

PARTICIPATORY REACTIONS TO POLICY THREATS: Senior Citizens and the Defense of Social Security and Medicare

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The sociodemographic factors emphasized in much participation research cannot explain abrupt changes in levels of activity. This study shows how threat of undesirable policy change acts as an impetus to participatory activity, helping to explain temporal variation in participation. Newly available individual-level time-series data are used to show surges in senior citizen letter writing in response to threats to Social Security and Medicare during the 1980s. Policy threat interacts with individual characteristics to produce variations in participatory reaction congruent with the magnitude of the threat to the individual.

Key words: participation; policy threat; Social Security; self-interest; senior citizens.

The extensive literature on political participation has rigorously documented who is politically active in terms of demographic characteristics. Increasingly sophisticated models elucidate the mechanisms that link those characteristics with participatory activity—resources, political engagement, and recruitment patterns (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). For all their merits, however, these models remain quite removed from politics, rarely including likely motivating factors such as issues that individuals care about (Brady, 1999).

Although difficult to study with extant survey data, issue motivations deserve more attention. Engagement in specific issues may be a powerful influence on participatory behavior, helping to explain variation in activity levels across individuals, even beyond those produced by sociodemographic factors. Issue engagements may also improve understanding of temporal variation in political participation. Proposed changes in policy, for example, may motivate

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political activity among those affected, helping to account for variations in participation levels across time that relatively stable sociodemographic factors cannot.

Policy change may represent opportunity or threat—increases or decreases in a group's government benefits, for example. Conceivably either could affect political behavior. An individual might be motivated to write a letter to Congress to voice support for proposed legislation that offers new benefits. However, the asymmetry of gains and losses (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979) suggests that activism is more likely when benefit reductions or other detrimental changes are put forth. Hence the participatory influence of policy threat is the focus of this study.

Using newly available individual-level time-series data, I explore citizens' participatory reactions to threats to government policies important to their well-being. Senior citizens reacted to threats during the 1980s to Social Security and Medicare with surges of letter writing to Congress. Furthermore, policy threat interacts with individual characteristics to produce variations in participatory reaction congruent with the magnitude of the threat to the individual. Therefore, the influence of policy threat adds to our understanding of both cross-sectional and time-series variation in mass political participation, helps explain sudden changes in participation levels that the explanatory variables traditionally emphasized in behavior research do not, and provides another example of self-interest influencing political behavior. The study of policy threat also links citizen participation with political events in a way that democratic theory would expect but that has rarely been studied empirically.

INFLUENCES ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Research using cross-sectional data has explicated the factors important in explaining differences in political activism across individuals (Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1995; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). The socioeconomic status (SES) components of education, occupation, and income enhance activity levels by increasing participatory capacity and engagement in politics. Higher levels of education and income and higher status occupations go hand and hand with location in social environments that provide political information, reinforce participatory norms, and offer recruitment opportunities (Verba et al., 1995). These factors help explain who participates and how much.

The influence of specific issue engagements on participatory behavior is, however, largely unexplored. Existing participation models tend to leave out such factors, in part because issue publics are often not identified in mass surveys or are too small to permit analysis when they are. However, scholars have succeeded in showing that some issues such as abortion (Verba et al., 1995, ch. 14) and public education (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, ch. 4) can animate participatory activity even beyond the familiar SES influences. This

suggests a more important role for issue engagements than they have played in past research.

Issue engagements promise to shed light on temporal variations in participation as well. Specifically, threat of policy change may spur participatory activity among those affected, resulting in a surge of participation among individuals whose basic sociodemographic characteristics remain unchanged. Research in psychology shows that threat is a compelling impetus to action (see Miller, Krosnick, and Lowe [1999] for the relevant psychological literature). In politics, threat can come from politicians or other policy-relevant actors, can be directed at an individual or a group the individual cares about, and can threaten policy changes that affect the individual's tangible well-being or values and principles (Miller et al., 1999). Threat has been shown to influence the behavior of both organizations and individuals. Threats posed by government regulators, environmentalists, and consumer advocates spurred businesses to form special interest groups to protect themselves (Loomis and Cigler, 1995; Truman, 1951; Walker, 1991). At the individual level, Miller and associates (1999) found that a "threat" fundraising letter sent to National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL) members mentioning three pieces of antiabortion rights legislation before Congress yielded contributions that were 40 percent higher than a control letter with no such threats.

Policy threat spurs political activity by making the benefits of political action more salient, highlighting the potential for loss (Hansen, 1985; Walker, 1991). Threat can have this effect whether one believes activism is more likely in times of despair or of satisfaction. One literature says that activism is inspired by a disturbance to the status quo (Truman, 1951) or by a sense of dissatisfaction with circumstances (Barnes and Kaase, 1979; Berry, 1984; Dalton, 1988; Gamson, 1975; Gurr, 1970; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). Another says that the desire to defend satisfactory current conditions can also motivate activism; political activity is directed toward preventing any future degradation in desirable circumstances (Hansen, 1985; Loomis and Cigler 1995; Ornstein and Elder, 1978). Regardless of which model of activism seems to apply, threat can motivate action because it implies a change for the worse (Miller et al., 1999).

We might furthermore expect participatory reaction to policy threat to vary with individuals' stake in the issue. Self-interest fails to predict attitudes in many issue areas (Sears and Funk, 1990; Stoker, 1994). The lack of an effect may be due to the costlessness of voicing a survey opinion, an act that does not significantly implicate one's self-interest (Citrin and Green, 1990). Another explanation is that researchers have measured self-interest objectively, assuming interests based on demographic characteristics, rather than subjectively; when survey respondents are allowed to state whether they believe a given policy is in their self-interest, the influence of self-interest on issue opinion is much stronger, rivaling that of political ideology and values (Stoker, 1994).

