

Original Article

The new older adult participant in American politics

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Email: bbram@uga.edu**Abstract**

This article analyzes the politics of older Americans in the 21st century. Older Americans have been significantly involved in American politics, relative to younger generations. Political participation typically increases with age, even ramping up during the early period of older adulthood. However, past work has indicated that political participation drops off due to frailty and loss of cognition in the latest years of the life span. And, yet, people are living longer than in previous decades when much of the past research on this relationship was conducted. We want to know whether these relationships remain consistent and want to especially analyze the old–old, a growing age group that has been difficult to study in the past due to their low numbers in traditional surveys. With tens of thousands of respondents, survey data from the Cooperative Election Studies from 2008 to 2020 allow us to analyze these older groups in recent years, across types of participation and party affiliation. We find that there is not much of a dip in political activity among the old–old. They are still quite active, particularly when it comes to donating money to campaigns and voting. Additionally, through analyzing birth cohorts, we find that political activity gradually increases as people age through their 60s and 70s and does not notably decline when they move into the old–old age group.

KEYWORDS

age, older adulthood, political participation

News articles covering the 2020 presidential election noted a shift in polling among older American voters and their preferences for the two main candidates. *The Upsshot* from the *New York Times* considered a Biden surge among the oldest American voters. Similarly, *The Washington Examiner* asked: “Why are older voters abandoning Trump for Biden?” (Larson 2020). And, *FiveThirtyEight* titled their piece: “Are Older Voters Turning Away from Trump?” (Skelley 2020). Only the *New York Times* article remarks on the significance of the shift, calling older voters a “great asset” and noting that “they turnout at high numbers” giving their preferred candidate the advantage (Cohn 2020). The fact that generations of older Americans have participated at high rates is no secret and probably taken for granted by the media, politicians, and even social scientists. However, the elderly Americans of yesterday are not the older Americans of today. Our data analysis reflects these changes, and provides a much needed update to past systematic inquiries into political participation at the end of the life cycle.

We started with the research question: when in the life cycle does political activity among Americans begin to decline for various political activities? It is a simple question that desperately needs updating, given the growing numbers of older Americans, with increased life expectancy throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century, and the oldest old or old–old (as opposed to young–old) comprising a fast-growing portion of the U.S. population (Hodes 2020). Does the political participation of the old–old look different from the young–old? What does the extension of the life cycle mean for political participation? This seems incredibly important to sort out as Pew Research Center documents a widening gap in party identity between younger and older Americans (Maniam and Smith 2017).

Much of what social scientists know and cite about older adult political engagement goes back to research from decades ago. This includes the well-documented dip in participation during the later years of the life span (Burr, Caro, and Moorhead 2002; Jennings and Niemi 1981; Milbrath and Goel 1977; Verba and Nie 1972; Glenn and Grimes 1968), an expansion of the life cycle (Neugarten 1974, 1975; Neugarten and Neugarten 1986), and disciplinary call for a political gerontology research agenda (Cutler 1977). These analyses are ripe for updating and addressing, but older populations are often difficult to study because they are often underrepresented in surveys, especially the oldest old (Dormagen and Michel 2018). Testing theorized differences between the growing numbers of young–old and old–old Americans, across a range of political activity, while considering the expanding life cycle, requires use of larger samples of the aged. Our study aims to build on this past work and fill some of these gaps, better understanding the new older adult participant and their electoral impact.

OLDER ADULT PARTICIPATION AND THE LIFE CYCLE

Political activity across the life cycle faces the “problems of startup and slowdown” (Nie, Verba, and Kim 1974:333). Activity rates tend to be lower in the early years as young adults learn participatory habits, political engagement picks up with settling down with marriage and a family and advancing age in the middle years, and then drop-off into the latest years of life. This pattern often forms the familiar inverted U-shaped curve evident from visual representations of political participation data across the life span (Burr, Caro, and Moorhead 2002; Jennings and Niemi 1981; Milbrath and Goel 1977; Verba and Nie 1972; Glenn and Grimes 1968).

Our present research focuses on the slowdown, when it happens, what it looks like, and how it is changed as aging has changed in the United States. Even if 60 is the new 50 (Levine and Crimmins 2018), people reaching the most advanced ages typically experience age-related physical limitations and chronic conditions that contribute to frailty (Hamerman 1999). These ailments may prohibit older citizens from some of the more physically and energy intensive forms of political participation. As past studies have shown, this later life slowdown is most evident for more active forms of participation (Strate et al. 1989; Jennings and Markus 1988; Miller, Gurin, and Gurin 1980; Binstock 1972; Streib and Schneider 1971). Others show that high voter turnout is sustained in older communities (Jirovec and Erich 1992; Streib, Folts, and La Greca 1985; Anderson and Anderson 1978). While voting requires less time and physical energy than many forms of participation, older adults may continually turnout at high rates out of habit (Streib and Schneider 1971).

