

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: THE UNIQUE POLITICAL ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS OF INDIVIDUALS IN AGED COMMUNITIES

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This dissertation examines the political attitudes and behaviors of individuals residing in communities with large proportions of older adults. These types of locations are growing in number in the United States as the Baby Boomer Generation arrives at retirement age. Many scholars and journalists rely on theories of ‘senior power’ and predict that the places with large numbers of senior citizens should be especially politically powerful. However, many studies have provided little evidence to support these claims. I explore the old questions with updated data, methods and approaches—theorizing that older adults living among their elderly peers will, in fact, exhibit unique levels of political knowledge, efficacy, and participation as well as hold distinct attitudes for safety net issues. Using large-scale surveys and multilevel modeling techniques, I find that older adults residing in aged communities display higher levels of political knowledge than their elderly peers living in places without the same aged context. However, they are less politically efficacious and somewhat

less likely to vote. Older adults living among their peers are also more likely to support social welfare programs, controlling for party identification. I also examine the contextual effect of the aged context for younger residents. In particular, I find that young people are also quite supportive of the safety net policies, which provide assistance for their elder neighbors. Because of this support from the younger generation, older adults in aged communities may rarely, if ever, face threats to their livelihood, driving them into political action. Taken together, the results from this dissertation show that older adults living amongst their peers are certainly equipped for intense political engagement or senior power—but they choose political retreatism rather than activism.

THE UNIQUE POLITICAL ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS OF INDIVIDUALS
IN AGED COMMUNITIES

By

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my husband, Will. Your unwavering support meant so much.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jim Gimpel for his guidance and feedback for every draft and idea associated with this project. I am also grateful for many helpful comments from Mike Hanmer, Frances Lee, Irwin Morris, and Joan Kahn. Finally, I also want to thank Heather Creek and Stephen Yoder, my fellow graduate students who provided support from the very beginning and throughout this project.

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Chapter 1: Age Politicization in Aged Communities

Introduction

People growing up and living in different places experience life differently. A person living in New York City encounters unique events when compared with another spending their days in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Even places geographically close, for example, Washington, D.C. and Harrisonburg, Virginia, offer very different lifestyles for residents. Places within states can also be very dissimilar. My husband and I both grew up in the state of Georgia, but he spent his formative years in rural, middle Georgia, while I grew up in a suburb increasingly wrapped in the metropolitan sprawl of Atlanta. We experienced politics differently on account of the distinctive characteristics of our hometowns.

Differing contexts produce different socialization processes and thus varying political attitudes and behaviors (Gimpel, Lay, and Schuknecht 2003). Communities of all shapes and sizes socialize young (and older) citizens into the political attitudes and behaviors that influence local and national politics, for instance, influencing who is mobilized, who participates, who is elected, and what becomes law. Older residents they consider to be the proper ways to think and behave in political society. However, while young adulthood is certainly the pivotal period of political socialization, political learning also occurs throughout the lifespan (Beck and Jennings 1982; Niemi and Hepburn 1995).

This project builds on the body of work that seeks to understand how different social environments produce different political attitudes and behaviors by studying one understudied but increasingly important context, one in which elderly citizens predominate in the local population, what I call the *aged context*.¹ Since communities differ in their age distributions, there will be social and political implications for the residents as the mix of younger and older people varies.

The aged context is particularly relevant for American politics and policymaking in the 21st Century given the growing old-age population and now ongoing retirement of the Baby Boomer Generation (Binstock 2010; Campbell 2003a; Cutler 1977; Schulz and Binstock 2008; Weaver 1976).² From 2000 to 2010, the population of people aged 45 and over grew 18 times the rate for younger people, indicating that the population of people aged 65 and older will continue to swell into the 2010s (Frey 2011). Aging communities are growing in size. Places with overwhelming numbers of politically active senior citizens are not just located in Florida and Arizona, but are increasingly found all over the map as many retirees decide to age in place (Frey 2011; Wolf 2001).

¹ In this dissertation, I will often use the terms age context, age distribution, and age structure. Many times they mean the same thing and can be used interchangeably.

² However, aged context can and should certainly be studied globally, although limited time and resources prevent me from widening my scope for this particular project. Even though my work focuses on one country, I expect that the findings will be meaningful and perhaps generalizable to aging populations outside the United States (Fishman 2010).

Figure 1.1 displays the United States Census 2009 population estimates by age categories, and clearly shows the large numbers of Americans either just beginning or on the verge of older adulthood.

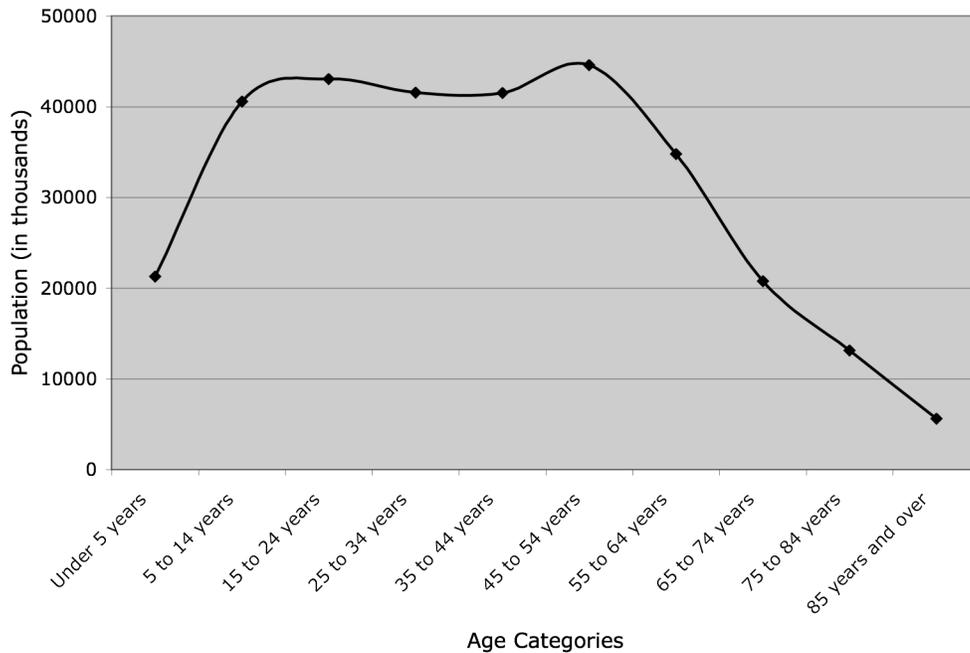


Figure 1.1 – United States Population by Age, U.S. Census 2009 Population Estimates

For a look at places with aged contexts, Figures 1.2 and 1.3 plot population estimates for two such locations--Sumter County, Florida and McIntosh County, North Dakota. The percentages of older adults and retirees are much larger relative to the total population in these locales. The number of older adults does not matter so much as the proportion of senior citizens compared with the total local population when identifying aged contexts.

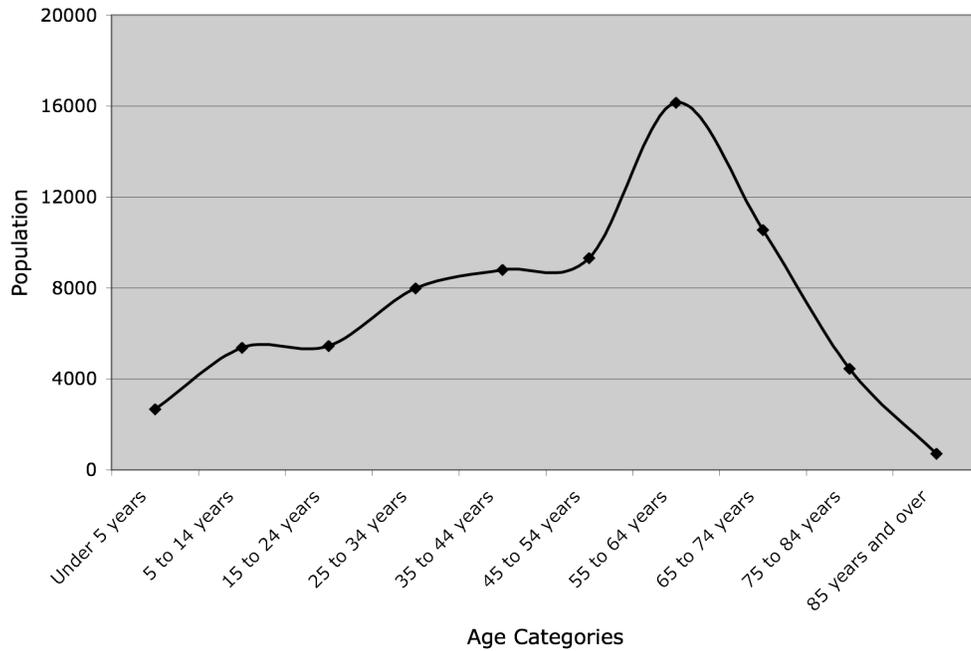


Figure 1.2 – Sumter County, Florida Population by Age, U.S. Census 2005-2009 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

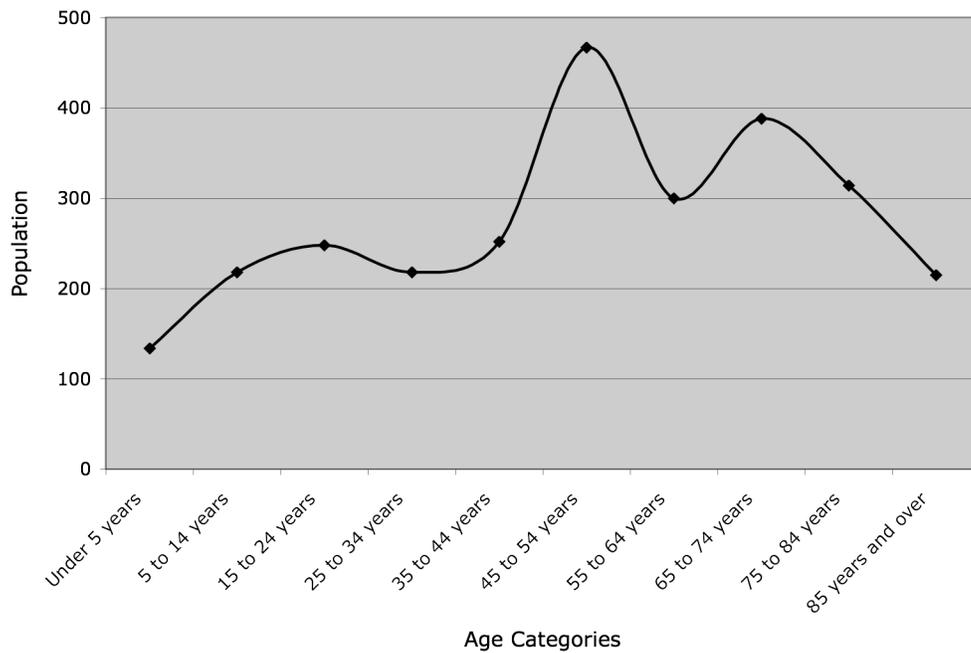


Figure 1.3 – McIntosh County, North Dakota Population by Age, U.S. Census 2005-2009 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

For comparison, Figures 1.4 and 1.5 show the population estimates for two counties (Loudoun County, Virginia and Eagle County, Colorado) on the other end of the spectrum without the aged context and with small percentages of older adults. These places are growing fast and attracting large numbers of younger adults.

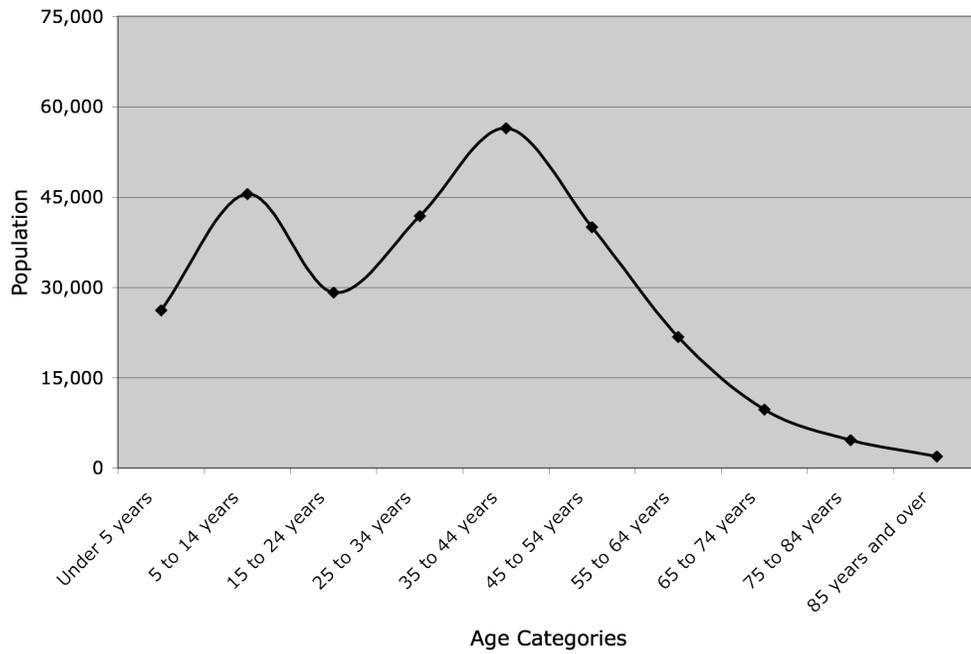


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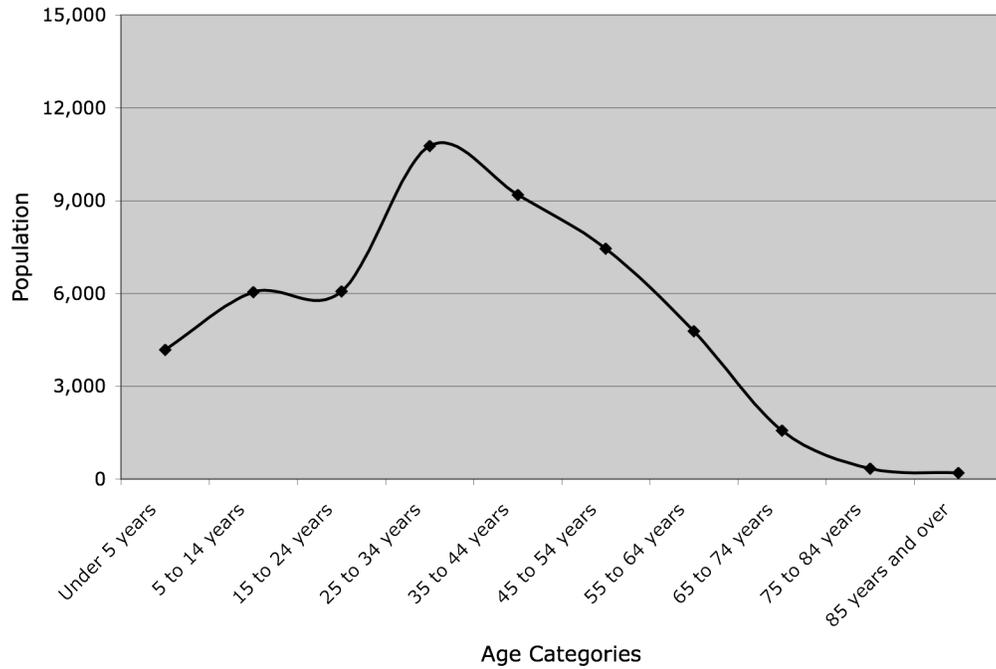


Figure 1.5 – Eagle County, Colorado Population by Age, U.S. Census 2005-2009 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Figures 1.6 and 1.7 provide another comparison, displaying the population estimates by age for counties (Jefferson County, Texas and Spokane County, Washington) with more average numbers of older adults. These pictures resemble the curve plotted in Figure 1 with the U.S. population estimates.

