. It is just that it is not logically reasonable to suppose that changing education causes a moment of participation to occur in the way flipping a light switch causes light to turn on in a room (education, in that example, might be more like the flow of electricity to the house — intermittent electricity makes it harder for the light switch to work).

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

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

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

Out of all 30855 person-years (935 respondents $\times$ 33 years), 27090 included 0 acts of community work followed by 0 acts of community work, 903 included 0 acts followed by 1 act, and 890 included 1 act followed by 0 acts. It is usually easier to look at this kind of table as a "transition matrix" which uses the column percentages of Table 1 as an estimate of the probabilities of observing the different types of movements between states. This matrix is shown as $\mathbf{T}$.

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

Of the people who did 0 acts of community work in the past year, 3.2% did one act in the current year. Of the people who did 1 act in the past, 42.5% of them did 0 acts in the present. Notice the large numbers on the main diagonal. These numbers imply that among the few people who manage to start participating at a certain rate (say doing 1, 2, or 3 acts in a year), many are apt to continue — at least across adjacent periods. Note that overall, about 65% of the Class of 1965 reported doing at least one act of Community Work across the 33 years of the

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

study – although the amount of participation in that group in any single year ranged from 1% (at age 19) to 19% (at age 31) with a mean of 9% engaged in any given year.[9]

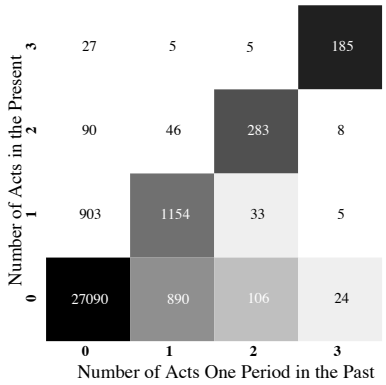


Figure 3: Transitions into and out of participation in Community Work from one year to the next for the Class of 1965 over the period from 1965 to 1997. Darker squares denote show more frequently observed past-to-present transitions.

Figure 3 summarizes the information in **T** and Table 1 graphically — using shaded squares to provide a quick sense of which kinds of transitions are most common. The shading of the squares is proportional to the number of person-years in that transition-category. The area above the diagonal represents movements from less activity one period in the past to more activity in the present. The diagonal represents continuance of the same level of activity across adjacent periods. 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, **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

[9] 35% of this generation reported no community work over the study period, 20% reported only one act of community work, about 13% reported doing two acts, 7% reported three acts, and about 20% reported anywhere from 4 to 19 acts. For more detailed information about participation over the lives of the individuals in the Political Socialization Study see Jennings and Stoker (2004); Bowers (2003); Jennings (1979); Beck and Jennings (1979, 1982); Jennings (1987).

activity.

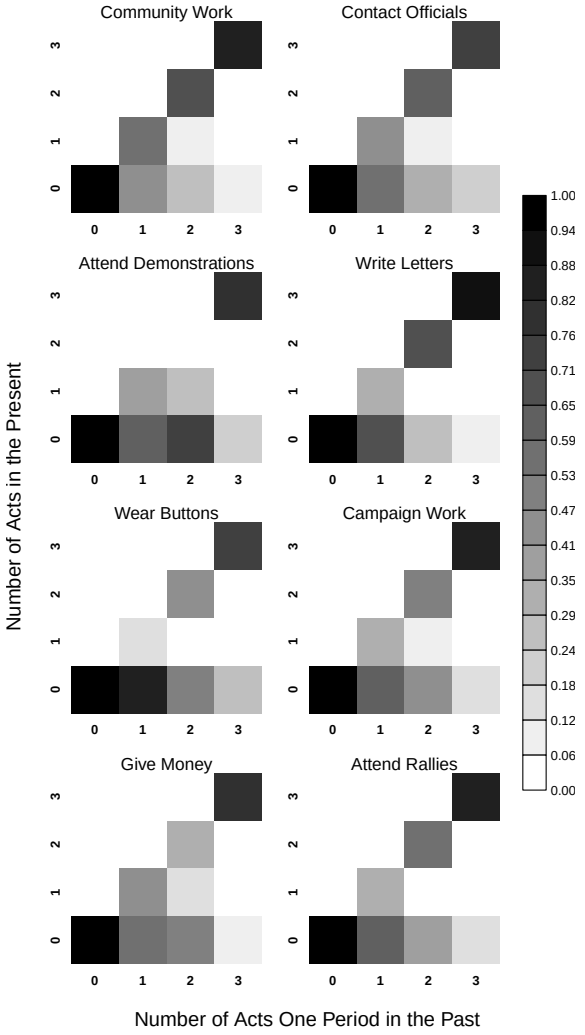


Figure 4: Transitions into and out of participation from one year to the next for the Class of 1965 over the period from 1965–1997 for non-electoral activities (left column), and over 1965–1982 for electoral activities (right column). The colors show the proportion of person-years where activity in the present (shown on the y-axes) followed activity one period in the past (shown on the x-axes). The key at right shows the proportions represented by the colors.