Civic participation includes a lot of different activities that require varying levels of resources in the form of time, skill, and/or money (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Nie, Verba, and Kim (1974:322) note that gaining a “clearer picture of the relationship between age and activity” necessitates observing several political activities that range in required motivation. Jennings and Markus (1988) explore the effect of older adulthood, finding some waning involvement for the more demanding forms of participation. At the same time, they find that older citizens often maintain their involvement in voting and other “age-appropriate behaviors that may have direct political implications, behaviors such as being aware of, utilizing, and (at least in some instances) demanding public and private resources for the aged” (Jennings and Markus 1988:315).

When studying older adults in the Boston area, Burr, Caro, and Moorhead (2002:103) write that contributing money, attending public meetings, or volunteering, for example, are “qualitatively and

quantitatively different from voting in terms of frequency, intensity, and resource requirements.” These distinctions are incredibly meaningful because of adults at “different stages of the family and career cycles possess different resource sets and group benefit orientations that may affect the decision to engage in this array of civic behavior” (2002:103).

In sum, Burr, Caro, and Moorhead (2002) importantly, and more recently than many, show that senior citizens continue to be civically engaged and productive into these latter parts of the life cycle, yet their study does not expand beyond the Boston area. The earlier work by Jennings and Markus (1988:315) also conclude that “an aging population is not necessarily a less politically active one, although the specific nodes of participation and their substantive focuses may well change in age-related ways.” The above work provided a critical foundation and continuation for our understanding of participation during the latter years of the life cycle. Senior citizenship is distinct and important, but it looks different today than four or even two decades ago. To understand contemporary American politics, we need an updated and broader portrait of the new older adult participant.

THE NEW OLDER ADULT PARTICIPANT IN AMERICAN POLITICS

A new portrait of older participants is necessary because the latter part of the life cycle has expanded in breadth and quality. The same findings and assumptions from past research may not hold anymore for today’s seniors. Or they might, but we do not know, and yet we have better data to test old and new hypotheses. Nie, Verba, and Kim (1974) stand out as a significant work that we want to build on to clarify aged participation today. They write that old age “brings sociological withdrawal as individuals retire from active employment” and it can bring “physical infirmities and fatigue that lower the rate of political activity” (1974:333). Measuring slowdown as whether the person has retired from the active workforce, they find that older people who continue to work are more politically active than those who have retired. But, participation of older adults in the labor market looks a lot different today. The number of seniors continuing to work is on the rise (U.S. Census Bureau 2020), so there is good reason to think that political activity of all types may be greater for this group than in the past.

Nie, Verba, and Kim (1974) also highlighted the need to control for educational attainment to understand the effect of aging on political activity. As one of the main predictors of participation, they argue that an “apparent low rate of activity reflects a lower educational level, and not a falloff in activity in later life” (1974:339). However, recent cohorts of older adults are more educated than previous generations. Although the millennials have the highest rate of bachelor’s degrees, the rate of college graduation for baby boomers (about ages 56–74) is significantly higher than for the silent generation (about ages 75–92) (Bialik and Fry 2019). If the new senior citizen is more educated than seniors of the past, then educational attainment may not explain as much of the apparent decline, especially among the younger–older adults.

The young–old are a relatively new addition to the latter part of the life cycle. Neugarten (1974, 1975) writes extensively on the rise of the young–old, predicting their emergence as baby boomers aged and people lived longer. The young–old constitutes make up those about ages 55–75, who are relatively healthy, and are more likely to be women, have a living parent, and be better educated than the old–old (Neugarten 1974). Although age 55 is the year prior to receiving Medicare or social security and the official age of retirement, Neugarten (1974) argued that it is a meaningful lower limit for the young–old, as many people retired earlier. Additionally, many senior citizen discounts begin around this time. Verba and Nie (1972) show that peak involvement for a range actions happens around 65, followed by a slight fall off, providing evidence for the young–old as especially active, compared to other age groups. Neugarten predicts the young–old are “not likely to become the neglected, the isolated, or expendables of society,” but instead, will continue to grow in size and influence “with their relative good health, education, purchasing power, free time and political involvement” (1974:198). This is a prediction we can test with more recent data. And, perhaps the peak of influence has moved or become a plateau with seniors of today enjoying many years of significant activity.

