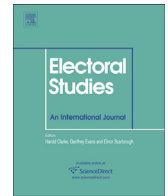




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The hierarchies of age-period-cohort research: Political context and the development of generational turnout patterns

Kaat Smets^a, Anja Neundorff^{b,*}^a University of Siena, Italy^b University of Nottingham, Nottingham, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Voters that come of age at roughly the same time share common influences because of the specific political context during their formative years. We can therefore assume the errors in a model explaining their political behavior to be dependent. Recent advances in social statistical analysis of age-period-cohort (APC) effects propose the use of hierarchical modeling in combination with repeated cross-sectional survey design to solve this problem. We apply these random-intercept models to assess the impact of the political context on the development of generational turnout patterns, assuming that cohorts that grew up in a highly-politicized context have a higher propensity to turnout to vote despite of any age or period effects.

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1. Introduction

The question of how to disentangle age, period and cohort (APC) effects is the central theme of cohort analysis that has challenged researchers for decades (Mason et al., 1973; Riley, 1973; Glenn, 1976, 2005). In most instances, the goal of APC research is to identify the independent effects of aging, enduring intracohort experiences, or time – that is, to isolate one out of three effects while controlling for the other two. It is, however, impossible to empirically separate age effects from period and cohort effects (and vice versa) with traditional statistical methods because the three are exact linear functions of each other.

Three decades ago Markus (1983, 720) rightfully noted that the variables in the APC model are often of little substantive interest in their own right. More often, age, birth date and period of observation are simply used as surrogates for unspecified and unmeasured variables of ultimate theoretical concern. Recent advances in the sociological statistical literature put forward by Yang and her colleagues (Yang,

2008; Yang and Land, 2006, 2008) attempt to overcome this limitation. Yang et al. propose to think of repeated cross-sectional data as having a hierarchical structure whereby individuals sharing the same context are nested in cohorts and periods. While age is thought of as a fixed attribute, period and cohort effects are considered higher-level variables that are allowed to vary randomly. The random effects for periods and cohorts are used to estimate variance in the dependent variable across these two dimensions isolated from any effects of age. The use of hierarchical modeling in combination with repeated cross-sectional surveys as such avoids the APC identification problem as linear fixed effects are estimated for one out of three components only (Harding, 2009, 1450). Implementing this method, we thus leave the debate of identification behind us and focus on the issue of actually testing whether substantively interesting factors can account for any observed cohort heterogeneity.¹

¹ Of course, we do not dispute that the identification strategy is central in any APC analysis. The models presented below are identified by using these cross-classified random effects for cohort and period, which breaks the linearity of the APC model. Furthermore, the grouping of cohorts into four-year elections-intervals forces grouped birth-years to have identical effects, which is another (more traditional) way to deal with the identification problem in APC-models (Fienberg and Mason, 1979; Mason et al., 1973).

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: smets@unisi.it (K. Smets), anja.neundorff@nottingham.ac.uk (A. Neundorff).

In this paper, we apply these random intercept models in a political science setting to assess the extent to which the political context influences the development of generational turnout patterns. Rooted in the political socialization and political learning literature, we assume that citizens who came of age in a highly-politicized context have a higher propensity of establishing a habit of turning out to vote in spite of any age or period effects. More specifically, we look into the socializing effects of general turnout levels, the closeness of elections, polarization, and presidential approval rates using pooled cross-sectional surveys conducted by the US General Social Survey between 1972 and 2010. Statistical developments now allow shifting focus to the more substantial question of identifying factors that can explain intercohort heterogeneity rather than attempting to juggle the intricacies of the identification problem. Applying the hierarchical modeling framework to a much researched topic, we are able to address the robustness of previous findings that were obtained with methods that were less capable of working around the APC identification problem. Moreover, we add to the literature by addressing the long-standing question of how long cohorts need to be exposed to a context before any learning effects are set in place.

Our findings show that individual level characteristics explain the largest share of the variance in generational turnout levels. In the spirit of the learning approach to political behavior, the context of the first election hardly plays a role in the turnout patterns of cohorts. More specifically, we find that it takes the collective experiences of at least two elections to form a pattern of turnout or abstention among citizens who came of age during the same period.

