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Political Participation over the Life Cycle

Jennifer L. Erkulwater
University of Richmond, jerkulwa@richmond.edu

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Political Participation over the Life Cycle

Elders tut-tutting about the younger generation and its lack of political engagement is an old but recurrent theme:

> The more I am around this generation of college students, the more I am . . . baffled . . . because they are so much less radical and politically engaged than they need to be. . . . America needs a jolt of the idealism, activism and outrage. . . . That's what twentysomethings are for—to light a fire under the country. But they can't e-mail it in.[1]

But then, again, the same was said about Gen X:

> How depressing. A generation ago, young people clamored to reform government and end a war, taking to the streets to fight what they regarded as wrong-headed policies and demanding that the voting age be lowered to 18 so more of them could be enfranchised. Now, many simply tune out politics and tune in TV. . . . That's too bad for democracy.[2]

Indeed, this tune was sung about what ultimately became known as the Greatest Generation:

Jennifer Erkulwater is coauthor of this chapter.

1. Thomas L. Friedman, "Generation Q," *New York Times*, October 10, 2007.
2. "Apathy on the Upswing," *Hartford Courant*, February 3, 1995, p. A14.

> The depression generation has scarcely had a chance to be lost. . . . It would be a magnificent thing if many could not only participate, but participate in a real cause rather than in a hollow one.[3]

These periodic lamentations asking, "Why can't they be like we were?"—with or without the follow-up, "perfect in every way"—alert us to another basis for inequality of political voice. Although we have paid attention to group differences in political activity on the basis of race or ethnicity, gender, and especially socio-economic status (SES), we have so far ignored such disparities among age groups, disparities that will become especially important in Chapter 16 when we consider inequalities in Internet-based political participation. The participatory deficit of citizens who have recently entered the electorate raises the same kinds of questions we have been bringing to inequalities of political voice on the basis of socio-economic status: How do we account for disparities in political activity on the basis of age? What are their implications for the representation of the opinions, concerns, and needs of all?

Life-Cycle, Period, and Cohort Effects

Answering these questions poses many methodological challenges. The most familiar is the difficulty of disentangling life-cycle, cohort, and period effects.[4] *Life-cycle effects* refer to the social, psychological, and physical changes that take place as individuals age. In any society, particular experiences tend to correspond to particular stages in the life cycle. For example, in America most people leave school during their late teens or early to midtwenties, and many people in their late forties or early fifties confront an empty nest for the first time. Researchers who study social domains as varied as criminal behavior and market behavior sometimes differentiate among the lasting impact throughout adulthood of what happens in childhood and adolescence; the ongoing changes in income, education, residence, family status, and other events that occur over the life cycle; and the impacts of such experiences as having actually committed a crime, purchased a product, or—more germane to our concerns—participated in politics.[5]

3. "Unfounded Generation," *New Republic*, July 11, 1934, p. 224.

4. The classic exposition of this problem is in Matilda White Riley, "Aging and Cohort Succession: Interpretations and Misinterpretations," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 37 (1973): 35–49.

5. A large literature distinguishes between the impact of "heterogeneity" and that of "state dependence" on behavior. *Heterogeneity* refers to those characteristics that persist over time

We should not exaggerate the extent to which age mates move in lockstep through common experiences. Members of a single cohort do not stay in step as they march, or saunter, toward developmental milestones,[6] and many of the differences within cohorts reflect differences among politically relevant groups rather than the idiosyncrasies of individual choice. For example, among low-skilled black men, high rates of imprisonment mean that incarceration has emerged as a stage in the life cycle, affecting family formation and employment patterns for decades afterward.[7] In addition, the patterns of delayed matriculation in college and the failure to graduate among those who enroll are more typical of men than of women, and especially of those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.[8] Among women, the tendency to put off childbearing is much more typical of well-educated women than of their less well-educated sisters.[9]

—either those that persist over a lifetime, such as the legacy of childhood (for example, heredity, parents' SES, childhood socialization, experience with student government and other activities during high school, and educational attainment) or those that persist over shorter but still significant periods of time, such as job status, educational attainment, marital status, or residency. *State dependence* focuses on "habituation" that occurs when the performance of a behavior changes the likelihood that a person will perform it again in the future. Those who perform criminal acts, for example, may develop a taste for crime or may learn that they can get away with it. Life-cycle effects may be the result either of relatively short-term changes in a person's characteristics or of habituation. See, for example, James J. Heckman, "Heterogeneity and State Dependence," in *Studies in Labor Markets*, ed. Sherwin Rosen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 91–140; Cheng Hsiao, *Analysis of Panel Data* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1986), chap. 4; Badi H. Baltagi, *Econometric Analysis of Panel Data* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1995), chap. 8; and Daniel Nagin and Raymond Paternoster, "Population Heterogeneity and State Dependence: State of the Evidence and Directions for Future Research," *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 16 (2000): 117–144.

6. See Glen Elder Jr., "Perspectives on the Life Course," in Glen Elder Jr., *Life Course Dynamics: Trajectories and Transitions, 1968–1980* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 31–36, and Ronald R. Rindfuss, C. Gray Swicegood, and Rachel A. Rosenfeld, "Disorder in the Life Course: How Common and Does It Matter?" *American Sociological Review* 52 (1987): 785–801.

7. Becky Pettit and Bruce Western, "Mass Imprisonment and the Life Course: Race and Class Inequality in U.S. Incarceration," *American Sociological Review* 69 (2004): 151–169.

8. See, for example, Robert Bozick and Stefanie DeLuca, "Better Late than Never? Delayed Enrollment in the High School to College Transition," *Social Forces* 84 (2005): 531–554, and John Bound, Michael F. Lovenheim, and Sarah Turner, "Why Have College Completion Rates Declined? An Analysis of Changing Student Preparation and Collegiate Resources," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 2 (2010): 129–157.

9. Ronald R. Rindfuss, S. Philip Morgan, and Kate Offutt, "Education and the Changing Age Pattern of American Fertility: 1963–1989," *Demography* 33 (1996): 277–290.

We must also understand that the participatory consequences of life-cycle events are not necessarily uniform across age mates. For example, the usual assumption is that marriage and family deepen one's commitment to the community and thus enhance political activity. However, among those under age thirty, marriage and children are associated with lower rates of participation, presumably as the result of selection processes such that many who delay these milestones of adulthood have other characteristics, in particular educational attainment, that are germane to participation.[10] Furthermore, marriage and especially having small children at home are associated with greater workforce commitment for men and the opposite for women, with, in turn, implications for the accumulation of such work-based participatory factors as the development of civic skills and exposure to requests for political activity.[11] Thus two of the most significant milestones in emerging adulthood work, on average, in opposite ways for women and men. Such considerations make clear that untangling the relationship between age and political participation is likely to be extremely difficult. Still, the advantage that accrues to the middle aged in terms of their stockpile of participatory factors suggests that they will be more active in politics.

In Chapter 6 we investigated another process that would create disparities among age groups, habituation. There we considered whether engaging in political activity is itself a participatory factor that boosts future political participation—over and above the attributes that predispose some people to take part in the first place. We found that while going to the polls is habit-forming, increasing the probability of turning out in the future, other forms of political activity are not.

Period effects are those occasional shocks that boost or depress political activity more or less across the board. Watergate is sometimes thought to have had a period effect, raising levels of public cynicism among American adults regardless of age. Genuine period effects are probably quite rare. Because they have an impact on everyone—irrespective of age, social class, gender, and so on—at a particular moment, they raise an issue to which we refer fre-

10. Raymond Wolfinger and Steven Rosenstone note that turnout is higher among young people who are in college than among cohorts who supposedly take on adult roles by working full time or getting married in *Who Votes?* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 55–58.

11. See Nancy Burns, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Sidney Verba, *The Private Roots of Public Action: Gender, Inequality and Political Participation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), chaps. 8 and 12.

quently throughout this inquiry: that changing the level of political activity does not necessarily alter its distribution. Therefore, as important as period effects can be for the political mobilization of citizens, our concern with inequalities of political voice implies that we should put them aside in our discussion.