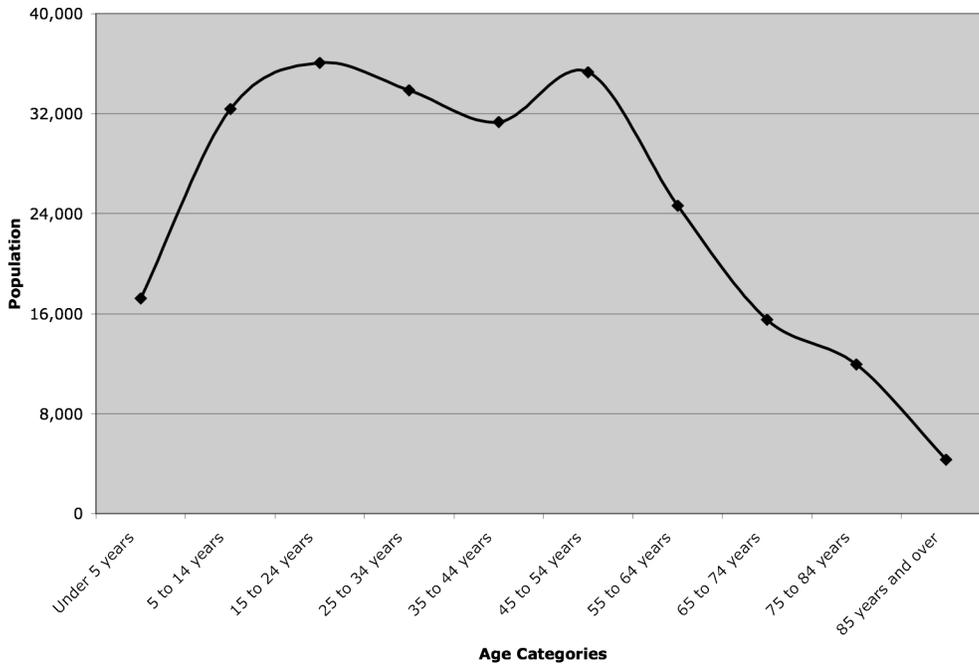


Figure 1.6 – Jefferson County, Texas Population by Age, U.S. Census 2005-2009 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

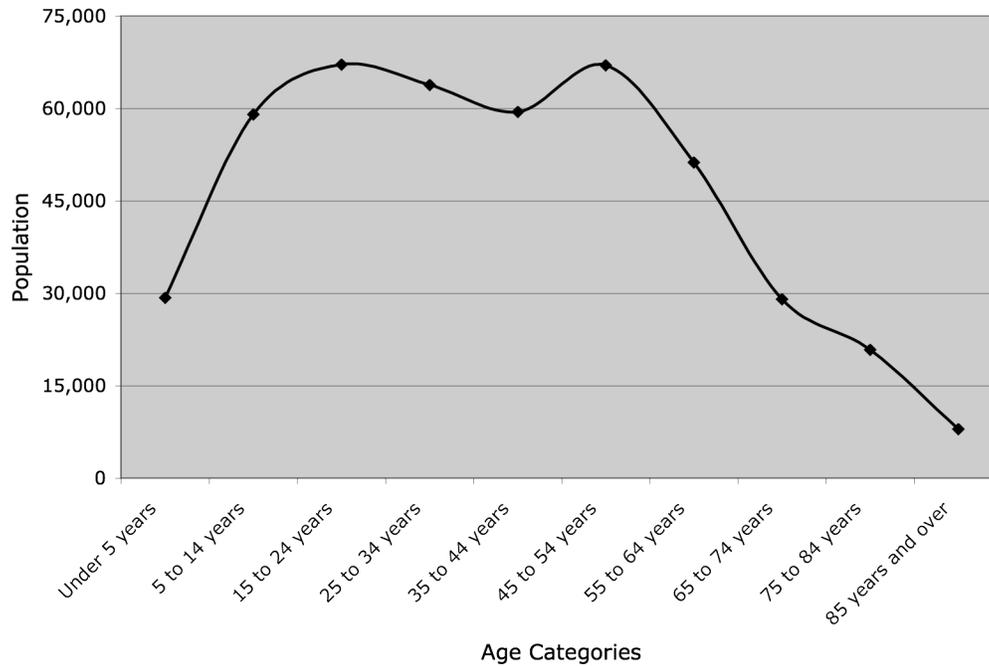


Figure 1.7 – Spokane County, Washington Population by Age, U.S. Census 2005-2009 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

While not everyone agrees that context counts for political behavior (King 1996), many studies have shown that it cannot be ignored.³ Individual factors certainly play a large part in predicting political behaviors and attitudes, but this dissertation follows the work of other contextual studies in showing that context and environment also matter. Places with highly skewed age distributions, like the counties of Figures 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, and 1.5, warrant attention because the context of a homogeneous community has been shown over and over to influence the political attitudes and behaviors of residents (Books and Prysby 1991; Brown 1988; Burbank 1995; Huckfeldt and John Sprague 1995; Huckfeldt 1986; Key 1949; W. E. Miller 1956).

The idea that social context matters for political behavior and attitudes has a long tradition in the social sciences (Baybeck and McClurg 2005; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Books and Prysby 1991; Burbank 1995; Key 1949; Putnam 2001, 2001). While context may be defined in many ways, it broadly refers to a person's local environment, social setting and/or neighborhood—places where individuals live out their daily lives. Neighborhood influences are politically consequential for individual residents as well as for the “political vitality of groups in the political process” (Huckfeldt 1986, 11). Context constrains the extent of social interaction. Many others have operationalized local population composition as

³ Schwanen and Kwan (2008) provide an account of why context still matters given a contemporary consensus arguing that newer information and communication technologies less the importance of context.

context, looking at the effect of dominant and non-dominant groups on people's political behaviors and attitudes.

The racial composition of communities influences individual residents' affinity for (or antagonism toward) members of other races (Giles and Buckner 1993; Giles and Hertz 1994; Key 1949; Kohfeld and Sprague 1995; Marschall and Stolle 2004; Taylor 1998). Communities with greater numbers of gay and lesbian residents increase the likelihood of warmer attitudes toward this group among neighborhood residents (Overby and Barth 2002). The social context influences the opportunities for contact, which influence attitudes. In addition, neighborhood relative educational composition (Tenn 2005) and the local age distribution (Gimpel, Morris, and Armstrong 2004) affect voting behaviors of residents. Finally, a community's composition of young people may alter the likelihood of political activity (conventional and extreme) among young residents (Hart et al. 2004). This past work leads to the expectation that an aged context will also influence residents of other ages—not just older adults.

The community social composition affects the ways people think about and participate in politics through 1) social interaction and 2) the available cognitive content (Burbank 1995; Huckfeldt 1986). First, people choose their friends and the people with whom they discuss politics, but distance also constrains these choices to those who are close by.⁴ Opportunities for contact and discussion partners are context

⁴ In discussions of context effects, selection problems may always be valid concerns. After all, people often have the flexibility to choose where they live and with whom they will be friends. Of course, individual characteristics play a very large role in predicting political behavior. But, contextual factors may also help to explain political

dependent (Huckfeldt and John Sprague 1995). Where older adults are concentrated, older people are more likely to have contact with people their own age, and younger people cannot escape the coercive information flow from the numerically dominant population.

Second, information bias in community heightens residents' sensitivity to relevant cues (Burbank 1995)—for this project, cues relevant to aging and life cycle stages. This means that residents experience a more casual form of social interaction merely by living among and making comparisons and associations with certain easily observed groups in relation to their own identities (Langton and Rapoport 1975).

Both of these mechanisms, social interaction and the cognitive content of the community, likely contribute to *age politicization*. Age politicization occurs when age (old age for this project) becomes a factor or guide for people when expressing political attitudes and/or participating in politics. The likelihood of age politicization will naturally be greater for more age homogeneous communities with large percentages of older adults. However, theories of senior power and group consciousness suggest a more complex account for the aged context. Age politicization may look differently for young residents living among older populations compared with older residents and may be observed for only *some* political attitudes and behaviors but not others.

Young people and the oldest adults in the aged locations will most likely have less social interaction with the large numbers of older adults (aged 65 to 74) due to a

behavior. Huckfeldt (1986, 83) responds to selection concerns by making concessions to both sides of the argument stating that both individual and contextual factors “produce a complex web of choices and reactions rooted in the personality of the actor, and in the characteristics of others in the actor’s environment.”

generation gap of interests for the young and increasing physical challenges for the oldest residents (aged 75 and over). For these reasons, any context effects observed for these groups might be limited to those influenced by the cognitive content of the community. In particular, I expect that their reported political attitudes will be influenced by the aged context rather than their political behavior because of their lack of opportunity for direct and personal persuasion by members of the overwhelming aged population.

Theories of Senior Influence

The *senior power model* considers the occurrence of and great potential to have large numbers of older adults in society coming together and influencing local and national politics. The media often portray senior power as the older generation dominating the others, creating the conditions for generational conflict. The Merchants of Doom, as dubbed by Schulz and Binstock (2008, 20) and including journalists and some scholars, will mobilize and bring the aging Baby Boomers to action by telling them they must carry the burden of inevitable cutbacks in pensions, health care, and retirement years. Young adults may worry that the growing older adult population will hinder spending for education and the welfare of young families (Plutzer and M. B. Berkman 2005; Ponza et al. 1988; Rosenbaum and Button 1989).

Senior power (also referred to as gray power) remains relevant, considered and studied for the past four decades and up to the present (Binstock 2010; Cutler, Pierce, and Steckenrider 1984; Cutler 1977; Hudson 1978, 1987, 1988, 2010; Rosenbaum and Button 1989). Some qualify the model showing that older adults may

exercise their collective power only when properly motivated. This motivation often occurs through some sort of threat to their welfare (Andel and Liebig 2002; W. A. Anderson and N. D. Anderson 1978; Streib, Folts, and La Greca 1985) often coupled with fear of losing benefits from government programs like Medicare and/or Social Security (Campbell 2002, 2003a, 2003b; Jennings and Markus 1988). Senior citizens often have a power advantage just by being more tuned into politics in general and particularly aware of politics involving the various benefit programs they use (Jennings and Markus 1988). However, these findings of senior power have been quite limited in number and scope.

Yet even when qualified, many social scientists describe the senior power model as too simplistic for such a diverse American older adult population, no matter how large their share of the electorate (Binstock 2010; Ponza et al. 1988; Schulz and Binstock 2008; Street 1997). A criticism of the senior power model is that it fails to account for many unrealized beneficial senior policies despite high levels of individual efficacy and participation (Andel and Liebig 2002; Binstock 1997, 2010; Jennings and Markus 1988; Jirovec and Erich 1992; Liebig 1992; Rosenbaum and Button 1989; Strate et al. 1989).

Even modest findings of increased morale for older adults depend upon their aging environment. It matters whether older adults *choose* to live in a community of peers. Ward et al. (1985) interview seniors in urban neighborhoods with concentrations of older adults and find decreased morale for these individuals. These urban elderly communities form because older adults require access to age-related services and not because of any particular preference for living among peers.

Sherman et al. (1985) find no relationship between old-age concentrated communities and political action. These findings warn against a simplistic outlook on the influence of seniors residing in aging communities.

This other work suggests a model of *senior powerlessness*. Some actually show that older group identification relates to *decreased* feelings of political power and political participation. Older survey respondents who identify with older adults are actually less politically involved than people not identifying themselves as elderly (A. H. Miller, P. Gurin, and G. Gurin 1980). These seniors may simply misperceive their potential influence or lack the socioeconomic resources to be more actively engaged (A. H. Miller, P. Gurin, and G. Gurin 1980). Additionally, people have been found to retain less political knowledge and show lower levels of political cognition as they reach their mid-60s (Lau and Redlawsk 2008). Seniors living amongst others their age may become more aware of this effect, creating a general sense or context of political withdrawal and inefficacy in the community.

Residents of retirement communities also devote much of their time to leisure and rarely become involved in politics, again, only when they feel directly threatened (Rosenbaum and Button 1989; Streib and Metsch 2002). In response to the supposed but unobserved senior power, Longino et al. (1980) described the “aged subculture” of retirement communities as retreatist in nature, rather than activist. It may be that many older adults do not feel particularly threatened or may have little faith that the political system will offer solutions.

These two very different theories of senior influence present seemingly opposing expectations of older adult political attitudes and behaviors. One theory of

senior influence promotes the idea of a potent and even unstoppable tide of older adult political action determined to get their pet policies enacted against all opposition. Another paints a picture of a withdrawn and despondent senior citizenry with no faith that political action will make a bit of difference. While journalists are quicker to take the more exciting and newsworthy side of senior power, most scholars agree that older adults probably fall somewhere between the two extremes, and perhaps act as a powerful group in one situation and powerless in another. In addition, the two theories of senior power may not be completely incompatible in as much as they speak to different attitudes and behaviors of older adults. The senior power model mostly involves activity while the senior powerlessness research refers to attitudes and perceptions of power. For these reasons, it is likely that an aged context will not influence attitudes and behaviors to the same extent or even in the same way.

In this dissertation, I argue that the older adults' actual and perceived power is mediated by their age context. Locations with high concentrations of older adults encourage unique political attitudes and behaviors that may equip older adults for senior power but for other reasons, may deflect that power from being exercised. My aim is to show how seniors with very similar individual characteristics may think and act differently depending on the age distribution of the places where they live. Each chapter in the dissertation will help to assess whether large proportions of older adults express political attitudes and exhibit behaviors that conform more toward the senior power notion or toward the powerlessness notion and in what circumstances each theory's predictions might hold.

Group Consciousness and the Aged

Coming together with like-minded people to establish a political voice and make a political impact is a familiar occurrence in American democracy. In the social sciences, when people identify with, think and act on behalf of a well-defined group, we say they possess *group consciousness*. Group consciousness may not necessarily always result in political power but it is a precursor to group politics; when people identify with others who have similar interests and coalesce to become a political community (Conover 1984).

Group consciousness can be especially important as an antecedent to advancing the interests of vulnerable or underrepresented groups that might otherwise be overlooked by society and underrepresented in public office, such as ethnic and racial minorities, the poor, and, yes many of the elderly (Campbell 2002; Masuoka 2006; A. H. Miller, P. Gurin, and G. Gurin 1980; Shingles 1981; Stokes 2003). On the other hand, threats to power may also activate group consciousness for powerful groups in society with the goal of maintaining the position of influence (A. H. Miller et al. 1981) Whether coming from a position of power or powerlessness, group identities and consciousness play a crucial role in shaping the way people view politics.

For this dissertation work, I am interested in the group consciousness of older adults in the United States—and especially those who live amongst their peers. Studying places with varying older adult concentrations is a good way to discover differences in the extent of group consciousness and better understand the political

attitudes and actions of older adults and the (Cagney 2006; Longino, McClelland, and Peterson 1980; Rose 1965; Sherman, Ward, and Lagory 1985; Subramanian et al. 2006; Ward, LaGory, and Sherman 1985).

With the rapidly growing elderly population, many have questioned whether American seniors are becoming more group conscious, wondering about their potential political power as a group. A common finding for earlier work was the apparent absence of any special political consciousness among older adults for any issue area other than health policy (Weaver 1976). With little evidence of an aged group consciousness, these same scholars also discussed the *potential* for an emerging consciousness with projections of a booming older adult population into the new century (Ragan and Dowd 1974; Rose 1965; Weaver 1976).

Rhodebeck (1993) discusses some of the possible reasons for not observing a broader group consciousness among older adults in the U.S later in the 20th Century. She identifies four explanations undermining senior solidarity. First, many of the issues high on the agenda were very familiar to Americans. Older adults, having lived full political lives, formed well-considered positions on these issues long ago. Their attitudes on similar issues that might arise would therefore remain stable, impervious to any contextual effects.

