

# Preaching in the Wilderness: Exploring the Macro Dynamics of Political Participation

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## **Abstract**

Research on the relationship between contextual factors and individual-level participation has offered a new frontier in the study of political activity. These studies push beyond the core characteristics highlighted in the Civic Voluntarism Model to understand how individuals respond to political, economic, and social environments. This paper builds on the contributions of both of these literatures to explore how national, political, and economic contexts shape aggregate rates of participation from 1973-1994. The central argument is that changes in the political and economic context produce alterations in individuals' political orientations, and these changed orientations drive fluctuations in aggregate behavior. Based on standard time series techniques, the results show that economic difficulties, competition over policymaking authority, and presidential elections act as stimulants for aggregate participation. The message is simple: civic participation is a dynamic response to a constantly changing world.

Context is the frontier of participation research. The core contributions toward our understanding of why people participate generally focus on individuals' attributes – socioeconomic status, resources, and political orientations (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). One of the greatest advantages of this approach has now become one of its most serious drawbacks: it explains participation decisions within some generic democracy, a world devoid of context. Unfortunately, we do not live in that generic world. Our world is full of continually changing political, economic, and social environments that structure how we make decisions about whether, when, and how to engage in political activity. Research on contextualized participation is blazing new trails toward a richer understanding of individual political behavior; one that conceives of participation as a response to political, economic, and social realities.

However, that is not to suggest that there is no longer any place for the accumulated knowledge captured in the Civic Voluntarism Model (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995; Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1995; Burns, Schlozman and Verba 2001). Studies of context accept the fundamental nature of these core contributions but seek to exploit the potential flexibility offered by political orientations to confront a more dynamic world of urban sprawl (Oliver 1999; Humphries 2001), political party mobilizations (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Gershtenson 2002; Hill and Leighley 1993), descriptive representation/empowerment (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Gay 2001, 2002; Griffin and Keane 2006; Lawless 2004), and anti-terrorism policies (Cho, Gimpel and Wu 2006). Much of this context-based research is limited in fully addressing the dynamic aspect of participation because they rely on cross-sectional research designs that provide insight into how contextual features differ across sub-national units instead of how these features change over time. This study adopts a longitudinal approach to context that has the dual benefits of dealing explicitly with how participatory behavior is altered by time-varying factors and nationalizes the measures of context to more broadly envision non-voting participation as a response to political and economic circumstances.

Such an approach allows one to question how the revival of political parties impacts behavior beyond the vote, what are the participatory consequences of institutional dynamics, and what are the broader ramifications of elections for non-voting activity? The point is that static considerations of participation are not capable of dealing with the full range of interesting questions involving

context. This paper investigates the role of macro-contextual features in terms of both the dynamics of participation and the forms of participatory activity as a way of expanding that range. The research question is simple: how does the macro-context influence aggregate participation over time? We build on the foundational understanding of individual-level participation by arguing that social, economic, and political factors alter individuals' political orientations, and it is these changing orientations which govern temporal fluctuations in aggregate rates of activity. Moreover, the relevance of the macro-context is conditioned on the forms of participation. This exploratory analysis can provide a more expansive, comprehensive view of non-voting, non-protest political participation.

In addition to these contributions to the study of context, this work is relevant in a larger sense. As stated by Verba and Nie (1972), one of the primary reasons for studying political participation is because, in a democracy, citizen participation should have some impact on policy. The problem is that we lack both the theoretical tools and empirical results to make such a connection plausible. Given the current state of our knowledge, it would be extremely difficult to tie individual participation decisions to policy outcomes due to a deficit in our understanding of the timing of these decisions. If participation has some instrumental value, then people should take action when there is either a higher chance of – or some enhanced motivation for – influencing policy. That is, the connection between participation and policy must fundamentally include how individual decisions relate to context. The time series analysis presented here allows us to begin to address this question regarding the timing of civic participation. Basically, this work should be viewed as the first leg of a long trek towards research capable of meaningfully integrating non-voting participation with policymaking. Along those lines, this foray into the contextual wilderness is aimed at offering a new conception of political participation as a dynamic heterogeneous phenomenon.

The paper proceeds in five sections. It begins by examining aggregate participation from 1973-1994 to serve as the motivation for this longitudinal study of national context. Second, there is a review of the literature on context to search for linkages between the macro world and micro behavior. Section three discusses how context is measured, the nature of the aggregate participation dependent variables, and the time series methods used for the analysis. The fourth section presents

the key findings that economic context and political context matter, and these contextual effects differ across forms of participation in somewhat intuitive ways. Finally, the conclusion articulates the core contributions of this work to an understanding of political participation: it provides (to our knowledge) the first time series treatment of non-voting, non-protest activity; it demonstrates the importance of national contextual features; and provides a launching point for a more comprehensive theory of political participation – one capable of addressing the timing of political activity.

## 1 Nature of Aggregate Participation

Before offering arguments and supporting evidence for how participation and context interact over time, it would be helpful to have some general notion regarding the nature of aggregate participation. The demand for measures of participation across time effectively limited the choice of data to one, the Roper Social and Political Trends Data 1973 - 1994 (Brady, Putnam et al. 2001). This data set contains almost monthly<sup>1</sup> surveys that ask respondents whether they had engaged in any of twelve political activities.<sup>2</sup> As stated in the introduction, our interest is in how context shapes participation across both time and type of activity, so we employ a number of different dependent variables. A composite participation index consisting of all twelve of the activities listed above is used to get a general sense of the influence that dynamic political and economic environments have on political behavior. However, the focus is on those forms of activity which are explicitly political and geared more towards the expression of collective aims. Following Harris, Sinclair-Chapman and McKenzie (2005, 2006) a “political work index” is employed. This is an additive scale ranging from 1 to 4 based on how many of the following acts a respondent engaged in: attending a political rally, being a member of a good government organization, signing a petition, and working for a political party. These four acts are particularly interesting because they are unambiguously collective, as opposed to individual, and politically oriented. Basically, they are examples of the image of grass roots politics that immediately comes to mind when discussing civic participation. Since the Roper

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<sup>1</sup>Surveys are generally available for ten of the twelve months, with June and November as the usual exclusions.