As students of socialization make clear, we are especially permeable to the effects of early experiences. The kinds of historical events that leave social change in their wake tend to have an especially profound and lasting impact on the young.[12] Thus, *generational* or *cohort effects*, which arise from the shared social and historical experiences of those who were born during the same era, can be understood as a combination of life-cycle effects and period effects.[13] Although we often discuss generational effects in terms of the enduring impact of major historical events—for example, the Depression of the 1930s, World War II, and 9/11—on those who experience them as they come of age, the social forces that create generational effects need not be confined to great historical events. The emergence of Facebook and other social media is a contemporary example of a social development with disproportionate consequences for those who were born in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Some of these generational differences involve differences among cohorts in the timing and sequencing of life-cycle events. Those who came of age during the 1950s were known to marry early and have children, lots of them, at a young age. In contrast, reflecting changing economic constraints, young people today are taking longer than their predecessors to achieve the traditional markers of adulthood: spending more time on their education; delay-

12. Period effects can also have a disproportionate effect on groups in society defined by attributes other than their age. For example, the experience of living through the civil rights era of the 1960s might have had a different and more pronounced effect on blacks than on whites. In addition, period effects become generational effects as older people who have been exposed to whatever is producing the period effect die off and are replaced by younger people who have not experienced the source of the period effect.

13. Generational theory was most succinctly put forth in the late 1920s by Karl Mannheim in his essay "The Problem of Generations," in Karl Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952). According to Mannheim, a generational unit is not merely a chronological age unit but a social unit, much like a class. It is formed by an age group, similarly situated in the social and historical processes, whose shared experiences form a common outlook and a sense of solidarity among its members. Mannheim saw the young as particularly impressionable to social, economic, and political change but believed that in order for such change to produce a generational difference, the events must have either a disproportionate impact on the young compared to other segments of the population or must affect the young in ways different from other age groups.

ing marriage, often in favor of cohabitation; and waiting longer before starting a family. They are also more likely to have high levels of debt and to rely on their parents longer for financial support. Compared to earlier cohorts, they are, as we saw in Chapter 3, also seeing their incomes rise less steeply as they age.[14] This generational distinctiveness in what is sometimes called "the changing timetable of adulthood," holds potential long-term consequences for disparities in political participation.

Life-Cycle and Generational Effects: Additional Considerations

As the discussion so far should already have made clear, it is extremely difficult to disentangle life-cycle from generational effects. Using the kind of cross-sectional evidence on which we often rely, it is impossible to do so. The perfect data set for sorting out these matters—a panel, conducted over a long period, that contains a rich array of measures of political participation and the multiple factors that facilitate it—does not exist. Therefore, in this chapter we do the best we can by using several kinds of data: panel data from the American National Election Studies (ANES); the rolling cross-section from the 1952–2008 ANES; cross-sectional data from the U.S. Census; the 1990 Citizen Participation Study; the 2004 Public Agendas and Citizen Engagement Survey (PACES); and the August 2008 election survey of the Pew Internet and American Life Project.

Rendering the task even more complicated for our concern with equality of political voice is that the distinction between life-cycle and cohort effects is germane not only for political activity but also for the factors that foster it and for political preferences and interests. For example, education attainment has both a life-cycle and a generational component. Because many people in their late teens and early twenties are still in school, they are not especially well educated. Although some people do return to school later on, most people today complete their educations by their mid- to late twenties, after which educational attainment is, by and large, stable. The cohort component arises from the extent to which levels of educational attainment have

14. On these themes, see the essays in Richard A. Settersten, Frank F. Furstenberg Jr., and Rubén G. Rumbaut, eds., *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), and Sheldon Danziger and Cecilia Elena Rouse, eds., *The Price of Independence: The Economics of Early Adulthood* (New York: Russell Sage, 2007), as well as Frank F. Furstenberg Jr., "On a New Schedule: Transitions to Adulthood and Family Change," *The Future of Children* 20 (2010): 67–87.

risen with successive generations, a pattern that may, for the first time, no longer obtain for the current generation.

Compounding these complexities is the fact that the distinction between life-cycle and cohort effects also pertains to age-group differences in political attitudes, needs, and preferences. In the next section we distinguish differences of opinion among age groups on such matters as, on one hand, funding for education and Social Security, which have roots in the life cycle, and, on the other, sex on television or gay rights, which are characterized by cohort differences.

Do We Really Need to Be Concerned about Age-Group Disparities in Political Voice?

Parents and teachers often reprove younger children, arguing that they need only be patient, and one day the freedoms and privileges exercised by older siblings and schoolmates will be theirs to enjoy. The your-turn-will-come logic underlying this admonition makes clear an important characteristic of disparities in political voice among age groups and suggests that, from the perspective of political voice, perhaps they are not really cause for concern. As the young settle down, finish school, find careers, get married, and acquire children and mortgages, they will pass out of their low-activity phase and catch up to their elders in participation. Thus, for those who live a normal life span, political voice on the basis of age is equalized across the life cycle—in contrast to participatory deficits based on such ordinarily unchanging characteristics as race or ethnicity, gender, and, to a lesser extent, social class. When considered over a lifetime, the participatory playing field of the age-group game appears fair.

But what if age is itself a politically relevant category and there are systematic differences among age groups in their political attitudes and concerns or in their stake in particular public policies? There is evidence for age-related differences that represent a generational phenomenon.[15] Figure 8.1 plots data from the 2004 PACES about whether respondents deem "sex on television" or "being gay" to be problems for society. The data show an age gradient for both, with young people significantly less likely than their elders to consider

15. On the way that "young people have distinct interests," see Peter Levine, *The Future of Democracy: Developing the Next Generation of American Citizens* (Medford, MA: Tufts University Press, 2007), pp. 60–61.

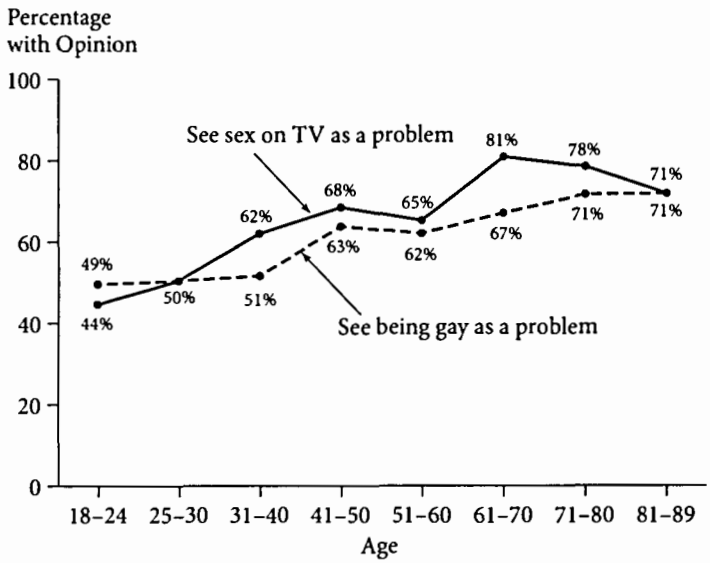

Figure 8.1 Perception of Social Problems by Age: Percentage Who Consider "Sex on Television" or "Being Gay" a Problem for Society

Source: Political Agendas and Citizen Engagement Survey (2004).

either homosexuality or sexual content on television to be a problem. While it is possible that these differences between age groups reflect changes in attitudes over the life cycle, research shows that opinions regarding sexuality change from cohort to cohort over time.[16] Consequently, if younger people are less politically active, political voice will disproportionately reflect the attitudes of older people, creating a "cultural lag" in the political system with

16. On opinion with respect to homosexuality and gay rights, see Jeni Loftus, "America's Liberalization in Attitudes toward Homosexuality, 1973 to 1998," *American Sociological Review* 66 (2001): 762–782; Alison G. Keleher and Eric R. A. N. Smith, "Explaining the Growing Support for Gay and Lesbian Equality since 1990," paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, August 2008; Robert Andersen and Tina Fetner, "Cohort Differences in Tolerance of Homosexuality: Attitudinal Change in Canada and the United States, 1981–2000," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 72 (2008): 311–330; and Jeffrey R. Lax and Justin H. Phillips, "Gay Rights in the States: Public Opinion and Policy Responsiveness," *American Political Science Review* 103 (2009): 367–386. On attitudes toward sexual issues, see Judith Treas, "How Cohorts, Education, and Ideology Shaped a New Sexual Revolution on American Attitudes toward Nonmarital Sex, 1972–1998," *Sociological Perspectives* 45 (2002): 267–283, and David J. Harding and Christopher Jencks, "Changing Attitudes toward Premarital Sex: Cohort, Period, and Aging Effects," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 67 (2003): 211–226.

respect to views on homosexuality and sexual freedom. Such a cohort effect would lead to a transitory disparity between public attitudes and political voice. Over time, however, public opinion and political voice would come to be in sync.