Second and third, older adults need to feel threatened to coalesce, but old age issues and services were not targets of budget cuts during the 1980s and 1990s. Finally, older adults might not identify first and foremost as elderly. They are a diverse group (Neugarten 1974, 1982; Seccombe and Ishii-Kuntz 1991), identifying first, for instance, as southerners or a Democrats or a grandparents. While these

explanations seem just as relevant for seniors of the 21st Century, Rhodebeck (1993) *also* argued that the circumstances for older Americans were changing and predicted increased cohesion for future generations of seniors.

One such change is the emergence of retirement communities encouraging “interactions that foster an awareness of common political interests” (Rhodebeck 1993, 343). The rising percentage of older adults across the country may not be enough, by itself, to generate age politicization. However, rising numbers of aging *communities*, in which older adults are concentrated, may produce the desired results with an influential older adult context. A limited amount of work examining the influence of an aged community has been published and can certainly be improved upon. Rhodebeck’s (1993) explanations for the lack of elderly consciousness will be important when considering for whom and for what political attitudes and behaviors to expect aged contextual effects.

The Aged Context

Examining the varying age compositions of locations provides an effective way to test for the contextual effects of old age⁵. However, a political community based on age may not emerge simply because a lot of older people happen to live in a particular place. Older age concentrated areas naturally increase opportunities for social interaction among older adults and may attract special attention from interest

⁵ Studies of the young age context, often referred to as youth bulges in the literature, have also described interesting findings with political implications (Fuller and Pitts 1990; Goldstone 2002; Hart et al. 2004; Huntington 1996; Mesquida and Wiener 1999; Moller 1968)

groups and candidates wishing to mobilize older adults in particular. Yet, the existing work provides limited evidence that aged contexts will foster an elderly populace that thinks about politics any different from their peers living without the context.

I argue that this area of research has many more opportunities for study: to uncover the particular circumstances for observing the aged contextual effects, to better understand the circumstances for not observing effects, and to update (and perhaps modify) the elderly consciousness and power theories in light of the findings. Past work, which considers the aged context, suggest a number of areas for expansion.

First, most of the work I have cited is more than 20 or 30 years old and desperately needs to be updated, especially with the increasing aging population. Two of the more recent studies examining the role of older age concentrated communities look at the impact they have on the health of older adults. One study finds that older adults living amongst their peers are more likely to report poor health (Subramanian et al. 2006). Another discusses the health implications of different neighborhood age structures (Cagney 2006). Older adults living in these areas may be more aware of their aging needs because of their increased social interaction with peers, which has implications for the health industry. Using up-to-date survey data may uncover some unique political attitudes and behaviors of older adults residing in aging communities, which have only become evident as the Baby Boomer near retirement age.

Second, a greater range of political attitudes and behaviors should be examined. The public opinion and political behavior work cited here focuses mostly on the impact of aging communities for a few dated issues and some political action.

Social scientists have long established age as a powerful predictor of political attitudes and behavior, through both generation effects and life-cycle effects (Abramson 1979; Alwin and Krosnick 1991; Alwin 1998; R. G. Braungart and M. M. Braungart 1986; Cutler and Bengtson 1974; Highton and Wolfinger 2001; Jennings and Niemi 1975, 1978; Jennings 1979; Nie, Verba, and Kim 1974; Niemi and Jennings 1981; Stoker and Jennings 1995). The age concentration of a community may also influence a wider range of political attitudes and behaviors than has been examined previously.

For instance, a very recent study shows that older adults surrounded by peers maintain higher cognitive function due to their higher rates of social interaction with peers (Clarke et al. 2011). Some political cognition of adults generally declines after reaching the mid to late 60s (Lau and Redlawsk 2006, 2008), but the social and political environments in the aging neighborhoods may minimize this decline. Research into the influence of the old age context and political knowledge is needed to fill this void in the literature. In addition, recent data used to study the young context shows that young people living in places with young-age distributions have lower levels of civic knowledge but greater levels of participation than young people living elsewhere (Hart et al. 2004). By looking at additional political attitudes and behaviors (with recent data), I may also find more enlightening results an association between the aged community and unique political knowledge, attitudes, efficacy, and participation of residents.

Third, past work looks only at the impact of the older age context for socializing older adults. As with other contextual studies, the age composition of the

local population should influence people of all ages in the community—not just the older adults. The educative role of community is powerful and necessary for political socialization, a concept that includes political learning and the acquisition of political attitudes (Greenstein 1970). However, given the great influence of individual age on political attitudes and behaviors, I expect that the aged context will not influence older and younger residents to the same degree or even in the same way.

For this dissertation, I focus mostly on the impact of old age concentrated communities for older adults and for the most malleable residents—young adults. While older adults may adjust their political attitudes and activities with certain motivation, young adulthood is the critical period for learning about politics (Niemi and Hepburn 1995). Younger people living in places with an aged context will certainly be socialized uniquely. They may absorb the homogeneous attitudes of the concentrated older population and make them their own (Huckfeldt 1986). As a minority population, younger adults in these communities may not choose or prefer much contact with the older adults, but they will may have little control over their contacts and be overwhelmed with information relevant for the aged community (Huckfeldt and John Sprague 1995). Finally, they are generally less engaged with politics and thus, may be more easily influenced by community (here, aged-relevant) cues (Orbell 1970).

I also consider the differences between the young-old and the old-old (Neugarten 1974, 1982), often examining the effects for those aged 65 to 74 separately from the most aged citizens, 75 and older. People began to live much longer in the last half of the 20th Century, and many older adults enjoy good health

and peak political engagement well into their 60s and often, in later years. Although delayed somewhat, many elderly eventually face mounting physical and cognitive challenges into their latest years, which influence their political cognition and participation (Clarke et al. 2011; Hamerman 1999; Hebert 1997; Jennings and Markus 1988; Jirovec and Erich 1992; Lau and Redlawsk 2006, 2008). The lessened opportunities for community interaction may prevent the oldest adults from the aged contextual effects evident for the more able and active *younger* older citizens.

Finally, this work needs to account for characteristics highly predictive of political attitudes and behaviors of older (and younger) adults, including individual economic circumstances and partisan identification and for community characteristics like the size and wealth of the population. Past work has not given much consideration to differences in the type of aged community. The different types of older adult communities span the economic distribution, from the wealthy to the very poor, entirely dependent on government income security programs. They are also quite different in their population size with many aged communities receiving an influx of new residents and other communities losing residents every year as young people move away and older residents pass away. Accounting for particular community characteristics will provide 1) additional confidence that context effects may be attributed to the aged context and not to these other community influences, and 2) test for varying effects for the different types of aged communities.

Outline for the Dissertation

The remaining chapters will contribute to the discussions of elderly political consciousness, senior power, and update the past literature in the ways just described. Chapter 2 describes the aged communities, how they developed and where they are located across the United States. This chapter provides additional justification for the importance of the project by delineating the aged-concentrated communities and sets the stage for the next four chapters by introducing data and methods used throughout the dissertation.

Chapter 3 will examine the unique political knowledge for older adults living in areas with high concentrations of seniors. Are older adults living in such places more likely to have higher levels of political cognition than others living in communities without so many of their peers? The increased social integration and opportunities for political discussion among the older people in these communities suggests that this may be the case.

Political awareness findings will inform the work in chapter 4, which examines the distinct age-relevant issue attitudes (safety net policies in particular) for seniors living in aged communities. The attitudes of the youngest residents are also examined as predictions of intergenerational conflict over the funding of such policies into the future are considered. Chapters 5 and 6 address the implications for these distinct preferences by looking at the differences in political efficacy and activity across locales with varying age distributions. I will also consider the minority population of young adults in these chapters and whether the aged context socializes

them into the distinct political efficacy attitudes and activity of the highly concentrated and integrated older adults.

Chapter 7 will conclude by discussing the age politicization findings and contributions to the aging politics and contextual effects research. Reflecting on the observations in the previous chapters, I will comment on the state of the older age population, concentrated and scattered, with regard to perceived and actual power. Electoral and public policy consequences will be discussed for local and national politics as the Baby Boomers move into retirement and socialize the younger generations well into the 21st Century.

Chapter 2: Defining and Identifying Aged Communities

Introduction

The population of the United States is aging, and the number of communities with large percentages of older adults is on the rise. Local populations are graying all over the country—not just in Florida—as people begin to age in place (Frey 2011). In this chapter, I will define the aged context, the main independent variable for this project, and identify and describe these older-adult locales across the United States. Details about the data sources and methods used in later chapters will also be discussed.

Aged context research focuses on a particular statistical occurrence (skewed age structures) and the consequences of such an occurrence. However, communities are not perpetually older places, they *become* this way. This chapter gives attention to the processes (fertility, mortality, or migration) leading to the formation of communities with large concentrations of senior citizens. Older adults do not belong to one homogeneous group, and elderly-concentrated places are not all alike. Striking differences in the types of aged communities may be attributed in large part to the very dissimilar ways they become homes to concentrations of senior citizens.

Finally, this chapter presents evidence for the reality of varying aging contexts in American society and thus, dissimilar political socialization experiences in American communities. This chapter is critical for setting up the content and analyses

for the remaining chapters, each focusing on the consequences of the aged context for residents' political attitudes and behaviors.

Defining the Aged Context Container

Defining the aged context is critical for understanding the impact of these aging populations on individuals' political behaviors and attitudes. Context can be a thorny concept to define and measure, and social scientists define the boundaries of various types of contexts (for example, racial context, political context, and age context) in many different ways. The choices made when defining context can have major implications for a study's findings, so they should be made carefully. I discuss some of the past work on context containers and my choices for defining the aged context.

The modifiable areal unit problem (MAUP) is well known among those studying context effects. The MAUP refers to the situation where studies produce different results with different contextual units of analysis. Choosing the unit of analysis should be done with care (Taylor, Gorard, and Fitz 2003), and "the very act of framing an analytical unit involves certain assumptions that permit us to investigate some concerns but not others" (Williams 1999, 325). Acknowledging that there may be no "right" or "adequate" unit of analysis is also important (Taylor, Gorard, and Fitz 2003; Williams 1999), and others recommend using more than one measure of context to increase the certainty in findings (Wong 2004).

Data limitations also influence the context container decision, leaving little room for theoretical concerns (Dietz 2002). "Identifying relevant social boundaries"

can be difficult (Huckfeldt, Plutzer, and Sprague 1993, 366), but some have provided guidelines for acceptable and common definitions. Books and Prysby (1991, 2-3) define context as a “geographically bounded social unit.” Geography constrains social interaction as the frequency of interaction decreases with physical distance. While the Internet has challenged this idea, face-to-face communication remains powerful and relevant (Bimber 1998; Latane, Liu, Nowak, Bonevento, et al. 1995; Schwanen and Kwan 2008). Others argue that contextual areas need not be self-contained social units, but more importantly, one should consider whether the characteristics of the units influence the flow of information to those residing within a determined contextual area (Huckfeldt 1986; Marschall and Stolle 2004).

Although there is *no consensus*, researchers carefully consider definitions of context and inform the decisions of others. Past studies defining a particular age context also use wide-ranging units of analysis. Some comparative work uses the country as the unit of analysis (Mesquida and Wiener 1999; Moller 1968) with others comparing only a few select countries (Fuller and Pitts 1990; Huntington 1996). Hart et al. (2004) present one study comparing countries, but they also use zip code-level data in their analyses. Zip codes typically include communities of people in contact with one another as shown in epidemiological studies showing the way communicable diseases are transmitted (Acevedo-Garcia 2001). Still, others define the context container as a census tract (Clarke et al. 2011; Subramanian, Kubzansky, Berkman, Fay, et al. 2006) or county (Gimpel, Morris, and Armstrong 2004).

In order to make the most informed and practical decision when defining the contextual boundary for the aged context of a community, I take cues from past

research. I define the contextual boundary in two different ways, by county and by zip code. Both contextual containers are commonly used in surveys and by social scientists. The theoretical reason for using political jurisdictions such as counties “derives from the official role that it occupies in the political system” (Williams 1999, 318). Counties usually cover larger land areas than some other geographic measures used and contain more diverse populations, including a greater diversity of ages. Zip codes, used for the purposes of the U.S. Postal Service, are mostly artificial jurisdictions with changing boundaries (Williams 1999). These smaller land areas may be made up almost entirely of age-restricted communities and home to more homogenous populations, with very few younger residents. Theory provides a number of good reasons for using these two particular units of analysis, and considering both of them in this study should satisfy those who question the validity of definition of context over another.

Demography and the Development of Aged Communities

Demographers study population distributions in places and the resulting compositions (or characteristics) of the population due to distinct distributions. This important work relates to political science because an understanding of “population composition, distribution, and change is essential for making decisions in both the public and private sectors” (Plane and Rogerson 1994, 1). Political change occurs in

places that undergo population changes as people interact with their government in a democracy (Gimpel 1999).⁶

Two main questions encompass the study of population (Jones 1990): 1) Where are people spatially distributed, and 2) why are they distributed in these places? To understand the unique political context of places with large older adult populations in the United States, it is imperative to also understand why certain places achieve these particular distributions. I provide a basic introduction to the processes influencing the aging trends in these locations with a brief look at some overlapping literature in demography, geography and political science.

Places lose or gain population through three processes: fertility, mortality, and migration. Attention to these processes help demographers understand why some areas increase in population and others decline. Increasing fertility rates around the middle of the 20th Century and decreasing mortality rates since that time have contributed to the expanding aging population in the United States. Improvements in health care have also made certain that older adults are not only living longer but happier and healthier into the 21st Century (Martin, Schoeni, and Andreski 2010), despite the economic challenges posed by increased demand for health care (Rice and Feldman 1983; Schoeni and Ofstedal 2010).

⁶In political science, the demographic composition of districts helps assess constituent representation (Bernstein 1989; Green and Guth 1991; Page, Shapiro, Gronke, and Rosenberg 1984), and many argue that changing populations contributed to political realignment in the South (Gimpel and Schuknecht 2001). Demographics also inform various areas of public policy (Kahn 2002; Ladewig 2006; Zald 1977) and have long been used to explain voting behavior.

While rising (and then decreasing) fertility rates and decreasing mortality rates help explain the rising numbers of Americans entering older adulthood across the country, migration patterns mostly influence the *local-area* populations (Jones 1990; Plane and Rogerson 1994, 12)⁷ of counties and zip codes. A focus on migration patterns in particular provides information on who moves and why people move. In addition, migration patterns can be highly selective on age. People of certain ages select to live in similar places for some of the same reasons, resulting in unusual local age distributions when compared with the national distribution (Plane and Rogerson 1994).⁸

Moving decisions do not occur at random. Americans move a lot, and they often (but not always) make the decision for economic reasons. The more highly educated and skilled Americans with higher incomes move more often than others (Fielding 1989; Johnson, Salt, and Wood 1974; Long 1988). Moving is expensive, and certain places (offering certain jobs) draw from only certain classes of people (Gimpel and Schuknecht 2001). People will also consider the climate of the potential new home in addition to the new locale's economic performance when deciding to move—both personal and external economic factors drive the moving decision (Jones 1990).

Along with and often related to economic concerns, age strongly predicts moving patterns. In fact, age is “the most important characteristic known to

⁷ However, migration is often much more difficult to define, measure and predict than fertility and mortality (Jones 1990; Plane and Rogerson 1994).

⁸ See figures in Chapter 1.

distinguish migrants from non-migrants” (Jones 1990, 196). People often consider a move as they age and approach retirement, and the likelihood of moving increases slightly for amenity reasons (Jones 1990; Rogers 1988). However, like other age groups, past moving experience often predicts future moves (Barsby and Cox 1975). Similarly, if an older person has never moved, they are more likely to remain in their long-settled location as they age.

