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Permalink

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Journal

The Journal of Politics, 81(1)

ISSN

0022-3816

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Publication Date

2019

DOI

10.1086/699916

Peer reviewed

**When Does a Group of Citizens Influence Policy?
Evidence from Senior Citizen Participation in City Politics**

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Abstract: When does a group of citizens influence public policy? Mainstream American politics research emphasizes the importance of the group's presence in the electorate, while other scholars argue that group cohesiveness, organization, and non-voting political activity are potentially more important. These two strands of the literature have largely developed in parallel, however, in part because they tend to employ different empirical methods. In this paper, I attempt to bridge the divide between them and test these ideas within the same empirical framework, using senior citizens and senior-friendly transportation policy as a test case. My results show that senior voting does *not* unconditionally predict policies friendlier to seniors. Instead, I find that city policies are friendlier to seniors when seniors are a more cohesive, meaningful group, and when they engage in activities *other* than voting. Moreover, when seniors *are* a cohesive group, their share of the electorate does matter for policy outcomes.

Keywords: group, policy, senior, local, turnout

Running header: When Does a Group of Citizens Influence Policy?

Data and other materials necessary to reproduce the numerical results in this paper are available in the *JOP* Dataverse at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jop>. An online appendix containing a detailed description of the data and additional empirical results is available at [URL].

Support for this research was provided by the Dipaola Foundation.

Some of the major questions that have motivated research in American politics are: Who governs? How well does government represent its citizens? And which individuals or groups in society influence public policy? The answers to these questions are almost certainly complex and conditional. Yet for the last few decades, mainstream American politics research has approached them with a somewhat narrow lens: it has mostly focused on citizens and elected officials, their linkages through elections, and the act of voting.

One claim in particular that is pervasive in the literature is that public policy tends to be biased in favor of groups of citizens who vote at high rates (e.g., Key 1949, Lijphart 1997, Griffin and Newman 2005, 2013, Leighley and Nagler 2014). Even if not stated explicitly, the logic underlying this claim is rooted in the Downsian model of political competition and empirical evidence on the predictors of turnout: In Downs' (1957) theory, the main political actors are individual citizens and candidates, and the core hypothesis is that politicians adopt policy positions in response to those who vote in their elections. Separately, in empirical work, it is well established that individual characteristics like race, education, and age are strong predictors of turnout (e.g., Rosenstone and Hansen 1992)—and that active voters are an unrepresentative subset of those eligible. Considering these two cornerstones of the literature together, it is no great leap to the conclusion that there should be a turnout-policy connection: if some groups of citizens (such as high-income citizens) vote at higher rates than others, then elected officials should favor them in their policy decisions.

But if political science adherence to the idea of a turnout-policy connection is robust, the empirical evidence in support of such a connection is not. While there are some studies that link overall turnout rates to election outcomes, roll-call votes, or federal spending (e.g., Martin 2003, Hajnal and Trounstein 2005, Martin and Claibourn 2013), studies that document a link between

the turnout rates of particular groups and policy outcomes in their favor are surprisingly rare (for exceptions, see Hill and Leighley 1992, Anzia 2014).

One can also question the proposed turnout-policy connection on theoretical grounds. For starters, its existence should depend on a group having relatively homogenous policy preferences that are distinct from those of non-group members (Citrin et al. 2003), which might be true for some groups and issues but not others. In addition, group members have to vote on the basis of those issues, and policymakers have to know that they are doing so. This, too, may or may not hold: groups vary in their cohesiveness and attentiveness to issues relevant to the group (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960, Arnold 1990, Campbell 2003, Martin 2003, Harden 2016), and the act of voting (by itself) does not clearly communicate those policy preferences to elected officials (e.g., Griffin and Newman 2005, Schlozman et al. 2012). Moreover, some groups are well organized and engage in politics in a variety of ways—not just by voting—while other groups with shared interests remain unorganized and relatively inactive (e.g., Schattschneider 1960). And in recent years, a growing number of scholars have argued that non-voting activity and the efforts of organized groups are probably more important than voting for explaining variation in public policy (e.g., Bartels 2008, Bawn et al. 2012, Hacker and Pierson 2014, Gilens and Page 2014).

What we have, then, is an open question about American politics: Under what conditions does a group of citizens influence public policy? A large body of work emphasizes the group's turnout and presence in the electorate, but there are few empirical tests of those hypotheses, and many scholars now question whether turnout is the most important factor.

To make headway, it is first worth asking why so few studies test for the hypothesized turnout-policy connection. One likely reason is that American politics scholars tend to study national politics—a context in which detecting the relationship might be difficult. As Citrin et al.

(2003) explain, the preferences of voters in national elections are not all that different from the preferences of nonvoters. There is also little variation in policy to analyze when the focus is a single policy-making body like the U.S. Congress.¹ It should therefore be easier to detect the relationship in state and local governments, because each state and local government has its own policies. Moreover, turnout tends to be lower in local than in national elections, and thus the potential for turnout bias greater (Hajnal and Trounstine 2005). The problem, however, is that even basic data on state and especially local elections are difficult to acquire (Trounstine 2009). And testing the effect of increased turnout by a particular group calls for more than basic data: it calls for turnout figures disaggregated by group. Thus, it might seem that testing the turnout-policy connection should be straightforward—because turnout is quantifiable, and one can imagine scenarios in which it is exogenous to policy outcomes—but it is actually quite difficult.

Scholars emphasizing group cohesiveness, organization, and non-voting political activity face even more daunting empirical challenges. Collecting data on non-voting activities like letter-writing, testimony, and lobbying is far more difficult than assembling data on voting. Furthermore, group activity, organization, and cohesiveness are often *endogenous* to policy. Scholars of organized groups and public policy have long studied policy feedback as important and theoretically interesting (e.g., Patashnik 2008), but one implication is that many of the hypotheses flowing from this theoretical work can't easily be tested using the causal inference methods that are de rigeur in American politics research today. Instead, scholars in this tradition

¹ Roll-call votes provide variation in legislators' *positions*, but only on the issues being debated.

Actual policies are shaped both by action and inaction (Hacker and Pierson 2014).

have relied more on qualitative data and non-causal quantitative analyses. As a result, this part of the literature has developed largely in parallel to the one emphasizing turnout.

Ultimately, though, both of these strands of the literature are interested in the same question, even if they face different empirical challenges and tend to utilize different methods. And there is much to be gained from bridging the theoretical and empirical divide between them—and from adopting a more unified, comprehensive approach.