When coupled with inequalities in political activity, differences of opinion among age groups anchored in life-cycle effects pose a greater challenge to equality of political voice. Many government programs—of which Social Security and public education are obvious examples—target benefits on the basis of age. Figure 8.2 presents PACES data that show age structuring with respect to both opposition to any change in Social Security in the face of President George W. Bush's call for privatization and support for increased funding for K–12 education. Unlike younger people, the elderly—who had lived through the Depression of the 1930s, who would not be able to benefit from decades of appreciation of equity investments for retirement income, and who would be spared the brunt of any long-run insolvency in Social Security—would have reason to support maintaining the defined benefits feature of Social Security.[17] In light of such considerations, it is not surprising that the elderly were most likely to favor retaining a traditional approach to Social Security and younger age groups were more congenial to privatizing Social Security. In contrast, consistent with what we might expect, when it comes to educational funding, support for increases in spending on precollegiate education was highest among those who were under age twenty-five and eroded steadily across age groups. Similarly, in Figure 8.3—which repeats the data about support for increases in spending on precollegiate education and adds data about support for aid for students in higher education—the youngest group was the most likely, and the oldest group the least likely, to express support for such aid.

That these age differences in support for education versus Social Security—which make a great deal of prima facie sense—have persisted over time suggests that we are seeing attitudinal differences with life-cycle, rather than generational, roots.[18] The consequence of such continuing age-structured attitudinal differences is that, at least when it comes to political voice through individual activity, such youth-related matters as grants and loans for higher

17. Similarly, an item in the 2008 ANES about allowing people to invest their Social Security payroll taxes in stocks and bonds shows a sharp trajectory of increasing rejection among those over forty.

18. Although there is some disagreement, many studies demonstrate that senior citizens support policies beneficial to their self-interest. See, for example, William Mayer, *The Changing*

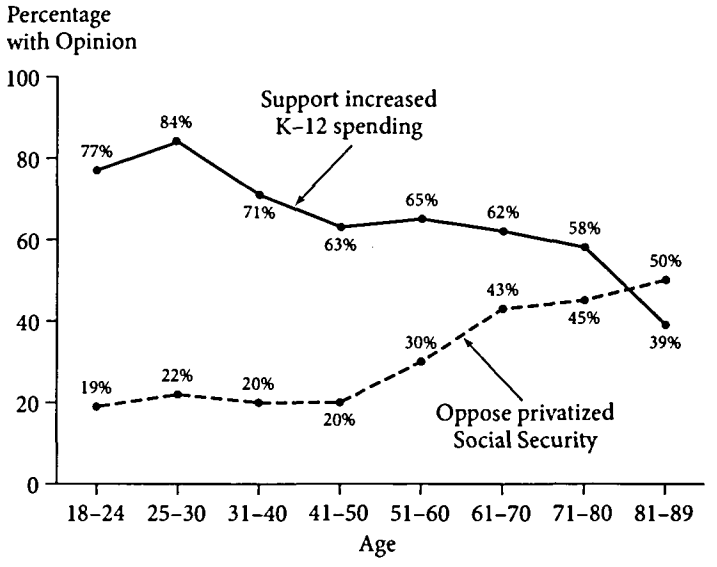

Figure 8.2 Support for Government Spending by Age: Percentage Who Support Increased K–12 Spending or Oppose Social Security Privatization

Source: Political Agendas and Citizen Engagement Survey (2004).

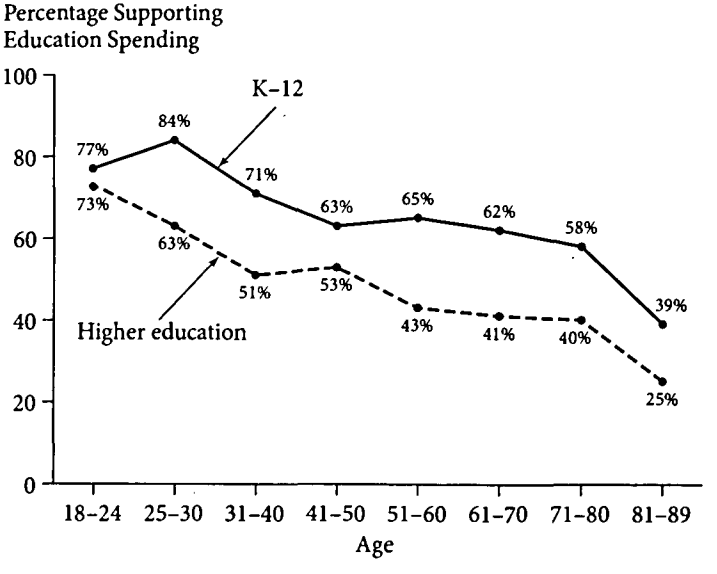

Figure 8.3 Support for Education Spending by Age: Percentage Who Support K–12 and Higher Education Spending

Source: Political Agendas and Citizen Engagement Survey (2004).

education will not achieve their proportionate share of advocacy. In fact, concerns about the continuing failure of the elderly to support education impelled Paul E. Peterson to propose, presumably in jest, that children—who are dependent for political voice and so much else on the kindness of their elders—should be allowed to vote so that they could protect their interests in government programs on their behalf in a manner parallel to the way that seniors have protected Social Security and Medicare.[19] Thus, if political preferences and interests change over the life cycle, enduring participatory differences among age groups would be of concern from the perspective of equality of political voice. Although each cohort would average out any age-related participatory differences over the life cycle, the distinctive concerns and needs of age groups with ongoing deficits in political activity would be underrepresented on a continuing basis—an obvious compromise of equality of political voice.[20]

American Mind: How and Why American Public Opinion Changed between 1960 and 1988 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992); Susan A. MacManus, *Young versus Old: Generational Combat in the 21st Century* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Andrea Louise Campbell, *How Politics Makes Citizens: Senior Political Activism and the American Welfare State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); and James H. Schulz and Robert H. Binstock, *Aging Nation: The Economics and Politics of Growing Older in America* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006).

A great deal of other research suggests that the elderly are less supportive of K–12 education. Cynthia Miller, in "Demographics and Spending for Public Education: A Test of Interest Group Influence," *Economics of Education Review* 15 (1996): 175–185, finds that spending on education increases with the percentage of parents in the state or county. James M. Poterba, in "Demographic Structure and the Political Economy of Public Education," NBER Working Paper W5677, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, July 1996, and Amy Rehder Harris, William N. Evans, and Robert M. Schwab, in "Education Spending in an Aging America," *Journal of Public Economics* 81 (2001): 449–472, find that it decreases with the fraction of elderly residents in a jurisdiction. For a partly dissenting opinion, see Helen F. Ladd and Sheila E. Murray, "Intergenerational Conflict Reconsidered: County Demographic Structures and the Demand for Public Education," *Economics of Education Review* 20 (2001): 343–357. In "The Guns of Autumn? Age Differences in Support for Income Transfers to the Young and Old," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 52 (1988): 441–466, Michael Ponza, Greg J. Duncan, Mary Corcoran, and Fred Groskind find senior citizens to be less supportive of spending for education and welfare but show complex results for Social Security. Eric Plutzer and Michael Berkman, in "The Graying of America and Support for Funding the Nation's Schools," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 69 (2005): 66–86, agree that surveys have long showed older Americans to be less likely than younger citizens to endorse increased spending on public schools but argue that a cohort effect is in part responsible.

19. Paul E. Peterson, "An Immodest Proposal," *Daedalus* 121 (1992): 151–174.

20. For a philosophical discussion of the issue of how to reconcile the younger self with the older self, see Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, England: Clarendon, 1984).

Why Would Age Groups Differ in Their Participation?

If shared generational experiences result in the widespread mobilization or deactivation of a group of young citizens on a long-term basis, that cohort will be advantaged, or disadvantaged, with respect to political voice in comparison to the generations that precede or succeed it.[21] When the gray of head rue the political apathy of the young, they make an implicit assumption that such generational processes are at work.