Self-interest has a stronger effect, however, on political behavior than on

attitudes, even when measured objectively (Citrin and Green, 1990). Unlike attitudes, political behaviors impose costs on the individual, and therefore only the self-interested typically act. The effect is greatest for issues where the stakes are tangible and large, such as tax policy (Green and Gerken, 1989; Sears and Citrin, 1982; Tedin, Matland, and Weiher, 2001). The strong effect may be due to congruence between objective and perceived self-interest in issue areas where individuals' stakes are so significant and apparent.¹

This study explores the participatory response of senior citizens to threats to Social Security and Medicare. Like tax policy, these social welfare programs involve large and obvious stakes for recipients. Social Security benefits account for almost 50 percent of senior incomes on average (Moon and Mulvey, 1996, p. 29). Medicare provides access to health care and benefits (averaging \$5,200 per enrollee in 1996²) to a population that before the program's enactment in 1965 was effectively barred from buying health insurance and was least likely among age groups to see a physician when needed (Anderson and Feldman, 1956; U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means, 1998, pp. 105–6). Given the magnitude of seniors' interest in these programs, the likely congruence between objective and subjective self-interest, and the fact that political behavior rather than opinion is the dependent variable, self-interest should emerge as an influence on participatory reaction to age-related policy threats.

THREATS TO SOCIAL SECURITY AND MEDICARE

These programs faced a period of threat from 1981 to 1989. The first inkling of trouble came in the late 1970s. The Social Security trust fund faced insolvency as rampant inflation dramatically increased benefits—which had been raised significantly by Congress between 1968 and 1972 and then tied to the Consumer Price Index beginning in 1975—just as higher unemployment decreased payroll tax revenues. High medical inflation rates threatened the Medicare trust fund as well. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter signed a bill shoring up Social Security by increasing the payroll tax rate and the level of wages that could be taxed. The legislation failed to solve Social Security's problems, and on May 12, 1981, the Reagan administration announced a plan to reduce benefits for early retirees, tighten disability requirements, delay a scheduled cost of living adjustment (COLA), and reduce benefit growth for future retirees. This was the first call for cuts in current retirees' benefits in program history. The proposed cut was large (a decrease in average monthly benefits for new early retirees from nearly \$500 to about \$300); affected many individuals (two thirds of new retirees at the time took their benefits "early," before age 65); and was to be immediate, allowing individuals no time to change their retirement or savings plans.

Facing a firestorm of protest from the public and resolutions from both the House and the Republican-controlled Senate excoriating the cuts, the administration effectively withdrew the proposals. In September 1981, Reagan established a bipartisan commission on Social Security to report in 1983, deferring the politically sensitive issue until after the midterm elections (Fessler and Donnelly, 1981, p. 2334). The 1983 Social Security amendments arising from the commission's recommendations proved to be relatively noncontroversial—reform was viewed as inevitable, and the 1983 bill spread the costs among current recipients, future recipients, and taxpayers. However, other threats and controversies over senior programs continued: in May 1982, Senate Republicans proposed cutting \$40 billion from Social Security over 3 years; in September 1983, the “notch baby” controversy ignited when a letter to “Dear Abby” revealed that Social Security recipients born between 1917 and 1921 did not share in a benefit windfall caused by a legislative miscalculation; in May 1984, Treasury Secretary Donald Regan suggested on *Meet the Press* that Social Security benefits for more affluent seniors be reduced; and in March 1985, the Senate adopted a budget including a one-year Social Security COLA freeze. None of these proposals came to fruition; in the face of seniors' objections, the Social Security cuts, freezes, and benefit reductions were never passed, but the period was marked by the continual emergence of policy threats.

The last major threat of the decade came in 1988, when the Medicare Catastrophic Coverage Act was signed. The act expanded Medicare benefits by capping the amount beneficiaries were required to pay for hospital care and doctor bills, providing prescription drug and mammogram coverage, and granting respite care for those tending severely disabled Medicare beneficiaries at home. Unlike previous policy expansions, the new Medicare benefits were financed not with a payroll tax increase but with premium increases on seniors themselves, especially the affluent. The act imposed a modest increase in monthly Medicare premiums for all seniors and a surtax on the income of the wealthiest 40 percent, reaching \$800 per year for the most affluent 5 percent of beneficiaries (Rovner, 1988).

Strong senior opposition to the act emerged by fall 1988. Less affluent seniors were frightened by fringe groups' misinformation campaigns claiming that all aged would be subject to the maximum \$800 premium. The chief opposition came, however, from affluent seniors who were angered at having to pay for benefits that many already had through former employers or private insurance (Bianco, 1994; Himelfarb, 1995; Rovner, 1995). In a rare move, Congress repealed the law in November 1989.