While income and climate unsurprisingly influence the moving decision, older adults are also more likely to move to places with lower costs of living, to places where they have familial and/or social ties, and to rural locations (Barsby and Cox 1975; D. L. Brown and Glasgow 2008). Older people leave higher income states and stay in lower income states more often than younger people. This results in the concentration of low-income elderly in low-income areas, which proves consequential for the elderly services provided in these locations (Barsby and Cox 1975; Serow 1987). Senior citizens are also more likely to move south than younger people (Barsby and Cox 1975).

In sum, when people move for different reasons, the population changes observed will mean different things for the resulting local population’s political attitudes and behaviors. Some argue that moving has an impact in the long term because migrants are re-socialized politically by their new neighbors (T. A. Brown 1988; Burbank 1997; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Huckfeldt 1986). Other evidence shows that moving does not change a person’s political attitudes or behaviors (T. A. Brown 1988; Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960) because early socialization processes are so influential that political habits stick with people despite

changes in their political contexts. At the least, changing migration patterns do alter the composition of an area's population, which can change the political composition and have consequences for local policy decisions (Plane and Rogerson 1994).

An important question is whether the local population influences the politics of older adults moving into an area, or whether new residents remain unchanged and their presence changes the local political context. The current migration literature does not provide a consensus for either side. Changes depend “on the volume of migration” in addition to “individual characteristics such as the strength of one's political beliefs and partisanship at the time of the move as well as the political character of the new community, including the pressures for conformity within it” (Gimpel and Schuknecht 2001, 209). We do know that places have become more homogenous because people move to places with like-minded people and certain favorable amenities (Bishop and Cushing 2009).

In the upcoming sections, I identify the locations across the United States with concentrations of older adults and describe the two major types of older adult locations. Considering migration research and the differences in the aged communities will be important for understanding aged context and its distinct influence on the older and younger residents in aged locales all over the United States.

Data and Methods

I use United States Census data containing 2009 population estimates and 2010 population counts broken into age categories to identify the communities with

high concentrations of older adults. Using past work as a guide for the measurement of community age saturation, I calculate the *older adult saturation quotient* (OASQ) by dividing the local population of people age 65 and older by the total local population. Hart et al. (2004) calculate their child saturation quotient, dividing the number of children (birth to age 16) by the number of adults (age 21 and old).

As described above, community will be defined in two ways: as county and zip code. The first OASQ measure is equal to the number of older adults, defined as 65 and over, residing in a zip code divided by the total population of the zip code. A second measure defines the older population in the same way (65 and over) but uses the county context container. I expect that there will be some differences between the OASQ county and zip code measures as counties given the typically larger geographical size and more diverse populations of the counties.

I designate 65 as the age that signifies old age because it is the full-retirement age where individuals can receive full social security benefits (Social Security Administration 2009). The oldest of the older adults (85 and above) may differ very much from the younger older adults (Neugarten 1974, 1982), but another measure of the aged context generated from a different definition of old age may not be very helpful. Since there are very few people of very advanced age, relative to the other age groups, included in survey responses, differences in their locations of concentration should have minimal if any impact on results.⁹

⁹ In earlier drafts, I compared measures using different definitions of “older adult” and they were very similar. I chose to use the more inclusive measure.

Identifying the communities across the United States with large percentages of senior citizens will provide a picture of the prevalence, location, and description of such communities. Because older locations do not become old in the same ways, the characteristics of these locations will vary. Once these places have been located, I will pay attention to some of the different types of older communities using additional population and place information. I use the American Fact Finder search tool on the United States Census website to collect economic and population growth information for each identified older adult location. As I collected the additional population information and combined it with the place characteristics, a few types of aged places emerged.

Describing the Aged Communities

Tables 2.1 and 2.2 list the 20 counties and zip codes with the highest percentages of older adults residing in the local populations. The tables reflect the differences between the county and zip code context containers at the high end of the measures as well as the differences between the types of aging communities. Only four states host the top 20 aged zip codes (with the highest OASQs) while 11 states host the top 20 aged counties.

Table 2.1. Top 20 Counties with the Highest Percentages of Older Adults in the United States

				Median household income (2009)	% Below poverty (2009)	% Change in population 2000-2009
	County	State	OASQ	50,221 for U.S.	14.3 in U.S.	9.7 in U.S.
1	McIntosh	ND	0.372	32,492	14.0	-17.1
2	Charlotte	FL	0.343	40,874	12.2	13.0
3	La Paz	AZ	0.331	30,939	25.4	3.9
4	Highlands	FL	0.315	33,401	19.9	13.1
5	Lancaster	VA	0.315	43,434	12.7	-1.5
6	Citrus	FL	0.309	37,861	15.8	19.6
7	Sarasota	FL	0.305	45,953	12.7	16.4
8	Northumberland	VA	0.303	53,856	13.6	0.6
9	Lake	FL	0.302	42,479	12.6	41.1
10	Garden	NE	0.301	33,572	15.8	-10.3
11	McPherson	SD	0.300	45,048	14.2	7.9
12	Alcona	MI	0.299	32,644	16.3	-6.6
13	Esmeralda	NV	0.297	42,526	14.2	-19.4
14	Llano	TX	0.295	41,431	13.2	13.2
15	Towns	GA	0.289	35,791	16.6	12.4
16	Lincoln	NE	0.284	45,183	11.2	4.8
17	Hickory	MO	0.283	45,149	14.6	7.0
18	Wells	ND	0.283	44,952	12.4	-17.5
19	Emmons	ND	0.282	37,191	14.7	-18.0
20	Adams	ND	0.281	39,799	11.5	-9.6

Table 2.2. Top 20 Zip Codes with the Highest Percentages of Older Adults in the United States

				Median household income (2010)	% Change in population 2000-2010
Zip code	City, State	OASQ	41,994* in U.S.		
1	33573 Sun City Center, FL	0.864	39,483		-33.3
2	85375 Sun City West, AZ	0.831	46,323		-18.3
3	85351 Sun City, AZ	0.783	32,860		-38.0
4	33446 Delray Beach, FL	0.721	37,632		-22.4
5	32961 Vero Beach, FL	0.695	30,566		-44.9
6	85614 Green Valley, AZ	0.694	44,756		-10.1
7	11005 Floral Park, NY	0.693	56,077		-27.7
8	34228 Longboat Key, FL	0.675	99,405		-6.8
9	85346 Quartzsite, AZ	0.637	21,690		-2.4
10	08759 Manchester Township, NJ	0.619	26,465		-22.2
11	33484 Delray Beach, FL	0.617	33,986		-11.1
12	32798 Zellwood, FL	0.605	34,329		-50.3
13	34292 Venice, FL	0.564	39,401		-33.8
14	32159 Lady Lake, FL	0.555	33,548		83.0
15	34285 Venice, FL	0.555	37,608		-3.4
16	85373 Sun City, AZ	0.549	39,945		1.8
17	32949 Grant-Valkaria, FL	0.547	28,350		6.1
18	34762 Okahumpka, FL	0.545	39,890		-7.4
19	33945 Pineland, FL	0.544	132,477		-26.0
20	34481 Ocala, FL	0.540	30,965		-21.8

The top-end of the county measure includes mostly places in Florida, Arizona, and in the Midwest. The upper end of the zip code measure does not appear to be as geographically diverse as the county measure, including zip codes mainly in Florida and Arizona. In Figures 2.1 and 2.2, maps highlight the top 50 county and zip codes from the two measures. Again, the map of the zip codes (Figure 2.1) shows locations concentrated mainly in Florida and Arizona. The map of the counties (Figure 2.2) clearly shows the two different types of aged communities: 1) the rural places from where young people move away (focused in Middle America), and 2) the retirement communities with amenities to which older people move to enjoy (generally in Florida, Arizona, and along the coast).

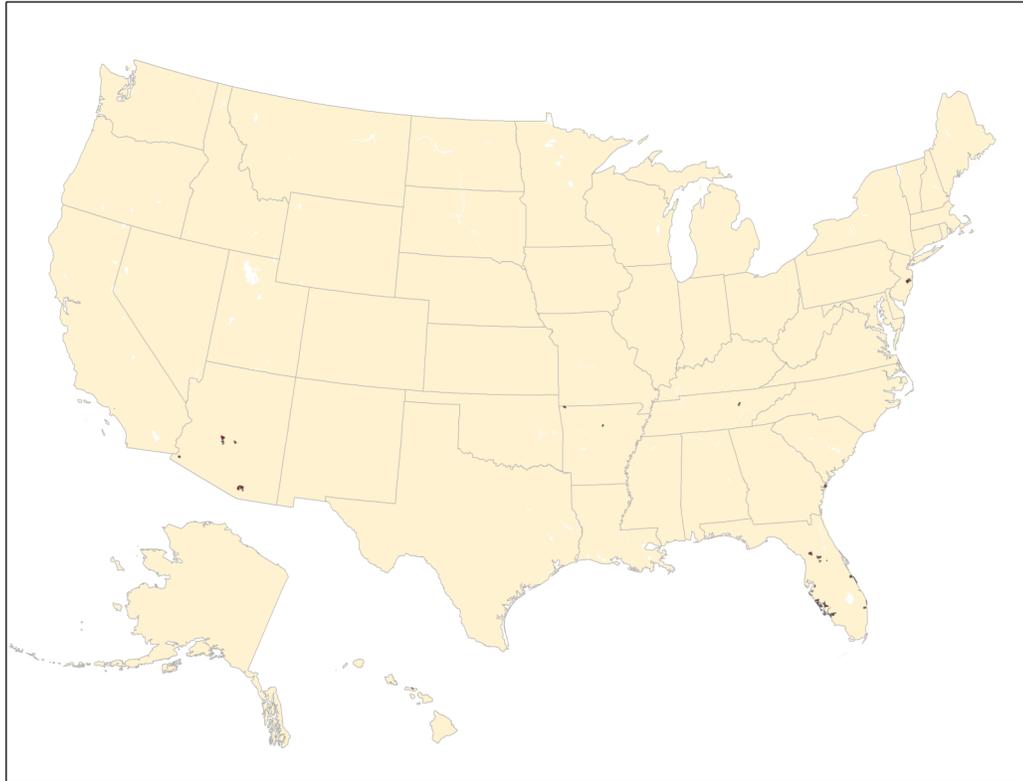


Figure 2.1 – Map of the Top 50 Zip Codes with the Highest Percentages of Older Adults in the United States

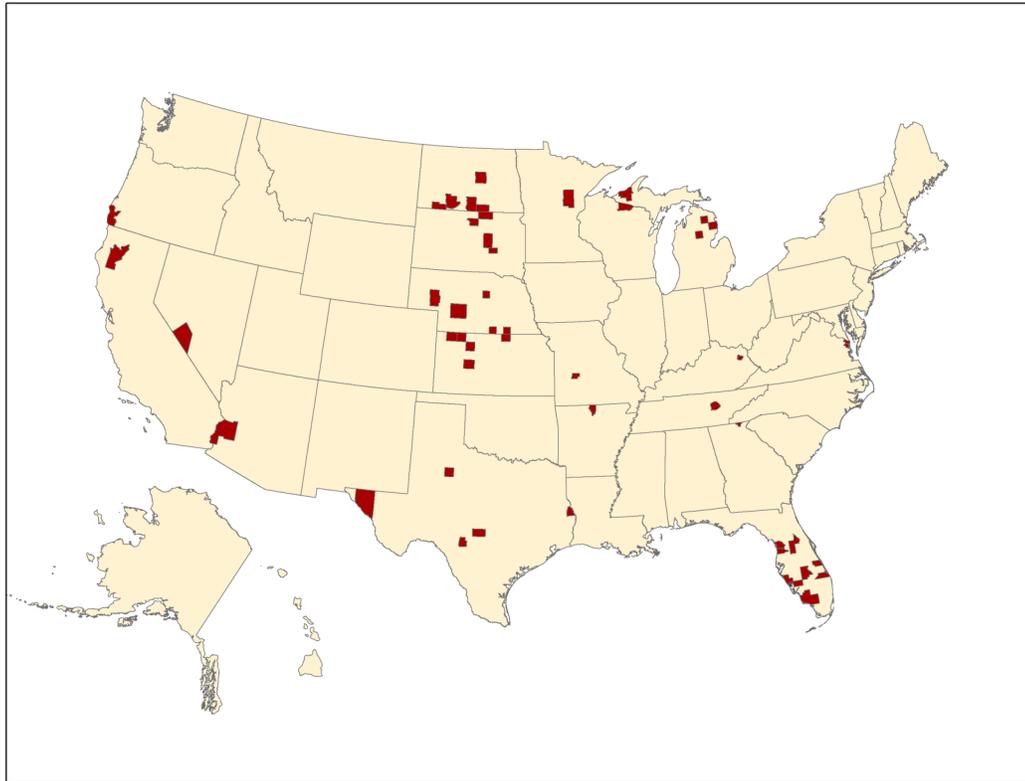


Figure 2.2 – Map of the Top 50 Counties with the Highest Percentages of Older Adults in the United States

Counties often cover larger land areas, so the measure includes places with high proportions of older adults aside from retirement communities where people 65 and over cluster. This is evident when comparing the OASQ’s for the top 20 locations of the two measures. The top older adult zip code (33573 in Sun City Center, Florida) has an OASQ of 0.864, which translates to a ratio of 9,167 people age 65 and over to the total population of 10,608. For comparison, the top older adult county (McIntosh County, North Dakota) has a much lower (but still sizeable) OASQ of 0.372, which translates to a ratio of 960 people 65 and over to the total population of 2,582.

Table 2.1, showing the high end of the county measure, reflects the differences in types of older adult locations and the processes of becoming older.

Some of these areas are fast-growing retirement destinations like Lady Lake¹⁰ County and Sarasota County, Florida and Towns County, Georgia. Other locations are rapidly losing people. For some places like Garden County, Nebraska or Wells County, North Dakota, younger people simply move away (for education or economic opportunities), leaving an older population behind. The aged concentrated places also differ in the sizes of their total populations, with some in the hundreds and others in the hundreds of thousands.

Table 2.2 (zip codes) reveals a difference between the warm-weather retirement communities. Most of these zip codes include formerly fast-growing clusters of retirement communities with decreasing populations as older adults pass away or return to families after achieving advanced old age. In addition, trends in the 2010 United States Census show that aging populations are increasing in suburban areas as older adults decide against moving long distance for retirement (Frey 2011).

Finally, the zip code measure, with its smaller and denser populations, shows the differences in income levels between the various aging communities.¹¹ The differences in economic wellbeing of locales are not as evident when comparing the older adult counties. In general, the counties are home to greater numbers of people, and poorer residents may surround wealthy retirement communities, pulling the median household income for the county down. Some zip codes may only contain a

¹⁰ This county includes The Villages, a retirement community like no other that has gained national media attention and fame after journalist Andrew Blechman (2009) wrote about his experience visiting friends who moved to the retirement community.

¹¹ The percentages of residents below poverty in 2010 for the zip codes were unavailable with the American FactFinder (factfinder.census.gov/).

single retirement community with residents of similar wealth. People of various economic means reside in aging communities, but the two measures of age context differ with respect to the way they represent the economic states of these residents. Either way, individual and community economic status will be important to account for in analyses so as not to attribute an economic influence as the impact of an aged context.

Discussion

This chapter shows that a considerable number of communities across the United States are home to concentrations of senior citizens. Older people end up clustered in certain places for a number of reasons, leading to consequences for local and national politics. Although communities with mainly aged populations can be found in many places across the country, they are not found everywhere. A limited number of states house the highest proportions of older adults, so campaigns may easily identify these populations. Politics should be experienced differently in these places because of the overwhelming presence of older residents, exhibiting distinct political knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors.

However, the effects observed in these areas may depend on whether community is defined as zip code or county. For these reasons, it will be important to use both definitions for an additional check on results. The county, because of its larger area, captures a more diverse population. The zip code measure indicates that the concentration of elderly residents is highly variable. Although the measures will likely produce somewhat different results for the analyses in the remaining chapters, I

expect that they will generate differences in intensity rather than differences in substantive political opinion or behavior. Aged contextual effects may be greater when using the zip code measures, compared with the counties, because of their more age-homogeneous populations.