Even the old–old, often those over the age of 75, may continue to be politically active, depending on their health, according to Neugarten (1974). This is a growing group with increasing options for support. Barnhart and Peñaloza (2013) study this group from the perspective of basic consumption activities, noting the growing group of Americans over 75 relying on assistance for activities such as grocery shopping, cleaning, money management, etc. They argue that life-cycle models have neglected to understand elderly consumers as being “socially embedded at the end of life,” so even as “loss of physiological abilities is inevitable in advanced age, loss of identity and social position are not” (Barnhart and Peñaloza 2013:1149). This has implications for our work as we consider political activities among the old–old. Even as physical health may decline the oldest of the old may continue participating with support from caregivers.

Do we know much about the old–old as political participants? They can be difficult to study for a number of reasons. First, many aging studies of the past often had to rely on survey data with insufficient numbers of elderly respondents (Jennings and Markus 1988). For instance, Jirovec and Erich (1995) consider the political activities of the very old, but their community-based survey resulted in only 86 respondents over the age of 85, with most being females. Their limited analysis indicates significant decline for all types of political participation among very old women. While they note some variation on this pattern across respondents’ past political participation, health status, and race, the sample size is too small for much intersectionality. Second, even surveys with larger samples of aged persons may not accurately portray this growing group. Dormagen and Michel (2018) show that survey respondents over 80 tend to be more educated, well-off, and report voting almost always. So even with larger samples, the data on the old–old skews toward those who are more affluent and well survived.

This is an important work that considers some of the most politically active members of society and when and how their activity may or may not decline during the latter part of the life cycle. As Neugarten (1974:188) remarks, there are times when “all age groups receive an appropriate share of goods and services and an appropriate place for their different world views” but other times when “relations among age groups become strained.” Our work explores these newer older Americans and their range of activities, as they seem more significant and influential in American politics as ever.

EXPECTATIONS AND DATA

We outline a few expectations for our data analysis. First, the ways we think about age have changed. The well-documented slowdown period (Nie, Verba, and Kim 1974) may be much later and be preceded by a ramp up among the young–old (Neugarten 1974). We expect to observe continued engagement and even higher participation with the young–old (55–75 years) group, compared to other age groups, over time. Contrary to the past work on the slowdown during the end of the life cycle, we predict a ramp up in political activity, around and past the age of 65.

Hypothesis 1: The young–old (55–75 years) will participate more than other age groups, across multiple types of political activities.

Overall, we may not see lower levels of political participation until much later in the life cycle. And, in fact, we may not see much decline at all for voting in particular, given that it is a relatively easy activity that older adults can continue for many years, especially with family/community support (Jennings and Markus 1988; Barnhart and Peñaloza 2013).

Hypothesis 2: Both young–old and old–old age groups will vote at similarly higher rates, compared to the younger age groups. We will not observe a significant difference in voting rates between the young–old and the old–old.

Of course, it will be important to account for any variation in income among the old–old sample, given its tendency to be overwhelmingly well-off.

We also want to probe this dip in participation toward the later years of life, even as it may come later in the life cycle than for past generations. Perhaps today's older generations do not lack education and civic skills compared to younger generations as much as in the past. Additionally, greater percentages of older adults continue to work well into their young-old years, and for some, into the old-old years (U.S. Census Bureau 2020). Older age context is a social context that matters for political cognition (Bramlett 2013). Older adults working around other older adults will likely benefit from greater opportunities for social interaction, ultimately leading to greater levels of political knowledge. Older adults who stay in the labor force may also stay more politically engaged. We hypothesize that

Hypothesis 3: Older adults, the young-old (55–75 years) and the old-old (older than the age of 75), will continue to vote at high rates, compared to other age groups, especially if they remain in the workforce.

However, there will be declines in activity toward the latest years, due to frailty, isolation, and/or mental deterioration eventually. While most recent older generations are more educated than older generations of the past, mental decline is still likely in older age and may have an impact on political knowledge (Schaie 2005; Lau and Redlawsk 2008). While older adults may continue to be politically active as they work, compared to others who retire earlier, that engagement will eventually decline. But, we argue that this shift will occur later in the life cycle than for past cohorts. We will not observe a dip in most forms of participation until people move into the old-old age group, when they are less physically, and perhaps mentally, able to participate. We hypothesize that

Hypothesis 4: Political activity will increase among the young-old cohorts (55–75 years) but then decline as the cohorts reach the latest years (older than the age of 75).