After 1989, calls for changes in Social Security and Medicare largely ceased. In 1993, the Clinton administration briefly floated a plan to freeze the Social Security COLA for one year as part of a deficit-cutting package, but seniors

had no interest in “shared sacrifice.” Faced with pressure from the AARP, Clinton withdrew the proposal within 10 days (Ifill, 1993, p. A1).³

HYPOTHESES

Thus, from 1981 to 1989 there was a period of threat to Social Security and Medicare bookended by two significant events, the 1981 Social Security proposal and the 1988 Catastrophic Act. Hypotheses can be generated about participatory reaction to these policy phenomena. According to the literature on self-interest, individuals whose interests are most directly implicated by the policy shocks should react most vociferously. Seniors should therefore react more strongly to the period of threat than nonseniors. Because Social Security and Medicare are federal programs, we would specifically expect to see a differential participatory reaction by age in an activity with a federal focus, such as writing letters to Congress. Concomitantly, seniors would not be expected to increase their participation in locally focused activities, like attending town meetings, where Social Security and Medicare are not implicated.

Furthermore, there is considerable variation among seniors in dependence on government benefits that should be reflected in subgroups’ reactions to policy threat (Binstock, 1992; Campbell, 2002). Older women, for example, have lower incomes, are less likely to work, and derive a greater portion of their income from Social Security than older men (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2000). Retired seniors have fewer alternatives to government programs than working seniors, who receive income and in many cases health insurance from their employers. Low-income seniors are more dependent on Social Security, the poorest two quintiles of seniors receiving 80 percent of their income from the program compared to 18 percent for the most affluent quintile (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2000, p. 66).⁴ Higher income seniors are more likely to have income from other sources such as private pensions, savings, and investments. They are also more likely to have supplemental medical insurance from private sources or former employers that may cover catastrophic costs or prescription drugs. Therefore, seniors who are more dependent on Social Security—retired, female, and low-income seniors—should react more strongly to the 1981 threat to cut benefits than their working, male, and high-income counterparts. In response to the 1988 Catastrophic Act, high-income seniors should react more vociferously than low-income seniors because they faced paying again for benefits they already had.

The data used here cannot determine the precise mechanism by which threat translates into political activity. Perhaps in the case of age-related policy, where the stakes are so large, tangible, and “transparently obvious” (Lipset, 1959/1981, p. 197), senior citizens react to threat essentially spontane-

ously, that is, writing Congress in response to media coverage of policy threats. However, mobilization by other actors, such as interest groups and political parties, makes participatory activity much more likely (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba et al., 1995; Wielhouwer and Lockerbie, 1994). Some observers even believe mobilization is a necessary stimulus for mass participation (Nagel, 1987; Rosenau, 1974). Certainly accounts of senior politics in the 1980s suggest mobilization was key (Day, 1990; Himelfarb, 1995; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Rovner, 1995). But regardless of the mechanism, empirical support for these hypotheses would demonstrate that policy threat can help explain participatory variation.

DATA AND METHODS

Newly available data enable examination of participatory reactions to the period of threat that lasted from May 1981 to November 1989. The Roper Social and Political Trends Archive (Brady et al., 2000) consists of surveys conducted 10 times per year over a 20-year period, late 1973–1994, for a total of more than 400,000 respondents. Included are items asking respondents both whether they have written a letter to their congressman or senator in the past year and whether they attended public meetings on town or local affairs (see Appendix A for question wording). The participatory reaction to each of the 1980s policy threats cannot be calculated separately; although the dataset provides nearly monthly reads of participatory activity, the data are smoothed somewhat by the question wording (a 12-month retrospective item) and many of the 1980s policy threats came in quick succession with overlapping effects. However, the participatory reaction to the period of threat overall and the reaction to the two major threats can be determined. The 1981 proposal to cut Social Security benefits came at the beginning of the period of threat and the 1988 Catastrophic Act came after 3 years of relative inactivity in aging policy, and so these events are discrete enough to allow separate analysis.⁵

The Roper data reveal whether a respondent wrote a letter, not the content or tenor of the letter. However, public opinion and other data show that seniors overwhelmingly objected to the proposed Social Security cuts and to the Medicare Catastrophic Coverage Act. In polls administered after the 1981 proposal to cut Social Security benefits, the majority of seniors were in opposition (Sussman, 1981). Similarly, journalistic accounts of the Medicare Catastrophic episode portray most senior letter writers as unfavorable to the legislation (Rovner, 1989a, 1989b), and all 92 members of Congress interviewed by William Bianco on this issue characterized sentiment in their districts as opposed to the law at the time of repeal: 59 percent said their districts were opposed, and 41 percent said strongly opposed (1994, pp. 126–127). Furthermore, a content analysis of letters to the editor of the *New York Times* from

1981 to 1989 shows that 90 percent of letter writers who could be identified as program recipients objected to the proposed changes (Campbell, 2000). Thus, it seems likely that most senior letter writers in the Roper data wrote in opposition to these policy threats.

In the figures that follow, I fit Lowess curves to the actual data points to reveal the underlying participation trends. The data points themselves are the proportion of people in a given age group in each of the 204 surveys who said they had performed the participatory act in the last year. Hence Figure 1 is based on more than 600 data points—200+ surveys times three age groups.⁶

To calculate the change in each group's participation rate for the time periods delineated by the two major policy events, I performed a multiple interrupted time series (MITS) analysis. Lewis-Beck and Alford (1980) developed this technique to evaluate whether the number of coal mine deaths changed in response to specific policy events, in that case new safety legislation. I apply the technique to discern whether participation rates among seniors, non-seniors, and senior subgroups changed in response to events in aging policy. Appendix B explains the dummy and countervariables that represent the policy events and intervening time periods and shows how the changes in participation for each age group in each time period are calculated. Durbin-Watson statistics and Box-Jenkins analysis of the autocorrelation and partial autocorrelation functions of the residuals from initial ordinary least squares (OLS) estimates indicated the presence of a first-order autoregressive process, and so the results shown are from an ARIMA (1 0 0) model.