Of course, working with others in the community is merely one kind of political activity. The Political Socialization Study measured 8 kinds of activities other than voting.[10] Due to a paucity of data I focus attention on non-voting participation in this paper. That said, among types non-voting participation perhaps community work is particularly sporadic as compared to the others (certainly it would be as compared to voting). To assess the evidence in favor of the claim that most

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

people do not participate most of the time, but many people participate at least once or twice in a decade, Figure 4 presents transition plots for each of the acts of participation measured in the Political Socialization dataset. The transition matrix **T** for *Community Work* maps onto the panel in the upper left corner of the Figure 4. The highest value (.96) is colored black and occurs at "present participation"= 0 following "past participation"= 0. As the legend shows, the darkness of color is proportional to the values in the squares, so the dark black squares contain values near 1 and the light gray (and white) squares contain values nearer to 0.

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

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

Figure 4 tells a story where one generation's participation appears sporadic. And, most of the person-years in the dataset contain zeros followed by zeros — that is, non-voting political participation is rare. It is possible that the appearance of dark squares on the diagonal is an artifact of the survey procedure. Respondents were allowed to name ranges of dates as they remembered their past activities: some respondents may have used ranges to mean "every year between X and Y dates," other respondents probably used ranges to mean "some year in between X and Y dates, I don't remember exactly." Unfortunately, given the data, there is no way to distinguish between these two possibilities. In the end, the fact that some very few people, over very few years, engaged in rather intense multi-year episodes of participation does not affect the overall conclusion that participation is not even close to constant over the lifespan, but instead occurs overwhelmingly as short bursts separated by long periods of inactivity.

3.2 Irregular Participation in the American National Election Studies

This pattern of sporadic participation from year to year is not merely an artifact of the particular cohorts in the Political Socialization study. The panel studies conducted by the National Election Studies (Campbell et al., 1999; Miller, Miller and Kline, 1999; Miller et al., 1999) show similar patterns over the short-term. These datasets have the strength that the respondents were only asked about their

participation in the past 12 months, thus forgetting is probably a minor problem and dating the participation to a particular year is easier than in the Political Socialization Study. The weakness of these panel studies, however, is that they only cover 3 waves, usually 2 years apart asking about participation only every other year rather than yearly. That said, they are still useful for checking and corroborating the longer term longitudinal data from the Political Socialization study.