This paper is an attempt to do that, and to thereby enhance our understanding of what it takes for a group of citizens to influence policy. As a test case, I focus on the role of senior citizens in local elections. Unlike many other groups of citizens that could be studied, senior citizens are present in every locality; moreover, their turnout rates and electoral presence differ from place to place. Just as importantly for the question at hand, senior citizens in different communities vary in their cohesiveness, their attentiveness to policy issues, and their non-voting political activity. Thus, by studying senior citizens, I am able to leverage cross-city variation in many factors that have been proposed as important in shaping a group's influence over policy.

Understanding the impact of seniors' political participation on public policy is also important in its own right. It is well understood that seniors influence national policy (Campbell 2003), yet we know little about how seniors influence state and local government, in spite of the fact that state and local governments account for more than half of all public spending in the United States and are devoting increasing shares of their budgets to programs that largely benefit older Americans (Kiewiet and McCubbins 2014, DiSalvo 2015). Even beyond the methodological advantages of studying seniors in local politics, then, there stand to be benefits of increased scholarly attention to age bias in participation and its effects on policy.

In what follows, I start with a test of the hypothesis that groups secure more favorable policies when they make up a larger share of the electorate. Focusing on the elections of over 400 cities in California, I ask whether cities that have larger shares of senior voters have transportation policies friendlier to seniors. My initial findings, it turns out, are not supportive of the hypothesis. I then turn to other arguments about the conditions under which a group of citizens will influence policy, and instead of shifting to a different empirical approach, I test them in the same quantitative framework. The results suggest that policies are friendlier to seniors when seniors engage in political activities other than voting and when they are a cohesive, meaningful group. Moreover, when seniors are cohesive, their share of the electorate *does* matter for policy—and thus under certain conditions, there *is* a turnout-policy connection.

In the end, my analysis highlights both the difficulty and promise of bridging the gap between these two scholarly approaches. It is certainly easier to collect data and carry out causally-oriented quantitative analysis when the theoretical focus is on voting and turnout rather than on groups and non-voting political activity. But if a primary aim of political science is to understand influence, it is not enough to only study voting. We must also learn about the conditions under which voting is influential, the other avenues groups pursue to exert influence, and how all of these come together to shape representation and public policy.

Testing the Turnout-Policy Connection

As I discussed above, testing the turnout-policy connection calls for turnout data disaggregated by the types of voters being studied. Mainly for data availability reasons, then, I focus my analysis on California cities. In California, Political Data, Inc., (PDI) collects and maintains the voter files of all local jurisdictions that administer elections. I was able to purchase from PDI data on the number of registered voters, by age, who voted in recent city elections.

California is a great testing ground for other reasons: it has more than 480 municipal governments, each with their own policies, and also the timing of city elections varies across the state. Because the timing of elections has a large impact on overall turnout rates (Hajnal et al. 2002), the within-state variation in local election timing makes it likely that age bias in participation varies as well (see Hajnal and Trounstine 2005).

In March 2014, therefore, I used local election data provided by the California Elections Data Archive (CEDA) to identify the most recent regular election date for each of the state's municipal governments. Then, for that list of city election dates, as well as for the dates of recent statewide primary and general elections, PDI provided city-level data on the number of residents who were registered and the number who voted in that election, broken down by age. The resulting dataset therefore includes information on the age distribution of registered and voting citizens in the elections of 433 California cities with more than 1,000 residents.²

As a starting point, Table 1 demonstrates that electorates tilt strongly in favor of older residents in the typical California city. In row 1, I combine 2010 U.S. Census data and the PDI data on registered voters in 2010 to calculate—for each city—the fraction of the city population in two age groups that is registered to vote: those between 20 and 45 years old, and those between 65 and 90 years old.³ On average, 57% of the younger group are registered, whereas 74% of the older residents are. In row 2, I present the fraction of those registered who voted in the most recent city election: 47% of the registered 20- to 45-year-olds in the average city voted,

² I excluded some municipal governments due to small size or lack of data; see online appendix.

³ I limit the data to residents 90 years old and younger, because many cities have small numbers of residents older than 90, and because the figures can be unreliable for those over 90.

compared to 74% of the 65- to 90-year-olds. Finally, in rows 3-6, I show that the age gap in turnout varies depending on when the city election is held: It is smallest in cities that held their elections concurrently with presidential elections—23 points—and rises to 32 points in midterms, 31 points in off-cycle elections, and 46 points in statewide primaries. Thus, older residents are consistently overrepresented in city electorates, but the size of the age gap in turnout depends on when the city elections are held.

Table 1: Registration and Voting in City Elections, by Age Group

	Ages 20-45	Ages 65-90	Difference	N
(1) % of Population Registered	0.565	0.742	0.177	433
(2) % of Registered Voting in City Election	0.473	0.739	0.266	433
(3) Concurrent with presidential elections	0.614	0.846	0.232	289
(4) Concurrent with midterm elections	0.474	0.795	0.321	18
(5) Concurrent with statewide primaries	0.223	0.687	0.464	18
(6) Off-cycle	0.138	0.451	0.313	108