SENIORS' PARTICIPATORY REACTION TO POLICY THREATS

Figure 1 shows the rates at which three age groups—under 30, 30–59, and 60 and over—wrote letters to Congress from 1973 to 1994. The policy threats described above are noted with reference lines on the figure. The overall period of threat extends from the initial May 1981 threat to cut Social Security benefits (reference line B) to the repeal of the Medicare Catastrophic Coverage Act (line I) in November 1989.

Prior to that initial threat, seniors wrote letters to Congress at higher rates than the under-30 youth group but at lower rates than the middle group aged 30–59. The middle group is more highly educated than seniors and so not surprisingly contacts at higher rates; young people participate at the lowest rate, as has been found elsewhere (Highton and Wolfinger, 2001; Verba et al., 1995; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). There is a bump in senior contacting around the 1977 Social Security rescue legislation (reference line A), showing how sensitive these data are to policy events, but for the most part contacting rates among all three age groups decline slightly from the beginning of the time series in late 1973 to May 1981.

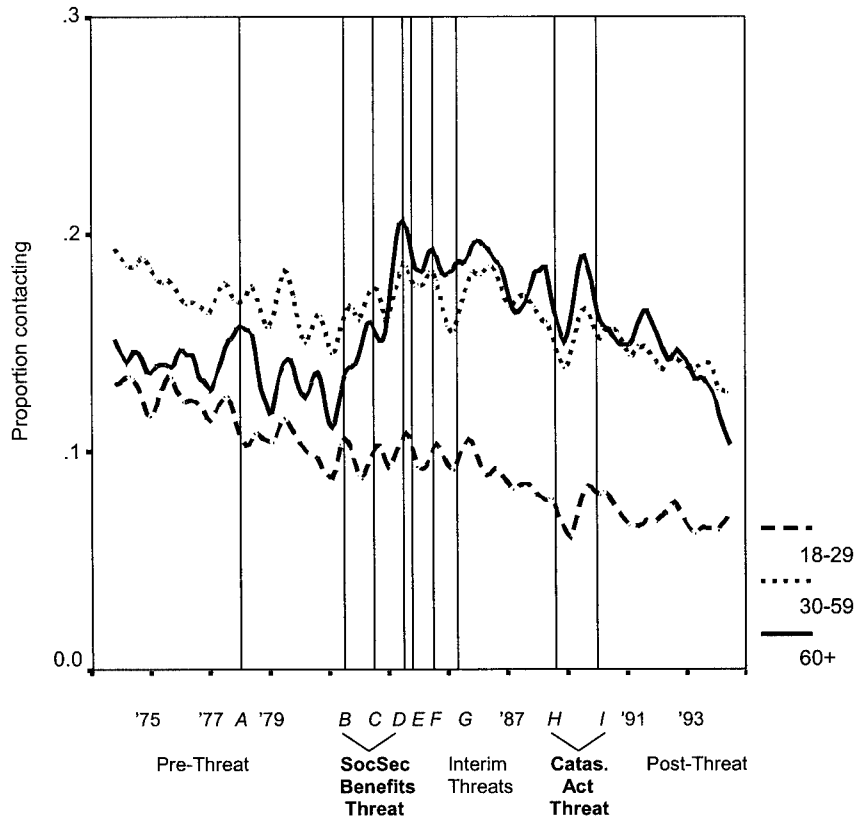


FIG. 1. Contacting by age.

Key: A Dec. 77: President Carter signs Social Security rescue legislation; B May 81: Reagan administration proposal to cut Social Security benefits; C May 82: Senate Republican proposal to cut \$40 billion from Social Security over 3 years; D Jul. 83: Reagan signs 1983 Social Security Amendments; E Sept. 83: Notch baby controversy erupts; F May 84: Treasury Secretary Donald Regan suggests reducing Social Security benefits for the well-off on *Meet the Press*; G Mar. 85: One-year COLA freeze proposal; H Jul. 88: Medicare Catastrophic Coverage Act signed; I Nov. 89: Medicare Catastrophic Coverage Act repealed.

Note: Proportion contacting means that .1 = 10% of respondents in age group wrote a letter to their congressman or senator in the last year.

Source: Roper Social and Political Trends Archive.

With the initial threat to Social Security in May 1981, the pattern of contacting changes abruptly, at least for seniors. Between that threat and the signing of the Social Security amendments in July 1983 (line D), senior contacting rose 7.3 percent, from around 13 percent to 20 percent, overtaking the 30- to 59-year-old group (see Appendix B, Table B2). The contacting rate

of younger groups rose much more modestly, 2.7 percent for the 30–59 group and 1.9 percent for the 18–29 group.⁷

After this initial threatening episode was concluded with the passage of the 1983 Social Security amendments, senior contacting declined somewhat, although it remained higher than that of nonseniors as other, less urgent threats continued. Then the second major policy shock came in July 1988, when the Catastrophic Act was signed. Again, senior participation increased dramatically, by 7.9 percent between the act's passage and its repeal in November 1989 (lines H to I in Figure 1). The participation of 18- to 29-year-olds and 30- to 59-year-olds rose by just 2.4 percent and 2.2 percent respectively. Only after the repeal of the Catastrophic Act, which signaled an end to the threats and alarm, did senior contacting decline, reaching pre-threat levels by the end of the time series in 1994.⁸