The differences between the top-ends of the two measures and *between* the various communities represented by the top 20 of each measure, highlight the need to also consider both the economic wellbeing of the community and the population density in the following chapters. As discussed above, moving is expensive, and only people of certain means have a choice to move. The communities with the highest concentrations of older adults also differ greatly in total population size, from urban to rural. Area income levels and numbers of residents could also act as a contextual influence on individual political attitudes and behaviors and must be accounted for when examining the impact of the aged context.

Chapter 3: Cognitive Reserve for Political Knowledge in Aged Communities

Introduction

Knowledge of political processes, institutions, and participants is important for sustaining democratic government, by the people and for the people. Citizens who are politically knowledgeable are also likely to be interested in and more likely to participate in their government (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997), and these qualities ensure that well-designed institutions continue to work well for society (Galston 1991, 2001). Political knowledge helps citizens identify their interests, helps them form coherent opinions on a range of issues in line with those interests, and then gives people the resources to link their attitudes with activities that serve their interests (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997, 219).

Political knowledge should increase with age (Strate et al. 1989; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). As people gain political experience over the course of their lives, they have the opportunity to accumulate and retain knowledge of political processes (Plutzer 2002). People also become more interested in local and community politics with age, as they become enmeshed in their communities (Alford and Scoble 1968; Blum and Kingston 1984; Nie, Verba, and Kim 1974; Sykes 1951) and accrue more detailed and specific political knowledge on candidates and campaign platforms in addition to gaining an increasing familiarity with political institutions at all levels of government.

Many aspects of the unfolding life cycle encourage gaining political knowledge even as people enter retirement. However, some forms of political knowledge may decrease for those reaching very advanced ages due to declining cognitive abilities that commonly accompany old age (Lau and Redlawsk 2006, 2008; Riggle and Johnson 1996). Decreased political knowledge among some of the most politically engaged citizens means that older people may be less likely to express their political preferences accurately. Republican government is based on the premise that elected officials represent the preferences of their constituents. When preferences are unclear or mistaken, the goals of representative government are undermined.

These consequences may be especially worrisome for the United States as the unusually large and historically active Baby Boomer Generation moves into older adulthood. On the other hand, some very recent research indicates that neighborhoods with concentrations of older adults preserve cognitive abilities among their older residents through increased opportunities for social interaction and information exchange with peers (Clarke et al. 2011). As aged communities become more common and widespread with the growing aged population (Frey 2011; Wolf 2001), it will be important to know whether these contexts foster (or impair) political knowledge.

We know that political knowledge increases with age, then peaks into old age, and finally declines with very advanced years. However, as aged communities become more commonplace, older adults may increasingly find themselves socially integrated with their peers. These aged contexts may prevent, curb, or delay the natural losses to political cognition experienced by the oldest Americans. In this

chapter, I examine locations with varying age distributions across the United States and whether locations with older-leaning age distributions create environments supportive of increased political knowledge among their elderly residents.

Aging and Cognition

People obtain knowledge about the world around them as they age and accumulate new experiences, many of which become familiar and routine as they are encountered again and again. Wisdom and perspective often comes with age, but advanced age may also bring senility, dementia, and a host of other ailments and impediments to maintaining and expressing a lifetime of accumulated knowledge (Schaie 2005; S. H. Zarit and J. M. Zarit 2011). These processes associated with later years have consequences for many areas of an aging person's life, including political cognition and participation (Lau and Redlawsk 2006, 2008; Riggle and Johnson 1996).

Understanding the question of what voters consider when making political decisions is critical to political behavior research. Particular attention to these factors among the oldest generations may be of the utmost importance for research in American politics as the aged population surges in the coming decades. Experimental research has shown that older people consider less information for longer periods of time when making political decisions, compared with younger subjects (Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Mata, Schooler, and Rieskamp 2007; Riggle and Johnson 1996). In general, older people take longer to process information than younger adults (Hartley

2006) and have been found to employ simpler decision-making strategies (Mata, Schooler, and Rieskamp 2007).

Aging effects on cognition vary by the type of memory and do not always indicate poorer decision-making (Mata, Schooler, and Rieskamp 2007). The same can be said for the various aspects of an individual's political decision-making process. Declines in semantic memory, which is related to concepts and meanings developed over time (Quillian 1968; Smith, Shoben, and Rips 1974), are small or insignificant in older adulthood (Hasher and Zacks 1988; Hess 2005; Hoyer and Verhaeghen 2006). The political equivalent of semantic memory is the crystallized political knowledge of government processes, parties and better-known candidates. Lau and Redlawsk (2008) make this comparison, finding that 78-year-olds answer 6 more correct answers (out of a possible score of 20) to factual-based political knowledge questions than 18-year-olds.

On the other hand, older adults have more difficulty recalling detailed information related to periodic events, otherwise considered to be part of short-term memory (Hoyer and Verhaeghen 2006). Age may be a stronger predictor of accurate political party knowledge than of candidate knowledge because candidates come and go, but the two major political parties are entrenched in American history (Lau and Redlawsk 2008). The ability to engage in more active cognitive processing regresses with age (Hasher and Zacks 1988; Hess 2005). Such processes might include remembering new information generated from current political campaigns, relating the information to personal preferences, and choosing the candidate that most accurately represents those preferences. Lau and Redlawsk (2008) show that the

likelihood of making correct vote choices (matching one's preferences to the candidate representing those preferences) decreases once people reach their mid-60s.

Some aspects of political cognition are retained and even peak well into older adulthood while others experience decline with the onset of retirement age (Lau and Redlawsk 2006, 2008; Riggle and Johnson 1996). However, even some of the most crystallized political memories can be forgotten with *very advanced age*. Losses to cognition are evident in most people reaching their mid-70s and 80s (Schaie 2005). Lau and Redlawsk (2008) find that decline in political cognition begins after age 69 for political knowledge, 67 for memories related to party politics, a much later 81 for memories of candidates, and around age 70 for correct voting.

Community Context and Cognition

While the process of getting older influences cognition in later life, whether a person ages in community or alone may have an additional impact on cognitive abilities, including knowledge of government processes and political events. To begin with, older people belonging to a social network of peers may be less likely to develop dementia than older adults living in solitude (Fratiglioni et al. 2000). Living in a community of similar others offers seniors emotional support (Seeman et al. 2001) and promotes opportunities for social interaction and intellectual stimulation (Fratiglioni, Paillard-Borg, and Winblad 2004; Wang et al. 2002). The cognitive reserve hypothesis suggests that being in community may directly influence brain development and guard against dementia and maintain cognitive abilities into older adulthood (Stern 2006).

Different types of communities produce varying levels of cognitive capacity in general. An entire literature has been devoted to examining the relationship between particular characteristics for specific geographic locales (such as census tracts, counties, or zip codes) and the well being of area residents. For instance, the local context of socioeconomic deprivation has been shown to be associated with diminished cognitive capacity among older residents (Lang et al. 2008). Related work suggests a link between the average education level in a community and the cognitive abilities of all of its residents. Older people living in highly educated locations show higher levels of cognition compared with their peers living in places with less-educated residents, even when accounting for individual education (Wight et al. 2006). Socioeconomic conditions may have an impact on cognition because impoverished communities are less likely to have the concentrations of physical, social, and institutional resources (parks, libraries, recreation and community centers, etc.) found in well-off communities (Clarke et al. 2011).

Another community characteristic that likely has implications for the cognitive reserve of older residents, and the one considered for the present study, is the local age structure. Given the findings related to community socioeconomic conditions, Clarke et al. (2011, 2) speculate that senior citizens living in places with greater percentages of older adults will benefit from “increased opportunities for social interaction with peers or a greater density of age-specific resources” like senior centers and social clubs for retirees.

Using data collected in Chicago neighborhoods, Clarke et al. (2011) find support for their hypotheses. Living in parts of the city with concentrations of older

adults was related to greater levels of cognitive function for older residents, however their finding is qualified by years of residency. The effect is *not* as evident for longer-term residents. Given the differences in cognitive decline among older adults in their 60s to early 70s and those reaching very advanced ages (Lau and Redlawsk 2008; Schaie 2005), the difference in effect for residency may simply reflect age differences between shorter- and longer-term residents. Shorter-term residents may be the younger, more active older adults, primed and able to absorb what the aged community has to offer.

Clarke et al. (2011) are not alone in considering implications of a skewed local age structure for individual cognitive engagement. Past research links aged communities with concentrations of community resources (Cagney 2006) and greater opportunities for social networks and engagement (Cagney 2006; Longino, McClelland, and Peterson 1980; Ward, LaGory, and Sherman 1985). The present research builds off of this past work by examining the impact of the age structure of a community on political cognition. The cognitive reserve benefits of living in aged communities may include increased political knowledge and cognition into older adulthood.

Theorizing about the Impact of the Aged Context on Political Cognition

The above research suggests that contextual influence in these aged communities may be occurring via a couple of mechanisms.

1. Older residents retain more political knowledge (compared with their peers in other locations) through more frequent opportunities for *social interaction with other older adults* provided by the older adult context.
2. Older residents retain more political knowledge (compared with their peers in other locations) through a greater *density of older-age-related resources* provided by the older adult context.

Both of the mechanisms are likely influencing mental stimulation and thus, cognitive reserves of political knowledge—and they are likely working together. The two explanations are interconnected and may be impossible to separate with the available data. Taking part in the available social networks in aged communities may not be possible without also taking advantage of the age-related resources and vice versa.

Past research suggests that the age context may influence different types of political knowledge to different degrees, and the effects for older adults may not be the same for those of very advanced age. I examine three types of political memories or knowledge for this chapter: factual-based knowledge of the political system, candidate issue positions, and candidate positions on senior-related issues. The two old-age categories of particular interest are younger older adults, ages 65 to 74, and those of more advanced age, 75 and older. Consideration of research on aged contextual effects and on cognitive decline lead to a number of hypotheses:

1. Younger older adults (those age 65-74) living in a context of older adults will know more about the political system than their peers living elsewhere. The older adult context will have a negligible effect on the oldest residents.

2. Younger older adults (those age 65-74) living in a context of older adults will know more about candidate issue positions than their peers living elsewhere, however this effect will be smaller than the effect for the political knowledge of well-established institutions. The older adult context will have a negligible effect on the oldest residents.
3. Younger older adults (those age 65-74) living in a context of older adults will know more about the candidate positions on senior-citizen-related issues than their peers living elsewhere. This effect will be greater than the effect for candidate issue positions in general but still less than the effect for the most concrete and lasting knowledge of the political system. The older adult context will have a negligible effect on the oldest residents.

Data and Methods

The National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) data from 2000 and 2004 provide a variety of knowledge questions posed to individual respondents. United States Census data from 2000 and 2004 (estimated) are used for the contextual measures of the old age context, the older adult saturation quotients (OASQ). As discussed in the previous chapter, I compare results for a county-level OASQ measure and a zip code-level OASQ measure. Also described in Chapter 2, I form each OASQ measure by dividing the local population of people age 65 and older by the total local population. The resulting county-level OASQ measure ranges from 3% to 35% while the zip code-level measure ranges from 0% to 83%. These percentages

highlight the larger land areas and more diverse populations of the counties, compared with the zip codes.

Hierarchical general linear modeling (HGLM) is used to model the relationship between the older age distributions at the county- and zip code-levels and the political knowledge of individual community residents.¹² Since the dependent variables are count variables of equal exposure, a Poisson model with a log link is used. Survey items for political system knowledge, candidate issue positions, and candidate positions on the elderly-related issues (social security and prescription drug coverage) were added together to make three dependent variables, which serve as knowledge indexes (see Appendix 3.1 for the list of questions and wording). Two of the measures rely on four items while the index for candidate issue positions relies on ten items¹³ (see Appendix 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4 for survey respondent distributions for the dependent variables).

Additional items will be accounted for (at both levels of analysis) when predicting responses to the knowledge questions. At the individual-level, I control for *partisan strength, income, race, gender, and level of education*. Many of these characteristics are highly predictive of political knowledge and have been widely used in previous research (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997; Lau and Redlawsk 2008).

¹² Multilevel modeling accounts for the two levels of data used to test the hypotheses. Individuals' attitudes may be influenced by individual-level characteristics, like party identification, in addition to county-level forces, like population composition. Theory supports hypothesize that a "higher level of analysis" influences "characteristics or processes at a lower level" (Luke 2004, 1).

¹³ Short scales provide reliable and valid measurements of political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993).

At level two, I control for population density and median household income by modeling the age category slopes. As discussed and demonstrated in Chapter 2, seniors differ fiscally and make different choices (with some not having any choice) for their retirement migration plans. Some choose to move to and live in retirement havens like Sumter County, Florida or Maricopa County, Arizona, while others remain in their lifetime homes in small town locations such as Woods County, Oklahoma, or Izard County, Arkansas. The active retired locations advertise their senior-living amenities and draw older residents from all over the country. Other places with concentrations of older adults often lose their younger adult residents to metropolitan areas with greater economic opportunities. These two types of aged communities often differ greatly by population density and by economic prospects. It is crucial to account for these community characteristics in the analyses given their potential for housing different populations with highly varying political dispositions.

Results

Before discussing the results for the multilevel models, Figures 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3 provide descriptive information from the NAES data on the knowledge scores for a few age categories. The thick black line represents respondents of all ages as a comparison. Figure 3.1 shows the scores for political system knowledge. As expected, a higher percentage of people in the older age groups responded correctly to 3 or 4 answers than younger age groups. Approximately 35 percent of people age 75 and older answered scored 3 out of 4 points, but only 23 percent scored the maximum of 4 points—only slightly higher than the percentage for the youngest age group.

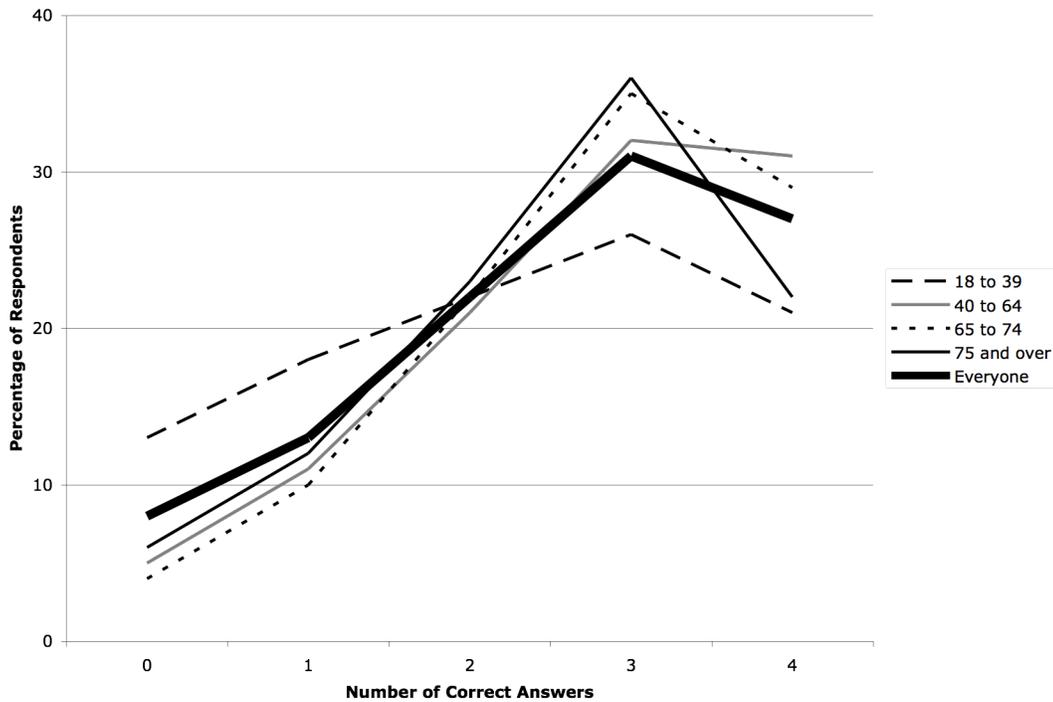


Figure 3.1 – Political System Knowledge Scores by Age Category

Figure 3.2 presents the knowledge scores for candidates' positions on a variety of issues. The age groups do not differ very much on these knowledge scores with the exception of the oldest group. Many more of the 75 and older respondents answer fewer questions correctly than the other age groups. Finally, Figure 3.3 provides the scores for the candidates' positions on senior issues in particular. The younger of the older groups, those ages 65 to 74, scored the highest on these older-age related items. Few respondents in the youngest age group and in the oldest age group achieved 3 or 4 on the senior issue knowledge index.