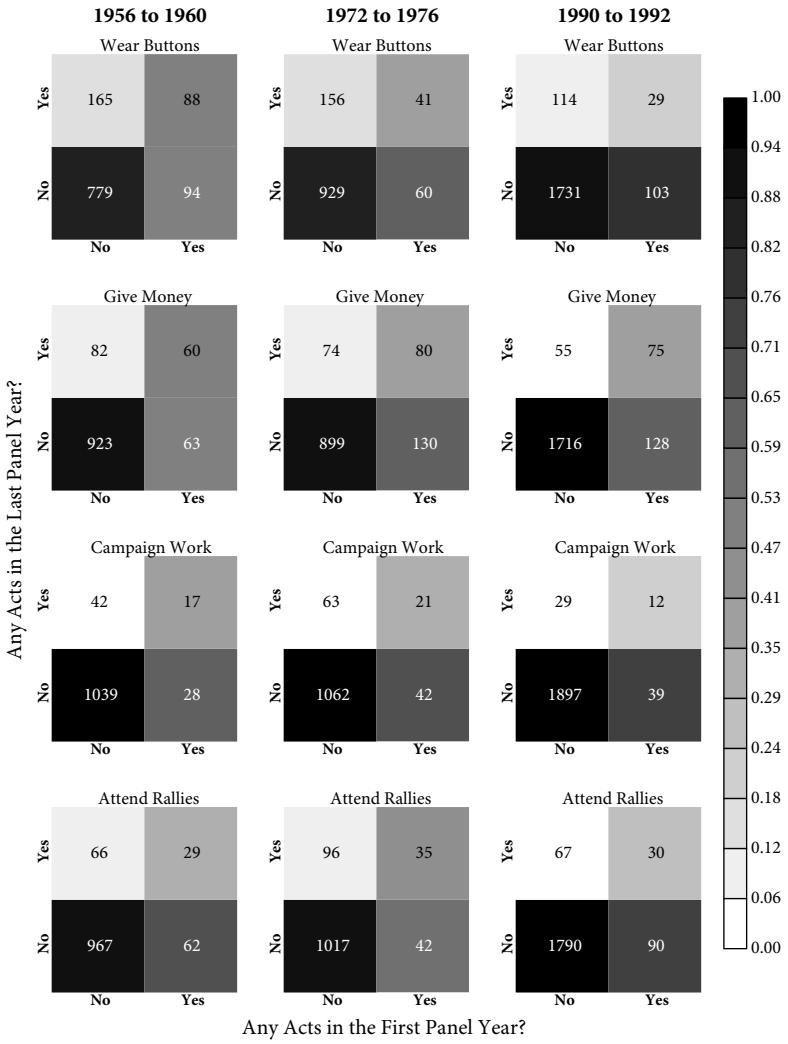


Figure 5: Transitions into and out of electoral activity participation across American National Election Study panel years. The colors show the proportion of respondents whose activity in the *last* panel year (1960, 1976, or 1992) (shown on the y-axes) followed activity in the *first* panel year (1956,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

Figure 5 shows the kinds of information about participation available from three

of these datasets. The 1956–1960 NES Panel Study is in the left column of figures, the 1972–1976 NES Panel Study is in the middle column, and the 1990–1992 NES Panel Study is on the right. Rather than person-years, these figures are based on persons — and the numbers of persons in each cell of the transition table is shown in each block.

These figures show that most respondents in the NES Panel Studies did not engage in electoral participation in either the first or the last years in the studies (shown by the dark black boxes at (no, no) for each activity). I focus here on the first and last years of the panels because these questions were not all uniformly asked during middle years of the panels. 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 1956–1960 panel. Of the NES respondents who reported wearing buttons in the 1956 campaign, about 52% (n=94) did not wear them in the 1960 campaign, but about 48% (n=88) did it again. Of the NES respondents who reported donating money in the 1956 campaign, about 51% (n=63) did not give money in the 1960 campaign, but about 49% (n=60) did it again. Comparing within rows of this figure, one sees differences between historical periods for button wearing and money giving, but not for campaign work or rally attendance. Overall, this figure corroborates Figure 1: non-voting participation in the USA seems both rare in any one cross-section of the public (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995), but also is sporadic within people across time — a finding that is the same across historical periods.

It is also possible that previous work can completely explain the patterns shown here — mobilization is a prominent current explanation for participation. And, although changes in socio-economic status and skills occur too rarely to explain these patterns, changes in mobilization can be plausible causal factors.[11] 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. Tragically, the Political Socialization data do not contain measures of mobilization.

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

[11] I will engage more directly with what makes a causal factor or variable more or less plausible a priori in § 4.

Table 2: Percent Participating Without Mobilization

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

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

calls to action, and when they might tend to accept rather than refuse them.[12]

So far I have shown that what previous data analyses and theory would lead us to expect is not found in the best available data on the dynamics of political participation. For example, previous work emphasizes the importance of education for political participation, but people do not gain and lose education from year to year while they do enter and exit from political involvement from year to year. The findings focused on interventions in the lives of citizens to stimulate vote turnout has so far not focused on political participation more broadly, and more importantly, cumulation of knowledge from those studies is hampered by the lack of a framework to tie together the many distinct findings. In addition, the forces at work to encourage or discourage protest or letters to members of Congress are qualitatively different from the forces engaged in stimulating or surpressing turnout: organized groups, the law, and the media all relate to campaigns differently from they way that they relate to non-voting and non-election related turnout. Of course the general problem is that a theory that relies on time-constant attributes of individuals cannot plausibly explain the sporadic, time-varying patterns that represent the "facts" about political participation. Of course, this paper does not present a theory. Rather, the job of this paper is to describe political participation as a target for theory in a new way: in addition to producing theory explaining differences across people at one point in time, I hope we begin to produce theories explaining difference across times within people, and theories tying the two types of phenomenon together (how the dynamics within people are crucially constrained by differences across people; how different types of people are more or less able to resist interruptions to spells of political action, or are more or less likely to act when they feel they ought to do so.)