In the face of threats to age-related policy, senior citizens dramatically increased their letter writing to Congress; participatory reaction was greatest for the relevant issue public and much more mild for younger people. Further breakdowns of the age groups give an even better idea of the relationship between age and participatory reaction to the Social Security threats. Beginning in 1977, finer age categories are available in the Roper data, allowing calculation of changes in contacting rates for age groups in 5-year intervals starting at age 40. As people get closer to retirement, we might expect that they would be more focused on age-related issues; this is confirmed in these data. With the exception of the 55- to 59-year-old group, the size of the participatory reaction to the initial period of threat to Social Security from May 1981 to July 1983 increases with age (see Appendix B, Table B2). The contacting rate of 40- to 44-year-olds, who are probably little focused on Social Security, increased just 1.3 percent during this period, about the same as the under-30 group. The contacting increases are larger as age goes up: 4.2 percent for 45- to 49-year-olds, 4.4 percent for 50- to 54-year-olds, 5.4 percent for 60- to 64-year-olds, and 8.4 percent for respondents aged 65 and over.

Further evidence that senior contacting rose in response to Social Security threats comes from a comparison with senior attendance at public meetings on town or local affairs. Senior participation increased dramatically in an act aimed at politicians with influence over Social Security and Medicare—contacting congressmen and senators. In contrast, seniors' participation in an act with no relevance for these federal programs—attending a public meeting on town or local affairs—was essentially flat over this 2-decade period (Figure 2).

VARIATIONS AMONG SENIORS

In general, working seniors contact at higher rates than their retired counterparts; over the entire 1973–1994 period of the Roper surveys, 20 percent of working seniors contacted lawmakers compared to 16 percent of retired

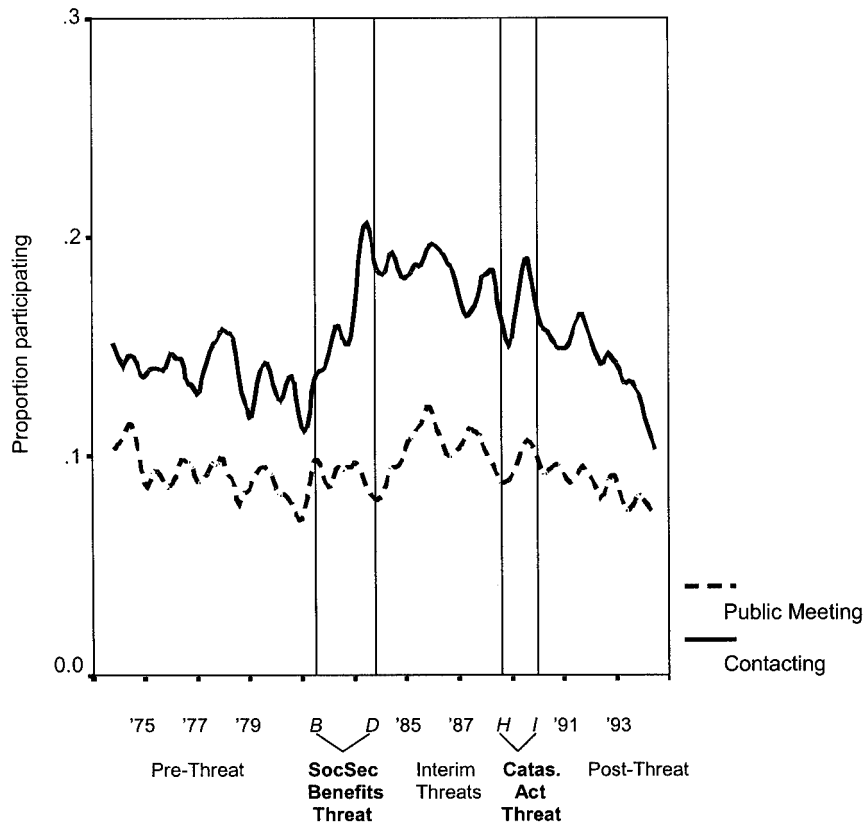


FIG. 2. Senior contacting and public meeting attendance.

Note: Seniors = Respondents age 60+.

Source: Roper Social and Political Trends Archive.

seniors. However, retired seniors reacted much more strongly to the two major policy threats, their contacting surging 8.9 percent and 9.2 percent compared to 5.6 percent and 4.2 percent among working seniors (Table 1). Similarly, senior women contact at lower rates than do senior men (14% versus 17% over the Roper series). But again, women’s reaction to the policy threats was greater, their contacting rising 8.0% and 9.2%, compared to 6.5% in each case for senior men (Table 1).

High-income seniors also contact at much higher rates than do low-income seniors. Extending the government dependency argument to income subgroups, low-income seniors would be expected to react more strongly than high-income seniors to the 1981–1983 threat to Social Security benefits, since they derive such a high share of total income from the program. Instead,

TABLE 1. Contacting Change Among Seniors During Periods of Policy Threat

	Social Security Benefit Threat May 81–July 83	Catastrophic Act Threat July 88–Nov 89
All Seniors	7.3%	7.9%
Work Status		
Retired	8.9	9.2
Working FT	5.6	4.2
Gender		
Female	8.0	9.2
Male	6.5	6.5
Income		
Low	5.4	6.6
Medium	7.2	7.6
High	7.5	17.2

Note: Cells contain the percentage increase in the rate at which the specified group sent letters to Congress during the two periods of policy threat.