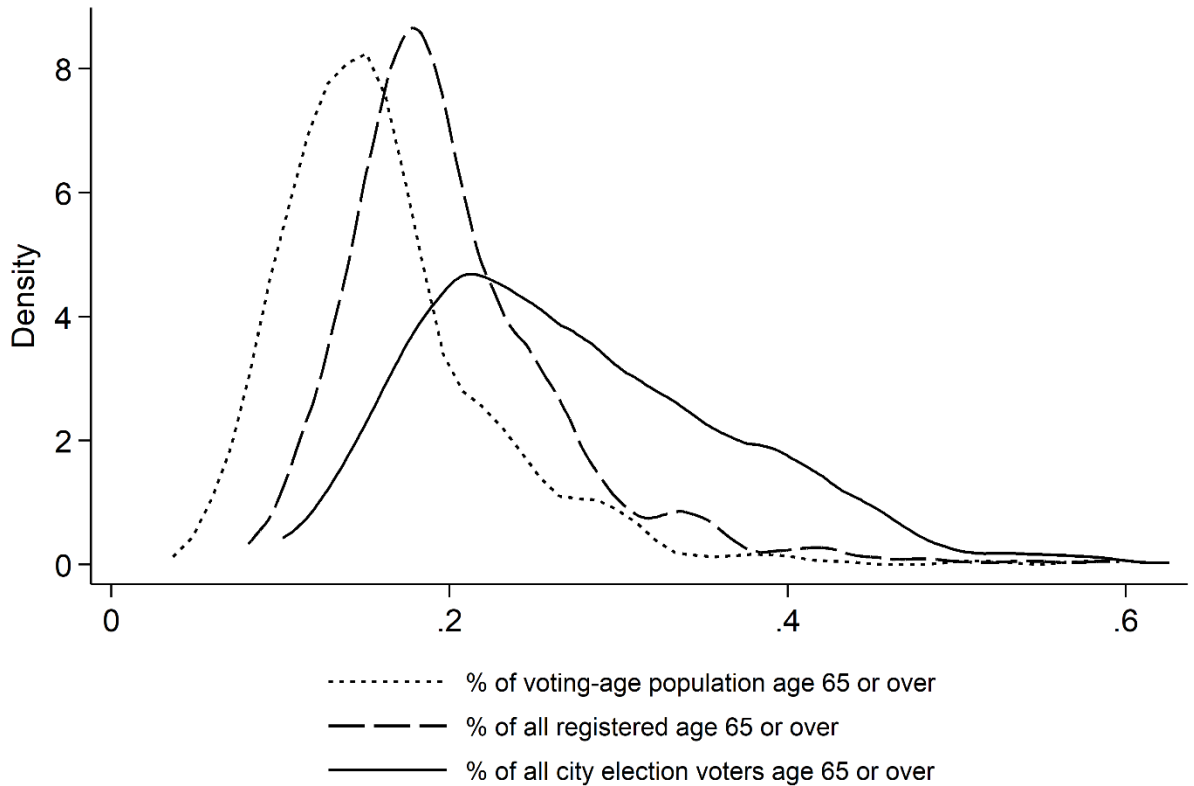
Notes: In all rows, the differences between the registered/voting rates of the older and younger residents are statistically significant at the 1% level.

What does this mean for the composition of the electorate in city elections? A high turnout rate among a small group might not weigh heavily on the decisions of policymakers, whereas high turnout by a large group should matter a great deal. Because my goal is to assess whether officials are more responsive to groups that make up a larger share of the electorate, the quantity of greatest interest here is the percentage of city election voters who are senior citizens.

For each city, therefore, I calculate the proportion of city election voters who are between 65 and 90 years of age—a variable I call *Percent senior*. The distribution of *Percent senior* in the dataset is shown by the solid line in Figure 1. That figure also shows the distributions of two other variables: the proportion of the city *voting-age population* between 65 and 90 (the dotted line) and the proportion of city *registered voters* between 65 and 90 (the dashed line). In the median city, seniors make up 15% of the voting-age population, but they make up 19% of those

registered and 25% of voters. There is also right skew in the distribution of *Percent senior*: in 104 of the 433 cities, for example, more than a *third* of the voters are senior citizens. Therefore, seniors' share of the electorate tends to be much higher than their share of the population, but their electoral presence varies considerably across cities.

Figure 1: Senior citizens in California municipalities



City Transportation Services for Senior Citizens

To test whether seniors' electoral presence helps to explain variation in city policy, it would be useful to have city-level measures of seniors' policy preferences. With those data in hand, and with data on what cities actually do in those policy areas, I could test whether city policies are more aligned with seniors' preferences when seniors make up a greater percentage of city voters. Unfortunately, there are no public opinion data detailing the preferences of senior citizens on local policy issues in each of these 433 cities. An alternative approach is to ask

whether there are local policies for which it is safe to assume that seniors have certain preferences—and, moreover, preferences that diverge from those of non-seniors.

A good candidate for that approach, I argue, is local transportation policy—specifically, local transportation services for senior citizens. Many local governments provide demand-response (DR) service, defined by the Federal Transit Administration as “a transit mode comprised of passenger cars, vans or small buses operating in response to calls from passengers or their agents to the transit operator, who then dispatches a vehicle to pick up the passengers and transport them to their destinations.”⁴ DR service is different from standard public transportation in that it does not follow a fixed route or operate on a set schedule; instead, it picks up and drops off users in the locations users request. Local governments that provide DR service typically provide it for senior citizens, disabled citizens, or both. My assumption, then, is that seniors would rather have access to DR service than not, and that they would rather have a service exclusively for them (and the disabled) than a service open to the public. Non-seniors, by contrast, do not directly benefit from DR service (unless it is available to the general public), and so we should expect them to be less strongly in favor of DR service for seniors.⁵

⁴ Federal Transit Administration, 2013. “National Transit Database Glossary.” Charlottesville, VA: Federal Transit Administration. Available at <http://www.ntdprogram.gov/ntdprogram/Glossary.htm> (accessed January 30, 2014).

⁵ While I know of no public opinion surveys that ask about support for DR service specifically, a public opinion study of DR service in rural Kansas (a service available to the general public) shows that about 70% of riders are 65 and older, that riders have high opinions of the service, and that non-riders know little about it and do not have well-formed opinions of it (Geiger 2009).

With this logic as motivation, I collected data on the DR services available to senior citizens in each California municipality as of spring 2014. Most of the information was available on the websites of California's local governments, but when needed, I followed up with phone calls to the relevant agencies. Over the course of two months, I mapped out which DR services were available to seniors living in each municipal government. The result was a dataset of all the public DR services available to senior citizens in California.

In roughly a third of the cities, seniors have no access to DR service, but in the cities where they do, the most common provider is the city government itself (172 cities). In addition, there are 88 cities where seniors have DR service provided by regional transit authorities and 83 cities where it is provided by the county. (Also, some cities have more than one DR service.) If only cities could provide DR service, then testing for the turnout-policy link in city government would be straightforward. But how to deal with cities that receive service from a transit authority or county? On the one hand, transit authority boards probably pay attention to the composition of city electorates, because these boards typically include city legislators from the areas served. On the other hand, *county* officials probably do not make decisions with an eye toward the composition of *city* electorates; the share of seniors in any county electorate is probably different than that of cities within the county. I therefore categorize cities according to whether they receive DR service from either city agencies or transit authorities. The dependent variable *DR service* equals 0 if the city's seniors have no access to DR service from a city or transit authority (183 cities), 1 if seniors have access to a DR service that is also available to the public (83 cities), and 2 if seniors have access to DR service that is exclusively for seniors (167 cities).

To test whether the percentage of seniors in the electorate affects the senior-friendliness of city transportation policy, I regress *DR service* on *Percent senior* using an ordinal logit

model.⁶ If the hypothesis implied by the turnout literature is correct, then the coefficient on *Percent senior* should be positive: cities where a larger percentage of city election voters are seniors should be more likely to provide DR service to their senior residents.

