Editorial

Beyond political socialization: New approaches to age, period, cohort analysis

Research on political socialization has accumulated a large number of insights about how voters acquire their political attitudes. Yet for all that, we know relatively little about when and why socialization experiences lead to generational differences in how citizens perceive and evaluate politics or behave in the political arena. Recognizing that societies are constantly changing, it is important to identify generational features of the electorate both to understand the present and to make predictions for the future. Ryder's (1965) seminal article on "the cohort as a concept in the study of social change" was a plea to think about the transformation of society in such a way by taking into account cohort changes and replacements. He famously noted that "society persists despite the mortality of its individual members, through processes of demographic metabolism and particularly the annual infusion of birth cohorts (…). Successive cohorts are differentiated by the changing content of formal education, by peer-group socialization, and by idiosyncratic historical experience" (Ryder, 1965: 843). Based on the importance to emphasizing cohorts he further added that "since cohorts are used to achieve structural transformation and since they manifest its consequences in characteristic ways, it is proposed that research be designed to capitalize on the congruence of social change and cohort identification" (Ryder, 1965: 843).

Motivated by Ryder's message, and drawing on a collection of six papers in *Electoral Studies* symposium "generational differences in electoral behavior", Wouter van der Brug and Sylvia Kritzinger not surprisingly conclude that "if one wants to understand political changes, one must not overlook generational differences" (2012: 248). However, despite the recognition accorded this point, studies of the make-up of political generations are still scarce. A major reason is the methodological challenge posed by questions involving generational turnover and replacement. Some of the papers in the recent *Electoral Studies* collection explicitly address these problems (Konzelmann et al., 2012; Bhatti and Hansen, 2012), while others acknowledge the limitations their study might have "in distinguishing life-cycle and generational effects" (Walczak et al., 2012: 282). The aim of the collection of papers in our follow-up symposium is to discuss diverse methodological approaches that address the problems that arise from such empirical analyses and provide solutions for overcoming them.[2]

This special issue hence brings together scholars in the field of political socialization and cohort analysis in an effort to explicate and advance various statistical approaches with reference to a variety of data. The wide availability of panel studies and repeated cross-section surveys, often covering several decades, as well as important methodological advances which have been made in demography, statistics, and sociology, have the potential to promote the importance of age, period, and cohort (APC) analyses and increase our confidence in their results. This paper symposium therefore focuses on new methods of identifying political generations and, more generally, of observing APC effects, which are applied to the area of political behavior and attitudes. The emphasis therefore is on the methods used in order to give political scientists interested in conducting theoretically interesting APC analyses and understanding of how such investigations can and should be conducted. The focus lies especially on cohort effects, as studies investigating these are still scarce in the political science literature or are often too tenuous to draw meaningful conclusions. To set the stage for the articles in this special issue, this introduction provides an overview of APC analysis in general.

1. Defining age, period, and cohort effects

Research into the question of why an individual holds specific attitudes or behaves in a certain way might hold three different – but highly-related – factors accountable: aging, enduring intercohort experiences, and time (Yang and Land, 2013). Firstly, we might attribute differences in

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[2] For an excellent overview of cohort analysis and methods used in to estimate age, period, and cohort effects, see also Yang and Land, 2013.

attitudes or behavior to age. Empirical studies often confirm that young and old citizens differ considerably in their political outlook. So-called *age effects* refer to changes that are associated with basic biological processes or progression through the life-cycle as social roles change with age or as the accumulation of social experience increases. These aging, or life-cycle effects, are usually indexed simply by an individual's age, though sometimes by a measure of their "place in the life-cycle" (e.g., parent of young children; retired person).[3] Secondly, observed attitudes or behavior might be thought of as a function of the current political, economic, or societal situation and idiosyncratic events that produce fluctuations over time and affect all age groups simultaneously. These *period effects* are usually measured by the current time *t*, for example, the year of a survey.

Thirdly, citizens might differ in their political attitudes because of different socialization experiences which manifest themselves in their belief systems. The resulting *cohort effects* or, as they are sometimes called, *generational effects* are defined as "enduring intercohort distinctions that are attributable to the common 'imprinting' of cohort members. With regard to attitudinal dependent variables, generational effects are often presumed to be the result of cohort members having shared similar socializing experiences, especially during late adolescence and early adulthood" (Markus, 1983: 718; cf. Mannheim, [1928] 1952; Ryder, 1965). This influential phase in an individual's life-cycle is often labeled the *formative* or *impressionable years*.