Source: Roper Social and Political Trends Archive.

contacting increased 5.4 percent for low-income seniors compared to 7.5 percent for high-income seniors (Table 1). However, low-income seniors are also less educated and less likely to belong to interest groups that mobilize seniors, so their baseline level of contacting is lower: over the entire 1973–1994 period, 8 percent of low-income seniors wrote letters to lawmakers, compared to 15 percent of moderate-income seniors and 25 percent of high-income seniors. Therefore, the 5.4 percent increase in low-income seniors' contacting in response to the 1981–1983 Social Security threat represents a greater increase over the group's baseline rate than is the case for the high-income group.⁹

The significance of income for the Catastrophic Act threat is different. Here it was high-income seniors who were most threatened. Indeed, their reaction was quite vociferous. Between the act's passage and its repeal 17 months later, their contacting increased 17.2 percent, nearly three times as much as low-income seniors at 6.6 percent (Table 1). As predicted, the participatory reaction of affluent seniors to the Catastrophic Act was much greater than that of low-income seniors.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Policy threat is an impetus to political participation. The effect is strongest for the implicated "issue publics," those who care strongly about an issue (Converse, 1964). Among age groups, senior citizens reacted most strongly to threats to age-related programs, with reaction falling off monotonically as age decreases. Furthermore, the mobilizing power of threat varies, with those

whose interests are most at risk reacting the most vigorously (retired, female, and, relative to their baseline participation rate, low-income seniors in the case of the proposed Social Security benefit cuts in 1981, high-income seniors with regard to the 1988 Catastrophic Act). Thus, this study provides another example of self-interest influencing political behavior. Social Security and Medicare are issue areas where, like tax policy, the material stakes are large, tangible, and certain enough both to align objective and subjective self-interests and to influence citizen activity.

The specific mechanism by which individuals are mobilized by threat cannot be addressed with these data. The Roper surveys asked only whether a respondent had written to Congress; we do not know whether an interest group, for example, contacted the individual to spur activity, although various analyses suggest such mobilization was central during the 1980s-era threats. However, a large role for mobilization makes the results reported here—the great reaction of disadvantaged seniors to the Social Security threats—more interesting, not less. The elderly are a politically important and unusual constituency because both high- and low-income seniors have sources of policy information and mobilization. AARP members, like members of voluntary organizations in general, are more likely than other seniors to be male, working, white, educated, and high income (Campbell, 2000). But low-income seniors can access thousands of senior centers and nutrition programs run under the Administration on Aging and other organizations where they hear policy news and discussion (Ragan and Dowd, 1974; Rose, 1965; Trela, 1972). Thus poorer seniors are unusual in American politics—a low-income group that is mobilized, particularly around economic issues (Campbell, 2002).

At the same time, the Medicare Catastrophic episode demonstrates the ability of mobilizing forces to alter at times the perceived self-interest of their target audiences. This study showed that high-income seniors reacted most strongly to the Catastrophic Act, consonant with their objective and subjective interest in avoiding new premiums. This finding is corroborated by Day's (1993) study, which shows that high-income seniors opposed the act more than did low-income seniors. Using a series of surveys administered over the course of the Catastrophic Act episode, however, Himelfarb (1995) finds that among low-income seniors subjective, or perceived, self-interest influenced opinions on the act more than objective self-interest. That is, low-income seniors who felt they would be worse off under the act opposed it, even though they would in fact have gained from the new provisions. As the campaign to repeal the act progressed, low-income seniors became even less supportive. The influence of subjective self-interest is also evidenced somewhat in this study. Although low-income seniors did not object to the Catastrophic Act nearly as much as affluent seniors, they nonetheless did agitate against the law even though they would have benefited from it. One explanation for seniors'

opposition may be that they did not understand the act's provisions, so that incomplete or incorrect information led them to misjudge their self-interest. Data from a February–March 1989 AARP poll show that few seniors, and even fewer low-income seniors, knew about their new benefits under the law: 65 percent of seniors did not know the act protected spousal income and assets (66% of low-income seniors did not know this); 66 percent did not know it covered mammograms (69% of low-income seniors); 78 percent did not know it covered prescription drugs (83% of low-income seniors); 79 percent did not know it covered all hospital expenses after a deductible (80% of low-income seniors); and 88 percent of seniors erroneously thought that a couple with \$30,000 in income would pay the maximum premium (94% of low-income seniors; Himelfarb, 1995, p. 66). The mismatch between subjective and objective self-interest shows the tremendous potential interest groups and other elite actors have to frame issues and shape both perceptions and opinions (Chong, Citrin, and Conley, 2001; Nelson and Kinder, 1996). It also demonstrates the need for a program's proponents to communicate clearly to the prospective clientele the nature of their new benefits.

The focus of this study has been the participatory influence of policy threat. It is possible that the flip side of issue engagement—policy opportunity—also influences citizen participation. Individuals who care deeply about an issue may increase their participation in reaction to moments of opportunity, writing letters, for example, to encourage proposed policy expansions. However, loss aversion—the well-documented tendency for people to value losses more than equal-sized gains (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979)—would suggest that policy threat is a stronger influence on participation than policy opportunity. Unfortunately, the Roper data begin only in late 1973, so it is not possible to assess whether senior contacting surged in response to policy opportunities such as the 1965 passage of Medicare and the Older Americans Act or the various pieces of Social Security legislation from 1968 to 1972 that greatly increased benefits and indexed them to inflation. An important task for future research is to measure the relative participatory influence of policy threat and policy opportunity.