Even if this hypothesis is correct, there may be city characteristics correlated with both the percentage of seniors in the electorate and the senior-friendliness of transportation. Perhaps larger or denser cities have lower percentages of seniors in the population (and in the electorate), but also have greater capacity to provide DR service. I therefore include log city population and population density in the model (as measured by the 2010 U.S. Census), expecting them to have a positive relationship with *DR service*. Income may be a factor as well if cities with high percentages of seniors tend to be less affluent and less able to afford DR service. Thus, I include log per capita income in the model.⁷ In addition, perhaps liberal cities provide a wider array of services and also have younger populations, so I include the percentage of the city's two-party vote for Barack Obama in November 2012. Finally, city officials are probably less inclined to provide DR service if the county government already provides it to the various cities within the county, so I control for the senior-friendliness of DR service provided by the county: mirroring the dependent variable, it equals 0 if the county provides no DR service to the city, 1 if it provides DR service to the general public, and 2 if it provides DR service exclusively for seniors.

This last variable addresses how city officials' decisions might be influenced by the services counties provide, but it also raises the question of whether cities within the same county share other important characteristics in common. For example, many counties provide

⁶ My results are substantively similar when I use OLS or multinomial logit. See online appendix.

⁷ The data are from the American Community Survey; I use the five-year estimates from 2013.

transportation funding to their cities, and they are often charged with distributing state money to local governments within their boundaries. If so, and if I estimate a positive coefficient on *Percent senior*, it may not be that city officials are responding to city voters. Instead, it might be driven by counties with large senior populations that have large budgets for transportation.

I deal with this potential problem in two ways. First, I cluster the standard errors by county to address correlation of the errors of cities in the same county. Second, I estimate models both with and without county fixed effects. Including 53 dummy variables in a model with 433 observations places heavy demands on the estimation, but including county fixed effects allows me to account for city features that are constant for cities within the same county.

Empirical Results

In Table 2, I present the basic models: regressions of *DR service* on *Percent senior* and the city-level control variables, first without county fixed effects (column 1), then with county fixed effects (column 2). Both models show that larger cities are more likely to have DR service, as expected. But does it look as though local transportation policy is friendlier to seniors when seniors make up a larger share of the electorate? Actually, the answer is no. In both models, the coefficient on *Percent Senior* is statistically indistinguishable from zero—indicating no clear association between senior turnout and senior transportation.

Given that this null finding is not what the turnout literature leads us to expect, what can explain it? In a series of tests presented in the online appendix, I explore whether the results change when I use alternative measures of senior transportation and senior turnout. First, I switch to a dependent variable equal to 1 if a city's seniors have access to *any* DR service from a city or transit authority, regardless of who else can use it; it equals 0 if the city has no DR service. Second, I set the dependent variable equal to 1 if seniors have access to DR service from the *city*

government (not transit authorities). Third, I recode the original dependent variable to count a city as having DR service even if it is provided by the county. In all three models, the coefficient on *Percent senior* is statistically insignificant. I also test whether transportation policy is influenced by seniors' turnout rate rather than by the share of all voters who are senior. But even with that alternative independent variable, there is no evidence of a turnout-policy connection.

Another possibility worth considering is that it may be difficult to detect a relationship using cross-sectional data. *Percent senior* captures the importance of seniors in *recent* city elections, even though several cities' DR services were started years ago. Is it possible, then, that in the years leading up to DR service adoption, cities had much higher senior turnout—and that that higher senior turnout motivated city officials to enact senior-friendly policy?

To test this, one would like to have panel data on city DR service provision as well as historical city election turnout data broken down by age. Unfortunately, there is no way to acquire reliable panel data on city DR service provision in California,⁸ and even if I could, obtaining historical city election turnout data broken down by age for 433 cities is prohibitively difficult. However, by turning to historical data on city election timing, one can make reasonable assumptions about how well *Percent senior* represents the share of seniors in the electorate in past elections. As I discussed earlier, the importance of seniors as voters depends on when city elections are held. And as I show in the online appendix (using additional data from PDI), for cities that don't change their election schedules, *Percent senior* fluctuates little from election to election. Given that most of the cities in this dataset have had the same election schedules since

⁸ I tried to collect data on when each service began, but I could only determine a date (sometimes approximate) for 57% of them. Most started during the 1990s and 2000s. See online appendix.

1996—the first year that CEDA began compiling local election data—*Percent senior* in recent elections is probably a good measure of seniors’ voting presence in past elections. That said, there are 46 cities in the dataset that *have* changed their election schedules since 1996, and for seven of them, I was able to obtain PDI turnout data by age for the city’s final elections before they switched to the new schedule. As I show in the online appendix, these cities did experience a large change in *Percent senior* from before to after the election timing change.

Table 2: Seniors in the Electorate and Senior-Friendly Policy

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Percent senior	0.548 (1.823)	-2.013 (1.278)	1.253 (1.667)
Ln(Population)	0.36 (0.111)	0.398 (0.155)	0.369 (0.123)
Ln(Population density)	0.32 (0.153)	-0.029 (0.204)	0.332 (0.158)
Ln(Income per capita)	-0.221 (0.328)	-0.582 (0.444)	-0.21 (0.314)
Dem. presidential vote	-1.025 (1.071)	-1.036 (1.643)	-1.118 (1.053)
County DR	-0.314 (0.317)		-0.283 (0.302)
Model details	Ordinal logit	Ordinal logit, county FE	Ordinal logit; consistent election timing
Observations	433	433	394
Pseudo R-squared	0.04	0.23	0.04

Notes: Standard errors clustered by county in parentheses.

As a next step, then, I return to the original model from column 1 but make an adjustment for the 46 cities that switched their election schedules: I exclude the 39 cities for which I don’t have *Percent senior* from an election before the switch, and for the seven cities for which I do, I use the value of *Percent senior* from the last election before the change. The results are presented in column 3 of Table 2. Even with this adjustment, I find no clear association between senior presence in the electorate and the senior-friendliness of city transportation.

As I discussed earlier, this is a context in which it should be relatively easy to detect the hypothesized relationship between the importance of a group as voters and public policies responsive to that group. My empirical design allows me to compare hundreds of governments, each with different policies. It focuses on a group of citizens known to have influence on national policy (Campbell 2003). And instead of assuming something about the importance of seniors as voters in elections, I have measured it—and tested whether it can explain variation in policies friendly to seniors. Yet I have not found the expected relationship.