We test our hypotheses with data from the Cooperative Election Study (CES). As noted previously, one of the primary problems with studying the political behavior of older Americans¹ is that the data are scant. Privately funded surveys often have a total of 1000 respondents or less, which means the sample size for older adults may be only around 150. If the sample is then further divided by gender, race, or partisanship, then a good deal of statistical power is lost. However, the CES, which began in 2008, is the first publicly available survey that contains a large enough sample to maintain a reasonable level of statistical confidence, even when dividing groups of older Americans. For instance, the 2008 wave contained 32,800 total respondents. That increased to 64,600 in the 2016 wave and contained 11,612 respondents who were at least 65 years old.

With the much larger samples of older adults, CES data allow us to address some of the issues plagued by past work. Unlike many past studies on older adult political behavior, limited by small sample sizes, we break down the older population into groups of the young-old and old-old (Neugarten 1974, 1975; Neugarten and Neugarten 1986) and by different political activities (Verba et al. 1995; Burr, Caro, and Moorhead 2002).

RESULTS

Figure 1 visualizes the weighted age distribution of each wave of the CES conducted biannually beginning in 2008. In the samples from 2010 through 2016, the share of the sample that was 65 or older was between 17.4 and 18.2 percent, which is just slightly more than that reported by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2019. In 2018, it rose to 21.1 percent, but dropped slightly to 19.1 percent in 2020. The average number of respondents who fell into this category was 10,054, and in total, the six waves contained a total 70,376

¹ According to the Census Bureau, 16.4 percent of Americans are least 65 years old: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2019/demo/age-and-sex/2019-age-sex-composition.html>.

Total Sample Size for Those 65+

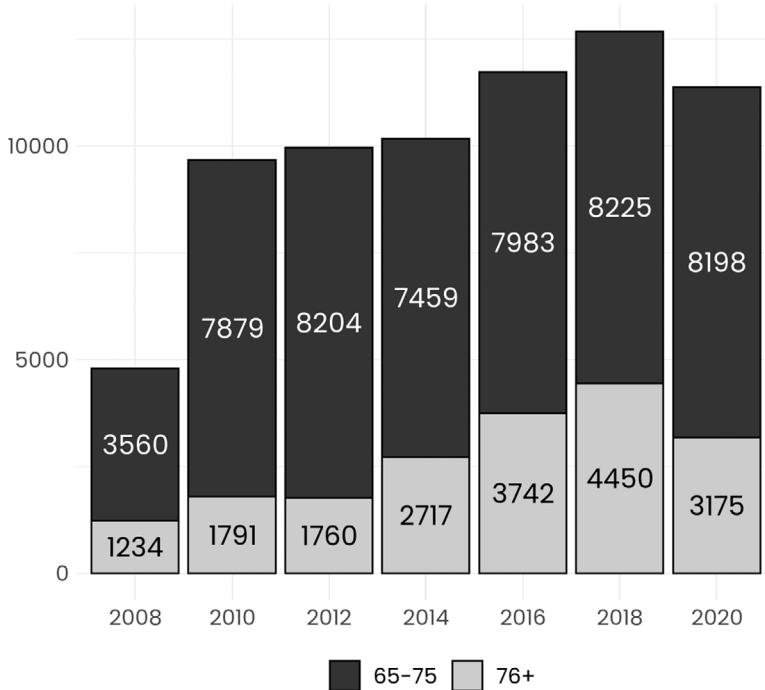


FIGURE 1 Total sample size for those 65 and older in the Cooperative Election Study (2008–2020)

respondents who were at least 65 years old. Additionally, and critical for our work, there were never less than 1234 respondents who were over 75 years old in any wave of the CES.

To begin, we wanted to understand if older Americans were more or less likely to engage in a specific political activity. While each wave of the CES contains a battery of questions about political activity, four questions were asked in a consistent way in each of the six waves from 2008 to 2020. Respondents were asked whether in the past year they engaged in the following activities: (1) attended a local political meeting; (2) put up a political sign; (3) donated money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization; (4) worked for a candidate or campaign; (5) were registered to vote; (6) voted in the primary election; and (7) voted in the general election. This battery was offered in a checkbox format so that respondents could indicate which activities they were engaged in by clicking next to each activity. Figure 2 breaks down the CES sample by year and into four broad age groups: those 18–35, 36–54, 55–75 (the young-old), and those 76 and older (the old-old). These results are displayed with 84 percent confidence intervals—although because of the sample size these are very small.²

One clear impression is that older Americans are more likely to engage in certain types of political activity. For instance, donating money to a political campaign or candidate is incredibly prevalent among this age group. And, the 76 and older group is much more likely to be doing this. In fact, in 2008 nearly half the sample of older respondents indicated that they had donated funds (49.2 percent). In most years, the share of older respondents who donated was at least double that of those between the ages of 18 and 35. There is a clearly positive relationship between age and likelihood of making a donation.