Still, there are reasons to expect variations in political participation over the life cycle. It is often argued that the young are less active in politics because they are unsettled and preoccupied with the enterprise of becoming adults. As a study of political participation conducted several decades ago put it: "In the early years one has the problem of 'start-up.' Individuals are still unsettled; they are likely to be residentially and occupationally mobile. They have yet to develop the stake in the politics of a particular locality that comes with extended residence, with home ownership, with children in school, and the like."[22] Some analysts who focus on the participatory consequences of the start-up phase focus on the impact of particular life events—for example, finding a job, getting married, buying a house, and having children. Beyond the ways that such life-cycle milestones function to anchor the unsettled into adulthood, owning a home and having children in school are presumed to give citizens a stake in public outcomes.

Focusing exclusively on life events may distract from the extent to which an array of changes over the life cycle will have repercussions for the accumulation of a variety of factors that foster participation.[23] Table 8.1 shows the differences among age groups with respect to a variety of such factors and gives evidence of both life-cycle and generational phenomena.[24] Because it is so rich in measures of a variety of participatory factors, we use the 1990 Citizen Participation Study. These data, which provide a cross-sectional snapshot, cannot be used to distinguish cohort and life-cycle effects. In fact, the

21. For a discussion of generational and period changes in participation, see Paul Allen Beck and M. Kent Jennings, "Political Periods and Political Participation," *American Political Science Review* 73 (1979): 737–750.

22. Sidney Verba and Norman H. Nie, *Participation in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 139.

23. See Chapter 1 for a discussion of the way that capacity, motivation, and location in social networks operate to foster political participation.

24. Question wording for the items summarized in Table 8.1 can be found in Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), Appendix B.

curvilinear patterns in the table could be due to the combined impact of age, period, or cohort effects.[25] Whenever possible, we use the 1952 to 2008 ANES to sort out cohort and life-cycle effects and report these results in footnotes.[26] Although the magnitude of effects may vary over time, we are confident that the pattern shown in Table 8.1 is correct.

Many of these participatory factors show a curvilinear pattern with the young, especially those under twenty-five, and the elderly commanding a much smaller stockpile of participatory factors than those in their forties and fifties. For example, those in their late teens or early twenties are neither especially well educated nor affluent.[27] Many of those who eventually achieve college, and especially post-graduate degrees, have not completed their education at this point. Although increasing numbers of nontraditional students return to college classrooms later on, most people complete their education by their mid-twenties.[28] When it comes to income, the twentysomethings are just beginning to establish their careers and are decades away from their peak earning power.[29] At the other end of the life cycle, the relatively low levels of educational attainment among those who are over age sixty probably represent a generational phenomenon—the fact that, at least until recently, successive cohorts have enjoyed widening educational opportunities—while low levels of family income reflect the life-cycle phenomenon of retirement.[30]

25. See Matilda White Riley, "Aging and Cohort Succession." For several reasons—ranging from necessity to the fact that, in any cross-section, period effects may have consequences for the level of participation without having an impact on its distribution—we neglect period effects in our analysis.

26. We use age and cohort dummy variables in repeated cross-sections to show that there is strong evidence of life-cycle effects even after controlling for cohorts.

27. An age and cohort regression using the ANES data confirms these results and demonstrates that, as discussed earlier, there is both a life-cycle and a cohort effect when it comes to education.

28. Muriel Egerton and Gareth Parry, "Lifelong Debt: Rates of Return to Mature Study," *Higher Education Quarterly* 55 (2001): 4–27; Jerry A. Jacobs and Rosalind Berkowitz King, "Age and College Completion: A Life-History Analysis of Women Aged 15–44," *Sociology of Education* 75 (2002): 211–230.

29. Economists estimate that about 30 percent of income inequality is due to life-cycle effects. See Alan Blinder, *Toward an Economic Theory of Income Distribution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974). Note that the youngest respondents, those under age twenty-five, reported higher family incomes but lower earnings than those in their late twenties. Presumably, a larger share of those in their early twenties are including their parents' incomes in the family incomes they report.

30. Norman H. Nie, Jane Junn, and Kenneth Stehlik-Barry emphasize the importance for political activity of relative rather than absolute levels of education and point out that, as the public has become better educated, levels of political participation have not kept pace. See

Table 8.1 Age and the Factors that Foster Political Activity

	Age Groups						
	18–24	25–30	31–40	41–50	51–60	61–70	71+
Education							
High School Diploma (Percent)	86%	91%	92%	90%	80%	74%	62%
College Graduate (Percent)	9%	29%	29%	30%	26%	18%	18%
Free Time (Mean Number of Hours per Day)	5.8	4.9	4.8	5.4	6.8	10.6	13.1
Income (Thousands of Dollars)							
Mean Family Income	$40.9	$36.4	$41.1	$50.4	$44.4	$33.0	$25.1
Mean Earnings (All Respondents)	$6.6	$17.8	$22.9	$27.2	$23.6	$7.1	$1.1
Mean Earnings (Working Only)	$9.8	$22.7	$27.0	$32.6	$33.1	$26.6	$40.4
Mean Civic Skills[a]							
On the Job	0.85	1.54	1.79	1.98	1.48	0.49	0.04
In a Nonpolitical Organization	0.36	0.50	0.65	0.67	0.68	0.79	0.57
At Church	0.34	0.31	0.48	0.49	0.42	0.52	0.44

Mean Number of Requests for Activity							
On the Job	0.13	0.17	0.23	0.24	0.10	0.04	0.01
In a Nonpolitical Organization	0.06	0.07	0.08	0.08	0.07	0.07	0.07
At Church	0.25	0.26	0.32	0.36	0.27	0.22	0.25
Psychological Engagement with Politics							
Political Interest[b]	3.0	3.5	3.7	4.0	4.0	4.1	3.7
Political Information[c]							
Civic Information (Percent)	56%	57%	60%	61%	54%	56%	48%
Knowledge of Names (Percent)	24%	32%	42%	50%	46%	53%	47%
Political Efficacy[d]	4.7	5.2	5.4	5.6	5.2	5.4	4.6
Strong Partisanship (Percent)	22%	25%	29%	32%	38%	47%	43%

Source: Citizen Participation Study (1990).

[a] Mean on an additive scale including the following: writing a letter, going to a meeting where the respondent took part in making decisions, planning or chairing a meeting, giving a presentation or speech, contacting a government official.

[b] Mean on an additive scale measuring the amount of expressed interest—ranging from "not at all interested" to "very interested"—in national and local politics and affairs.

[c] Percentage correct on each part of a political information scale consisting of five items testing knowledge of government and politics and three asking about the names of public officials

[d] Mean on an additive scale of four items about how much attention a local or national government official would pay if the respondent had a complaint and how much influence the respondent has over local or national government decisions.

Leaving school and getting a full-time job is clearly one of the stepping-stones to adulthood, but it is not so much the fact of having a job as the association between paid work and several of the factors that foster political participation that matters for political participation. Jobs produce income, and those with jobs have opportunities to learn civic skills useful for political activity and become the targets of requests for political involvement. Obviously, such job-related participatory factors are available only to those who are employed, a group that includes relatively few of the elderly. And of course jobs vary not only in the extent to which they provide income, civic skills, and exposure to requests for activity but also in the extent to which opportunities to acquire such participatory factors grow with accumulated workforce experience.

Involvement in nonpolitical organizations and religious institutions functions in a parallel manner to facilitate political participation. Presumably reflecting reduced levels of involvement and leadership in these venues, once again, the young and the elderly are less likely than those in between to gain civic skills or to be asked to take part politically in either of these venues.[31]

When it comes to several measures of psychological engagement with politics—measures not obviously attached to a particular life-cycle event but

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their *Education and Democratic Citizenship in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

31. These deficits in participatory factors among the elderly are consistent with a perspective, called disengagement theory, emphasizing that many of the very elderly have physical infirmities that impair their mobility and thus their ability to be active in civic life. In fact, research has discredited the idea that as people age they disengage from the world in favor of a more nuanced description of withdrawal to activities more appropriate to their age, with potential implications for politics. Norval D. Glenn and Michael Grimes, in "Aging, Voting, and Political Interest," *American Sociological Review* 33 (1968): 563–573, consider but reject disengagement theory, as do M. Kent Jennings and Gregory Markus in "Political Involvement in the Later Years: A Longitudinal Study," *American Journal of Political Science* 32 (1988): 302–316. The latter authors propose (p. 302) "selective withdrawal," in which "participation in the more demanding modes declined following the transition to old age," but point out that these "declines were partly offset by increased involvement of the elderly in age-appropriate activities that can have direct political consequences."