Non-Voting Political Activity and Group Cohesiveness

In light of this evidence that the group's voting presence does not make a clear difference in this case, what *does* explain variation in policy outcomes? Are there some other conditions—beyond high turnout—that have to be met in order for a group of citizens to influence policy?⁹

First, it may be that other forms of political activity are more important than voting for influencing policy. After all, a citizen's vote for a candidate, by itself, does not clearly communicate policy preferences. Especially in local politics, where there are few public opinion polls, elections are usually nonpartisan, and politics is less ideological than at the national level (Oliver 2012), elected officials may not know what citizens want—even if those citizens vote at high rates. If so, then activities that *do* convey citizens' policy preferences—such as contacting officials, testifying at hearings, or lobbying—might be key to whether a group of citizens secures

⁹ One response, discussed above, is that group members must have policy preferences distinct from those of non-group members (Citrin et al. 2003). But I chose to examine senior transportation *because* it is safe to assume that seniors' preferences on the issue look different than those of non-seniors. Therefore, it is difficult to see how this could explain the null finding.

policy outcomes it favors (see Martin 2003, Griffin and Newman 2005, Schlozman et al. 2012). This, then, is one way of answering the question: that a group's influence on policy is more about non-voting political activity than it is about voting (see Hacker and Pierson 2014).

A second approach begins with a distinction between the substance of citizens' preferences and the *focus* of the citizens who hold those preferences. Even if citizens are able to state a preference on a policy issue when asked, that issue may or may not be important to them (Krosnick 1990). As Arnold (1990) explains in his discussion of "attentive publics," some groups of citizens feel passionately about a particular issue and weigh that issue heavily in their vote decisions, whereas others—even if they can state an opinion—are less attentive to the issue and vote on the basis of other factors (see also Martin 2003). It is possible, then, that having distinct preferences on an issue is not enough for a group's turnout to affect policymakers' decisions. In addition, the group has to be focused on the issue and willing to vote on that basis.

If that's the case, then the logical next question is: what makes certain groups of citizens focused on particular issues and others less focused? In the mainstream American politics literature today, this is not a central research question, but several decades ago, it was a core concern of scholars studying political behavior. And some of the classics of American politics, such as Berelson et al. (1954) and Campbell et al. (1960), argue that individuals' political views and behaviors are heavily shaped by their social interactions and group memberships. More recently, scholars have built on these insights using newer data and more sophisticated methodology, providing evidence that social networks do influence political behavior (Nickerson 2008, Gerber et al. 2008, Sinclair 2012). So far, though, this newer work has focused on the effects of social networks on political actions such as turning out to vote and contributing money to campaigns—not on how social networks shape individuals' preferences on particular policy

issues, the intensity with which they hold such preferences, and their willingness to take political action on the basis of those preferences.

In the literatures on comparative politics and public policy, however, these are central themes: scholars have developed theories of how policies and institutions can enhance group cohesiveness—giving rise to groups with a strong focus on their shared concerns, and groups that effectively pursue policies in their interest (e.g., Pierson 1993, Tsai 2007). Precisely what causes a group of citizens to become cohesive (or not) can vary: it can be public policies (e.g., Patashnik 2008), institutions like churches and workplaces (Mutz and Mondak 2006, Tsai 2007, Hertel-Fernandez 2017), or the particulars of historical development and culture (e.g., Putnam 1994, 2000, Skocpol 2003). Regardless of what *causes* the variation in group cohesiveness, the important point here is that the variation *exists*—and may well make a difference. Some groups of citizens regularly interact, are part of tightly-knit social and political networks, have focused preferences on issues relevant to the group, and vote and participate in politics on the basis of those preferences. In the words of Campbell et al. (1960, 293), they are “self-conscious groups.” Other groups of citizens are not. And this factor may well count for just as much or more in influencing policy than the sheer number of voters of a particular “type” in a community.

Putting these considerations together, what might a more comprehensive model of group influence look like? Consider Campbell’s (2003) study of senior citizens and Social Security. Voter turnout is certainly part of that account: prior to the expansion of Social Security, senior citizens participated at rates similar to or even lower than young citizens, and when the program expanded, their turnout increased. That increase in turnout—along with the overall growth in seniors as a share of the population—was one factor that motivated members of Congress to cast roll-call votes that were responsive to seniors. But there was more. After the expansion of Social

Security, seniors increasingly wrote letters to policymakers to communicate their preferences. They gained clout through the AARP and other interest groups that lobbied on their behalf. Seniors' voices also found a place within government itself: key government agencies, such as the Social Security Administration and the Agency on Aging, became important vehicles for communicating the interests of seniors to policymakers. And with policy benefits conferred upon seniors on the basis of their age, political parties and other groups had incentives to mobilize them into politics, helping to transform them into a meaningful group in national politics—one that was aware of their shared policy interests and willing to act on them. All of these factors contributed to the success of seniors in shaping national policy.

This discussion suggests that a comprehensive answer to the question of when a group of citizens influences policy should include consideration of the group's non-voting political activity as well as the group's focus. But it also hints at possible synergies between theories emphasizing turnout and theories emphasizing group cohesiveness. Consider, for example, Campbell's (2003) finding that between 1981 and 1989, members of Congress with more seniors in their constituencies *were* more responsive to seniors in their roll-call votes. By that time, of course, seniors were already a cohesive, meaningful group in national politics. And if they hadn't been, perhaps we wouldn't expect to see the same relationship. More generally, it is possible that *in order* for a group's voting presence to influence policy, it has to be a cohesive, politically-focused group—one for which the group's votes represent a clear expression of group-relevant policy preferences. For groups that are *not* cohesive—such as a group of people who are just similar in age—their votes may not carry the same clear policy meaning, and so there is less reason to think their numbers in the electorate should make much difference to public policy.

Reflecting on the models of Table 2, we now have three new hypotheses about the conditions under which seniors will be more likely to secure favorable policies. The first is that city policies will more closely reflect seniors' preferences when seniors are more politically active in ways other than voting. Second, city policies should be friendlier to seniors when seniors are a cohesive, meaningful group—and not just a group of citizens similar in age. And third, we might expect an interactive effect of group cohesiveness and turnout: specifically, that the importance of the group in the electorate matters when the group is a cohesive one, and that any effect of group cohesiveness should increase with the number of votes the group can deliver.

Data and Empirical Analysis

As I discussed earlier, studying groups and non-voting activity brings significant data and measurement challenges, and the hypotheses I've developed here are no exception. Consider the task of measuring non-voting political activity. There could be many ways that seniors influence policy at the local level—such as by attending city council meetings or contacting elected officials—but most of these forms of participation are difficult or impossible to measure for hundreds of cities. There is, however, one form of participation that is easier to measure and may be an important way that seniors communicate their preferences: senior commissions.