Displaying a political yard sign also seems to be popular among older Americans, although that popularity has seemed to wane in the last few years and the gap between age groups is much smaller here than it

²The most up-to-date guidance for visualizing uncertainty is to generate 84 percent confidence intervals, which is equivalent to a 95 percent *t*-test (Goldstein and Healy 1995; Knol et al. 2011; MacGregor-Fors and Payton 2013; Payton, Greenstone, and Schenker 2003).

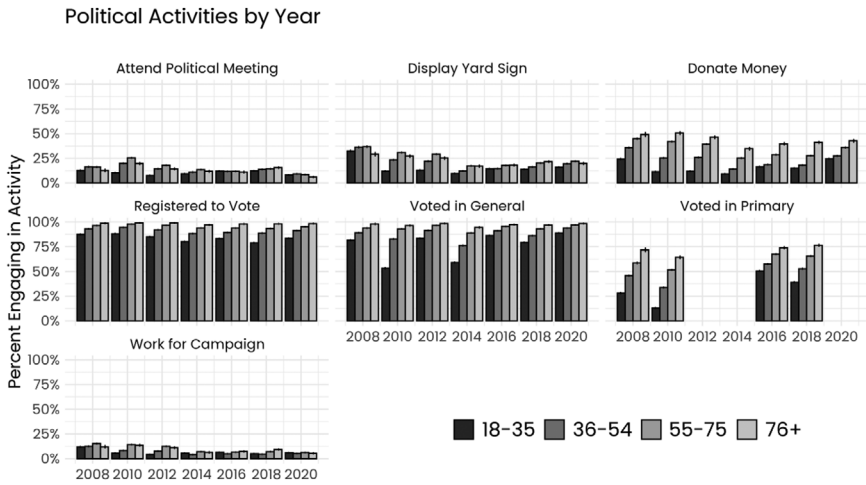


FIGURE 2 Percent engaging in seven different political activities broken down by age group

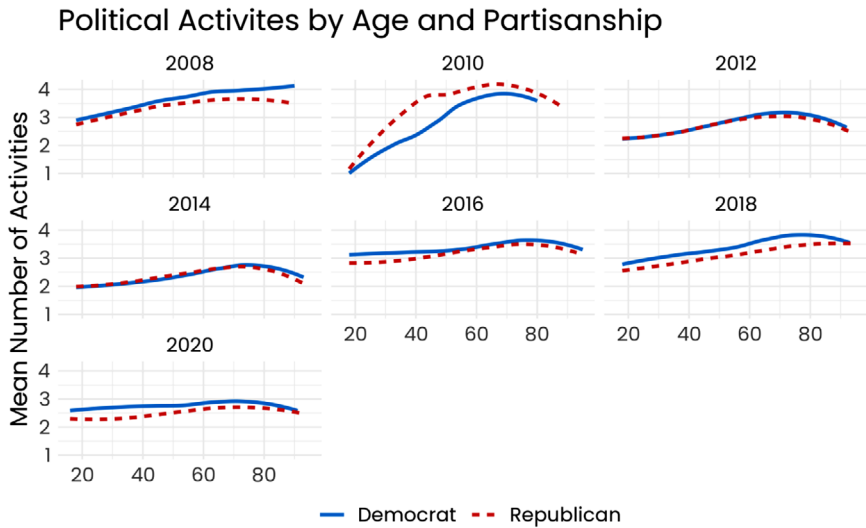


FIGURE 3 Mean number of political activities engaged in by age and partisanship from 2008 to 2020

is for donating money. A drop in this activity may be due to many of the oldest adults not having their own yard and living with family members or in assisted living facilities. Volunteering for a campaign is not a very popular political activity among any age group, and it does seem to decline moving into the oldest age group. In most years, someone who was older than the age of 75 was 2 or 3 percentage points less likely to volunteer than those between 55 and 75. Attending a meeting evinces much of the same pattern—a small but notable drop-off in participation among the oldest Americans.