2. Empirical example: political socialization and turnout

The aim of the methodological approach discussed in this paper is to single out factors that explain cohort differences in a variable of interest. In order to illustrate this method, we look at generational variation in voter turnout. To address this phenomenon, we first need to discuss where the propensity to participate in elections comes from. The impressionable or formative years between childhood and adulthood are generally considered a key period during which citizens form the basis of political attitudes and behaviors see e.g., [Strate et al., 1989](#); [Highton and Wolfinger, 2001](#); [Plutzer, 2002](#); [Franklin, 2004](#). Young citizens, it is believed, are not yet set in their political ways and are, subsequently, more easily influenced by external factors ([Alwin and Krosnick, 1991](#); [Flanagan and Sherod, 1998](#); [Sears and Levy, 2003](#)).

Already in the 1950s [Hyman \(1959, 25\)](#) drew attention to the necessity of studying processes of early political socialization, which he defined as an individuals learning of social patterns corresponding to his societal position as mediated through various agencies of society. Such agencies can be diverse: family, peers, school, mass media, and – as is the focus of our study – even the political context. The mechanism through which socialization affects political attitudes and behavior is not just one of

mobilization. The socialization model also assumes that citizens step-by-step learn to participate in politics.

In the political learning approach to political behavior it is argued that citizens learn the habit of either voting or non-voting in the early stages of their adult life, and that past behavior predicts present behavior ([Green and Shachar, 2000](#); [Kanazawa, 2000](#); [Bendor et al., 2003](#); [Gerber et al., 2003](#); [Aldrich et al., 2011](#)). [Plutzer \(2002, 44\)](#) explains the political learning perspective with the example of someone aged forty with a higher than average income. Based on this information we would expect this man or woman to have an above average level of political participation. What if a couple of years later the person loses his or her job and has to take on one that earns an average wage? Thinking of voting as a habit, a change in income is not likely to influence levels of political participation even though the possibility of disruptions in the habit of voting can never be completely be excluded ([Plutzer, 2002](#); [Strate et al., 1989](#)).

The large impact of past turnout on current turnout decisions as observed in the literature may be brought forward by various mechanisms see e.g. [Cutts et al., 2009](#); [Aldrich et al., 2011](#); [Dinas, 2012](#) for overviews. First, turnout is caused by a set of factors such as political interest or partisanship that are stable over the life span ([Neundorff et al., 2009](#)). These factors may therefore influence the starting level of political participation (i.e., whether someone will vote at his or her first opportunity) but not so much the subsequent levels of political participation over the life span ([Plutzer, 2002](#)). Moreover, the act of voting is self-reinforcing as it increases positive attitudes towards voting and alters ones self-image to the extent that voting contributes to that image. Third, once voters have been to the polls they face lower information barriers and can make use of their hands-on experience and knowledge of the political system during subsequent elections.

Despite a fair amount of empirical evidence of the existence of a habitual voting effect, the literature is not yet set on the cause of repeated behavior. In his contribution on turnout in established democracies and the learning effect of voting, [Franklin](#) argues that the way in which young voters react to the character of an election is crucial to this incoming cohorts future turnout levels ([Franklin, 2004, 65](#)). Short-term characteristics of elections influence younger citizens turnout decisions but have much less impact on the decisions of older voters who have already established a habit of voting or abstaining ([Franklin, 2004, 80](#)). Electoral competition is especially important in this respect. High stake elections tend to attract more voters than elections where the outcome already is a foregone conclusion. We measure the saliency of elections through closeness of the race, margin of the victory, party polarization, general turnout levels and presidential approval rates. The mechanisms through which these contextual variables are linked with individual level turnout are discussed in detail below.

One may ask how much time it takes to become a habitual voter. [Franklin \(2004\)](#) and [Franklin et al. \(2004\)](#) suggest that the answer to this question can be found in the literature on party choice. [Butler and Stokes \(1974\)](#) found that after 13 years (i.e., three national elections) peoples likelihood to vote for a certain party stabilizes. The

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