Nearly all U.S. municipal governments have citizen authorities, boards, or commissions, most of which have appointed members who advise the city council on designated issues. Senior commissions, in particular, are set up to consider and advise city officials on matters of interest to seniors. These commissions are therefore a potentially important way in which seniors participate in local politics and voice their concerns to city officials. To test whether this form of senior participation influences city policy, I used information on cities' websites—following up with a phone call if necessary—to establish whether or not each of the 433 cities has a senior

board or commission. I expect that the 106 cities that have senior commissions will be more likely to provide senior DR service than cities without senior commissions.

Measuring group cohesiveness is even more difficult. In the specific case of seniors in California, there aren't any data on the interactions and group-focus of seniors in each of the cities in my dataset. The question, then, is how we might identify communities where seniors interact a great deal and are politically focused on senior issues—and distinguish them from communities where seniors interact less, have less focus, and vote on the basis of other matters.

I propose that one reasonable way of doing this is to differentiate between cities with and without senior centers. Senior centers provide services to communities' seniors, but they are also places where seniors interact socially as a group. As a general rule, I expect that seniors in cities with senior centers should be more cohesive and attentive to local senior issues than those in cities without senior centers. If so, then because of that greater cohesiveness, cities with senior centers should also be more likely to have senior-friendly transportation. Following this logic, I used information on the Congress of California Seniors' website, cross-checked with cities' official websites, to create an indicator equal to 1 if the city has a senior center (360 cities) and 0 if it does not (73 cities). This is my main measure of senior cohesiveness in each city—one that allows me to test whether cohesive groups are more likely to receive favorable policies.

Returning to the city dataset, I once again start with the simplest model that includes all 433 cities and excludes county fixed effects, but this time I add *Senior commission* as a measure of seniors' non-voting political activity and *Senior center* as a measure of senior cohesiveness.

The estimates are presented in column 1 of Table 3.¹⁰ Both of the new variables have positive, significant relationships with *DR service*. To illustrate the magnitude of the effects, in the top panel of Table 4, I calculate the predicted probability that a city will have DR service exclusively for seniors, setting the continuous variables at their means and *County DR* at zero. The predicted probability in a city with no senior center and no senior commission is 26%. Cities with either a senior commission or senior centers (but not both) are predicted to have exclusive DR service 39% of the time—a 13 point increase. And in cities with both senior commissions and senior centers, the model predicts that 54% will have exclusive DR service.

In column 2 of Table 3, I estimate the model without the cities that recently changed their election schedules. Again, having a senior commission and a senior center are both positively associated with having DR service. In column 3, I add county fixed effects, and I find the same pattern. Even when I focus on variation within counties, then, I find that cities with senior centers and senior commissions are more likely to have senior-friendly transportation.¹¹

These models overcome one hurdle in the study of groups and non-voting political activity—the challenge of data and measurement—but they also raise concerns about endogeneity. As the policy literature makes clear, policy feedback effects are common. It is possible, for example, that the availability of senior transportation increases seniors' cohesiveness or their non-voting participation. It could also be that some unobserved city characteristic, such as historical senior activism, or city officials' commitment to supporting

¹⁰ These models include all of the variables from Table 2, but I limit the presentation to those that are explicitly discussed in this section. The full results are shown in the online appendix.

¹¹ I find similar patterns when I use OLS and multinomial logit. See online appendix.

seniors, explains the presence of senior centers, senior commissions, *and* senior transportation. If so, then the positive coefficients on *Senior center* and *Senior commission* might not actually represent the influence of group cohesiveness and non-voting activity on policy.¹²

I take a two-pronged approach to evaluating these concerns. First, I continue with these two institutional measures of non-voting activity and group cohesiveness, but I attempt to account for the processes by which some cities got senior commissions and senior centers while others did not. Second, to address the specific concern that having a senior center is more of a policy outcome than a measure of senior cohesiveness, I turn to two alternative measures: one based on the age of senior centers, and the other a historical measure of local senior social clubs.

Starting with the first approach, why do some cities have senior centers while others do not? Part of the answer has to do with the national Older Americans Act (OAA) of 1965. The OAA created a series of federal grants to address the needs of older people, and one of those grants—started in 1972—was specifically for the purpose of building local senior centers. Thus, many senior centers were started during the 1970s and 1980s, in part because they received federal funds to do so.

¹² As a side note, if “senior activism” were the crucial omitted variable that explained senior centers, senior commissions, and senior transportation, that would not necessarily contradict my theoretical argument. Presumably, a group has to be cohesive and participate in ways other than voting in order to be engaged in “activism.” And while I am measuring seniors’ non-voting activity and cohesiveness with indicators for institutions, it is not my goal to test the effects of these institutions, but rather to evaluate the importance of non-voting activity and cohesiveness.

Table 3: Turnout, Non-Voting Participation, and Group Cohesiveness

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Percent senior	0.595 (1.861)	1.33 (1.687)	-1.302 (1.328)	1.769 (1.474)	1.548 (1.586)	-1.268 (1.375)	-5.574 (4.122)
Senior commission	0.616 (0.195)	0.65 (0.185)	0.848 (0.266)	0.763 (0.220)	0.846 (0.228)	0.959 (0.300)	0.779 (0.225)
Senior center	0.634 (0.299)	0.608 (0.315)	0.73 (0.379)	1.132 (0.331)			-1.165 (0.823)
Age of senior center					0.236 (0.093)		
Senior club						2.447 (0.821)	
Senior center * Percent senior							8.171 (3.406)
PSA 60+ population, 1980				7.315 (9.760)	7.141 (9.889)		7.148 (9.857)
PSA 75+ population, 1980				-18.485 (6.743)	-18.636 (6.771)		-19.106 (6.864)
PSA 60+ pop. low-income, 1980				-10.734 (5.147)	-9.752 (5.502)		-10.761 (5.264)
PSA 60+ pop. minority, 1980				1.201 (3.398)	1.256 (3.268)		1.000 (3.484)
City senior population, 1980				-2.359 (1.550)	-1.738 (1.496)		-2.573 (1.591)
Ln(Commissions)				-0.154 (0.214)	-0.159 (0.213)	-0.048 (0.303)	-0.158 (0.213)
Observations	433	394	394	375	351	391	375
Pseudo R-squared	0.05	0.06	0.25	0.09	0.09	0.26	0.10
Percent senior + (Senior center*Percent senior)							2.597 (1.387)

Notes: Standard errors clustered by county in parentheses. Models 2-7 drop cities that recently changed their election schedules. Models 4-7 have some missing data for *City senior population, 1980* and *Ln(Commissions)*. Model 5 is also missing some data for *Age of senior center*. Models 3 and 6 include county fixed effects.