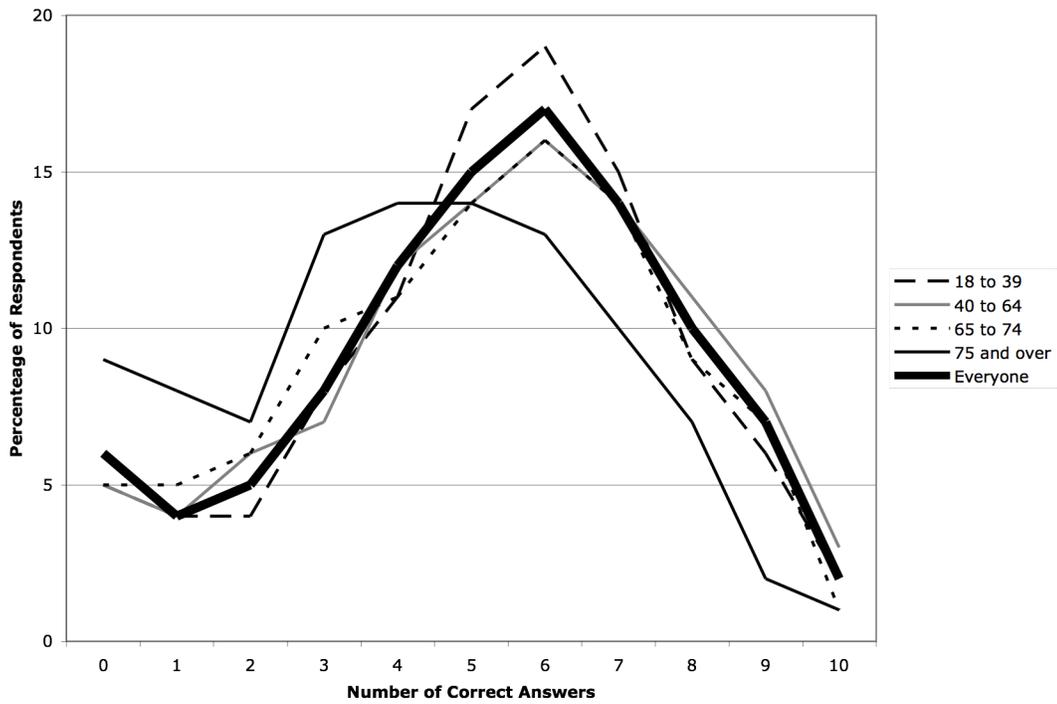


Figure 3.2 – Candidate Issue Position Scores by Age Category

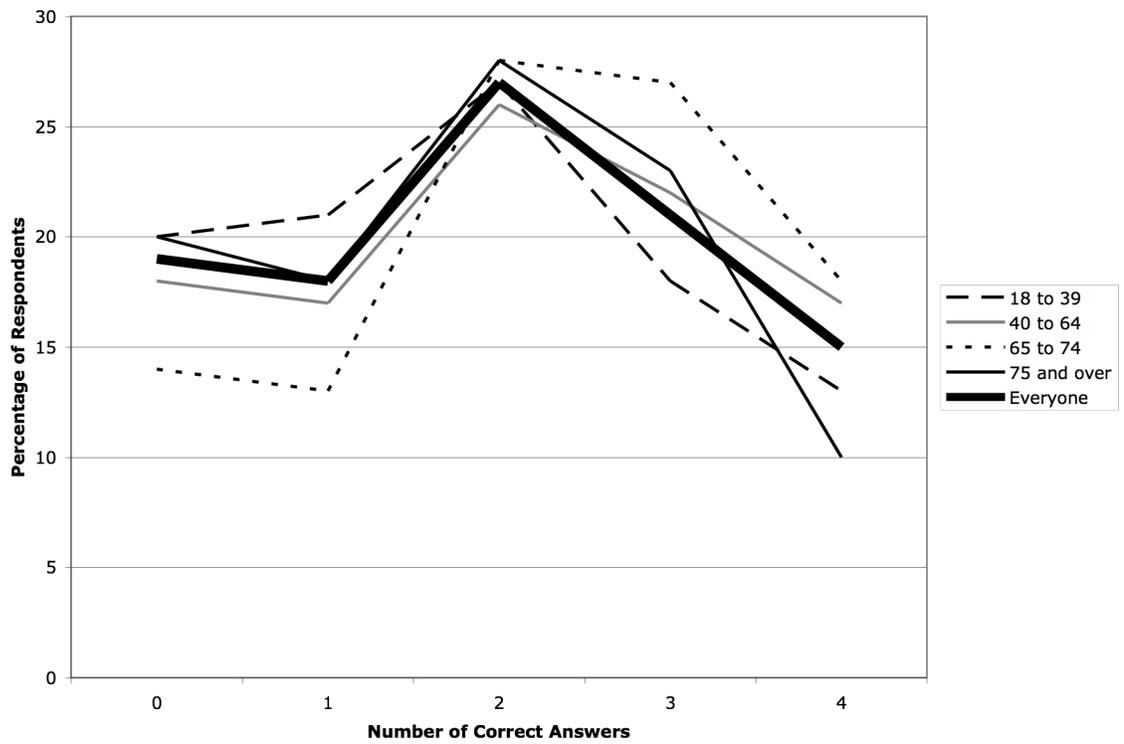


Figure 3.3 – Knowledge of Candidate Senior Issue Positions by Age Category

The descriptive figures support past research and provide additional evidence that older generations are generally more politically knowledgeable, but that this knowledge may taper into the latest years of life. In addition, the percentages of correct answers varied by the type of knowledge. It may be especially notable that 65 to 74 year olds were the highest scorers on the age-specific knowledge items. The hierarchical models provide a test for whether these relationships (between age and political knowledge) vary with the context of the local age distribution.

Table 3.1 presents the results for the hierarchical models for the three dependent variable knowledge scores with zip code-level context measures. Table 3.2 contains the same model specifications but with county population data at level 2. I discuss results for each type of knowledge index, comparing the results for the different context measures in Tables 3.1 and 3.2. First, individual income, party attachment, gender, education and race strongly predict respondents' knowledge for all the three measures. Having a high income, being strongly identified with a political party, being of male gender, having graduated from a four-year college and being white are all associated with higher scores on the three dependent variables measuring political knowledge. These results are consistent for both the zip code-level and county-level results.

Table 3.1. Zip Code HGLM Results for Knowledge Measures

	Political System Knowledge 2004 NAES	Candidate Issue Position Knowledge 2000 NAES	Candidate Senior Issue Position Knowledge 2000 NAES
<i>Level 2 variables</i>			
Intercept			
Intercept	1.013** (0.007)	1.677** (0.012)	0.714** (0.014)
Old age (65 to74) slope			
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	0.001 (0.001)	0.003 (0.002)	0.001 (0.001)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	0.002** (0.000)	0.001 (0.001)	0.003** (0.001)
OASQ	0.002* (0.001)	0.001 (0.002)	0.005* (0.002)
Old age (75 and over) slope			
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	0.001 (0.002)	0.001 (0.001)	0.002 (0.002)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	0.001* (0.001)	-0.002 (0.002)	-0.000 (0.001)
OASQ	0.001 (0.001)	-0.005 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.003)

Table 3.1. Zip Code HGLM Results for Knowledge Measures, cont.

	Political System Knowledge 2004 NAES	Candidate Issue Position Knowledge 2000 NAES	Candidate Senior Issue Position Knowledge 2000 NAES
<i>Level 1 variables</i>			
Young age	-0.145** (0.007)	0.009 (0.010)	-0.057** (0.013)
Old age (65 to 74)	-0.079* (0.028)	-0.093 (0.065)	-0.125* (0.054)
Old age (75 and over)	-0.103* (0.035)	-0.024 (0.088)	-0.001 (0.087)
Four year college degree	0.154** (0.006)	0.120** (0.011)	0.139** (0.013)
Female	-0.167** (0.005)	-0.125** (0.010)	-0.150** (0.011)
Partisan strength	0.085** (0.006)	0.116** (0.010)	0.138** (0.012)
Less than 10K	-0.309** (0.022)	-0.141** (0.025)	-0.187** (0.028)
Income 35 to 50K	-0.002 (0.008)	-0.000 (0.013)	-0.006 (0.015)
Income 50 to 75K	0.076** (0.024)	0.058** (0.012)	0.059** (0.014)
Income 150K or more	0.157** (0.008)	0.139** (0.021)	0.173** (0.022)
Nonwhite	-0.187** (0.100)	-0.027* (0.013)	-0.088** (0.016)
Level 1 N =	25,308	7,755	12,522
Level 2 N =	9,022	4,920	6,618
Reduction in error variance ¹⁴ =	0.02	0.01	0.01

Source: NAES 2000, 2004 and U.S. Census 2000, 2004 estimates;

**p<0.001 *P<0.05

¹⁴ Reduction in the error variance going from the model including only level one variables to the full model presented, which includes variables at level one and level two. This number should be interpreted in this way throughout the dissertation.

Table 3.2. County HGLM Results for Knowledge Measures

	Political System Knowledge 2004 NAES	Candidate Issue Position Knowledge 2000 NAES	Candidate Senior Issue Position Knowledge 2000 NAES
<i>Level 2 variables</i>			
Intercept			
Intercept	1.011** (0.007)	1.676** (0.013)	0.711** (0.015)
Old age (65 to74) slope			
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	0.001 (0.001)	0.004** (0.001)	0.003 (0.001)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	0.003** (0.001)	0.001 (0.002)	0.005** (0.001)
OASQ	0.004* (0.002)	-0.006 (0.004)	0.011** (0.003)
Old age (75 and over) slope			
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	0.001 (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.002)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.003)	0.002 (0.003)
OASQ	0.000 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.006)	0.006 (0.006)

Table 3.2. County HGLM Results for Knowledge Measures, cont.

	Political System Knowledge 2004 NAES	Candidate Issue Position Knowledge 2000 NAES	Candidate Senior Issue Position Knowledge 2000 NAES
<i>Level 1 variables</i>			
Young age	-0.144** (0.007)	0.009 (0.010)	-0.057** (0.012)
Old age (65 to 74)	-0.155** (0.047)	-0.016 (0.107)	-0.257* (0.088)
Old age (75 and over)	-0.070 (0.055)	-0.210 (0.194)	-0.170 (0.162)
Four year college degree	0.157** (0.005)	0.121** (0.011)	0.138** (0.013)
Female	-0.168** (0.005)	-0.126** (0.010)	-0.150** (0.012)
Partisan strength	0.085** (0.006)	0.117** (0.010)	0.139** (0.012)
Less than 10K	-0.318** (0.022)	-1.142** (0.026)	-0.184** (0.027)
Income 35 to 50K	-0.001 (0.008)	-0.001 (0.013)	-0.006 (0.016)
Income 50 to 75K	0.072** (0.007)	0.056** (0.013)	0.057** (0.014)
Income 150K or more	0.159** (0.009)	0.134** (0.021)	0.175** (0.022)
Nonwhite	-0.185** (0.011)	-0.030* (0.012)	-0.089** (0.015)
Level 1 N =	25,823	7,729	12,464
Level 2 N =	2,516	1,762	2,084
Reduction in error variance =	0.44	0.06	0.05

Source: NAES 2000, 2004 and U.S. Census 2000, 2004 estimates;

**p<0.001 *P<0.05

For political system knowledge, age can also be a good indicator. These effects are also consistent and similar for both the models with zip code contextual data and those with county contextual data. Tables 3.1 and 3.2 indicate that younger and older people have less knowledge of the political system than respondents of middle age, controlling for all of the other factors in the models. However, I am most interested in the *effect of the aged community setting* for the knowledge of older residents. To explore this effect, I model the age category slopes in the HGLM

analyses with the OASQ measures. This modeling choice allows for the comparison of the effect for older adults living in places ranging from an insignificant aged context (0%, 3%; zip code, county) to the political knowledge of their peers residing in locations with the highest proportions of older adults (83% 35%; zip code, county).

The OASQ coefficients are similar for the two types of contexts, zip codes and counties. Older adults living in elderly zip codes (and counties) have higher levels of political system knowledge than their peers living in places with fewer older adults. However, this same effect is not evident for the oldest respondents. Knowledge of the political system for people age 75 and older does not vary with the age structure of their local community.

As for substantive significance, the 65 to 74 year olds living in an aged community on average answer 0.4 more questions correctly than their peers living without the same older community (see Figure 3.4). This effect is slightly higher when using the zip code data than when using the county data, but the difference is fairly insignificant. While this increase in scores may seem small, it represents 10 percent of the total possible score. If the respondents received quiz grades for their responses, the effect would be similar to receiving a score of 90 compared with a score of 100.

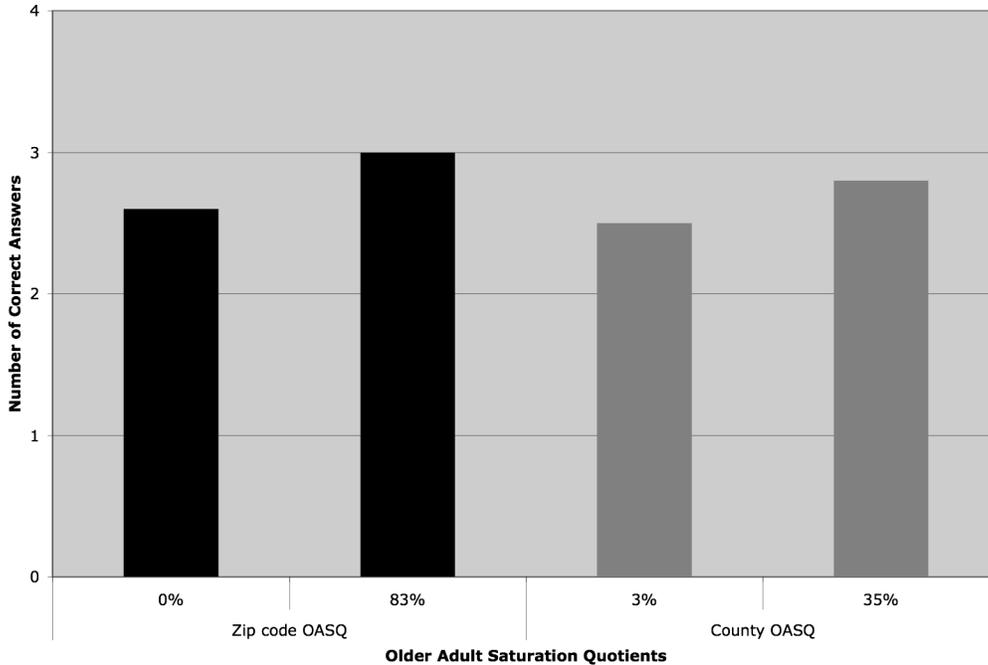


Figure 3.4 – Political System Knowledge Index Scores (for ages 65 to 74) by Old Age Distributions

The results for the models in Tables 3.1 and 3.2 predicting knowledge of candidates’ issue positions are also comparable. Overall, age and the age context are not good indicators for knowledge of the candidates’ positions, controlling for all of the other factors. Figure 3.5 shows substantive results, and the direction of the relationship changes, based on the level of context considered. The positive effect is pretty small for the zip code models, but the negative relationship is sizeable for the county model. When considering the larger land area with more diverse populations, there is about a 10% drop in candidate issue position knowledge for 65 to 74 year olds living in places with very few older adults to places where one out of every three people is elderly. Results may be more easily understood when measuring respondents’ knowledge of candidates’ positions for *aging-related* issues alone.