<sup>2</sup>The twelve activities are: contacting a member of Congress, attending a public meeting on local affairs, attending a political rally, seeking/holding political office, serving on a committee for an organization, serving as an officer for an organization, writing a letter to a newspaper, signing a petition, working for a political party, making a speech, writing an article for a periodical, or being a member of a good government organization.

data usually does not have surveys for two or three months in a given year, these aggregate rates of participation are measured as the quarterly average number of participatory forms that survey respondents reported engaging in.

Figure 1 presents the aggregate rates of activity for the composite participation and political work indices from 1973 to 1994.

[Figure 1 about here.]

The time trends begin in late 1973 at relative peaks of activity at 1.46 and 0.63 for composite participation and political work respectively. Throughout the second half of the 1970s aggregate participation rates begin to decline until they hit lows of 1.05 and 0.46 in the fourth quarter of 1979. This ushers in a trough for the first half of the 1980s when both indices hover around their means. Aggregate participation experiences a resurgence between 1985 and 1987, exceeding even the high points of the 1970s to attain the maximum values in our sample. However, these peaks are followed by fairly dramatic drops in 1988 that mark a serious decline in aggregate participation throughout the remainder of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. Composite participation finally dips below one act at the start of 1993 before hitting the minimum of only 0.84 acts in 1994, and the same pattern is true of political work.

There are two main points to take away from these graphs: 1) aggregate participation is in fact dynamic, it fluctuates over time; 2) these fluctuations are not quite what would be expected based solely on resources/SES. Figure 2 elaborates on this second point by presenting plots of the average level of education and household income of the survey respondents over the period of this study.<sup>3</sup>

[Figure 2 about here.]

It is fairly straightforward to see that the illustration of aggregate participation found in Figure 1 is not consistent with steadily increasing levels of education, as seen in Figure 2. However, it appears that the pattern for household income is similar to the patterns of composite participation and political work. Specifically, all three of these plots begin with some relatively high values in

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<sup>3</sup>Education level is measured on a four-point scale: 1 = 'no school, 2 = primary school (grades 1-8), 3 = secondary school (grades 9-12), and 4 = higher education. Income is measured in constant dollars with 1982-1984 serving as the baseline.

the 1970s, a trough in the first half of the 1980s, a strong resurgence from roughly 1985 to 1989, and finally giving way to a decline in the 1990s. Judging from figures 1 and 2, one would conclude that aggregate participation is a function of household income.

We reject that conclusion as too simplistic. There are a few possibilities here. It may be that aggregate participation fluctuates around some baseline that is determined by SES, but the deviations from that baseline are governed by context. Alternatively, it could be that household income and aggregate participation rates appear to follow similar trajectories because both are shaped by the broader economic climate. Lastly, the bivariate correlation between composite participation and household income is only 0.365, so there is ample room for other factors to influence how civic participation varies across time periods. Basically, participation appears to generally be a fairly stable phenomenon, but it is also able to experience marked periods of both surge and decline. The task is to understand the role of political and economic context in these fluctuations. Mobilization and political orientations are plausible starting points for explaining how macro-context could influence individual decisions to produce aggregate changes in participation rates. The implied premise for studies of contextual effects on civic activism is that alterations of political or economic factors have some impact on those individual-level attributes of recruitment and/or political orientations. This paper makes that premise more explicit by arguing that social, economic, and political conditions alter political orientations, thus shaping patterns of participation over time.

## **2 Macro Context, Micro Effects, and Political Participation**

Beginning with the work of Huckfeldt (1979), scholars have contended that the social context of peoples' neighborhoods can have an impact on their participation decisions. Huckfeldt's initial findings were that social forms of activity, such as informing others about politics, were encouraged by higher status neighborhoods, while neighborhood status was irrelevant for more individualized forms of participation, such as writing a letter. These results have been confirmed by later work (Giles and Dantico 1982; Bowers 2004; Humphries 2001) and extended to show that social interaction can boost individualized forms of participation as well (Kenny 1992). The theoretical

arguments in all of these works emphasize how the flow of information is shaped by the neighborhood context (Cho, Gimpel and Dyck 2006; McClurg 2003). When individuals are part of an information network, such as those in higher status neighborhoods, homeowners in ethnic enclaves, or non-commuters, then levels of political knowledge and interest should increase. The end product is enhanced levels of political participation.

The logic behind this research on how social context influences participation is also at the core of studies on the effects of local economic context. Focusing specifically on black Americans, Cohen and Dawson (1993) find that concentrated poverty severely depresses the political activity of black people, and these findings are reinforced through later work by Alex-Assensoh and Assensoh (2001). The message from both of these studies is that high rates of poverty isolate black people in these neighborhoods from the benefits of social interaction extolled by Huckfeldt (1979) and his progeny. Oliver (1999) lends further support by showing that civic participation was lowest in economically homogenous communities, whether high or low status, and highest in cities that are economically diverse. He concludes that economic heterogeneity in a neighborhood boosts levels of participation because the heightened conflict over local resources stimulates levels of political interest. Whether through social isolation or competition for government services, at the local level, economic context is important because it alters peoples' ability to feel connected to the political process.

Some early studies of the national economic context echo this sentiment from the local level. Research by Scott and Acock (1979) along with Rosenstone (1982) claim that unemployment depresses participation through its deleterious effects on individual's self-esteem and perceived societal roles. However, there is also a strand of scholarship which situates economic conditions into evaluations of governmental competence (Arcelus and Meltzer 1975). They argue that rates of unemployment or inflation act as signals of individuals' larger problems with the government's handling of the economy (Kinder and Kiewiet 1979; Feldman 1982; Arceneaux 2003), so it is the resultant shifts in efficacy and/or trust that shape participation. The overarching point is that – regardless of which approach seems more appealing – national economic trends have been demonstrated to influence individual voting behavior in a variety of settings, and all of these studies offer political orientations as the theoretical link between a macro world and micro behavior.