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

4 Precipitating versus Potentiating Factors:

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

In the case of political participation, nearly all of the attention has been on potentiating factors with only recent attention to precipitating factors of voting, and those factors having mostly to do with mobilization. The focus on time-constant factors has been so overwhelming and the set of findings from field experiments are so new that "theories of political participation" almost exclusively refer to the potentiating side.[13] That is, education increases the potential for a person to get involved in politics at any one time, but education itself cannot catalyse a moment of action. A knock on the door by a campaign canvasser is a good candidate for a precipitant, as would be some other event understood by the person to be of political import. Other events might matter not by being understood as politically relevant but by changing the preconditions — the pervasive effects of residential mobility on vote turnout and other types of participation might be understood in this way (above and beyond the relationship to the need to re-register). Thus, a compelling explanation of what precipitates (or inhibits) episodes of political participation it must involve factors that change over time — events versus conditions. Second, it must also involve the fact that resources do matter — given the massive amount of research that has shown this to be so.

The most plausible account for the sporadic patterns in Figure 1 is an approach that is based on events that precipitate political participation. That is, moments of political participation must have precipitating factors associated with them, just as we know that they have potentiating factors associated with them. If political participation does occur in short, sporadic bursts, what might provide the

[13] 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.

stimuli for such actions? It is hard to imagine that individuals would generate these stimuli themselves in a static environment. Rather, I suggest that we see these spikes of activity as reactions to a changing environment; furthermore, the changes in the environment are discrete and abrupt, not smooth or slow. Following common usage I call such exogenous shocks, "events". An event occurs whenever something in the environment of a person changes. Thus, a pothole forming in the road is such an event, as is the arrival of a mobilizing neighbor, election day, the publication of a dramatic story in the media, or a cross-burning on one's lawn. Events can also inhibit participation. In preliminary work, I have shown that crossburnings can both stimulate *and* depress political activity among African-Americans (Bowers, 1997), and that childbearing inhibits participation in the short term among women but spurs it among men (Bowers, 2003; Bowers and Gallagher, 2006).[14] And social movement-caused events, such as protests, can be their own impetus to individual action (Kaplan and Brady, 2004; Lohmann, 1994). I suspect that the sequence of participation for any given person depends crucially on the supply of events in his or her environment and life, given extant conditions like historical period or political campaigns.

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

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

5 What Next?

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

[14] For similar cross-sectional findings on parenthood, see Burns, Schlozman and Verba (2001). Notice also how "child-birth" is a kind of event which can stop (or perhaps start) political action, but "parenthood", like "well-educated" is a kind of condition which might make certain kinds of political activity more or less likely.

5.1 Participation, Equality, and Democracy

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

Imagine that we discovered that 50% of people participated using many cross-sectional surveys over many years — that is, we were very confident that 50% of people got involved and 50% did not. What does this information mean about the health of the democracy within which the research occurred? Figure 6 shows three of the longitudinal patterns consistent with this finding. The top row suggests a kind of oligarchy of the active: only one kind of person ever participates and that person participates constantly — the 50% finding reveals merely that half of the population consists of this group. The middle row would also tell survey researchers that 50% participate in any one survey, but now the entire population is involved 10 years out of 20. The bottom row merely makes the selection of 10 years out of 20 random — thus allowing some people to participate in multi-year spells. And, of course, one could imagine many other scenarios: for example, if each person acted based on a coin-flip, this might lead to more or fewer participatory years than strictly 10 out of 20.

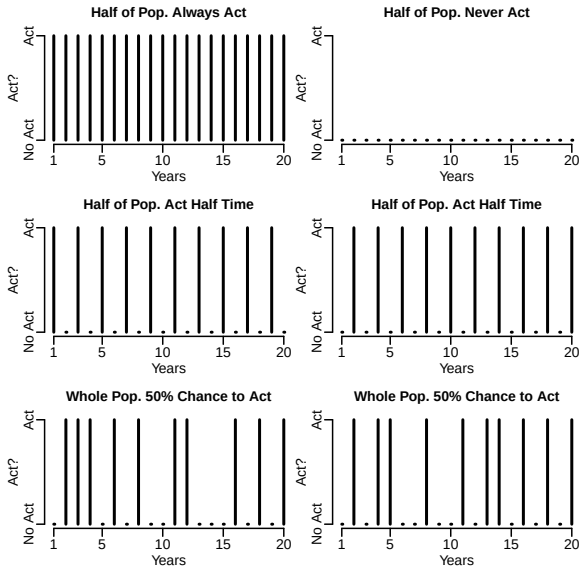


Figure 6: Three democracies from one cross-sectional finding that 50% of the sample was involved in politics assuming two equal sized groups.