In terms of registering and voting, the relationship is clear: the oldest Americans are more likely to participate than any other age group. Voter registration and participation rates for the oldest in the sample are incredibly high. For instance, voting in a general election was never lower than 94.5 percent and peaked at 98 percent in 2008. Voting in primaries reveals a stark difference by age group. In 2008, just 28.1 percent of respondents aged 18–35 said that they participated in the primary, yet it was 71.8 percent of the oldest

Americans. Clearly, many older adults, even those in their late 70s and among the old–old continue in these types of activities today.

Looked at broadly, Figure 2 provides evidence that older Americans choose how they try to influence the political system based on their unique concerns. While they are reluctant to engage in more labor-intensive activities such as working for campaigns and attending meetings, they seem very eager to make donations to political candidates and display yard signs supporting candidates, along with showing up on election day. This is indirect evidence that things like mobility may be a concern for those who are older than the age of 75.

However, a broader question looms: does overall political activity remain steady or drop across varies age groups, particularly as we compare the young–old with the old–old? To answer this question, we created an additive index of the political activities indicated in Figure 2.³ If an individual indicated they were engaged in all seven activities they would score a 7, and if they were completely politically inactive that would score a 0. The sample was also divided into Republicans and Democrats, since partisans may be mobilized differently, depending on the election year (Figure 3).⁴ The average number of political activities was calculated for each individual age in each wave of the CES. Then a LOESS line was specified as a way to visualize the trend while not being too sensitive to outlier ages in the data. Note that those who were older than the age of 85 were excluded, as the total sample size becomes too small to model at this age threshold.

First, it is crucial to note that Democrats are more politically active overall. There are some years in which this difference is not statistically significant such as 2012 and 2014, however generally, Democrats engage in about a 0.15–0.25 of an activity more at each level. Yet, there are some years in which there is no clear drop-off in political activity among the very old. This is especially evident in 2008 and 2016. However, in 2012 there was a clear decline in political activity, but that drop-off did not begin until the sample was at least 70 years old. That same pattern repeated in 2014. In 2020, there was a narrow gap among partisans with Democrats being more active at all age levels, although the difference disappears around the age 80. At this point, older Democrats are somewhat less active, while older Republicans do not see a decline in activity. Overall, there is a dip in activity present for some years, but only among the very old.

Having established that political participation is not necessarily lower among the oldest Americans, we turn now to understanding how certain factors may work differently among the oldest Americans. First, we will test the hypothesis that those who are still in the labor force are more politically active than those who move into retirement. To do this, four different logit regressions were specified using the data from the 2020 CES. The dependent variable was whether the respondent attended a political meeting, volunteered for a candidate/campaign, donated money to a candidate, or displayed a political yard sign. The interaction was age, and whether someone was employed or not.⁵ In addition, a number of control variables were included: political interest, education, income, as well as a dummy variable for race and a dummy variable for gender, and a dummy variable for Republican identification. Additionally, the sample was restricted to just those who were between the ages of 55 and 85. The lower bound was chosen because this is when some Americans begin to retire, while the upper bound was included as the sample size becomes problematically low above 85 years old.

There are clearly some differences in political engagement based on the type of activity that is being analyzed. For instance, the data indicate that there is a strong and positive relationship between age and donating to a political candidate or campaign. While just a quarter of those aged 55 make a donation, this rises to at least 45 percent among those who are 85 years old. In this case, those who are still working are more likely to donate than those who are not. However, that pattern is not necessarily repeated in

³ Creating an additive index for things such as political knowledge, interest in politics, and political activity is a common practice among those who study political behavior (Ulbig et al. 1999; Memoli 2011; Carlisle and Patton 2013).

⁴ Party identification shapes so much of American political behavior. Additionally, there is a significant literature that indicates partisans are especially activated when their party does not hold political power (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Green and Schwam-Baird 2016; Hansen 2016).

⁵ This was defined as respondents who indicated that they were working either full time or part time.