We should also note a measurement issue. In the Citizen Participation Study, the items measuring the exercise of civic skills at work asked those currently in the workforce about such work-based activities as organizing a meeting within the past six months. Respondents who were retired were not asked these questions. Because having exercised civic skills at work might be expected to have a lasting effect into retirement, especially for those with long work histories in highly skilled jobs, the measure of civic skills, on average, underestimates the civic skills of the retired.

very powerful as predictors of political participation—those under age twenty-five show low levels of involvement. The single exception is textbook knowledge of the principles of American government—such matters as whether the Fifth Amendment shields freedom of speech or provides protection from forced confessions or whether the government spends more money on the National Aeronautics and Space Administration or on Social Security. Otherwise, younger respondents show a deficit when it comes to political interest, the knowledge of names of contemporary public officials, political efficacy, and strength of partisanship—all of which are strongly associated with participation in politics.[32]

Free time—that is, time unencumbered by responsibilities to paid work, school, or home and family—is the sole participatory resource for which the youngest, and especially the oldest, age groups are not disadvantaged in comparison to those in between.

Disparities in Participation among Age Groups

Consistent with these considerations and the findings of other researchers, political participation follows a curvilinear pattern across age groups.[33] Let us consider first the disparities among age groups with respect to the political act on which scholarly attention has tended to focus exclusively, electoral turnout. Figure 8.4 presents U.S. Census data from 2008 and shows that voting turnout and voting registration were lowest among the young and increased for each age group before declining somewhat among the elderly.[34]

32. Using the ANES cumulative file to sort out cohort and life-cycle effects for these kinds of factors, we can show that these results are not mostly due to cohort effects. These data show that young people are much less interested than older people and that interest peaks when people are in their fifties or sixties. Similarly, partisan strength is lowest for the youngest age group, and it steadily increases throughout the age groups. The only exception is that data derived from the cumulative ANES about a different measure of political efficacy, this one measuring personal efficacy (that is, how much "say" the respondent has over what the government does), show a completely different pattern, with younger respondents more politically efficacious than their elders.

33. Although this pattern emerges in data from other sources, age-group differences are more pronounced in the Citizen Participation Study. We are not certain whether this difference reflects a generational phenomenon, the particular attention paid to measuring acts of participation in that questionnaire, or something else.

34. Numerous scholarly inquiries have found a genuine life-cycle effect with respect to voting turnout. See Norval D. Glenn and Michael Grimes, "Aging, Voting, and Political Interest," *American Sociological Review* 33 (1968): 563–573; John M. Strate, Charles J. Parrish, Charles D. Elder, and Coit Ford, "Life Span Civic Development and Voting Participation,"

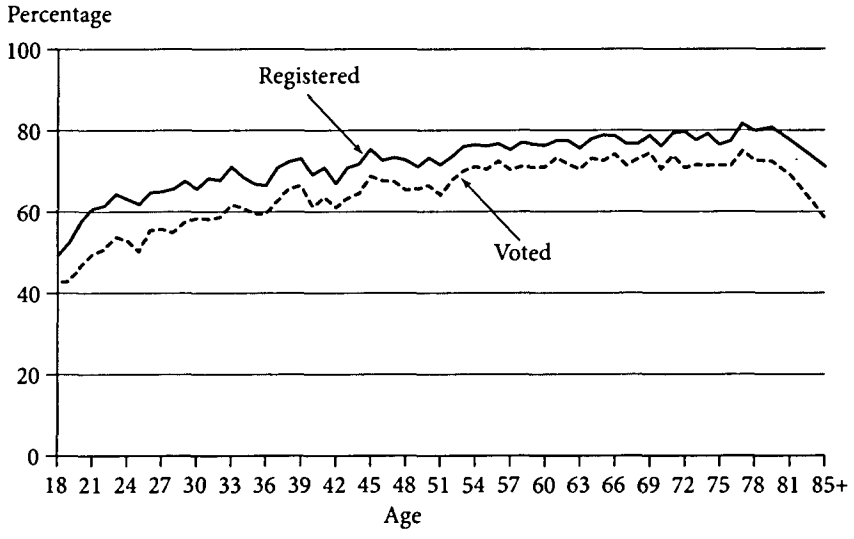

Figure 8.4 Registered and Voting by Age, 2008

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2008).

This age-related arc for turnout has been observed every election year since survey research on voting began.[35]

Moving beyond the vote to a more expansive understanding of individual political voice, we see a similar trajectory in Figure 8.5, in which we use data from a 2008 survey conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project and an additive scale of eight political acts.[36] On average, those in their fifties, who are the most active group, engage in roughly 0.65 more acts than

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American Political Science Review 83 (1989): 443–464; Warren E. Miller and J. Merrill Shanks, *The New American Voter* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Richard J. Timpone, "Structure, Behavior, and Voter Turnout in the United States," *American Political Science Review* 92 (1998): 145–158; and Eric Plutzer, "Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood," *American Political Science Review* 96 (2002): 41–56.

35. In 1948, turnout was 41 percent for those in the youngest group (21–24), rising to 75 percent for those between 45 and 54, then falling back to 59 percent for those between 65 and 74. Similar results hold for each subsequent ANES conducted in a presidential election year.

36. The scale includes the following acts: being registered to vote; working for a political party or candidate; contributing money to a political candidate or party; contacting a government official about an issue; working with fellow citizens to solve a problem in the community; attending a political meeting on local, town or school affairs; attending an organized protest of some kind; and being an active member of a group that tries to influence public policy or government. The point in the life cycle at which participation peaks before declining varies among political acts and across data sets.

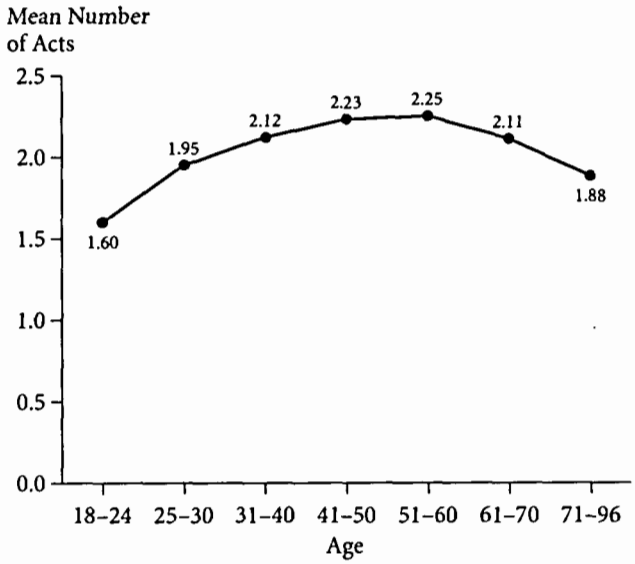

Figure 8.5 Mean Political Acts by Age

Source: Pew Internet and American Life Survey (2008).

Note: The figure indicates the mean number of political acts from an 8-act scale that includes registering to vote; working for a political party or candidate; contributing money to a political candidate or party; contacting a government official about an issue; working with fellow citizens to solve a problem in the community; attending a political meeting on local, town, or school affairs; attending an organized protest of some kind; and being an active member of a group that tries to influence public policy or government.

those under twenty-five and roughly 0.37 more acts than those who are seventy and over. If we separate out the components in the scale measuring overall participation, it becomes clear that individual forms of political activity do not all conform to this pattern. As shown in Table 8.2, the two least common activities—working for a political party or candidate and attending a protest—are the province of the young. Although these two activities are rare in any age group, those in the youngest age group are the most likely to engage in them, and the share declines with age. The participation rates for the remaining six activities all take on a more or less curvilinear shape. There is a particularly steep start-up for younger people when it comes to registering to vote and contacting government officials and a particularly steep "wind-down" for the elderly when it comes to involvement in community affairs.

Table 8.2 Age and Political Participation

	Percentage of Each Age Group Who Engaged in Each Activity						
	18–24	25–30	31–40	41–50	51–60	61–70	71+
Registered to Vote	55%	73%	77%	84%	86%	83%	89%
Worked for a Political Party or Candidate	11%	9%	8%	8%	8%	8%	6%
Made a Political Contribution	7%	13%	18%	20%	23%	22%	21%
Contacted a Government Official	16%	27%	28%	29%	39%	36%	28%
Worked with Others to Solve a Community Problem	25%	30%	30%	33%	27%	27%	21%
Attended a Local Meeting	23%	22%	29%	30%	23%	19%	15%
Attended a Protest	9%	5%	4%	3%	2%	2%	2%
Affiliated with a Group that Takes Stands in Politics	14%	18%	18%	16%	17%	14%	6%

Source: Pew Internet and American Life Project Survey (August 2008).