Which scenario seems best? Of course it depends on the purposes of this participation and the theory of politics and life guiding one's answers. Manin's (1997) discussion of the importance of lot over election in Athens suggests that Aristotle and other Athenians would have seen either of the sporadically participating scenarios as best for government. However, Manin also highlights that concern for stability and competence led many subsequent democracies (Venice, Florence, Rome) to combine institutions like lot — encouraging a flow of people into and out of public service — with institutions like elections, which helped ensure that highly competent or otherwise high status people run the government. To the extent that the half of the population acting is somehow the best governors then one may worry about the cross-sectional finding hiding the middle or bottom scenarios. Of course, other points of view, such as those argued by Pateman (1972) let alone those she cites, might argue that the best government as well as the best individual life is the life lived in constant political action.

And, of course, I have blurred some distinctions here between the exercise of "voice" by ordinary people and actual involvement in legislation or other functions of government by discussing the Athenian and Italian republic examples. And it is beyond the scope of this paper to answer the question about how much participation is best.

5.2 Policy Implications

Although the question of how much participation is best remains unanswered, civic groups and campaigns aiming to increase the extent to which the electorate represents the citizenry will continue to try to improve turnout (or other kinds of participation). A focus on cross-sectional indicators, however, can cause such mobilization efforts to backfire. Figure 7 shows just how this can happen.

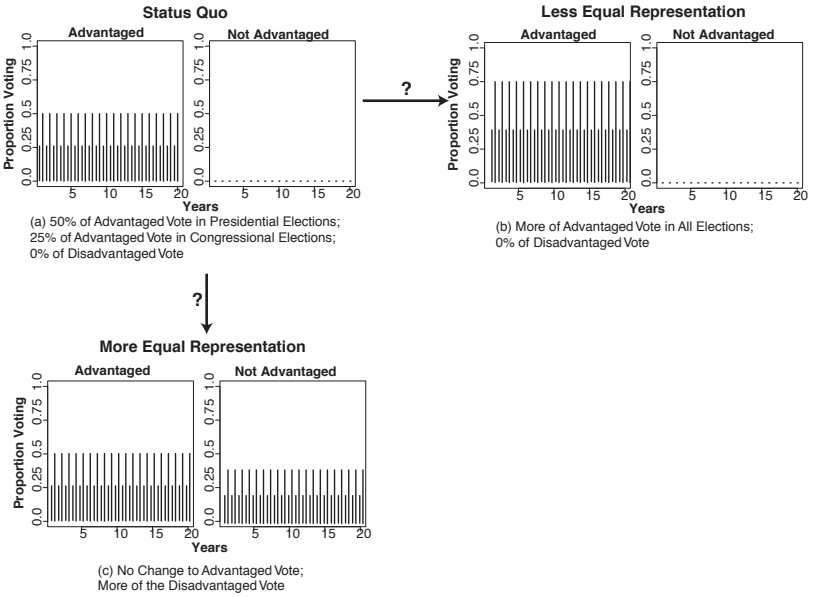


Figure 7: Get-out-the-vote efforts may either increase or decrease the representativeness of the electorate.

For example, Berinsky, Burns and Traugott (2001) suggest that the outcome of making the costs of voting lower (by allowing voting by mail) is to prevent people who already have histories of voting from forgetting — thus turnout overall increases, but the electorate is less representative. Hansen and Bowers (2009) and Bowers and Hansen (2006) support this finding with the suggestion that, to the extent that GOTV efforts work, they work to enhance the participation of previous voters, not to encourage new people to join the electorate. Figure 7 shows how a hypothetical scenario where a Status Quo exists in which only the "advantaged" vote, but then voter mobilization occurs which can increase overall turnout either by making the electorate less representative (the arrow to the right-hand panel) or by making the electorate more representative (the arrow to the lower-panel).

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

5.3 More theory=Better

One might expect the end of this paper to call for more data. Instead, I call for more theory. Let me explain.