The study of policy threat adds to our understanding of the factors behind participation. Threat of undesirable policy change helps explain temporal variation in the level of participatory activity. Interactions between policy threat and individual characteristics go beyond traditional sociodemographic factors to help get purchase on who is active and why. Future efforts to collect data on issue engagements would increase understanding of both the motivations behind political activity and the timing of participatory surges.

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APPENDIX A: ROPER SOCIAL AND POLITICAL TRENDS ARCHIVE QUESTION WORDING

Participation. Here is a list of things some people do about government or politics. Have you happened to have done any of those things in the past year? *Contacting:* Written your Congressman or Senator. *Public Meeting Attendance:* Attended a public meeting on town or school affairs.

Income. Now here is a list of income categories. Would you call off the letter of the category that best describes the combined annual income of all members of this household, including wages or salary, pensions, interest or dividends, and all other sources? Within each survey, senior income recoded into high-, medium-, and low-income groups.

Work Status. Are you at present employed, either full time or part time? (If no): Are you a housewife, unemployed, a student, retired, or what?

Age. Here is a list of age groups. Would you call off the letter of the age group you happen to be in?

Gender. Coded by interviewer.

APPENDIX B: MULTIPLE INTERRUPTED TIME SERIES ANALYSIS

I performed a multiple interrupted time series (MITS) analysis of the participatory trends in the Roper data to assess how participation rates change with policy events (and how the changes differ across population subgroups). This analysis uses a series of counter- and dummy variables to delineate the policy events and intervening time periods. Proper combination of the resulting parameters yields the slope of participation before, during, and after the two major policy events.

Following the example of Lewis-Beck and Alford (1980), I performed a dummy variable analysis, estimating the following equation:

$$P_t = b_0 + b_1X_{1t} + b_2X_{2t} + b_3X_{3t} + b_4X_{4t} + b_5X_{5t} + b_6X_{6t} + b_7X_{7t} + b_8X_{8t} + b_9X_9 + e_t,$$

where P_t = mean level of participation in each survey, that is, the proportion of, say, seniors who said they wrote a letter to their congressman or senator in the past year. The independent variables are counters and dummy variables for the various time periods. X_{1t} = a counter for surveys from 1 to 204, which equals the number of observations; X_{2t} = a dichotomous variable scored 0 for observations before Reagan's May 12, 1981, threat (Point B in Figure 1) and 1 for observations after the threat; X_{3t} = a counter for surveys, scored 0 for observations before May 12, 1981 and 1,2,3 . . . for observations after the threat; X_{4t} = a dichotomous variable scored 0 for observations before the July 1983 signing of the Social Security Amendments (Point D in Figure 1) and 1 for observations after that; X_{5t} = a counter for surveys, scored 0 for observations before July 1983 and 1,2,3 . . . for observations after that; X_{6t} = a dichotomous variable scored 0 for observations before the July 1988 passage of the Medicare Catastrophic Health Care Act (Point H in Figure 1) and 1 for observations after that; X_{7t} = a counter for surveys, scored 0 for observations before July 1988 and 1,2,3 . . . for observations after that; X_{8t} = a dichotomous variable scored 0 for observations before the November

1989 repeal of the Medicare Catastrophic Health Care Act (Point I in Figure 1) and 1 for observations after that; X_{9t} = a counter for surveys, scored 0 for observations before November 1989 and 1,2,3 . . . for observations after that.

I originally estimated the coefficients with OLS, but the Durbin-Watson statistics and Box-Jenkins analysis of the autocorrelation (ACF) and partial autocorrelation (PACF) functions of the residuals indicated the presence of positive autocorrelation for some of the age-participation equations. I replicated the analysis using an ARIMA (1 0 0) model (the Box-Jenkins analysis indicated a first-order autoregressive process). The ARIMA and OLS results are nearly identical; I report the ARIMA results here.

The contacting rates for the three age groups appearing in Figure 1 will serve as an example on converting the parameter estimates into changes in participation. Table B1 contains the slope coefficients (b_1, b_3, b_5, b_7, b_9) for contacting by the three age groups.

The slope for the period from the beginning of the time series to May 1981 is b_1 , from May 1981 to July 1983 is $(b_1 + b_3)$, from July 1983 to July 1988 is $(b_1 + b_3 + b_5)$, from July 1988 to November 1989 is $(b_1 + b_3 + b_5 + b_7)$, and from November 1989 to the end of the time series in October 1994 is $(b_1 + b_3 + b_5 + b_7 + b_9)$; see Table B2). To calculate the percentage change in contacting for each time period and age group, I multiplied the slope coefficients by the number of surveys in each time period and then multiplied this product by 100 to convert from a proportion to a percentage. For example, the calculation for the change in the contacting rate of seniors during the threat to Social Security benefits from May 1981 to July 1983 is

$$(b_{1\text{seniors}} + b_{3\text{seniors}})(21)(100) = (-.000278 + .003743)(21)(100) = 7.3\%.$$

TABLE B1. MITS Analysis Coefficients for Contacting by Age (ARIMA results)

	Contacting		
	18-29	30-59	60+
b_1	-.000527	-.000452	-.000278
b_3	.0014089	.001718	.003743
b_5	-.0013421	-.001539	-.003859
b_7	.0021464	.000181	.006046
b_9	-.0020223	-.002099	-.006727