Accounting for Age Differences in Political Participation

From the perspective of inequalities of political voice, we have observed two critical patterns: there are significant differences in political activity across age groups, and age groups differ in their political attitudes and concerns—in ways that reflect both generation and life cycle. In Chapter 5 we discussed differences in political voice among politically relevant groups—in particular between women and men and among African Americans, non-Hispanic whites, and Latinos. There we made the point that, even if those group disparities could be explained in terms of other factors that are associated with political activity, especially social class, what matters for inequalities of political voice is the fact of the disparities rather than the other attributes that account for them. The same argument can be made here. Still, it seems worth placing participatory differences among age groups in the context of our understanding of the factors that foster political activity.

The differences among age groups with respect to two components of social class, income and education, have obvious consequences for participation. Figure 8.6 shows for SES quintiles the average score on the eight-point scale measuring overall participation for each of seven age groups and confirms an ongoing theme of our inquiry, the strength of the association between social class and participation. The lines for the age groups cluster together and, as expected, for each one, average participation rises sharply with SES.[37]

Considering an Array of Participatory Factors

Our account of participation in politics rests on understanding a variety of attributes in addition to SES that foster political activity. Some of them—for example, exposure to a politically rich home environment, experiences in student government and other organized activities while in high school, and high levels of educational attainment—are more or less fixed in childhood and adolescence and brought into adulthood.[38] Others—for example, income, civic skills, and interest in and knowledge about politics—can vary with adult experiences in such domains as the family, workplace, and church.

37. The only obvious exception is the sharp drop in the highest SES quintile for those between eighteen and twenty-four years of age, which is probably sampling error due to the very small sample size of only ten respondents.

38. On the significance for adult political engagement of the nonpolitical voluntary involvement of youth, see Daniel A. McFarland and Reuben J. Thomas, "Bowling Young: How Youth Voluntary Associations Influence Adult Political Participation," *American Sociological Review* 71 (2006): 401–425.

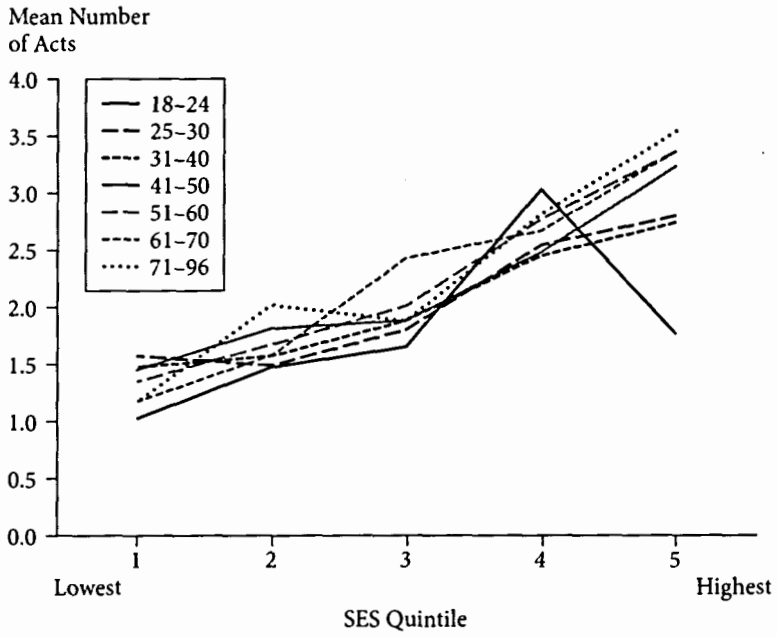

Figure 8.6 Mean Political Acts by Age and SES Quintile

Source: Pew Internet and American Life Survey (2008).

Note: For definitions of political acts see note to Figure 8.5.

A number of these variables have a generational as well as a life-cycle component. We have mentioned that, at least until recently, successive generations have become, on average, better and better educated. Furthermore, Robert Putnam has shown substantial generational differences between the long civic generation, born roughly between 1910 and 1940, and Generation X, born between 1964 and 1980, with respect to a variety of attitudinal and behavioral measures of civic commitment and engagement.[39]

To gain a sense of whether differences in these factors explain the participation gaps among age groups, we employ two complementary methods. First we turn to the data from the 1990 Citizen Participation Study. Because these data are cross-sectional, they have serious liabilities for our attempt to

39. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), chap. 14. See also Stephen Bennett, Staci Rhine, and Richard Flickinger, "Young Americans' Attention to Media Accounts of Politics," paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April 2007.

understand the differences among age groups in political activity, in particular, the extent to which such differences reflect generational or life-cycle effects. Still, because they contain such a rich array of relevant measures, they are helpful in illuminating both the relative importance of various factors in explaining political activity and the extent to which age-group differences with respect to these factors explain the disparities in participation. Second we use the ANES cumulative data to separate out life-cycle and cohort effects. Although the ANES lacks many relevant measures, its repeated cross-sections make it possible to control for cohort effects and to identify the remaining effects as due to life-cycle factors.[40]

Table 8.3 presents the results of an ordinary least squares analysis of data from the Citizen Participation Study in which the dependent variable is an eight-point measure of overall political activity. Even with many variables taken into account, several aspects of the legacy of the years before adulthood are significantly associated with political participation: exposure to a politically rich home environment, participation in student government and other activities in high school, and especially educational attainment. In addition, a number of factors related to development during adulthood are associated with political activity: family income, civic skills and requests for activity associated with the workplace, involvement in nonpolitical organizations and religious institutions, and various measures of political engagement—in particular, interest in politics. It is noteworthy that, with these factors controlled, the amount of free time available has absolutely no impact on political participation, a finding that has emerged from these data over and over again.[41]

The evidence for the impact of particular life events is much more mixed. In spite of the frequently heard comment "It wasn't until I had kids in school that I got involved in the issues in this town," we find much more limited confirmation of the hypothesis that lower levels of activity among the young are a function of their not yet having assumed the responsibilities of adulthood—job, marriage, children, and home ownership. On one hand, home ownership and the number of years in the community retain positive effects on activity even with everything else taken into account—suggesting that the stake in the

40. As indicated earlier, we are not treating period effects.

41. Although the amount of available leisure does not predict political participation, among those who take part in politics, spare time does predict how much time is devoted to voluntary political activity. See Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, *Voice and Equality*, pp. 340–341 and 357, and Burns, Schlozman, and Verba, *Private Roots of Public Action*, pp. 256–257.

Table 8.3 Predicting Overall Political Activity: Ordinary Least Squares Regression

Variable	B	SE B	Beta
Age			
18–24	–.64***	.13	–.12
25–30	–.44***	.10	–.10
31–40	–.02	.08	–.01
41–50	Baseline Group		
51–60	.13	.10	.02
61–70	–.12	.12	–.02
71+	–.32*	.16	–.05
Other Demographic Characteristics			
Female	–.02	.06	–.01
Black	.07	.09	.01
Latino	–.04	.13	–.01
The Legacy of Youth			
Politics at Home	.04*	.02	.04
High School Activity	.10***	.03	.06
Education	.16***	.02	.15
Resources			
Family Income	.04***	.01	.07
Earnings	.01	.01	.02
Free Time	–.01	.01	–.02
Civic Skills	.10***	.02	.14
Nonpolitical Involvements			
Affiliation with an Organization	.02	.06	.00
Church Attendance	–.02	.01	–.03
Requests for Activity	.23***	.03	.13
Political Engagement			
Political Interest	.23***	.02	.22
Political Information	.09***	.02	.10
Political Efficacy	.08***	.01	.11
Partisanship	.08**	.03	.04
Community Roots			
Years in Community	.00*	.00	.05
Own Home	.21***	.06	.06

continued

Table 8.3 Continued

Variable	B	SE B	Beta
Marital Status			
Married	−.09	.09	−.03
Separated or Divorced	−.25*	.10	−.05
Widowed	−.34*	.14	−.06
Single (Never Married)	Baseline Group		
Children			
Preschool Age	−.12	.08	−.03
School Age	−.13	.08	−.03
Employment Status			
Student	−.48*	.20	−.05
Full-Time Work	−.66***	.16	−.20
Part-Time Work	−.57***	.16	−.10
Retired	Baseline Group		
Unemployed or Other	−.59***	.16	−.09
Keeping House	−.37**	.13	−.08
Job Level	−.01	.02	−.01
Constant	−1.08***	.25	

Source: Citizen Participation Study (1990).