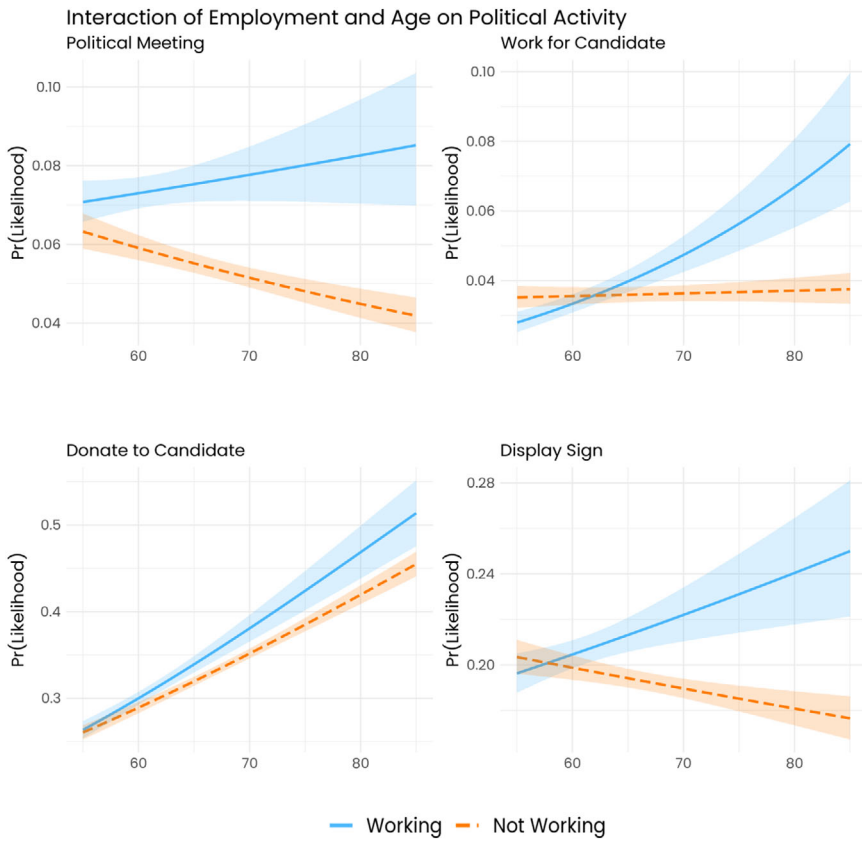


FIGURE 4 Interaction of employment and age on political activity

the other four scenarios. In terms of attending a political meeting and displaying a yard sign, this model indicates that both behaviors decrease as people move into their 70s and 80s among those who are no longer employed. However, that is not the case among those who are still members of the labor force. In the case of the relationship between attending a political meeting and age, there is no statistically significant relationship among those who are still working and their likelihood to attend. In terms of placing a yard sign, those who are employed and in their 80s are slightly more likely to place one in their yard than those in their 60s.

The final model's dependent variable was whether someone had volunteered for a candidate or a campaign. The results in the top right of Figure 4 indicate that there is no relationship between age and volunteerism among those who no longer work. Just less than 4 percent of those who were out of the labor force were working on a political campaign, regardless of if they were 55 or 85 years old. But, among those who are still working there is clear, positive relationship between age and volunteerism. Between 6 and 8 percent of 85 years old who were still working were estimated to be working for a campaign. It was just 4 percent of the same group that was 55 years old. Thus, this provides some evidence to indicate that those who are employed are never less likely to be politically active than those who are not among older Americans. In fact, there is some reason to believe that employment actually drives up political activity among the old-old members of American society. For those who postulate that working will crowd out other political activity, there is no evidence of that happening in these data.

Finally, while it is instructive to understand how age is related to political participation across several election cycles, it can obfuscate the fact that someone who turned 65 years in 2020 had experienced certain life events at different stage than someone who turned 65 years in 2008. Thus, comparing them both

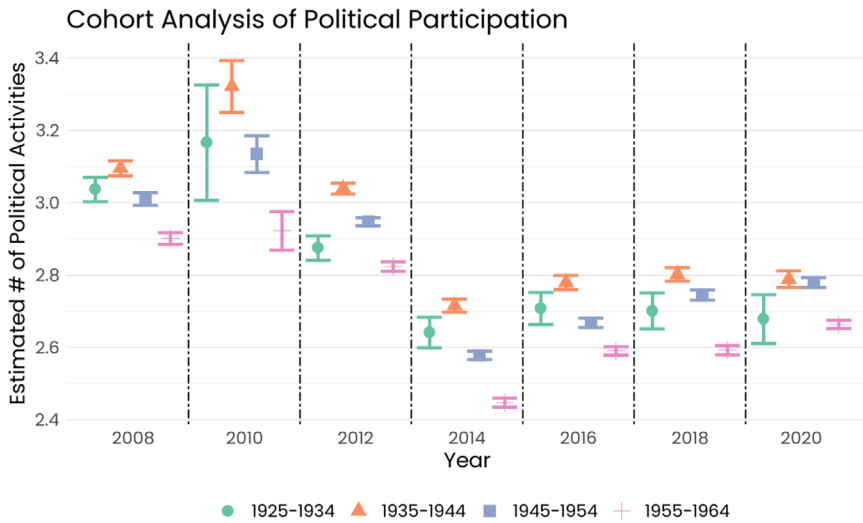


FIGURE 5 Cohort analysis of political activity from 2008 to 2020

by obscuring, some underlying mechanisms could make some birth cohorts have a higher likelihood of engaging in the political process than other birth cohorts. For instance, those born in the 1930s had a reasonable chance of being drafted to fight in World War II, while those born in the 1950s may have gotten called to fight in the conflict in Vietnam.

