Predicting Political Involvement through Demographics, Overall Involvement, and

Political Interest

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Abstract

Relationships between demographic characteristics, general involvement
characteristics, and political interest characteristics were compared as predictors of
political involvement. Previous research tended to focus on one kind of political
involvement at a time, but in this analysis different kinds of involvement factors are
grouped together and therefore more generalizable. The Political Temperament Survey
was completed by 340 participants in 2010 from a medium size Midwestern city. Results
replicated the findings that age, gender, frequency of political knowledge acquisition,
political interest and membership of non-political clubs contributed to political
involvement. But results did not replicate the common findings that strong political
feelings, partisan strength and religious service attendance contributed to political
involvement. The full model, consisting of all potentially influential factors, predicted
political involvement better than the three reduced models, consisting of one group of
characteristics at a time, on their own.

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Political participation and involvement has been one of the keys to democratic

success since the founding of the United States (McFarland & Thomas, 2006). In some

contexts (say when disapproval of the government as a whole is at an all-time high)

participation, or lack thereof, is critical in regards to prosperity. Individual citizens do not

see the point in a government, and get discouraged from participating in it (Shames,

2014). A democratic government relies on its' citizens to play some kind of role in the

system-running to represent others, voicing an opinion or helping someone else

become an effective political leader, in order to run effectively and stay afloat. The many

questions underlying political involvement for decades have been "how do people

become politically active?", "to what extent are they politically active?" and "what are the

consequences of that activism?", while usually expressed more or less eloquently

(McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Eulau & Schneider, 1956; Snell 2010; Prior, 2005, 2010).

A multitude of factors can contribute to political involvement, making these questions

that much harder to definitively answer- similar to the classic nature versus nurture

debate. Scholars and corporations have been actively searching out answers to these

questions, and their alternatives, for years and have discovered many factors can

matter but that the real answer is simple- it depends (McFarland & Thomas, 2006;

Jones-Correa & Leal, 2001; Smith, 2013).

Narrowing the contributing factors down to one or two holy-grail characteristics

has proven to be improbable, if not impossible. The direct and observable factors that

are consistently cited as influencing participation are often too far developed for any

researcher to manipulate or control in a true experiment. So, the next best option is to

survey the masses and hope that randomization will filter out some of these effects. But,

causation can never be inferred with studies designed this way, making the process of

pinpointing what causes involvement that much more challenging. For example- Pew

Research Center, one of the most reputable think tanks in the world, conducted a study

examining social media's effect on civic engagement (Pew Research Center, 2013).

Their question- will social media's presence negate the traditional finding that only those

with high socioeconomic status participate in politics? Their answer- Nope… Well, not

directly at least. Those with higher socioeconomic status utilize social media as an

outlet for political activity as much as they participate in person, and this effect held true

for those at the opposite end of the scale. When access to social media is held

constant, those with lower socioeconomic status simply weren't as actively involved.

Their proposed reasoning for this finding was that those with lower socioeconomic

status aren't exposed to political discussion or activity in the same way as those with

higher socioeconomic status, so they just don't have the same desire to be involved,

and may not see what they can gain from such an involvement.

Many studies attempt to relate one or two kinds of influential characteristics (i.e.

involvement in extracurricular activities at school) to one kind of political involvement

(i.e. identifying as "political"). Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger and Alisat (2007) identified

many behaviors/traits that predicted involvement for their sample, but the ways in which

those people were involved may have been too similar to each other, resulting in a

narrowed sense of what "involvement" is. This analysis identified nine different traits

commonly used to define political involvement:

- Having ever communicated thoughts to a public official (Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger & Alisat, 2007; Smith, 2013; Pew, 2014)

- Having ever held a governmental office (Smith, 2013)

- Having ever worked on a political campaign (Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger & Alisat,2007; Smith, 2013; McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Pew 2014)

- Having ever attended a political rally (Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger & Alisat,2007; Smith, 2013; Eulau & Schneider, 1956; Pew 2014)

- Having ever contributed money to a political cause/party/candidate (Smith, 2013; Eulau & Schneider, 1956; Pew Research Center; 2014)

- Having ever sought out political information through three different channels-reading the newspaper, online or listening to the radio (Smith, 2013; Eulau & Schneider, 1956; Prior, 2005)

- Having ever discussed politics with others (Eulau & Schneider, 1956; Prior, 2005; Pew Research Center, 2014)

Utilizing others' significant definitions in combination will allow for a more representative picture of involvement than offered in previous studies.