Research on the political component of this macro world has tended to focus on three areas: mobilization, elections, and empowerment. In their analysis of political mobilization, Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) show the effects of ballot referenda, government budgeting, election cycles, congressional activity, and the residual impact of social movements on civic participation. Although they do not specifically refer to these variables as “context”, their longitudinal study of participation demonstrates how elections and the heightened activities of political elites shape participation. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993, 70) find that the “patterns of participation in governmental politics must have something to do with the agendas of government and the activities of the politicians and the interest groups that seek to influence them.” These agendas and activities of elites provide a political backdrop against which to examine variations in the level of activism across time. Basically, they construct a foundation to examine both institutional and electoral contexts as shapers of aggregate participation over time.

In terms of elections, distinct and competitive political parties are vital to political activity. Although it has been applied to various settings, from women’s suffrage (Corder and Wolbrecht 2006) to “lower-class” mobilization (Hill and Leighley 1996), the basic argument is that ideologically distinct and competitive political parties serve to increase interest in a campaign and stimulate turnout (Hill and Leighley 1993). Gershtenson (2002) moves away from voter turnout by finding that the likelihood of Democratic victory – as measured by partisan distributions and prospects for the general election – actually lowers rates of party activism. In this case, political interest falls due to the surety of electoral success. Once again, the thread tying all of these studies together is that the political context – particularly partisan competition – affects participation by altering individuals’ political orientations.

The empowerment literature perhaps makes the most explicit case for the importance of political orientations to an understanding of macro-context and micro-behavior. Empowerment research argues that descriptive representation provides a signal of enhanced responsiveness to constituents, and this signal is translated into higher levels of trust, efficacy, and knowledge (Bobo and Gilliam 1990). Originally intended as an explanation regarding the impact of black mayors, empowerment has been extended to the representation of women and minorities in Congress (Hansen 1997; Gay

2001, 2002; Barreto, Segura and Woods 2004; Banducci, Donovan and Karp 2004; Lawless 2004). Although not explicitly describing their work as a focus on context, Harris, Sinclair-Chapman and McKenzie (2006) show that the benefits of empowerment are often overshadowed by the counter-vailing forces of black income inequality, inflation, and economic competition from immigration. Whether it is through mobilization, elections, or empowerment, political context matters because of its impact on political orientations.

The literature on context and political participation has shown how macro-level economic forces and political context affect individual-level behavior. Political orientations, unlike socioeconomic status or resources, provide a mechanism for individuals to choose when to participate. Ultimately, our aim is to connect individual participation decisions to policy outcomes, such a connection is only possible if we understand when and how people take action. This paper takes a first step towards that goal by illustrating how contextual forces shape the timing of participation. Specifically, it seeks to extend the fundamental claim about the intermediary role of political orientations to the aggregate level.<sup>4</sup> We argue that fluctuations in aggregate activity are driven by the shifting political orientations of individuals. These shifts in orientations are the result of the political and economic contexts. Basically, aggregate political activism is a response to evolving political and economic environments. In pursuing this argument, a dynamic rather than a static model of civic participation is developed by estimating how shifting contextual forces in national politics and the economy influence the direction and intensity of civic engagement.<sup>5</sup>

### 3 Data and Methods

Our stated interest is in how political participation responds to changes in the economic and political contexts over time. The first tasks are simply to develop expectations for the data analysis and define what those contexts actually are. As previously stated, there is no consensus in the literature

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<sup>4</sup>We are not unaware of the ecological fallacy. An unstated assumption in our argument is that – unlike macro political features such as partisanship (Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson 2002) – aggregate participation is essentially identical to individual participation. For that reason, we claim that individual processes should apply in the aggregate.

<sup>5</sup>It should be noted that the contributions of Harris, Sinclair-Chapman and McKenzie (2005, 2006) to studying aggregate black participation were influential to this work. However, this paper goes beyond their arguments by explicitly modeling participation as a dynamic process and analyzing participation more generally.

for how economic context relates to political behavior. However, part of the divide in this literature is based on whether economic hardships are taken to be individual or government failings (Feldman 1982; Arceneaux 2003). Given that aggregate changes in participation and national economic conditions are being examined, it seems reasonable to adopt a view that focuses on sociotropic responses to the economy. Research on how economic evaluations determine election outcomes also suggests that – at least when dealing with aggregates – individuals react like “bankers” to changes in the economic context (Markus 1988; MacKuen, Erikson and Stimson 1992; Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson 2000). For that reason, it is hypothesized that worsening economic conditions alter individuals’ levels of political trust and efficacy, thus stimulating aggregate increases in participation rates. There are three measures of economic conditions: unemployment, consumer sentiment, and inflation. Unemployment is measured as the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate as reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics; consumer sentiment is measured as the composite consumer sentiment index from the University of Michigan; and inflation is measured as the change in the consumer price index reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Unemployment and inflation are expected to have positive coefficients, while consumer sentiment should have a negative relationship with aggregate participation. Periods of rising unemployment, high inflation, and/or pessimistic evaluations of economic performance should experience higher rates of aggregate participation.