Any ordinary person inspecting her own political participation will notice that it is sporadic. Why would I need to go through such lengths to convince academics of this fact? The reason is that "political participation" is an object of theorizing by us. We care about it because we care about ordinary people and we care about politics (and we have been taught to care by centuries of theorists arguing about the topic). Most people other than Constant (1988) think that good governments (and/or the good life) involve some amount of political activity by citizens (more or less, and precisely who, and how and why are debated among many schools of thought). Thus, an obviously important question about the goodness of our government is "who participates." Asking that question, of course, means that we must measure "participation" (quoted because it is a concept), and if what we care about are differences between people, and if we have limited resources, we devote disciplinary attention to a very specific and limited (and useful for many purposes) way of measuring what we care about given extant technology. So, we do a single survey (perhaps just to explore the idea that pervasive differences in participation may exist between people, knowing that our own personal experience may mislead us, at least regarding the rest of the population). If we are successful (in that we do find such differences), then the survey design and items we used are apt to be used again. And, eventually, if one desires to study "participation" one rapidly learns that this mostly means voting, or the other 8 items on the National Election Studies survey, and it means studying cross-sections. A sign of a good research design at some point becomes using the National Election Studies designs and items (since they are by now so well-tested and understood).

And, resources being scarce, prudent money is spent continuing the research of the past. And thus, theory-driven research, pursued scientifically, leads to (1) operationalism (i.e. the blurring of distinctions between concepts and their different manifestations — i.e. making "math ability" equivalent to SAT math score) and (2) a narrowing of targets of theory/objects of study.

Feyerabend (1963) uses a section label to summarize this process: "Contemporary Empiricism Liable to Lead to Establishment of a Dogmatic Metaphysics." As a social scientist, I doubt many of us will argue that "political participation" is entirely and only what the NES measures, so "dogmatic metaphysics" is too strong. Yet, the fact that our own work has so diverged from what is plain to see suggests that the general criticism that Feyerabend aims at physics is relevant to the study of political participation.

The solution, as Feyerabend (1963) puts it, is "tolerance in matters empirical" — but what this really means is more theory. As long as we have enough theories being pursued more or less tenaciously, we are going to be building lots of new observations that are relevant to them (and more importantly to the important topics that we are developing these theories to understand). Lots of models/theories, even lots of seemingly incommensurable ones, mean that a discipline is vigorous and knowledge is progressing. The biggest danger to the study of political participation is, from this perspective, a unitary theory which generates data from designs built to shed light on that theory and thus, if tested enough, cannot help but support the theory merely through chance.[15]

Thus, while it is a shame that we do not have a constantly operating socialization study, refreshed with new cross-sections to run in parallel with the National Election Studies, what is more important for intellectual progress is more theory.[16]

I began this paper clearly saying that I do not propose a theory here. I see this paper as providing a hint of the raw material for what I hope will be many future theories.

5.4 Finally

Political participation understood as a dynamic process within the lives of individuals is different from political participation thought of as a dividing line in society. Both perspectives on participation are important: political participation is an important way in which power and influence are distributed in a society at any given moment, and in any given moment some people tend to have dis-

[15] Imagine 20 randomized experiments each assessing the same stimulus which, in fact, has no effect. In a series of well-done experiments and associated carefully done hypotheses tests, 1 out of those 20 will encourage the analyst to reject the null of no effects at $\alpha = .05$.

[16] Rolling panels in the NES is a great start on this, but following people for 6 years is not enough.

proportionate power and others tend to have much less.[17] Moment-to-moment changes in participation cannot be caused, in a proximate sense, by attributes of people which change slowly if at all over their lives — we require catalysts or precipitants to make sense of these dynamics. Of course, instead of precipitants, we might also appeal to some underlying stochastic process. For example, each emission of a radioactive particles by a chunks of Uranium tends to be explained as a random event — a Poisson process, for example, will produce series of spikes like those seen in Figure 1. But, such explanations tend to come very close to defining away the problem (i.e. calling it "noise" or "residual" or "random" is one way to call something "not interesting"). Of course, the study of radioactivity manages to make the randomness itself interesting, and perhaps that is another fruitful direction for social scientists interested in the study of political activity over the life-span. In fact, if we discovered that these patterns of participation over the life span looked as if they could have been generated from a random number generator, that in and of itself is politically and theoretically interesting: Should citizens not participating by lot behave as if they are?

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

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

questions require new data and designs for answers.

Focusing on political participation as a dynamic process opens up an exciting research agenda. As we add moving pictures to our library of snapshots, we may gain new perspectives about what political participation is and how we should understand what we think we already know. The question of "who participates" can be, and ought to be, expanded to address what stimulates, inhibits or sustains political participation over time within the lives of ordinary people.

Appendix A: Measures of Political Participation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The following questions were asked about such activities in the 1973, 1982,

and 1997 waves of the Study of Political Socialization for the panel of respondents who were 18 years old in 1965:

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

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

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

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

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

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