The characteristics that have been associated with different kinds of political involvement in previous research range from definitive characteristics such as age, to manipulative characteristics such as number of hours spent volunteering a week. The characteristics used in these analyses can be broken up into three groups, which have been supported in previous research as predictors as well: demographics, general involvement and political interest.

- Demographic characteristics: perception and preference of politics, age and gender (Shames, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2014; Prior, 2010).

- General involvement characteristics: club membership, club leadership, time allocated for clubs and regular religious service attendance (Pancer, Pratt, Hunsperger & Alisat, 2007; McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Jones-Correa & Leal, 2001; Pew Research Center, 2014; Jansen, 2001; Prior, 2010).

- Political interest characteristics: political fascination, strength of political feelings, number of days per week they read the newspaper/ watch television/ listen to the radio/ read on the internet political information, identifying as a partisan, or identifying as someone interested in politics (Smith, 2013; Pancer, Pratt, Hunsperger & Alisat, 2007; Eulau & Schneider, 1956; McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Shames, 2014; Prior, 2005; Pew Research Center, 2014; Rampell, 2014; Prior, 2010).

All of the factors in this analysis have significantly predicted some degree of political involvement in previous research, but have not been observed together as groups of characteristics predicting different kinds of involvement.

Hypothesis one: Demographic characteristics alone should not be able to predict political involvement as well as the full model also including the general involvement model and the political interest model. Majority of the previous research done concludes similarly- demographics matter, but other factors contribute to involvement more and are therefore more important. However there are significant implications if this analysis

finds that demographic variables can predict involvement just as well as this all other

kinds of predictors when kinds of involvement are compiled.

Hypothesis two: The general involvement model should be able to predict political

involvement as well as the full model that includes the demographics model and the

political interest model. Previous research has found that being involved in other

aspects of life is related to being involved politically. But, the nature vs nurture debate

can come into play again here. If this analysis yields consistent results, then kinds of

general involvement might be a better way to look at kinds of political involvement.

Hypothesis three: The political interest model should be able to predict political

involvement as well as the full model that includes the demographics model and the

general involvement model. Previous research has found that interest alone is a strong

predictor of involvement, but interest alone can't instantly catalyze all kinds of

involvement, and other predictors are needed to capture the full involvement picture.

Hypothesis four: The political interest model should be able to predict political interest

better than the other two reduced models, and will have the strongest single predictor of

involvement in it. Since demographics and general involvement have traditionally

predicted political interest, the compounding relationship should show up in this analysis

as well.

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Methods

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Participants

Participants were recruited by an independent survey organization during the

summer of 2010. There were 340 participants randomly drawn from a medium-size

Midwestern city with complete data. The study was approved by the local IRB and all

participants gave written informed consent. Gender, age, religious affiliation, ideology,

marital status, education and occupation were all demographics recorded in the

provided survey but only gender and age were used in this analysis. Female

participants accounted for 54.1% of the sample (N=184) whereas men accounted for

45.9 (N=156). As seen in table 2, ages ranged from 19-65, the average age was 45.6,

and the most common age was 61 (4.7%).

Materials

The survey was created to measure political temperament, and contained items

that examined a wide array of factors, but only those relating to political involvement

and interest, political preference and perception, demographics, and leadership habits

were used in this analysis.

Political involvement was a scale composed of nine individual questions: "Have you
ever communicated thoughts or requests to a public official?", "Have you ever held any
governmental office, no matter how minor?", "Have you ever worked in a political
campaign in any capacity (even for no pay)?", "Have you ever attended a political
meeting or rally?", "Have you ever contributed money to a political cause, party, or
candidate?", "Do you read about politics in the newspaper?", "Do you use the television
or radio to find out about politics?", "Do you use the internet to find out about politics?",
and "Do you discuss politics with others?". All questions were coded 1=yes, 0=no. The
higher a participant's composite score the more politically active they were and vice
versa.