Political context encompasses both institutional and electoral variables. The institutional variables are intended to capture how changes in the characteristics or behavior of the executive and legislative branches impact aggregate participation. When the insights from the elections literature are extended to the institutional political context, the hypothesis emerges that greater competition over policymaking authority, polarized voting patterns in Congress (signalling distinct ideologies for the parties), and higher volumes of Congressional activity will all boost aggregate participation rates. More specifically, the analysis includes a dummy variable taking the value of one for all quarters in which a Democrat is serving as president; a dummy taking the value of one for quarters in which the House and Senate are controlled by different parties is used to gauge the balance of Congressional power; the quarterly number of bills introduced measures the level of Congressional activity; and the ideological polarization of Congress is measured as the quarterly proportion of

roll call votes on which most Democrats vote in opposition to most Republicans.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, we are interested in the role of elections in shaping aggregate participation. Here the hypothesis is simply that participation should increase across the board during election years – for both presidential and midterm elections. To that end, a dummy variable taking a value of one for all four quarters of midterm election years and an identically constructed dummy for presidential election years are included. Lastly, Figure 2 illustrated that SES cannot be entirely dismissed as a contributing factor in aggregate rates of civic participation. In order to support the claim that aggregate activism is a response to how the macro-context changes across time, the previously described measures of aggregate education and income are included as controls. Descriptive statistics for these variables are available in the appendix. Now that it is clear what is meant by context, the exploration of macro-dynamics can properly begin by returning to an earlier discussion regarding the nature of the dependent variable – aggregate rates of non-voting, political participation.

The primary dependent variables, indices of composite participation and political work, have already been discussed and presented in Figure 1. However, this research is also interested in how contextual effects vary across the distinct forms of political activity. With that interest in mind, the individual types of activity which comprise the political work index – rally attendance, petition signing, organization membership, and working for a political party – are used as dependent variables to gauge the differences in macro-contextual effects across acts. Each dependent variable is measured as a quarterly average, the sum of all acts in a quarter divided by the number of respondents. For the two indices, composite participation and political work, the variables represent the average number of acts committed, and for the individual types of activity (rally attendance, organizational membership, petition signing, and party work) the variables are the proportion of individuals who engaged in a given form of participation.<sup>7</sup>

These measures of aggregate participation are modeled as standard transfer functions (Enders 2004, 239-261). Basically, innovations in the time series for the dependent variables are theorized to

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<sup>6</sup>For our purposes, “most” meant 90% of Democrats opposed 90% of Republicans. When different thresholds were used, the results did not change substantially.

<sup>7</sup>The proportions were multiplied by 100 for ease of interpretation, so the measures are actually the percent who participate in an act.

be caused by the innovations in the time series of our independent variables. The estimation process is similar to that described by Box-Steffensmeier, Boef and Lin (2004): ARIMA models were fit to each of the series<sup>8</sup> (both dependent and independent variables); diagnostics were performed to ascertain the “proper” lags for the model; and then the residuals from the ARIMA models were used as the inputs for the final estimation. In our case this amounted to performing OLS (without a constant) on the purged residuals with the contextual variables lagged by a full year (four quarters).<sup>9</sup> This modeling strategy has important substantive implications. By not including some autoregressive component, it explicitly conceives of aggregate participation as a response to national political and economic contexts. That is, previous shocks to participation rates are not relevant to subsequent deviations. Worsening economic conditions, elections, and an active, competitive policymaking environment characterized by ideologically distinct parties should all lead to greater positive changes in participation, and these surges in activity persist until the conditions themselves change.<sup>10</sup> Now attention may be shifted to evaluating these hypotheses through the data analysis.

## 4 Results

Due to a relatively consistent lack of surveys conducted in June and November, these models were estimated with dummy variables for the second and fourth quarters of each year. Those coefficients do not provide any additional insight into how aggregate rates of participation change over time, so they have been excluded from the presentation of results.<sup>11</sup> The results from the time series

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<sup>8</sup>Results for the individual ARIMA models fitted to the measures of aggregate participation rates can be found in the appendix.

<sup>9</sup>Aside from the diagnostic reasons for this lag length, the Roper question asks whether respondents had committed any of these twelve acts in the past year. Basically, the lag is justified on both methodological and theoretical grounds. Our dummies for midterm and presidential elections are exceptions. These variables are lagged by only three quarters to more accurately capture the impact of the election cycle.

<sup>10</sup>It is important to note here that aggregate participation rates are non-stationary. The two exceptions are rally attendance, which is stationary, and working for parties, which was trend stationary. This is important because the substantive interpretation for political work, organizational membership, petition signing, and composite participation deals with *changes* in aggregate rates of activity rather than the level of activity itself. Party work is similarly interpreted as the deviation from its downward trend, and rally attendance should be discussed in terms of the absolute rate of participation.

<sup>11</sup>The second quarter dummy was not significant, while the fourth quarter dummy was significant and negative for all models.

analysis of the indices for composite participation and political work are presented below in Table 1.<sup>12</sup>

[Table 1 about here.]

Returning to the comparisons of Figures 1 and 2, it is clear that the relationship between aggregate income and aggregate rates of participation is more illusory than real. While education appears to have a substantial influence on changes in participation rates across these time periods, some important caveats must be kept in mind. First, as shown in Figure 2, there is very little variation in education levels during this period, so the large shifts these coefficients might suggest never come close to occurring in actual practice. Second, because of the way education is measured, as a four category scale, a unit increase in aggregate education could reflect tremendous differences in terms of the number of years of education or highest degrees attained. Therefore, education and income were important controls that were necessary to have confidence in the validity of the contextual variables; however, fluctuations in aggregate rates of civic participation are not simply reflections of temporal changes in SES.

There is some support for the argument concerning economic conditions. Inflation is positive and significant for both the composite participation and political work indices. Consumer sentiment is also significant and negative for political work. Although these coefficients have opposite signs, they tell a coherent story. As the economy worsens – whether measured by falling consumer sentiment or rising inflation – there should be higher changes in the rates of participation. These findings are particularly useful in that they apply the logic offered by studies of voting behavior to non-voting forms of activity (Fiorina 1981; Markus 1988; MacKuen, Erikson and Stimson 1992; Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson 2000). Aggregate changes in participation over time are responses to fluctuating, national economic circumstances. Interestingly, unemployment does not have a significant effect. This is perhaps reflective of individuals’ internalization of unemployment as compared to the externalization of blame that accompanies inflation or perceived economic shortcomings more broadly. The basic point is that periods of economic uncertainty lead to larger

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<sup>12</sup>Bold entries indicate coefficients that are statistically significant for  $p < 0.1$ . The standard errors are in parentheses.

positive changes in aggregate rates of participation.