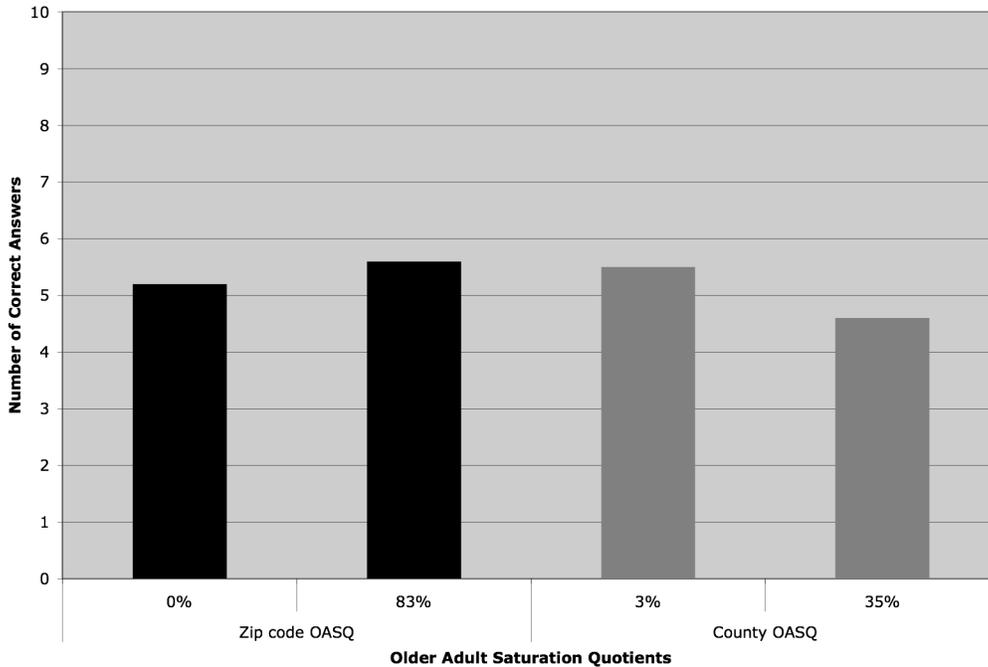


Figure 3.5 – Candidate Issue Position Knowledge Index Scores (for ages 65 to 74) by Old Age Distributions

Once again, results are consistent across the two context measures in the two tables. Younger and older adults have less knowledge of the aging related issues, when controlling for all of the other factors. However, the OASQ coefficient is significantly positive when modeled on the slope for the younger of the old age categories, age 65 to 74. Figure 3.6 shows the substantive effect. People age 65 to 74 who live among large numbers of their peers, relative to people of other ages, answer approximately one more additional question (out of 4) correctly than their peers in locations without the aged community.

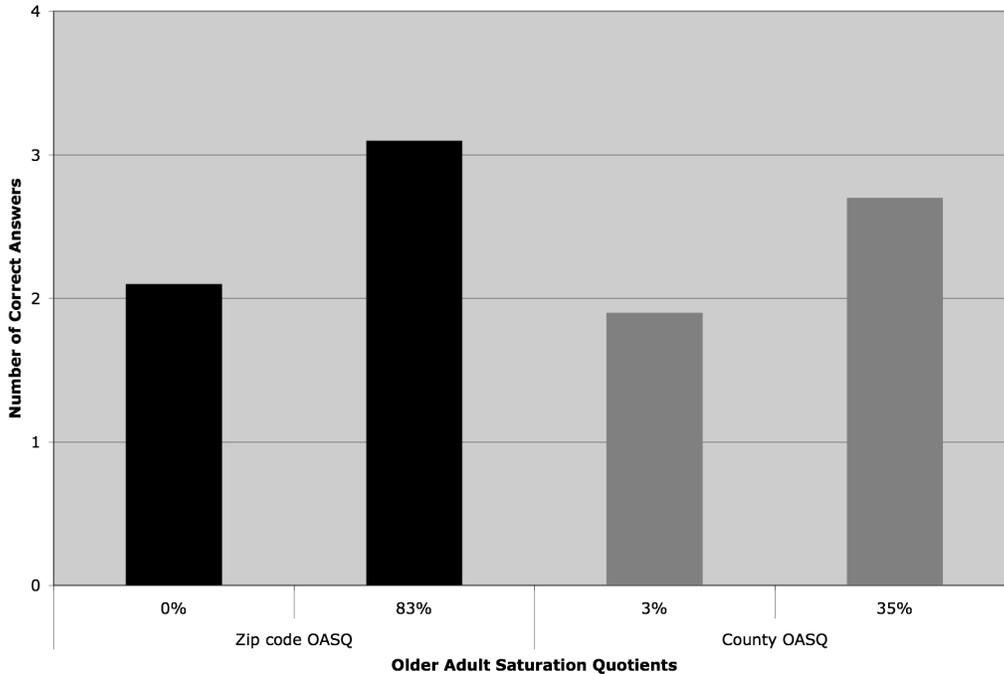


Figure 3.6 – Candidate Senior Issue Position Knowledge Index Scores (for ages 65 to 74) by Old Age Distributions

This would be like going from a 75 on an exam to a grade of 100. Again, the effect is just a small amount greater for the zip code model but only slightly larger. However, as with the measure of political system knowledge, the same effect is not observed for the oldest age group of people, aged 75 and older.

Discussion

The findings show that living in an older adult community is associated with greater levels of political knowledge for older residents—with some caveats. First, the oldest residents, those age 75 and over, did not receive the same boost to their political cognition as the younger aged group, those between the ages of 65 and 74. Second, the old-age context effect was not evident for every type of political

knowledge examined. Knowledge of the political system and knowledge of candidates' positions on senior citizen-related issues were both influenced by an environment produced by an aging community, but this same effect was not found for knowledge of candidates' positions on a wider variety of issues.

The first qualification is fully in line with the hypotheses proposed earlier in the chapter. The decline of political cognition, using a number of political knowledge measures, among those of the most advanced ages has been well-documented in recent years (Lau and Redlawsk 2006, 2008; Riggle and Johnson 1996). Although aging neighborhoods have been shown to delay or prevent the onset of dementia in older adults (Clarke et al. 2011), the proposed mechanisms involve being integrated with a social network of peers and participation in activities provided by the widely available senior-focuses resources (Clarke et al. 2011; Fratiglioni, Paillard-Borg, and Winblad 2004; Fratiglioni et al. 2000). Even with cognition intact later in older adulthood, the oldest of the old are more likely to be frail due to a combination of limitations and ailments associated with advanced aging (Hamerman 1999). These impairments compromise the autonomy of the oldest members of society and leave fewer opportunities for social interaction that would encourage the maintenance of or prevent decline in political cognition (Hebert 1997).

As for the second addendum, the findings fully support two out of the three hypotheses. Lau and Redlawsk (2008) showed different sized effects for a few types of political memories. They find that age has less of an effect for shorter-term candidate memories, compared with memories rooted in a lifetime of political

experience. The present study made the same prediction for the aged context effect on political knowledge of candidates' issue positions but found no relationship.

However, this chapter makes an important contribution to the past work by examining political knowledge especially relevant for older adults. The findings indicate that knowledge of candidates' positions on issues specific to the concerns of senior citizens is greater among 65 to 74 years olds in aged communities. These results make intuitive sense and may provide additional insight for the underlying mechanisms of the aged context. Older adults living in places with very large older populations may be the target of interest groups focused on aging concerns and/or campaigns wanting to mobilize seniors based on these issues. Older residents in these contexts likely have greater opportunities for acquiring information on these issues. Even less politically interested older adults may not be able to ignore the older-favored information supply (Huckfeldt 1986). They learn about these age-specific candidate positions simply by living in a place with an older cognitive content (Burbank 1995).

These findings contribute to the study of 1) the maintenance of political knowledge into older adulthood and 2) the impact of an aging community for cognition—which seems to be enhanced by bringing them together. In sum, an aged context is associated with the political cognition of individual residents. These findings are encouraging as the country's population grays and as communities are increasingly home to overwhelming numbers of senior citizens. The aged contexts may act as political knowledge preservers, encouraging political engagement into retirement age. These communities may be particularly important for socializing their

younger citizens into politically active dispositions, supporting democratic government well into the future.

This work supports the ongoing research showing that older communities may influence a host of political experiences, attitudes, and behaviors of the locales—as I will test in the next three chapters. The observed relationships are statistically significant and substantively important and quite robust, with very similar effects across two different measures of context. While the models indicate that individual characteristics still play a very large explanatory role when predicting levels of political knowledge, the aged context also counts.

Chapter 4: Social Welfare Policy Attitudes in Aged Communities

Introduction

Political issues often divide Americans based on cleavages associated with partisan identification, gender, education, wealth, and—age. While it isn't uncommon to find the values of older people clashing with younger generations, the age distribution of the United States is undergoing rapid change and so are predictions about intergenerational division. The mounting numbers of older Americans have provoked discussions among journalists and academics of a persistent and possibly widening gap between older and younger adults with the potential to widen the scope of intergenerational political conflict (Alwin 1998; Binstock 2010; Campbell 1971; Foner 1974; Logan and Spitze 1995; Plutzer and M. B. Berkman 2005; Ponza et al. 1988; Rhodebeck 1993; Street 1997; Streib and Metsch 2002; Walker 1990; Weaver 1976).

According to contemporary reports, today's younger generations may fear for their economic futures as they face the burden of figuring out how (and whether) to pay for the needs of a growing older adult population (Levine 1997; Nagourney 2009). Older adults may fear cuts to social welfare programs like Social Security and Medicare as the Baby Boomer Generation is now entering retirement (Navarro 1996; LA Times Editorial Desk 2011). With the current national debt crisis, looming cuts to entitlement programs, and the partisan clash over whether to raise taxes it is not surprising that older adults may be concerned about their health and financial

security. However, it is the argument of some and for this chapter that much of the apprehension associated with the potential for intergenerational conflict over dismantling the institutional safety net has been exaggerated (Binstock 2010; Schulz and Binstock 2008; Walker 1990).

This chapter addresses the question of whether older adults should be concerned about their future health care needs and financial security by examining how public opinion toward aging and more broadly, social welfare policies varies geographically with a location's age composition. Locations with large concentrations of older adults serve as ideal places to examine these issue attitudes and the potential for intergenerational conflict. I use multilevel modeling, as in the previous chapter, to assess the relationship between the age distribution of the community and whether the aged context in particular is associated with attitudes uniquely supportive of safety net policies.

Past research has put forth evidence for the relationship between a location's age distribution and political preferences of residents, even after considering the individual age of residents. For example, social scientists have considered the impact of large elderly concentrations on willingness to pay taxes for education (Button 1992; Deller and Walzer 1993; Fullerton and Dixon 2010; MacManus 1996; Plutzer and M. B. Berkman 2005; Poterba 1997; Rhodebeck 1993). Others are concerned about the age structure as it relates to the health of elderly residents and the health of the larger community (Cagney 2006; Subramanian et al. 2006). Moreover, the responsibility of caring for an aging population is likely to be far more visible in those locations where there are large elderly-to-young ratios. Thus, it makes sense

that we would expect the age composition of communities to influence residents' opinions for such age-specific policy areas as health and financial security.

It is not entirely clear how residing in an aged context will influence the public support of such programs for residents who are not themselves elderly. Certainly we have reason to expect that older adults living amongst their peers may be especially aware, mobilized and active regarding support for safety net programs. This older adult context may socialize young people into similar supportive attitudes in a number of ways. For instance, younger residents may acquire an extra awareness of the immense needs of their older neighbors by living near them and feel moved to support programs that provide some assistance. It is also possible that they begin to think about their own aging and the programs they want in place as they gain understanding of the challenges faced by the elderly. Finally, young adults in their 20s and 30s often have their hands full with career responsibilities or raising children, and thereby view government programming for the elderly as a much needed relief.

On the other hand, there may also be increased tensions between an overwhelming older adult presence and the minority of younger residents in these communities. Older people sometimes face age-based discrimination and stereotyping (Garstka, Hummert, and Branscombe 2005; Harwood and Giles 1996). Stories of age discrimination in employment, and elder abuse in assisted living facilities are regularly in the news. There are dire predictions of a new politics of age polarization (Rosenbaum and Button 1993) and research on age-based controversies (Moody 2009) ranging from the rationing of health care to euthanasia to retirement age to the future of Social Security.

Social Welfare Attitudes in the United States

Social welfare programs have become an integral part of American government and society since the New Deal laid the foundation for and the Great Society further expanded upon a social safety net. While public support for expansion of government assistance through social welfare programs dipped during the Reagan Administration it rebounded in the next two decades (McCall and Kenworthy 2009; Shapiro and Young 1989). Presently, the country's current economic state is being linked to government spending and a mammoth national debt due in part to entitlement programs. These conditions have generated a resurgence of antigovernment attitudes, yet old-age benefits generally maintain their "safe harbor" status as popular government policies (Schulz and Binstock 2008, 16–17).

While many programs have become institutionalized, including programs which benefit older people, a discussion of attitudes toward social welfare policies must address the complex, push-and-pull nature of the American creed: equality versus liberty. A distinction needs to be made between support for programs and support for *government*-directed programs. Many Americans are sympathetic to the needs of the poor and elderly, but this humanitarianism may not extend to support for policies that include federal government intervention (Feldman and Steenbergen 2001; Free and Cantril 1968; McCall and Kenworthy 2009; McClosky and Zaller 1987). Political ideology and partisanship direct Americans' preferences for social welfare programs with race and socioeconomic status also highly associated with opinion (Brady and Kessler 2010; Shapiro and Young 1989).

Even with the constraint of political ideology, public opinion surveys have shown support to be quite high¹⁵ for actual social welfare policies among Americans (Cook and Barrett 1992; Feldman and Steenbergen 2001; Free and Cantril 1968; McClosky and Zaller 1987; Shapiro and Young 1989; E. Smith and Kluegel 1986). When people are most dissatisfied with inequality, they are also most likely to support social welfare policies with the aim of equalizing the balance—even after accounting for survey respondents’ partisanship, ideology, and sociodemographic characteristics (McCall and Kenworthy 2009).

Generational Safety Net Preferences

While social welfare policy opinion is divided by political ideology and partisanship, it may be unsurprising that the young and old respondents often express different viewpoints when it comes to social welfare policies. In general, younger adults are more supportive of safety net policies than older adults (Shapiro and Young 1989). During the period of Shapiro and Young’s (1989) work, younger generations were more supportive of nearly every social welfare policy examined despite being

¹⁵ It should be noted that more Americans likely favor such policies than may be evident in public opinion surveys. While public opinion surveys are immensely helpful in sorting out support for social welfare programs, findings should be interpreted with caution. The natural supporters of many of these policies—the poor, less educated, and those supporting principles of political equality—are “less easily able to form coherent and consistent opinions on such policies than those well-endowed with politically relevant resources” (Berinsky 2002, 277). These respondents may answer “don’t know” or “unsure” to complex policy questions when they actually prefer government assistance. This phenomenon leads to an “exclusion bias” in opinion for safety net issues.

socialized during the Reagan years, a period with increased antigovernment sentiment.