The California State Archives' Department of Aging records provide detail on how OAA funds were distributed to localities within California.¹³ Specifically, starting around 1980, OAA

¹³ In the online appendix, I provide a detailed list of the archival sources I rely on for this section.

funds were allocated to 33 Planning and Service Areas (PSAs) within the state using formulas based on the numbers of seniors in the PSA as well as the share of the PSA senior population that was low-income or minority.¹⁴ In the archives' 1982-1984 Director Administrative Files, I found the PSA-level demographic statistics (using 1980 Census data) that formed the basis for the formulas:¹⁵ the share of the PSA population that was 60 and older, the share that was 75 and older, the share of the 60-and-over population that was low-income (0-125% of the poverty level), and the share of the 60-and-over population that was minority. In what follows, I add these four historical PSA-level variables to the models as one way of accounting for the likelihood that a city received a senior center.

Table 4: Predicted Probability of Exclusive DR Service

		Without Senior Commission	With Senior Commission
(1)	Without Senior Center	0.257	0.388
	With Senior Center	0.393	0.543
(2)	Without Senior Center	0.176	0.315
	With Senior Center, Low <i>Percent Senior</i>	0.309	0.490
	With Senior Center, High <i>Percent Senior</i>	0.478	0.661

The state formulas, however, did not determine how funds were distributed to municipal governments *within* PSAs. Moreover, archival records make it clear that some cities were operating senior centers as early as the 1950s and 1960s—and that in the 1970s, the distribution of OAA funds was not based on a well-defined formula. In addition to the PSA-level variables, therefore, I add to the models the share of each *city's* population that was 65 or older as of 1980

¹⁴ All except one of the PSAs (for Los Angeles) were coterminous with one or more counties.

¹⁵ The formula was periodically debated and changed, but these demographic variables formed the backbone of the various formulas used during that time period.

(using data from the Census),¹⁶ expecting that the share of seniors in the city at that time should be correlated with the presence of a senior center today and the senior-friendliness of city transit.

It is less clear why some cities created senior commissions. One possibility, raised above, is that the availability of senior transportation made it more likely that those cities would eventually establish a senior commission. While I cannot rule this out, I collected recent meeting minutes and agendas for a sample of 20 senior commissions, and I found that more than half of them discussed transportation issues—suggesting that it’s at least plausible that the commissions played a role in getting the transportation services established. Another possibility is that more progressive cities are more inclined to invite citizens to participate in the policymaking process—and perhaps also provide more services. In an attempt to address these concerns, I include the log of the total number of citizen commissions, committees, and boards in each city as a predictor, using data I collected from cities’ websites.¹⁷ Some cities have none, others have a few, and still others have twenty or more. If some cities encourage greater citizen participation and also provide more services, then the number of commissions should help to capture that.

Putting all of this together, I return to the model from column 2 of Table 3 and add the four historical PSA-level variables, the share of the city’s population that was senior in 1980, and the log of the number of commissions. The results are presented in column 4 of Table 3. Notably, even with all of these controls added, the coefficients on *Senior commission* and *Senior center* remain strong and positive. The findings are therefore consistent with the idea that when seniors are a cohesive group, and when seniors’ voices are heard through participatory channels other than voting, policy outcomes tilt in their favor.

¹⁶ This variable is missing for 16 cities out of the 394 included in column 3.

¹⁷ This variable is missing for an additional 3 of the 394 cities in column 3.

As a second approach to addressing concerns about endogeneity, I move away from using a city institutional variable as a measure of senior group cohesiveness. *Senior commission*, at least, is a direct measure of a non-voting channel through which seniors' interests are voiced to city officials. *Senior center*, however, is a proxy for group cohesiveness—and a proxy that itself is a policy outcome (perhaps explained by the same factors that explain the senior-friendliness of city transportation).

One reasonable alternative measure of senior cohesiveness is the age of the city's senior centers. Expanding on my original logic for using senior centers, cities that have had senior centers for a longer time should have more focused and effective seniors than cities with newer senior centers. To test whether this leads to greater policy responsiveness, I set out to collect the establishment dates of all 876 senior centers in the Congress of California Seniors' directory; I then coded each city according to its oldest senior center. In column 5 of Table 3, I replace the senior center indicator with the log of the number of years a city had had a senior center as of 2014; it equals zero for cities without senior centers. The coefficient on senior center age is positive and significant—consistent with my expectation that cities with more cohesive groups of senior citizens are more likely to have DR service.

A second alternative measure gets away from city institutional and policy variables altogether and more directly captures the historical cohesiveness of seniors. The measure comes from a document available in the Department of Aging archives: the *Directory of Senior Centers and Special Services for Older Californians*, which provides rich information on the senior

services available in each California county as of 1966.¹⁸ For 33 of the counties, the directory identifies which cities had active senior clubs—groups of seniors that assembled for social purposes. I use this information to create the variable *Senior club*, which is a binary indicator equal to one if the city had a senior club as of 1966. Importantly, this is a measure of historical senior social interaction in the city that does not use an official city policy as a proxy for group cohesiveness. Because the *Directory* does not provide detail on which cities had senior clubs in the remaining counties, I set the variable to zero for all cities in those counties and include county fixed effects in the model to follow.

Column 6 of Table 3 presents the results of the model that uses *Senior club* as the measure of senior cohesiveness.¹⁹ Strikingly, the coefficient on *Senior club* is positive and statistically significant, indicating that cities that had active senior clubs fifty years ago are more likely to have senior transportation today. As shown in the online appendix, for cities without senior clubs in the 1960s (and also no senior commissions), the predicted probability of exclusive DR service is 28%. For cities with senior clubs, it is 78%. This, then, is further evidence that cities with more cohesive seniors are more likely to have senior-friendly policies.

Throughout this second round of analysis so far, the coefficient on *Percent senior* has remained statistically insignificant. But I set out a third hypothesis above: that the size of the

¹⁸ It is worth noting, as a side point, that while several cities already had senior centers at that time, *not a single city* had any government-provided transportation services for seniors.