Demographics included the following items: "Age", "Gender" (coded 1=male, 2=female),

"What is your political perception?" (where a higher score suggests a higher perception

of a conservative government, and a lower suggests the opposite), and "What is your

political preference?" (where a higher score suggests a higher preference for a

conservative government, and a lower suggests the opposite).

General involvement was comprised of the following items: "Are you a member of a non-political club?" (coded 1=yes, 0=no), "Are you a contributing member of a club, if you're not a leader?" (coded 1=yes, 0=no), "Does being involved take more time than you have to give?" (coded 1=yes, 0=no), and "How frequently do you attend religious services?" (where a higher number indicates more frequent attendance).

Political interest was comprised of the following items: "Do you find politics fascinating?" (coded 1=yes, 0=no), "Are you interested in politics?" (coded 1=yes, 0=no), "How strongly political do you feel? (where a higher score indicates stronger feelings), and "How many days per week do you use the internet/ television/ radio/ newspaper to learn political information?" (where a higher score indicates higher frequency).

Procedures

Participants were issued the survey by the researcher and asked to complete it. When they were finished with the survey they were given a standard working memory test where a string of numbers would appear on a screen in front of them, and they were asked to remember, and recite, as many as they could when prompted by the researcher. The working memory task was not used in this analysis.

Results

A series of regression analyses were run to examine the relationship between political involvement, political perception and preference, age, gender, fascination with politics, strength of feelings about politics, number of days per week searching out political information (radio, television, internet and newspapers), political interest, partisan strength, non-political club membership, contribution to clubs, time available for clubs or leadership, and religious service attendance frequency. Table 1 shows the

regression weights for the various models. The full model had an R^2=0.558, F(13,326)=31.595, and p<0.001. The following variables had significant regression weights: age, political fascination, number of days per week getting politically informed, political interest and non-political club membership had significant regression weights. The number of days per week getting politically informed had the largest individual contribution to the full model.

The first research hypothesis was that a model including just demographics variables (political perception, age and gender) would not perform as well as the full model. This reduced model had an R^2=0.158, F(4,326)=15.961, p<0.001. Age and gender had significant regression weights, while age had the largest contribution to the model. In support of the research hypothesis, this model did not perform as well as the full model, R^2-$change$=0.4, F-$change$(9,326) =15.904, p<0.001, suggesting that political and general interests are necessary for predicting political involvement.

The second research hypothesis was that a model including just general involvement variables (being a member of a non-political club, being a contributing member, time available for clubs or leadership and frequency of religious service attendance) would perform just as well as the full model. This reduced model had an R^2=0.079, F(4,335)=7.164, p<0.001. Club membership and contribution had significant regression weights; membership had the largest contribution. Contrary to the research hypothesis, this reduced model did not perform as well as the full model, $R^2change$=0.479, F-$change$(9,326)=39.254, p<0.001.

The third research hypothesis was that a model including just political interest variables (political fascination, strength of feelings about politics, number of days per

week searching out political information (radio, television, internet and newspapers), political interest and partisan strength) would perform as well as the full model. This reduced model had an R^2=0.511, $F(5,334)$=69.821, p<0.001. Contrary to the research hypothesis, the reduced model did not perform as well as the full model, R^2-*change*=0.047, *F-change*(8,326) =4.333, p<0.001.

The fourth research hypothesis was that political interest model would be able to predict better than the other predictors, and that the strongest single predictor of political involvement would be a part of the political interest model. This research hypothesis was supported-the political involvement model had an R^2=0.511, and the other reduced models had R^2=0.158 (general involvement) and R^2=0.079 (political interest). As seen in Table 1, number of days per week getting politically informed had the strongest unique contribution to involvement in the full model, β=0.491, p<0.001, and is in the political involvement model.