A *cohort* is very generally defined as a "number of individuals who have some characteristics in common" (Glenn, 2005: 2) or that "share experiences" (Fienberg and Mason, 1985: 51). Ryder (1965: 845) describes a cohort as "an aggregate of individuals" which has "a distinctive composition and character reflecting the circumstances of its unique origination and history." Cohorts are most often operationalized by people's birth years, but they are sometimes divided into equal time periods – such as five-year intervals – where the span of years for each cohort may be dictated by theoretical concerns or by data constraints. But cohorts may also be defined with reference to any of a number of variables (e.g., persons who came of age at the same time or individuals who finished high school in a particular year).[4]

The term *cohort analysis* is usually used to describe the systematic comparison of two or more cohorts in regard to one dependent variable or a set of related dependent variables (Glenn, 2005: 3). The studies presented in this special issue follow this logic. Fig. 1 illustrates a simple cohort analysis by plotting annual percentages opposing interracial marriage for four different birth cohorts from the United States between 1972 and 2002.[5] The idea of such an analysis is to explore whether these cohorts differ in their attitudes and, typically, whether the differences can be attributed to events or attitudes characteristic of the time at which each cohort matured. Here it would seem relatively straightforward. The oldest cohort – born before 1930 – was socialized in a highly racially divided country, whereas the cohort born after 1970 grew up after the turbulent times of the Civil Rights Movements of the 1950s and 1960s, when legal and quasi-legal racial discrimination was abolished.[6] The changing historical legacies during the formative years of these four cohorts are assumed to have shaped racial attitudes.

According to Fig. 1, the cohort born before 1930 consistently exhibits the highest anti-miscegenation attitudes, with as many as 50 percent opposing interracial marriage in the mid-1970s. Each cohort born and socialized later is less against interracial marriages.[7] This simple graph reveals three findings. Firstly, we observe a period effect, as all cohorts seem to become less and less racially intolerant over time. Secondly, the declining, more-or-less parallel lines of each cohort confirm that clear differences exist regarding racial attitudes depending on the time a respondent was born and hence socialized. Thirdly, we note what some people call *generational replacement*. That is, the thick solid line, which plots the overall trend in anti-racial statements, is not just declining at the same rate as, for example, the cohort born before 1930, but more sharply. Note that after the mid-1990s, the overall trend line is lower than the average attitude among the cohort born in 1930–1950. The explanation for this observation is simply that the weight of the 'older' cohorts in the overall population is decreasing as members of these two groups are fewer in number, as they are getting older and eventually dying. Similarly, the graph shows how new cohorts are entering the population, with the post-1970 cohort first included in the General Social Survey in 1989.

Overall, it is assumed that cohort analysis or APC analysis in general – as illustrated here – is a method for studying longitudinal patterns of change.

2. Age, period, and cohort analysis in political science

Research on age, period, and cohort effects is not new in political science. However, the attention is often on only one of the three. The interest in cohorts evolves mainly around the question of the 'making of a generation' side of it,

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[3] Biological processes and place in the life-cycle may not coincide; one could, for example, be the mother of an elementary school child in one's mid-20s or in one's mid-40s or beyond. In practice, however, it is rare that a sharp distinction is made between the two concepts.

[4] The terms 'cohort' and 'generation' are often used interchangeably, though *generations* are usually thought of as connected by some shared historical experience such as having grown up during the Great Depression (Elder, 1974). The boundaries of such events are often imprecise; nevertheless, for purposes of analysis, generations are often operationalized in terms of specific birth years.

[5] The question wording was as follows: "Do you think there should be laws against marriages between Negroes/Blacks/African-Americans and Whites? – Yes or No." Fig. 1 plots the percentages agreeing with this statement. The data was taken from the U.S. General Social Survey, which is available annually or bi-annually since 1972. The question was not included after 2002.

[6] Among the most important actions for abolishing state-approved discrimination in public life were ratification of the 24thAmendment to the U.S. Constitution (outlawing poll taxes) and passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

[7] The small and initially inconsistent difference between the 1951–1970 and the post-1970 cohorts is likely due to a declining cohort effect but may also be affected by small numbers of respondents when the youngest cohort first entered the analysis.