Thus, to understand if these age effects that were described in the prior analysis are cohort effects, the sample was divided into 10-year birth cohorts. These are as follows: those born between 1925 and 1934, those born between 1935 and 1944, those born between 1945 and 1954, and those born between 1955 and 1964. Thus, this tracks cohorts that were between the ages of 44 and 83 when the CES began, and they were between the ages of 56 and 95 during the last wave of the survey. A regression analysis was conducted with the number of political activities engaged in as the dependent variable. There were controls for education, income, race, gender, employment status, political interest, and Republican affiliation included in the model as well. The estimate number of political activities for each of the three cohorts in every election cycle between 2008 and 2020 is visualized in Figure 5.

The overall impression from visualizing these results relatively stable political participation has been, especially from 2014 through 2020. In the three election cycles from 2008 through 2012, there was a notably higher level of political activity among all birth cohorts. But overall activity dropped significantly between 2012 and 2014 at nearly half an activity on average. Then, a consistent pattern emerged in 2014 through 2020. Those born between 1935 and 1944 were the most politically active during this time period. While those in the youngest cohort (born between 1955 and 1964) were the least politically engaged.

But, in terms of any cohort effects, there is a clear pattern that emerges in the last four election cycles. Among the youngest cohort, there has been an appreciable increase in political activity as the average members of this cohort have moved from their mid-50s to early 60s. In 2014, there were an average 2.45 activities, which was up to 2.67 by 2020. This gradual increase is also evident among those born between 1945 and 1954. For those born between 1935 and 1944, there was also a small increase in political activities between 2014 and 2016, but it has since leveled off in both 2018 and 2020. In the oldest cohort, there has been no appreciable change in activities between 2014 and 2020. Thus, there does seem to be some evidence that individuals in their 60s and 70s do see a notable increase in political engagement that does not decline as they move into their 80s and beyond.

DISCUSSION

To summarize these findings, the young–old and the old–old of the past decade continue to participate in American politics at very high rates and across multiple types of activities. In some cases, as with voting and donating money to campaigns, the old–old were the most participatory age group—physical decline that often comes with agedness did not make much of an impact on these activities. Additionally, we observe only the familiar drop-off in participation with age among survey respondents in their 80s. Finally, the older Americans of today differ from older Americans in the past. Many are living longer and thus, staying in the workforce longer. These activities and social connections likely support the continued and vibrant political engagement of this new older adult participant well into the young–old years and even into the latest years for many.

We have presented a lot of data analysis here, so what does all of this mean? First, Americans are living longer and healthier lives into the 21st century, so our understanding of the life cycle and how it relates to political participation must change. While many scholars over the last several decades suggest that adjustments are needed for thinking about when old age begins and what it looks like for civic engagement, many studies do not use data with adequate samples to break the aged population (particularly those over 75) into the young–old or the old–old and by type of activity. While quite active across the board, clearly, older adults differ in their rates of participation across activities. The oldest Americans are often the most likely to vote, despite possible physical and cognitive difficulties that may come with the later years. With the old–old, if they are able, they likely vote.

Past work shows that it is good for older persons and cohorts to be involved individually and collectively, for society. Late in the 20th century, Hamerman (1999) wrote that “perhaps in the next decade, the ‘new gerontology’ [Rowe 1997] will become ‘preventative gerontology’ [Hazzard, 1997], with reduction of morbidity in very late life and great societal benefits.” Volunteering is associated with psychological health and contentment among older adults (Jirovec and Hyduk 1999). Burr, Caro, and Moorhead argue that civic participation is productive aging, arguing that it has social value, which “accrues not only to the individual but also the community and larger society” (2002:89).

Finally, we know that there have been and continue to be barriers to voting for many Americans across their life span. In future research projects, we hope to build upon the work of Peterson and Somit (1992) and Petriwskyj et al. (2017), further exploring the political behavior of older Americans of color.

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