Political context also provides an intuitive finding: political participation is driven by political realities. In terms of the institutional context, the revival of parties within Congress (Rohde 1991) – and subsequent increases in polarized roll call voting – appears to have negative consequences for changes in political work. Conversely, divided control of the House and Senate acts as a catalyst for composite participation. Other measures of the contextual influence provided by political institutions, the number of bills introduced and the party affiliation of the president, fail to achieve statistical significance in either of these models. Finally, elections consistently shape patterns of aggregate behavior, though in somewhat surprising ways. In both models, changes in the rates of composite participation and political work decrease during midterm election years. Needless to say, this is somewhat surprising. All of the subfield’s ideas concerning the importance of mobilization suggest that elections should produce spikes in participation rates (Hill and Leighley 1993, 1996; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Brady, Schlozman and Verba 1999). This expectation is born out for presidential elections, which is positive and significant across both models, so changes in the rates of political work and composite participation increase during presidential election years.

Before proceeding to the discussion of the separate acts of participation, there are a few points about these findings worth underlining. First, and most importantly, these results make the simple point that national context matters. Even after controlling for the aggregate levels of resources, political participation rates are governed by the alterations of dynamic, national, political, and economic contexts. Secondly, the results thus far have a – more or less – intuitive appeal in that a souring economy, bipartisanship, and presidential elections all stimulate political activity. Finally, it is important to reiterate that these changes are taking place over time. Years in which presidential elections are held result in higher rates of activity compared to non-election years. Two institutional consequences of the Reagan revolution, divided control of Congress and a resurgence in partisan roll calls, shape aggregate rates of participation across the time periods in this sample.

[Figure 3 about here.]

In particular, Figure 3 shows that there is a rise in polarized roll call votes beginning in 1990 which appears to correspond with the declining rates of activity seen in the composite participation and

political work indices presented in Figure 1. Additionally, the jump in polarized voting beginning with the 1980s is in line with a trough in civic activism rates. In order to provide greater nuance to these results, the distinct effects of the macro-context across modes of political activity are also examined.

The results for the individual types of participation are presented in Table 2. Interestingly, none of the four modes of civic activism examined here respond to the same set of contextual features.

[Table 2 about here.]

Economic context seems to play a relatively minor role in rates of participation for the distinct forms of activity. Periods of rising inflation yield greater positive shifts in the proportion of individuals who sign petitions. However, the remaining acts seem to bear no relation to the economic environment. The basic point seems to be that economic context has a somewhat limited role in determining aggregate rates of participation over time.

As we anticipated, examining the individual forms of participation provides a more nuanced description of how the political context shapes participation as well. Ideological polarization depresses the rate of organization membership and rally attendance, and the boost yielded by divided control of Congress is experienced only for organizational membership and signing petitions. These findings about organizational membership are particularly interesting because they imply that the nature of our elite institutions is reflected in how citizens' institutions operate. This correspondence between government and civic organizations has been dealt with extensively by the literature on American political development (Skocpol, Ganz and Munson 2000; Crowley and Skocpol 2001). In particular, previous research has shown that the structure and growth of civic organizations are tied to broader institutional factors such as war and federalism. Table 2 suggests that the composition of the legislature is an institutional variable that has been overlooked in prior work on civic participation. We have already discussed the influence of Reagan-Bush Era politics on composite participation and political work; however, the results for party work suggest that there is another important consequence. Namely, the Reagan and Bush presidencies oversaw a surge in the rate of individuals who work for political parties. It would appear that these two presidents provided a sufficient foil to spur the mobilization efforts of the Democratic party between 1981-1992.

Midterm elections still have a puzzling negative relationship to petitions, but the coefficients are not significant for any of the other forms of political activity. Judging from these results, there is perhaps something peculiar about petitions. It could be that petitions are geared more toward local issues that are superseded with more national concerns during off-year elections. However, that sort of substitution should also be present for presidential elections, but the coefficient is insignificant. At the very least, by examining the individual forms of civic participation this “problem” has been isolated to petition signing specifically rather than participation more generally. Lastly, presidential elections continue to meet expectations by providing an almost universal stimulus to participatory behavior. In contrast to midterm elections, presidential contests provide an electoral context for citizens to join organizations, campaign for candidates, and attend political rallies.

Tables 1 and 2 have exhibited some interesting and important points. They have shown that innovations in the contextual time series govern temporal changes in aggregate rates of participation. Indeed, these results persist when SES is included in the models and extend across both the additive indices and distinct acts of political activity. Inflation is the most consistent economic indicator which has some impact on aggregate behavior, while consumer sentiment and unemployment are largely non-factors. In terms of political context, presidential elections were shown to provide a boon to aggregate rates of activity in almost every model ran. Though the results are not quite as robust as presidential elections, the institutional variables of ideological polarization and divided control of Congress also seem to play an important role in aggregate movements of participation. Basically, aggregate political participation cannot be understood as only a simple byproduct of a set of resources. Instead, it is also shaped by dynamic macro-contextual forces. Non-voting, non-protest civic participation is a response to political reality.

#### **4.1 It’s kinda sorta the economy stupid**

This paper’s stated interest is in how economic and political contexts at the national level influence aggregate rates of participation over time. Moreover, the central argument was that political orientations – trust, efficacy, knowledge, and interest – provide the most plausible link between macro-context and aggregate behavior, so the results should be interpreted through the lens of

that argument. Table 1 showed that, after controlling for education and income, aggregate rates of political work were enhanced by declining consumer sentiment and rising inflation. That is, as economic conditions deteriorate, aggregate participation rises. These results are completely in line with our hypothesis, which was based upon previous work on voting behavior (Kinder and Kiewiet 1979; Fiorina 1981; Feldman 1982; Markus 1988; MacKuen, Erikson and Stimson 1992; Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson 2000; Arceneaux 2003). The idea here is that economic conditions are a means of evaluating governmental competence, so when the economy sours citizens mobilize as a way of holding elected officials accountable. This is a very different conceptualization of civic participation. These findings portray political activity as a continuous process of updating behavior according to ever-changing economic indicators such as inflation. Under this view, accountability is not confined to elections, citizens can constantly take action to express dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the economy.