Note: The dependent variable is an 8-act measure of political activity that includes the following: voting; working in a campaign; contributing to a campaign; contacting a public official; taking part in a protest, march, or demonstration; working with others in the community to solve a local problem; serving on a local community board or regularly attending meetings of such a board; and being affiliated with an organization that takes stands in politics.
*Significant at the .05 level; **significant at the .01 level; ***significant at the .001 level.

community that accompanies owning a home and long residence does make a difference.

On the other hand, whatever association there is between the role of worker, spouse, or parent and increased participation results either from selection effects such that those who take on adult roles have other characteristics that predispose them to take part or from indirect effects such that these roles lead to greater involvement in civil society or, in particular, increased political engagement. Compared to being retired, being in the workforce, espe-

cially full time, which had been presumed to increase an individual's stake in political outcomes and thus to serve as a spur to activity, has a negative impact, as do being a student, being unemployed, or being at home—even with age and leisure time taken into account.[42] However, there is a significant association between political participation and what happens at work in terms of the development of civic skills and exposure to requests for political activity—which are, of course, dependent on having a job.

With respect to marriage and family, although being widowed, divorced, or separated are all negatively associated with political activity compared to being single, marriage and the presence of either preschool or school-aged children at home are not significantly related to political participation. Further analysis shows very modest indirect effects from having children at home, effects that are opposite in direction for men and women.[43] Because, on average, women reduce their workforce commitment when they have children at home, the resultant impact on workplace-based skills and recruitment implies a perceptible but tiny diminution of their political activity. For men, both marriage and children at home enhance their commitment to paid work and their involvement in religious institutions, thus leading indirectly to an increase in political participation that, while still very slight, is more than twice as large as the negative impact of children on women's activity.

Interestingly, accounting for these many factors leaves no statistically significant difference in participation between men and women or among non-Hispanic whites, African Americans, and Latinos. However, it does not go the distance in terms of explaining the participatory gap between the most active age group, those in their forties, and either the young or the elderly:

	Initial Deficit Compared to Those in Their Forties	Deficit Remaining after Accounting for Participatory Factors
Under 25	1.25 acts	0.64 act
25–30	0.88 act	0.44 act
71 and over	0.64 act	0.32 act

42. As indicated in note 31, the Citizen Participation Study did not ask retired respondents about the exercise of civic skills in their previous jobs. We speculate that the positive association between retirement and political activity results from the residual effects of a lifetime of work in terms of civic skills.

43. This analysis is reported in Burns, Schlozman, and Verba, *Private Roots of Public Action*, pp. 316–321.

Once the various participatory factors have been taken into account, the participatory deficits at the near and far ends of the life cycle, while still statistically significant, have been reduced by about half and the familiar curvilinear pattern is harder to discern.

That a variety of participatory factors together account for differences in activity between groups based on gender and on race or ethnicity—but not for disparities in political activity among age groups—is intriguing. One explanation for the participatory gaps that remain is that there are likely to be unmeasured attributes that not only vary systematically with age but have consequences for participation. For example, chronic illness, a variable that was not measured, has been shown to depress participation; we would expect the elderly to be especially likely to face chronic illness. Without appropriate measures, we are able to do nothing more than speculate.[44] Furthermore, there are generational processes at work with differential effects on the various age groups in the 1990 Citizen Participation Study. That is, if, as is often argued, the members of Generation X, who were under thirty at the time of the survey, entered the electorate at particularly low rates of political activity, the participatory factors that account for differences in activity among other groups would be insufficient to account fully for the participatory deficit among the young. We investigate this possibility in the next section.

In Chapter 6 we saw that processes of habituation such that, once having taken part, individuals become more likely to do so again, apart from the other characteristics that predispose them to participate, operate only for voting and not for other participatory acts. Because voting is one of the political acts on the scale and because the young have low rates of turnout, habituation may have a tiny role in explaining the deficit of activity among those under thirty, a role that would be nearly impossible to measure.

How Important Are Life-Cycle Effects for Political Participation?

The other interpretation of the unexplained participatory gaps among age groups is that they represent generational rather than life-cycle phenomena. There is a great deal of evidence that, compared to their predecessors, cohorts that have entered the electorate recently are less likely to vote or to engage in

44. Steven A. Peterson, in "Biosocial Predictors of Older Americans' Political Participation," *Politics and the Life Sciences* 5 (1987): 246–251, finds evidence for a relationship between health status and political orientations and behaviors.

other forms of activity.[45] We are led to ask whether there are any life-cycle effects at all. Unfortunately, the sophisticated econometric methods used in Chapter 6 to seek evidence of processes of habituation have three defects. They require at least three-wave panels in which the same people are interviewed three times in succession. They need very large samples of data to detect effects because they have low statistical power. And, perhaps most important, with measurement periods just four years long, they fall short of the time period required to capture most life-cycle effects. We now turn to a method that, while it has limitations, has the virtue of being simple and straightforward. We use the repeated data cross-sections for all presidential elections from 1952 to 2008 from the ANES to search for life-cycle effects while controlling for cohort effects. To control for cohort effects, we ran regressions that had dummy variables both for age groups and for cohorts.[46]

Figure 8.7 plots for each of five political acts the net life-cycle (or age-group) effects estimated from separate regressions, which include controls for cohort effects, for each act. Because we chose those between forty-one and fifty as the baseline group for the regressions, all the curves for that age group go through zero for ages forty-one to fifty. The values on each curve that can be read off the vertical axis are percentage increases or decreases in the activity from that baseline for each of the other age groups. Because the ANES traditionally focuses on participatory acts related to elections, four of them are electoral. Except for voting, all of them are relatively rare: voting (74 percent); writing a letter to a government official (24 percent); giving money to a candidate or party (10 percent); working for a candidate (4 per-

45. See, for example, William Lyons and Robert Alexander, "A Tale of Two Electorates: Generational Replacement and the Decline of Voting in Presidential Elections," *Journal of Politics* 62 (2000): 1014–1034; Marc Hooghe, "Political Socialization and the Future of Politics," *Acta Politica* 39 (2004): 331–341; Cliff Zukin, Scott Keeter, Molly Andolina, Krista Jenkins, and Michael X. Delli Carpini, *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2006); Martin P. Wattenberg, *Is Voting for Young People? With a Postscript on Citizen Engagement* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2008); Kaat Smets, "In Need of an Update or Overdue? Re-evaluating the Political Life-Cycle Model," paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April 3–6, 2008); Constance Flanagan and Peter Levine, "Civic Engagement and the Transition to Adulthood," *Future of Children* 20 (2010): 159–179. Various authors point to compensatory factors. Hooghe shows that younger cohorts, although less politically involved, display greater tolerance, and Zukin et al. show that they demonstrate a greater commitment to nonpolitical voluntary activity.

46. See Appendix D for an explication of our methods and their limitations as well as discussion of the reasons that we feel justified in ignoring period effects.

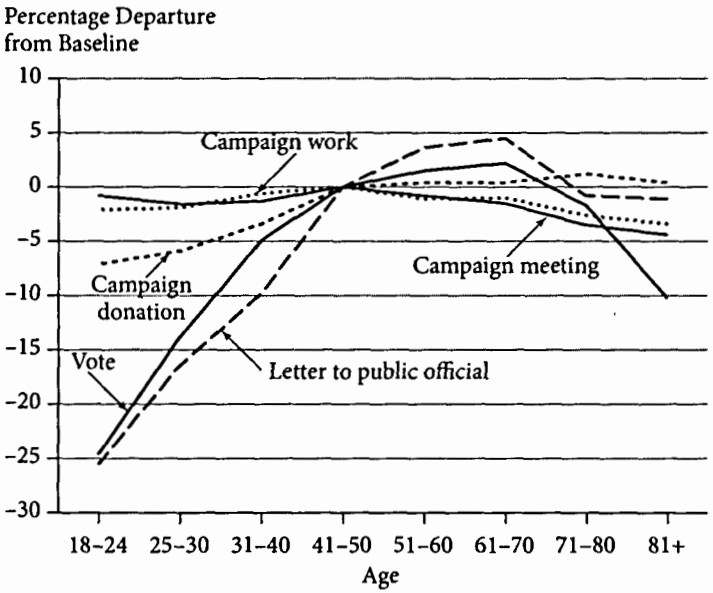

Figure 8.7 Life-Cycle Effects for Five Political Acts: Percentage Departure in Activity for Each Act from That of Baseline Age Group (41–50) in Cohort-Corrected Regressions

Source: American National Election Studies (1952–2008).

cent); and attending political meetings, rallies, and the like in support of a candidate (7 percent). For all five of the activities, there are clear processes of start-up for younger people. That is, apart from cohort effects, the youngest citizens are less likely than their middle-aged counterparts to undertake any of the five acts. Not unexpectedly for a set of acts of quite varying frequency, the magnitude of the deficit differs across the acts and is especially pronounced for writing to public officials, voting, and, to a lesser extent, making contributions. On the basis of what we saw earlier in the chapter, had we had access to data about taking part in protests, we would have expected a very different pattern and no shortfall among new voters. We also see processes of wind-down for older people that are particularly marked for the three activities that, under most circumstances, require leaving home to accomplish: voting, working in a campaign, and going to a political meeting. Thus, with the controls for cohort, these data strongly suggest that there are real life-cycle effects at work.