TABLE B2. Changes in Subgroup Participation Rates in Each Period

	9/73–5/81	5/81–7/83 Social Security Benefits Threat	7/83–7/88	7/88–11/89 Catastrophic Act Threat	11/89–0/94
Contacting by Age					
18–29	-4.1	1.9	-2.3	2.4	-1.4
30–59	-3.5	2.7	-1.4	2.2	-2.4
60+	-2.1	7.3	-2.0	7.9	-4.5
40–44*	-4.6	1.3	1.2	5.0	-2.1
45–49	-3.8	4.2	-1.8	3.0	-3.5
50–54	-1.2	4.4	-2.7	5.8	-1.9
55–59	-3.1	-3	-2.3	3.3	-2.7
60–64	-2.7	5.4	-2.9	3.8	-3.1
65+	-3.7	8.4	-1.5	9.3	-5.0
Pub Mtg Attendance					
60+	-2.1	-8	1.9	3.3	-1.7
Senior Contacting by Income					
Low	-.4	5.4	-.3	6.6	.1
Medium	-.7	7.2	.6	7.6	-6.2
High	-1.0	7.5	-5.7	17.2	-6.7
Senior Contacting by Work Status					
Retired	-3.3	8.9	-2.9	9.2	-5.1
Wrk FT	-1.8	5.6	-4.5	4.2	-3.0
Senior Contacting by Gender					
Female	-2.5	8.0	-2.1	9.2	-2.9
Male	-1.8	6.5	-2.3	6.5	-6.2

Note: Seniors are age 60+.

*For 5-year age increments, data begin in January 1977.

Cells contain the percentage change in the participation rate of the specified group during each time period.

Source: Roper Social and Political Trends Archive.

NOTES

1. Chong, Citrin, and Conley (2001) find that objective and subjective self-interest are strongly correlated even with regard to political attitudes.
2. In 1996, Medicare Part A (hospital insurance) provided \$3,300 in benefits per enrollee (\$15,200 per enrollee receiving services) and Part B (supplemental medical insurance covering physician services, etc.) provided \$1,870 in benefits per enrollee (\$1,960 per enrollee receiving services).
3. In 1995, congressional Republicans proposed reducing Medicare growth by \$270 billion over 7 years. Unfortunately, the participation data used in this analysis do not extend beyond 1994, so I can test only the 1981–1989 period of threat.

4. I use income as a proxy for Social Security dependency because Social Security income is not available in the Roper dataset.
5. Using crosstabs from select years of the Roper Surveys created for them by the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut, Rosenstone and Hansen noted an increase in senior contacting from 1980 to 1984 that was not shared by younger respondents (1993, p. 116). Now with the availability of the actual micro-data, and the extension of the data to 1994, the participatory effects of the 1981–1983 and 1988–1989 policy shocks and the interaction of those shocks with individual characteristics can be assessed.
6. The Lowess curves are produced by a locally weighted smoothing technique that reduces the distorting effects of outliers (Cleveland, 1979, 1985). The senior group starts at age 60 rather than 65 because of the original Roper coding. Each Roper survey has approximately 2000 respondents. Cell sizes among the 204 surveys for each age group:

	minimum	maximum	median
18–29	319	616	534
30–59	679	1283	1019
60+	249	493	427

7. Note that the Lowess curves are calculated differently than the MITS analysis, and so the changes in participation shown by the curves in Figures 1 and 2 may not appear to correspond exactly with the participation changes derived from the MITS analysis. The Lowess curves are locally weighted curves that ignore the delineations among the five time periods, while the MITS analysis calculates the linear regression slopes for each time period.
8. From 1978 through 1994, the American National Election Studies (NES) asked respondents whether they or anyone in their family had contacted the running U.S. House incumbent from their district. The NES data provide a rough confirmation of the magnitude of contacting reported in the Roper studies; the percentages of respondents who contacted between 1978 and 1992 (the last year in which both NES data and a full year's worth of Roper surveys are available) are similar as shown in the following table (in 1980, for example, youth contacting rates were 8% and 10% in the NES and Roper data respectively, middle age contacting rates were 17% and 16%, and senior contacting rates were 16% and 13%; the Roper figures are from yearly aggregations of the nearly monthly data). Over the entire period, however, the NES data do not exhibit exactly the same variations in contacting as the Roper data, which is not surprising given differences in question wording and survey granularity. The NES item was asked only of respondents living in districts where an incumbent representative was running; excluded is contacting of both senators and retiring representatives. Also, the NES item was asked only a single time during each biennial election year while the Roper item was asked 10 times per year. Memories fade; Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) found in an experimental question-wording test of the Roper items that a 6-month retrospective item produced the same reported activity level as a 12-month retrospective item, meaning that respondents forgot about their participatory activity of 7 to 12 months ago. Hence it is likely that the biennial NES item fails to pick up a great deal of activity. This may explain why reported contacting among seniors in the 1982 NES is relatively low; the survey was administered in November 1982, 17 months after the initial May 1981 threat to Social Security. In contrast, the nearly monthly Roper surveys capture participatory activity as it is happening.
9. Low-income individuals participate at low levels in part because they lack the necessary resources (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). Campbell (2002) shows, however, that both low income and low education levels among senior citizens are mitigated in a number of ways and so are not as detrimental to senior participation as low resource levels are to the participation of younger citizens.

Reported Contacting in Roper and NES Surveys

Year	18–29		30–59		60+	
	Roper	NES	Roper	NES	Roper	NES
1978	10%	10%	17%	18%	14%	12%
1980	10	8	16	17	13	16
1982	10	8	17	19	16	11
1984	10	9	18	17	18	13
1986	9	11	18	17	19	14
1988	7	6	15	14	17	14
1990	8	8	15	18	15	15
1992	7	9	14	16	15	13

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