## **4.2 Reagan, Bush, and institutional context**

Two separate types of political context variables were offered, institutional and electoral. The dominant theme emerging from the results for institutional variables was the tremendous impact that Reagan-Bush had on American politics. Beginning with Reagan's inauguration in 1981, we saw in Figure 3 that polarized roll calls in Congress surged upward. Additionally, the electorate's newfound conservatism allowed the Republicans to seize control of the Senate. These two factors produced a curious cross-current in which rising polarization lowered rates of participation while the divided control of Congress stimulated composite participation, political work, petition signing, and organizational membership. Basically, split party control of the House and Senate afforded a higher baseline for civic activism throughout the period of 1981-1986, but rising polarization in Congress produced more negative deviations from that baseline. This period in American politics was particularly contentious in terms of both foreign and domestic policies, and the gravity of these policy debates are responsible for the institutional features we observe. It should therefore not be surprising that citizens would respond accordingly through civic activism.

In terms of the literature, previous research has shown that more competitive political parties

increase both voter turnout and non-voting campaign activity (Hill and Leighley 1993; Gershtenson 2002). Divided control of Congress is congruent with this logic in that there is greater partisan competition over policymaking. The apparent “problem” is that the negative coefficients for polarization contradict earlier findings that ideologically extreme parties are more effective mobilizers of political activists (Hill and Leighley 1993, 1996; Gershtenson 2002). In our case it just seems that polarized voting behavior in Congress lowers individuals’ levels of interest and/or trust, and these altered political orientations are manifested through lower rates of aggregate participation. Basically, it appears that policy questions of tax reform, Cold War politics, government responsibilities for social welfare, retrenchment of civil rights, and the decline of urban industry created the sort of atmosphere that allowed both parties to gain a hold on policymaking authority. That shared authority provided greater access to a broader swath of interests, so aggregate rates of activity rose. However, when citizens perceived that partisan politics was preventing definitive solutions to these issues, people became disillusioned and so participation fluctuated accordingly. It is important to recognize that by adopting a longitudinal approach to context, civic participation can be explained as a component of the political environment itself.

Further support for this interpretation is offered by the analysis of the individual forms of activity. Examining the individual acts contributes some evidence for the above claim that divided control of Congress provides greater access to policymaking authority, and thus increases participation, because it is only relevant for precisely those sorts of activities which articulate group interests: signing petitions and organization membership. Similarly, we state above that polarized voting in Congress might lower aggregate rates of activity due to lessened enthusiasm among citizens. Those effects are again borne out for the specific forms of activity that would presumably be most dependent upon the political interest of committed activists: attending rallies and organization membership. Again, these insights are a product of the research design to examine context across both time and type of activity.

The last institutional factor that appears to correspond to the Reagan-Bush era is the impact of Republican presidents on the rates at which people work for political parties. We interpret these results as indicative of Democrats’ mobilizing efforts, which would tend to be more aggressive

during periods of Republican control. Essentially, twelve years of Reagan and Bush presented Democratic civic activists with compelling bogeymen to fight against. As a result they had higher levels of political interest and correspondingly higher rates of party work. This idea is buttressed by the finding in Gershtenson (2002) that Democratic campaign activists tend to work harder when victory is less certain. By using time series analysis of national political factors and distinct forms of participation, we have moved away from a description of how participation works in some generic democracy. Instead, these explanations root civic activism firmly within the prevailing political context. More importantly, what constitutes that “prevailing political context” is allowed to vary.

### **4.3 The civic ritual of elections**

Midterm and presidential elections are two of the most important ways that the American political context can vary across years. Midterm elections present a somewhat confusing case. The confusion, of course, stems from the negative coefficients in the results for composite participation and political work. This means that changes in the aggregate rate of participation will be lower during midterm elections relative to years when there are not elections for national office. Certainly one would expect midterm elections to alter participation to a lesser extent than presidential elections, but a negative coefficient is surprising. Although there is not a clear understanding as to why midterm elections have a negative impact on petition signing, replacing the indices with separate types of activity at least provides some confidence that this effect does not extend to civic participation more generally.

Despite this confusion, it is unambiguously evident that presidential elections provide a unique opportunity in the civic life of America, and this opportunity yields increased rates of civic participation. The indices of composite participation and political work both demonstrated that, in a general sense, presidential election years are marked by augmented rates of political activity compared to non-election years. This general effect was further refined by the analysis of distinct forms of participation. There are (proportionally) more members of organizations, attendees at rallies, and workers for political parties when the president is on the ballot.

Zulow (1994) offers a possible explanation for the difference between presidential and midterm

elections. First, there is simply something special about presidential elections. He argues that they serve to legitimize institutions and reinforce shared American values. As a result, there are “quadrennial peaks in optimism.” Rahm, Brehm and Carlson (1999) provide further support for this idea by demonstrating that the 1996 election served as an institutional stimulant for social capital. Second, Zullo (1994) shows that midterm elections are actually associated with declining levels of optimism. He argues that candidates in presidential elections tap into notions of American exceptionalism by putting forth optimistic visions of the future. Conversely, midterm elections are characterized by greater negativity and a localized focus that fails to inspire the citizenry. Our results are in line with this explanation about the role of national elections in terms of the connection between elections and orientations and the negative coefficient for midterms. Presidential elections are a uniquely important civic ritual in the United States, and by studying civic activism across time periods, we have been able to capture that importance in terms of non-voting participation.