We took this analysis one step further to see if we could explain away life-cycle effects by cohort differences or by changing participatory factors over a lifetime. We constructed a five-act scale of political activity that includes four of the five acts just discussed (all but writing a letter) and that adds another act (talking to people about why they should vote).[47] Using this scale as the dependent variable, we conducted three separate regressions to identify raw life-cycle effects, life-cycle effects adjusted for cohort differences, and life-cycle effects after adjusting for cohort differences and participatory factors.

The solid line in Figure 8.8 shows the highly curvilinear raw life-cycle effects for this five-act scale. Because we are interested only in how the shape of this curve changes as we control for various factors, we set the participation of those in the forty-one to fifty age group at zero even though, in fact, their participation averages 1.4 acts throughout the period. Although those who are a decade older (between fifty-one and sixty years of age) are slightly more active than this baseline group, all other age groups are less active—as much as four-tenths of an act less active for the youngest and oldest age groups, which means that these two groups actually average about one act. The dashed line shows that, once we control for cohort differences, the life-cycle effects for older people are somewhat less pronounced. Adding to the regression participatory factors such as education, income, and various measures of psychological engagement with politics explains even more of the raw life-cycle effects and yields the dotted line at the top of the diagram. Although the arc has about half the depth that we saw for the raw life-cycle curve, the line still retains a curvilinear shape.

Our analyses surely show variation in political activity over the life cycle. Two regressions using somewhat different measures of political participation as dependent variables—one using data from the Citizen Participation Study, which includes an array of participatory factors, and the other adjusting for cohort effects while using the narrower array of participatory factors available in the ANES—conclude that there are life-cycle effects even after controlling for a large number of factors. In addition, the controls in both regressions—such as education, income, partisan strength, and political interest—themselves exhibit life-cycle effects. There can be no question about the reality of true life-cycle differences in political participation.

47. We did not use "writing a letter" because it was not asked in all the years. The item asking whether the respondent talked to any people and tried to show them why they should vote was asked throughout the period.

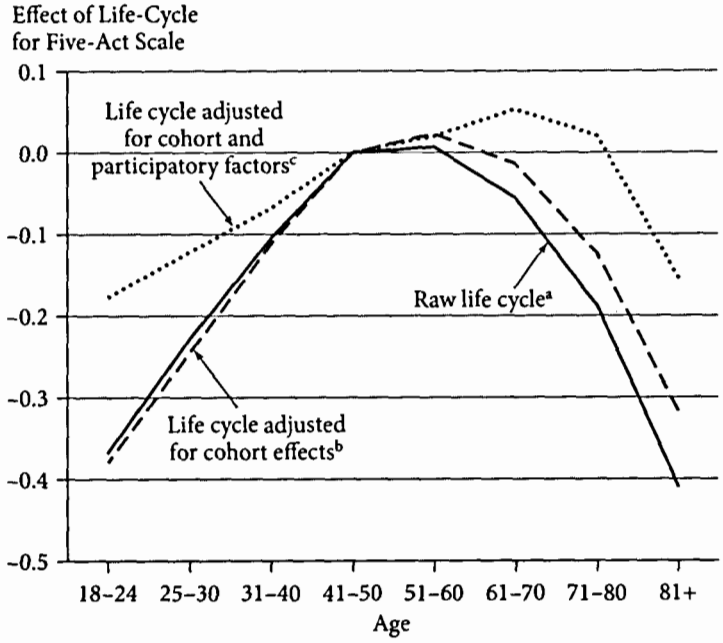

Figure 8.8 Life-Cycle Effects of Political Activity: Raw Effects, Cohort-Adjusted Effects, and Cohort- and Participatory Factors–Adjusted Effects

Source: American National Election Studies (1952–2008).

Note: The dependent variable is a 5-act scale that includes voting; talking to people about why they should vote; giving money to a candidate or party; working for a candidate; and attending political meetings.

[a] This line indicates how much each age group's average participation on the 5-act scale departs from that of the reference group (41–50).

[b] This line indicates how much each age group's average participation on the 5-act scale departs from that of the reference group (41–50) after a regression adjustment for cohort differences.

[c] This line indicates how much each age group's average participation on the 5-act scale departs from that of the reference group (41–50) after a regression adjustment for participatory factors and cohort differences.

Conclusion

In spite of attention by pundits to the lack of involvement of the younger generation, political scientists have long discerned a curvilinear pattern across the life cycle such that participation is relatively low among those entering the electorate, picks up among those in their thirties, peaks among the middle aged, and tails off among the elderly. We have found that same pattern in several data sets.

From one perspective, the attendant disparities in political voice differ from those rooted in such politically relevant categories as race or gender. To the extent that they are anchored in life-cycle effects, the young need only be patient; with time their levels of political participation will increase in middle age. At the other end of the life cycle, the elderly have had their chance. However, these disparities among age groups in political activity are accompanied by age-related differences in political preferences and concerns. Therefore, even though political voice can be equalized across the life cycle for those who live a normal life span, the age-related gaps in political participation have consequences for inequality of political voice. Furthermore, if there are cohort effects that accompany a particular generation across the life cycle, that group will enjoy a participatory advantage or suffer a participatory disadvantage on a sustained basis. Once again, equality of political voice would be compromised.

Although we do not have a long-term panel containing rich measures of both participatory factors and political acts, which would allow us to solve the puzzles posed by differences among age groups in political activity, we mobilized a number of data sets and some complicated methods in pursuit of that objective. A cross-sectional regression that included a variety of factors known to be associated with participation showed that, with the exception of owning a home and staying put residentially, the milestones of adulthood do not really function as expected in enhancing participation directly. Any discernible participatory consequences of getting a job, getting married, or having children result either from selection effects or from the way that the resulting adult statuses lead to the acquisition of participatory factors in such venues as the workplace or religious institutions and thus indirectly to increased political activity. In fact, the more powerful predictors of political activity among adults are such factors—many of them rooted in social class—as resources, psychological orientations to politics, and location in networks that mediate requests to take part.

That said, these participatory factors were not able to explain fully the disparities among age groups in overall participation. Ordinarily, a model focusing on the role of resources, motivation, and recruitment is able to account for participatory differences among demographic groups. Leaving aside the critical question of why groups distinguished by gender or race differ in class-based participatory factors, we are able to specify what it is about being African American or being female that leads to lower rates of political participation.[48] The disparity in participation between African Americans and Anglo whites disappears when racial differences in education and income are taken into account. The gap in activity between women and men can be fully explained by gender differences in education, income, civic skills, and political engagement. Life-cycle differences seem to persist even after controlling for a large number of factors. In fact, the *unexplained portion* of the disparity between the most and least active age groups is actually twice as large as the initial gap in activity between African Americans and Anglo whites or between women and men—before anything else is taken into account.

Using data from ANES panel studies and from more than a half century of ANES cross-sections, we were able to investigate further the origins of gaps among age groups in participation and found evidence for both cohort and life-cycle effects. Still, as important as it is to distinguish these effects in order to understand the roots of disparities in participation among age groups, from the perspective of equality of political voice, what matters is the fact of those disparities.

48. See, for example, Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, "Race, Ethnicity, and Political Participation," in *Classifying by Race*, ed. Paul E. Peterson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), chap. 15, and Burns, Schlozman, and Verba, *Private Roots of Public Action*, chap. 10.