Finally, the predictive utility of the three reduced models was compared, using Steiger's Z-test. The correlation between the demographic model and the political interest model was r=0.353, p<0.001, and political interest accounted for larger amounts of variance among political involvement Z=6.866, p<0.001. The correlation between the demographic model and the general involvement model was r=0.148, p=0.006, and accounted for equal amounts of variance among political involvement, Z=1.786, p=0.074. The correlation between the general involvement model and political interest model was r=0.204, p<0.001 and political interest accounted for larger amounts of variance among political involvement, Z=9.133, p<0.001.

Discussion

Age, political fascination, frequency of searching out political information, political interest, and membership in non-political clubs had significant collinear relationships and multiple regression weights, as seen in table 1 and 2. These variables then are a safe bet when recruiting political participants, regardless of what kind of participation is needed.

Political perception, political preference, time allotted for club memberships, and religious service attendance had no significant relationship with political involvement, as seen in table 1 and 2. Religious service attendance is the most surprising out of these results, as many previous studies had found it to be a significant predictor of political involvement. Analyses including other religious involvement factors, such as donating money or affiliation, combined into a scale could be a better predictor of political involvement. Religious affiliation and involvement has wider range of definitions, the same way political involvement does. Increasing the scope of this predictor may account for more of the underlying influences of different kinds of political involvement. Or, religious activity could only be significant in predicting active measures of political involvement, such as volunteering for a campaign, rather than passive measures such as frequency of political knowledge acquisition that are included in this scale of political involvement.

Gender, strength of political feelings, and club membership contribution all had linear relationships with political involvement, but didn't contribute to the full model until all other variables were held constant, as seen in tables 1 and 2. They were probably all too collinear with the other variables in the full model to have individual significant contributions. Club membership is the most surprising, because simply being involved in

one area should influence political involvement later on, according to previous research. Maybe the same issue arose here, as did with the Pew study previously mentioned; an alternative explanation was needed to understand why lower SES individuals weren't involved politically on social media, even when social media access was held constant. They reasoned that the desire, or example, to get involved just wasn't there. Perhaps in this circumstance, perhaps the same reasoning is appropriate. Individuals could just be involved in other ways, and not have any desire to get involved politically too.

Partisan strength had a linear relationship but didn't uniquely contribute to the full model, or its' reduced model, as seen in tables 1 and 2. These results are surprising, since previous research has demonstrated many times that strongly associating with one party leads to higher involvement rates. The question in the survey "how strongly partisan are you?" is very face valid. Previous research has had a problem addressing the underlying reasoning that participants use when they answer questions this face valid. Snell, 2010, addressed this dilemma by allowing participants to explain themselves. Many said something to the effect of "I am affiliated with one party, but don't agree with them every single time," or "I agree with this party often but I wouldn't identify as one of them," suggesting that even though participants may actually be strongly partisan, they don't want to identify that way (even though they vote Republican, and align with those party values, they don't want to call themselves a Republican or have any attachment to the party). Older people are typically more concerned with party unity than younger people, and are maybe therefore more likely to identify as "very strongly partisan" on a scale. Perhaps, partisan strength is only associated with one *kind* of political involvement; previous research has found that older

and younger people have different amounts of resources (time and money) that affect their ability to be involved in different ways politically. Older people donate more money, because they have more of it, and younger people donate more time, because they have more of it.

None of the models worked as well as the full model in predicting political involvement. But, political interest came close and did better than the other two reduced models. Having certain characteristics, and being involved, can help predict political involvement and are possibly factors that influence involvement, but without any political interest, that potential may not really matter. When identifying people that are going to be involved, in many different kinds of ways, most of these variables are useful. However, if the characteristics that this person has only fall into one reduced model, then they may not be the best candidate in comparison to someone else with characteristics in all of the reduced models.

Conclusion

Predicting, and defining, political involvement can differ from source to source. In this analysis, different kinds of previously used political involvement characteristics were combined to create a scale that should provide a more complete picture of what political involvement is. Three reduced models with characteristics that have been found to predict involvement in previous research were tested for utility. None of the reduced models (demographics, general involvement, and political interest) were as useful as the full model in predicting involvement. But, political interest was more useful than the other two reduced models. This suggests that although demographics and involvement are important in the relationship, political alone may matter more. Further research,

involving political involvement scales, should be explored to determine what kinds of

people are involved in what kinds of ways.

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