## 5 Conclusion

With the exception of Putnam (1995), the literature is virtually absent from discussions on how participation ebbs and flows over time. Furthermore, of the work that has been done, there is a lack of emphasis on how macroeconomic forces and the political activities of national elites have a dynamic influence on the shape and direction of civic activism. This paper makes a contribution to the study of context and political participation by moving the discussion from local to national context and by taking a longitudinal approach to see how shifting economic and political environments influence changes in civic participation. It simply asked, from a contextual perspective, what moves aggregate-level changes in non-voting civic participation? Using quarterly level changes in civic participation over the course of twenty-one years we find that the political activities and behavior of national elites and, to a lesser extent, changes in the national economy, account for changes in civic participation.

The results have shown that worsening economic conditions, particularly periods of rising inflation, will stimulate political activity as individuals seek to hold the government accountable for its perceived failings. This extends insights from the voting literature to non-voting participation by

addressing the role of economic context on a national level. However, the most intriguing findings relate to our measures of political context. The aftermath of the Reagan Revolution – divided control of Congress, polarized roll call votes, and Republican dominance of the White House – has been shown to alter patterns of participatory behavior in significant ways. Indeed, the results emphasize that civic activism cannot be properly understood without paying attention to the political context. Since everyone agrees that politics are dynamic phenomena, then it is only appropriate to have a dynamic view of how individuals engage in politics. We provide such a view. Lastly, this longitudinal approach to participation allows one to study the impact of elections beyond questions of voting. Rates of non-voting political activity experience a surge during presidential elections just as is observed for turnout. Our message is simple yet important: political participation is a dynamic response to ever-changing economic and political contexts at the national level.

Despite these advances for the study of context, this paper does not provide some messianic answer to the core questions regarding the timing of political participation. Rather it is more akin to John the Baptist preaching in a contextual wilderness. Although it certainly makes a contribution in its own right, its greater worth is in preparing the way for future research. Our conceptualization of aggregate participation as dynamic activity composed of distinct heterogeneous pieces provides a foundation for developing new theoretical insights. Building on our macro model of civic participation, future research should examine how macroeconomic and political context influence micro-level political attitudes, such as efficacy, trust, and interest in politics. We need to know how changes in the macro environment either enhance or depress micro-level attitudes and how those micro effects may influence shifts in the civic participation of Americans. A more comprehensive theory of participation can exploit these findings about the timing of participation in response to political and economic events to construct a model capable of tying activism to policy outcomes. This paper attempts to further the teachings that context matters; future work should spread the gospel that participation matters.

# Appendices

## A Descriptive Statistics and ARIMA Models

[Table 3 about here.]

[Table 4 about here.]

[Table 5 about here.]

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Figure 1: Composite Participation and Political Work, 1973-1994

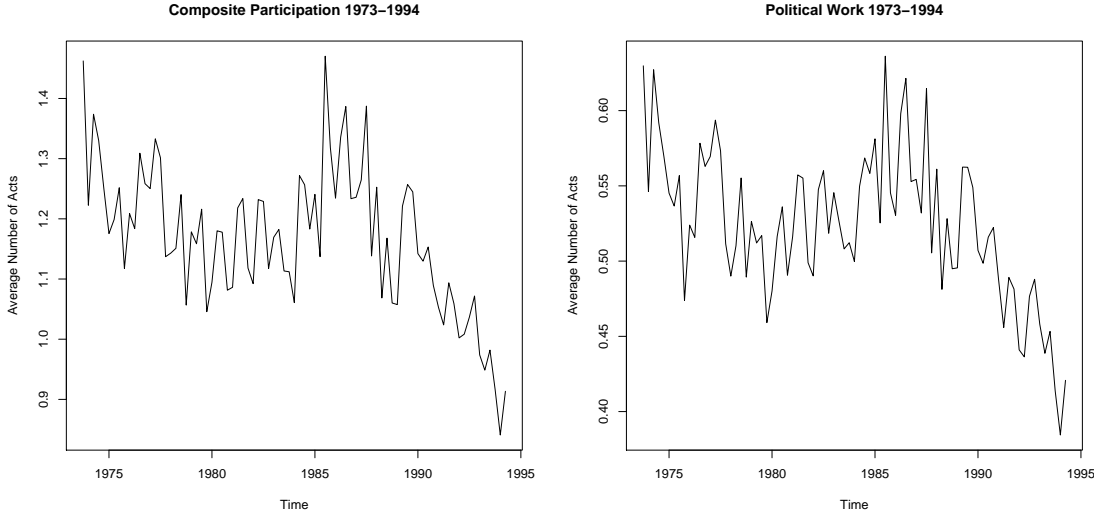


Figure 2: Composite Participation and Political Work, 1973-1994

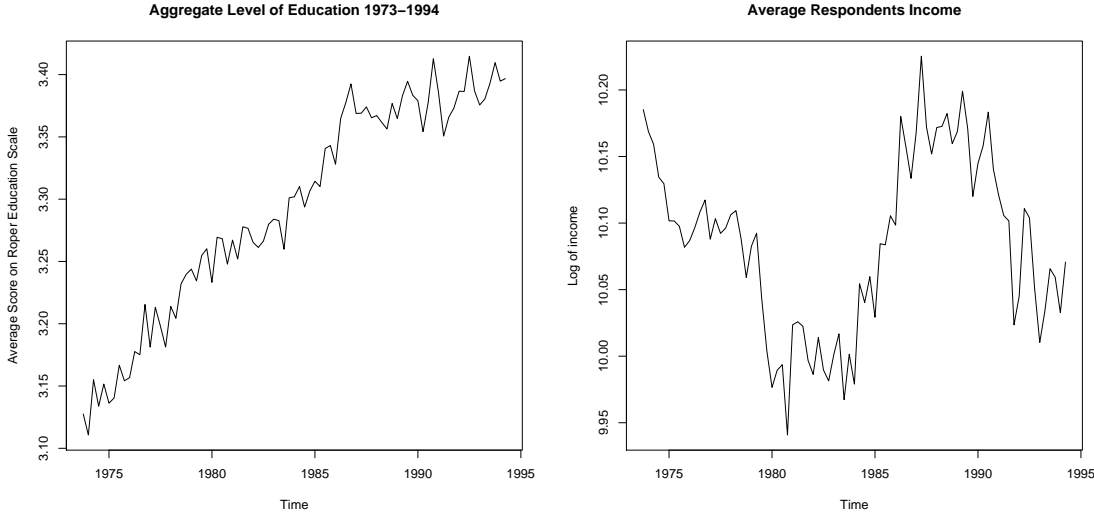
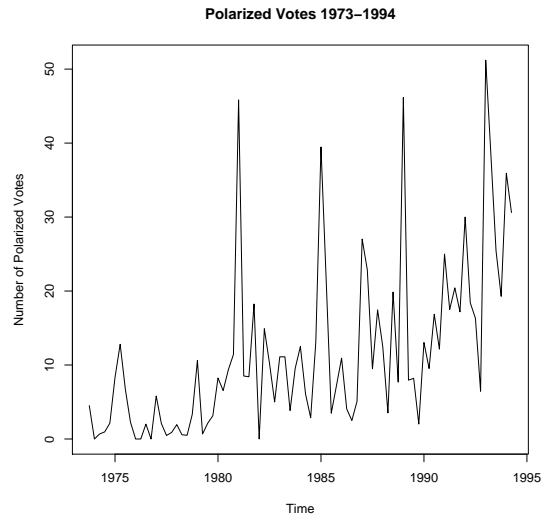