¹⁹ Because *Senior center* is not included in this model, I drop the PSA-level demographic variables and the share of the city's population that was senior in 1980. However, I still include the log of the total number of citizen commissions, committees, and boards.

senior voting bloc *should* matter when seniors are a cohesive group focused on issues relevant to seniors. To test this hypothesis, in column 7 of Table 3, I return to my main measure of senior cohesiveness—*Senior center*—and interact it with *Percent senior*. The coefficient on *Percent senior* is statistically insignificant, indicating that in cities without senior centers, seniors’ presence in the electorate has little effect on the availability of senior-friendly transportation. To understand the effect of seniors’ electoral presence in cities that do have senior centers, I combine the coefficients on *Percent senior* and its interaction with *Senior center*, with the results shown at the bottom of column 7. The effect is positive and statistically significant, suggesting that when the group of citizens is a meaningful group—one that is cohesive and focused on issues relevant to the group—its share of the electorate *does* matter for policy responsiveness.

The second panel of Table 4 shows the predicted probabilities. The probability of exclusive DR service in cities without senior centers or senior commissions is 18%. Next, I calculate two different probabilities for cities with senior centers (and no senior commissions): those with low senior turnout—where seniors make up 15% of city electorates (the 5th percentile)—and those with high senior turnout—where seniors make up 44% of the electorate (the 95th percentile). For the low-turnout cities, the probability of exclusive DR service is 31%. For high-turnout cities, it is 48%. The pattern is similar for cities with senior commissions. In particular, in cities with senior commissions, senior centers, *and* high senior turnout, the probability of having exclusive DR service is 66%. Thus, there *is* evidence of a turnout-policy connection for seniors in city politics, but that connection is conditional. For a group to be influential as a voting bloc, it has to be a cohesive, meaningful group.

Discussion

This paper poses an important question about American politics: When does a group of citizens influence public policy? In recent decades, American politics research has focused heavily on voter turnout, and so have many scholars' answers to the question. In particular, a common claim in the literature is that groups of citizens who make up a larger share of the electorate are more successful in securing favorable policies than groups with a smaller voting presence. But for an idea so widely referenced by scholars of American politics, it has been subjected to surprisingly little testing. In the first part of this paper, then, I exploited variation in over 400 California city governments to test whether transportation policy is friendlier to senior citizens in cities where seniors make up a larger percentage of voters in city elections. Contrary to the expectations of the literature, I did not find evidence of that relationship.

To understand why, I propose that we should turn to the literature on organized groups and the politics of public policy—which asks the same general question but approaches it with a different theoretical lens and usually different empirical methods. Scholars in this tradition have emphasized the importance of non-voting forms of political activity, group cohesiveness and attentiveness, and organization. In the second part of the paper, then, I draw on these ideas to make a three-part argument. First, in part because voting is not a very precise way of communicating a group's preferences to elected officials, other forms of political activity may actually have greater effect. Second, a cohesive group of citizens that is focused on issues relevant to the group will have more success in getting policies they favor, compared to a group with less focus. And third, there is reason to expect a group's share of the electorate to matter when it is a cohesive group, but far less reason to expect a turnout-policy connection when it is

not. I then tested this argument within the same empirical set-up as the original test of the turnout hypothesis, and I found support for all three theoretical expectations.

The results highlight the potential payoffs of bridging the divide between these two strands of the literature. But there are also some downsides and challenges of testing these ideas using local governments. Because I am focusing on a large set of local governments, it is not possible to acquire reliable over-time data on some of the variables for all cities, such as senior commissions. This makes it difficult to explore policy feedback effects in a thorough manner. It is also more difficult to satisfactorily address concerns of omitted variable bias with cross-sectional data. My inclusion of key controls (such as the OAA formula variables) and my use of alternative measures (such as the indicator of senior clubs in the 1960s) help to address these concerns, but more work needs to be done to develop better measures of historical senior activism and other possible contributors. Along with these downsides of my approach, however, come significant advantages: By testing hypotheses about turnout, non-voting activity, and group cohesiveness within the same framework, we can compare the explanatory effects of each—and the extent to which they interact. We learn, quite importantly, that there *is* evidence of a turnout-policy connection, but only when the group in question is a cohesive, meaningful group. We also learn that voting is not the only factor worth considering, and that it is necessary to examine non-voting political activity if the goal is to explain policy variation.

These findings also help to shed new light on existing findings. As I discussed earlier, the literature already features some evidence that turnout shapes policy in particular contexts for particular groups. Hill and Leighley (1992) find that turnout bias in favor of high-income voters leads to less generous state welfare policies. My own work shows that when overall turnout is low, organized groups with a big stake in the election outcome make up a larger share of those

voting—and are more likely to get policies they favor (Anzia 2014). This paper tests the turnout-policy connection in a new context with a new group, and it reveals something important about the conditions under which that connection will exist. Consider Hill and Leighley (1992): If high-income voters in state elections are focused on welfare policy, or are more focused on public policy generally (see Harden 2016), it makes sense that state policies would be correlated with their numbers in the electorate. Similarly, organized groups such as teacher and municipal employee unions—central to my earlier empirical work—are focused on the policy issues of interest to their members. But for any given group of citizens, that focus and cohesiveness may or may not be present. And if it is not, we should not necessarily expect to find a turnout-policy connection. Thus, exploring a new context enables us to take a theoretical step forward—enhancing our understanding of the conditions under which a group’s turnout will matter.

In the future, American politics scholars should pursue other tests of the turnout-policy connection and the conditions that create such a connection. They should also devote greater attention to what makes certain groups attentive publics and others not—and do more to understand the policy effects of political activities other than voting. After all, as Harold Lasswell (1958, 7) wrote, “the study of politics is the study of influence and the influential.” If a primary aim of political science is to understand influence, it is not enough to only study voting. We must also learn about the conditions under which voting is influential and also the other avenues groups pursue to exert influence. It is true that collecting data on voter turnout is easier than measuring testimony at government hearings, lobbying interactions, letter-writing to elected officials, and the social interactions of groups. But even if these phenomena are harder to measure and raise thorny issues of identification, they stand to play an important role in shaping public policy and representation—and their effects need to be understood.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Sarah Chevallier, Gabrielle Elul, and Sita McGuire for excellent research assistance, and to Paul Mitchell from Political Data, Inc., for providing the voter turnout data. I am grateful for the helpful comments of Josh Clinton, Greg Huber, Terry Moe, Melody Crowder-Meyer, and Hye Young You, as well as the participants of the UCLA American politics workshop, the Indiana University SPEA governance and management workshop, the Pacific Coast American Politics Conference at the University of Arizona, the Urban Political Economy Conference at Vanderbilt University, the Research Workshop in American Politics at the University of California, Berkeley, and the 2016 Midwest Political Science Association meeting.

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