Figure 3: The Rise of Polarized Congressional Voting, 1973-1994



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Table 1: The Effects of Macro-Context on Political Work and Overall Participation

	Composite Index	Political Work
<b><i>SES</i></b>		
Education	<b>1.583</b> (0.490)	<b>0.818</b> (0.198)
Income	0.174 (0.322)	0.109 (0.130)
<hr/> <b><i>Economic Context</i></b>		
Unemployment Rate	0.014 (0.028)	-0.005 (0.011)
Inflation Rate	<b>0.037</b> (0.019)	<b>0.016</b> (0.008)
Consumer Sentiment	-0.001 (0.002)	<b>-0.0012</b> (0.0007)
<hr/> <b><i>Political Context</i></b>		
Ideological Polarization	-0.001 (0.001)	<b>-0.001</b> (0.000)
Divided Congress	<b>0.032</b> (0.016)	0.011 (0.007)
Number of Bills Introduced	-0.003 (0.019)	-0.001 (0.008)
Democrat President	-0.018 (0.017)	-0.008 (0.007)
Midterm Elections	<b>-0.040</b> (0.007)	<b>-0.014</b> (0.007)
Presidential Elections	<b>0.029</b> (0.016)	<b>0.020</b> (0.006)

Table 2: The Effects of Macro-Context on Signing Petitions and Organizational Membership

	Petitions	Membership	Party Work	Rallies
<b><i>SES</i></b>				
Education	<b>47.919</b> (12.845)	2.033 (3.155)	<b>7.155</b> (3.881)	<b>19.212</b> (7.304)
Income	1.433 (8.441)	1.833 (2.073)	1.956 (2.550)	2.844 (4.800)
<b><i>Economic Context</i></b>				
Unemployment Rate	-0.519 (0.727)	0.176 (0.179)	0.187 (0.220)	-0.039 (0.413)
Inflation Rate	<b>1.167</b> (0.499)	0.007 (0.122)	0.086 (0.151)	0.367 (0.284)
Consumer Sentiment	-0.058 (0.041)	-0.001 (0.010)	-0.007 (0.012)	-0.017 (0.023)
<b><i>Political Context</i></b>				
Ideological Polarization	-0.030 (0.021)	<b>-0.009</b> (0.005)	-0.006 (0.006)	<b>-0.026</b> (0.012)
Divided Congress	<b>1.019</b> (0.429)	<b>0.195</b> (0.105)	0.139 (0.130)	0.108 (0.244)
Number of Bills Introduced	-0.106 (0.497)	-0.098 (0.122)	-0.115 (0.150)	-0.0998 (0.283)
Democrat President	-0.183 (0.449)	0.044 (0.109)	<b>-0.279</b> (0.135)	-0.365 (0.253)
Midterm Elections	<b>-0.987</b> (0.481)	-0.188 (0.118)	-0.006 (0.145)	-0.306 (0.273)
Presidential Elections	0.444 (0.418)	<b>0.190</b> (0.103)	<b>0.309</b> (0.126)	<b>0.423</b> (0.238)

Table 3: The Frequencies of Political Activism

	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Std. Deviation
Composite Participation	1.168	0.841	1.470	0.121
Political Work	0.524	0.384	0.636	0.050
Petition Signing	35.19	27.24	42.15	2.87
Organization Membership	3.66	2.42	5.20	0.50
Party Work	4.46	2.59	6.86	0.94
Rally Attendance	9.10	5.69	12.95	1.49

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Std. Deviation
Aggregate Participation	1.144	0.841	1.470	0.120
Education	3.333	3.233	3.415	0.055
Income	23852.93	20760.50	27594.07	1727.58
Inflation	1.290	-0.6	3	0.649
Inequality	0.363	0.348	0.389	0.010
Bills Introduced	2142.839	419	5093	1009.348

Table 5: Fitted ARIMA Models for Aggregate Rates of Participation

	Political Work	Composite Index	Petitions	Rallies	Parties	Membership
Order	(3,1,0)	(3,1,0)	(3,1,0)	(1,0,1)	(0,0,1)	(0,1,1)
AR1	<b>-0.603</b> (0.105)	<b>-0.646</b> (0.106)	<b>-0.724</b> (0.097)	<b>0.858</b> (0.096)		
AR2	<b>-0.380</b> (0.117)	<b>-0.476</b> (0.116)	<b>-0.523</b> (0.113)			
AR3	<b>-0.330</b> (0.107)	<b>-0.347</b> (0.106)	<b>-0.472</b> (0.098)			
MA1				<b>-0.326</b> (0.155)	<b>0.279</b> (0.097)	<b>-0.782</b> (0.091)
Intercept				<b>9.136</b> (0.547)	0.006 (0.082)	