Zukin et al. (2006, 157) provide a more contemporary look at the DotNet generation of youth, finding them to be committed to the “same basic and often contradictory American values of democratic government, egalitarianism, and free market economy as the rest of the public.” As with young generations in history, they find that today’s young people generally support a social safety net, in the form of government health insurance for the uninsured and are more supportive of policies aiming to reduce the gap between rich and poor people. Younger Americans were more likely to favor the recent health care reform legislation than older adults (Brady and Kessler 2010), however, young adults comprise the age group with the greatest likelihood of being uninsured (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and J. C. Smith 2009). Support for government health care may also be popular among younger generations as they face the challenge of providing for their aging parents and grandparents (Shapiro and Young 1989). These explanations suggest that younger Americans’ views on government support for the elderly are likely consistent with their self-interest.

On the other end of the age spectrum, opposition to health care reform among older adults is surprising given their increasing health care costs, compared with younger people (Brady and Kessler 2010; Schulz and Binstock 2008). Their opposition may be due to hesitancy toward major policy changes rather than the specifics of the health care reform debate (Brady and Kessler 2010). In addition, older people as a group may not always express safety net policy preferences congruent

with popular expectations regarding aging interests ((Rhodebeck 1993; Schulz and Binstock 2008; Street 1997). And, as mentioned above, income and partisanship shape social welfare policy preferences of the elderly as with Americans of all ages (Schulz and Binstock 2008).

Finally, young people today are not wholly supportive of social welfare policy—they are not as supportive of increased spending for Social Security as older generations (Zukin et al. 2006). The 21st Century's youngest adult cohorts were socialized during a period, in the early 2000s, where the future of Social Security came into question and with privatization on the political agenda. Some explanations for such viewpoints suggest that young people may support privatization for Social Security because 1) they have little hope that the current program will benefit them in the future; and/or 2) they are more confident in their ability (and have the luxury of time) to invest their money wisely to save for retirement (Zukin et al. 2006).

Young people may be unsympathetic to government support for the aged simply because they have little first-hand knowledge about the challenges faced by older adults. Many young adults generally have little contact with older adults and probably rarely think about aging. Their communities may be absent the kind of contact with older adults that might influence their public opinion in a more supportive direction toward the current benefits of Social Security and Medicare. I suggest that the attitudes of young people living among high concentrations of older adults, with more routine exposure to the needs of the (often poor) elderly are more likely to understand the challenges of becoming old and will express more pro-

government attitudes for safety net issues than their peers living elsewhere without the similar aged context.

Theorizing about the Impact of the Aged Context on Safety Net Attitudes

Locations with skewed age compositions deserve attention in political socialization research because the social context of a community has been shown to influence residents' political attitudes and behaviors (Books and Prysby 1991; Brown 1988; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Huckfeldt 1986; Key 1949; Miller 1956). As discussed in Chapter 1, communities with large populations of older adults relative to the number of younger residents have the potential to influence political attitudes of not just older residents, but residents of *all* ages.

I am especially interested in whether the older adult context will make an impression on the attitudes of younger adults. Young adults may be more likely to support most social welfare policies in general, but conventional wisdom suggests the potential for intergenerational conflict when people begin to perceive the burden of a sizable older adult presence. Current communities with an overabundance of older people relative to younger people provide an appropriate test for this theory of political division.

There are a couple of possible mechanisms for this contextual influence:¹⁶

¹⁶ These mechanisms are discussed at length in the work of Huckfeldt (1986) and Burbank (1995). Also, a brief description is provided in Chapter 1.

1. Younger adults will be socialized into more or less supportive attitudes (compared with their peers in other locations) by the older adult context through more frequent *social contact with older adults*.
2. Younger adults will be socialized into more or less supportive attitudes (compared with their peers in other locations) by the older adult context through the *older adult-focused cognitive content* uniquely available in the older adult community, even without regular social interaction with elders.

The first scenario supposes that younger adults are socialized into more or less supportive attitudes through increased opportunities for contact with older adults in the community (Burbank 1995; Huckfeldt 1986). Intergroup contact with an “other” group has the potential to warm the opinion of one group toward another group and their policy preferences (Barth, Overby, and Huffmon 2009; Dovidio, Gaertner, and Kawakami 2003; Pettigrew 1997; Stein, Post, and Rinden 2000).

There are a number of reasons why it is unlikely that social contact is the primary mechanism at work. First, although social context constrains social contacts (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995), making it more likely that younger adults will come into contact with older adults in these neighborhoods, it is more likely that this increased contact is very casual rather than personal in nature (Williams and Nussbaum 2001). Aside from family members, the social circles of young adults and older adults rarely overlap. In addition, this mechanism presumes that older adults have cohesive social welfare policy preferences that will influence younger adults in the direction of support or opposition. Even with the potential for increased awareness of common political interests in older communities, older adults living

among many of their peers are still likely to belong to diverse associations and are probably not facing direct opposition or threats to services that may motivate them to action (Binstock 2010; Rhodebeck 1993; Weaver 1976).

The second proposed mechanism is more likely occurring in older adult contexts. Context not only constrains social contexts but also constrains information supply, which leans toward the preferences of the majority group in society (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). The minority group, younger adults, cannot escape the information flow (from local media and political party or interest group mobilization efforts, for example) with the older population as the primary target. Similarly, Burbank's (1995) research shows that information bias in community heights residents' sensitivity to relevant cues—in this case, cues relevant to the overriding concerns of the elderly for health and financial security. This means that young adults living and still being socialized in places as different as Sarasota County, Florida and McPherson County, South Dakota will have at least one thing in common—the aged context. They may be physically surrounded by their aged neighbors and inundated by aged-related content in the media, providing them a unique education on the challenges faced in older adulthood.

Consideration of contextual effects research and social welfare policy attitudes among the young point toward a hypothesis suggesting that *younger adults living in a context of older adults will be even more supportive of social welfare policies than their peers living elsewhere*. Young people may be much more likely to be sensitive to aging concerns in older concentrated communities with abundant age-relevant cognitive content. Although the content will speak to a diverse population of

older adults, information will likely lean in favor of policies, which support the health and security needs of the elderly and poor. Any information in support of such policies will be congruent with the generally supportive attitudes common among young people. For those young people with more conservative preferences, the aging cognitive content may promote humanitarianism, which “makes it possible for people to support specific welfare policies without embracing the welfare state as an alternative to capitalism” (Feldman and Steenbergen 2001, 674).

Data and Methods

The National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) data from 2000, 2004, and 2008 provide a useful selection of safety net attitudinal measures for individual residents. United States Census data from 2000, 2004, and 2008 are used for the county-level measure of the old age context¹⁷, the older adult saturation quotient (OASQ). As with the previous chapters and throughout the dissertation, I divide the local population of people age 65 and older by the total local population for the OASQ measure.

All of the dependent variables are dichotomous, so hierarchical generalized linear regression (HGLM) is used to model the relationship between the older age distributions at the county level and the health and security issue attitudes of

¹⁷ In the previous chapter, I present results using county and zip code measures of context. Results were very consistent for the Chapter 3 results and continued to be for this and later chapters. I present county-level results here because the number of survey respondents residing in each county is greater than for the zip code measure. This leads to greater variation within each level 2 unit, ensuring more confidence in results. The author may provide the zip code-level results upon request.

individual community residents. The dependent variables measure attitudes related to healthcare, social security, and wealth inequality (see Appendix 4.1 for the list of questions and wording). Additional items will be accounted for (at both levels of analysis) when predicting responses to the health and security questions. At the individual-level, I control for *party identification*, *income*, and *race*. Many of these characteristics are quite predictive of safety net policy attitudes or political attitudes more generally (Berinsky 2002; Schneider and Jacoby 2005) and should be considered to gauge the impact of age context. As with the previous chapter, I also control for population density and median household income to account for some of the major differences between various aged communities.

Results

Tables 4.1a, 4.1b, 4.2, and 4.3 present the coefficients for the 10 dependent variables measuring health and security attitudes from three years of survey data. Each of the hierarchical models uses county-level demographic data at level 2 and individual measures from the NAES. Table 4.1a and Table 4.1b contain the HGLM results from 2000, and Tables 4.2 and 4.3 provide results from 2004 and 2008, respectively. As expected, individual party identification and household income strongly predict respondents' positions on issues of health and financial security.

Age is also often a good indicator of these attitudes, however both young adulthood and older adulthood are not consistently predicting attitudes fully supporting or fully opposing policies to provide a wider safety net for the vulnerable population. However, I am most interested in the *effect of the aged community setting*

for the attitudes of older and younger generations of residents. To explore this effect, I model the older and younger age slopes in the HGLM analyses with the OASQ measure. Modeling these slopes allows for the comparison of the effect for younger adults living in places ranging from a miniscule aged context¹⁸ to the attitudes of their peers living in places with an overwhelming aged context.¹⁹ The same comparison will be made for the older adult populations across the range of age distributions.

¹⁸ The lowest OASQs, the proportions of older adults to the total population, differ with the year but fall in the range of 0.016 to 0.02.

¹⁹ The highest OASQs differ with the year but fall in the range of 0.36 to 0.50.

Table 4.1a. HGLM Results for Health and Security Attitudes in 2000

	Spend More Medicare 2000	Health Insurance Problem 2000	Spend More on Health Insurance 2000
<i>Level 2 variables</i>			
Intercept			
Intercept	1.001** (0.030)	2.443** (0.047)	0.968** (0.023)
Young age slope			
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	0.005 (0.004)	0.016* (0.005)	0.003 (0.004)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	-0.006* (0.002)	-0.005 (0.004)	0.002 (0.002)
OASQ	0.013 (0.008)	0.043** (0.013)	0.016* (0.006)
Old age (65 to 74) slope			
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	0.023** (0.007)	0.022 (0.014)	0.008 (0.005)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	-0.006 (0.005)	0.004 (0.008)	0.004 (0.004)
OASQ	0.013 (0.012)	0.059* (0.021)	0.035** (0.009)
Old age (75 and above) slope			
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	0.012 (0.018)	0.072 (0.070)	0.032* (0.014)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	0.013 (0.008)	0.029 (0.017)	0.019** (0.005)
OASQ	0.027 (0.017)	0.030 (0.031)	0.017 (0.013)

Table 4.1a. HGLM Results for Health and Security Attitudes in 2000, cont.

	Spend More Medicare 2000	Health Insurance Problem 2000	Spend More on Health Insurance 2000
<i>Level 1 variables</i>			
Young age	-0.059 (0.172)	-0.468 (0.254)	-0.465** (0.128)
Old age (65 to 74)	-0.491 (0.317)	-1.142* (0.519)	-0.979** (0.237)
Old age (75 and above)	-1.724** (0.459)	-1.754 (0.936)	-1.585** (0.324)
Republican	-0.676** (0.034)	-0.863** (0.048)	-0.947** (0.024)
Income less than 10K	0.780** (0.080)	0.495** (0.125)	0.667** (0.049)
Income 10 to 15K	0.584** (0.076)	0.528** (0.124)	0.541** (0.050)
Income 15 to 25K	0.558** (0.056)	0.589** (0.090)	0.448** (0.037)
Income 25 to 35K	0.297** (0.048)	0.530** (0.078)	0.304** (0.032)
Income 100 to 150K	-0.355** (0.059)	-0.215* (0.085)	-0.135* (0.044)
Income 150K or more	-0.422** (0.072)	-0.535** (0.090)	-0.210** (0.048)
Nonwhite	0.480** (0.061)	0.250* (0.079)	0.425** (0.039)
Level 1 N =	20,661	20,717	45,200
Level 2 N =	2,445	2,446	2,777
Reduction in error variance =	0.17	0.27	0.16

Source: NAES 2000 and U.S. Census 2000; **p<0.001 *P<0.05

Table 4.1b. HGLM Results for Health and Security Attitudes in 2000

	Oppose Soc Sec in Stock Market 2000	Poverty a Problem 2000	Favor Reducing Inc Diffs 2000
<i>Level 2 variables</i>			
Intercept			
Intercept	-0.357** (0.028)	1.656** (0.024)	-0.081* (0.030)
Young age slope			
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	0.007* (0.002)	0.013** (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	-0.003 (0.002)	-0.004* (0.002)	-0.000 (0.002)
OASQ	0.011 (0.008)	0.012 (0.007)	0.032** (0.007)
Old age (65 to 74) slope			
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	0.000 (0.005)	0.022* (0.011)	0.004 (0.007)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	0.008 (0.005)	-0.002 (0.004)	0.001 (0.005)
OASQ	0.026* (0.012)	0.018 (0.009)	-0.002 (0.013)
Old age (75 and above) slope			
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	0.000 (0.008)	0.028 (0.016)	0.045* (0.020)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	-0.004 (0.007)	0.013* (0.006)	0.007 (0.008)
OASQ	0.011 (0.015)	-0.001 (0.013)	-0.007 (0.018)

Table 4.1b. HGLM Results for Health and Security Attitudes in 2000, cont.

	Oppose Soc Sec in Stock Market 2000	Poverty a Problem 2000	Favor Reducing Inc Diffs 2000
<i>Level 1 variables</i>			
Young age	-0.497* (0.171)	-0.062 (0.140)	-0.125 (0.164)
Old age (65 to 74)	-0.176 (0.300)	-0.440 (0.259)	-0.358 (0.329)
Old age (75 and above)	0.802* (0.404)	-1.029* (0.347)	-0.670 (0.490)
Republican	-0.696** (0.034)	-0.660** (0.025)	-0.755** (0.034)
Income less than 10K	0.438** (0.059)	0.262** (0.056)	0.875** (0.073)
Income 10 to 15K	0.401** (0.060)	0.379** (0.058)	0.693** (0.066)
Income 15 to 25K	0.345** (0.045)	0.292** (0.040)	0.636** (0.050)
Income 25 to 35K	0.227** (0.041)	0.283** (0.037)	0.384** (0.043)
Income 100 to 150K	-0.275** (0.057)	-0.222** (0.044)	-0.478** (0.060)
Income 150K or more	-0.408** (0.083)	-0.343** (0.054)	-0.830** (0.087)
Nonwhite	0.049 (0.039)	0.001 (0.040)	0.453** (0.041)
Level 1 N =	23,942	48,606	20,067
Level 2 N =	2,500	2,808	2,417
Reduction in error variance =	0.08	0.22	0.12

Source: NAES 2000 and U.S. Census 2000; **p<0.001 *P<0.05

Table 4.2. HGLM Results for Health and Security Attitudes in 2004

	Spend More on Health Insurance 2004	Favor Reducing Income Diffs 2004
<i>Level 2 variables</i>		
Intercept		
Intercept	1.354** (0.037)	0.754** (0.025)
Young age slope		
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	0.011* (0.005)	0.003 (0.002)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	0.001 (0.003)	0.000 (0.002)
OASQ	0.034** (0.010)	0.023* (0.007)
Old age (65 to 74) slope		
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	0.000 (0.004)	0.003 (0.005)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	0.001 (0.005)	0.009* (0.004)
OASQ	-0.009 (0.015)	0.014 (0.011)
Old age (75 and above) slope		
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	0.024 (0.024)	-0.010 (0.007)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	0.010 (0.006)	0.010* (0.005)
OASQ	0.022 (0.014)	0.030* (0.010)

Table 4.2. HGLM Results for Health and Security Attitudes in 2004, cont.

	Spend More on Health Insurance 2004	Favor Reducing Income Diffs 2004
<i>Level 1 variables</i>		
Young age	-0.539* (0.233)	-0.084 (0.153)
Old age (65 to 74)	-0.327 (0.363)	-0.886** (0.0268)
Old age (75 and above)	-1.431** (0.398)	-1.086** (0.298)
Republican	-1.151** (0.036)	-0.993** (0.026)
Income less than 10K	0.789** (0.099)	0.214** (0.061)
Income 10 to 15K	0.814** (0.093)	0.323** (0.063)
Income 15 to 25K	0.617** (0.069)	0.312** (0.051)
Income 25 to 35K	0.346** (0.056)	0.166** (0.038)
Income 100 to 150K	-0.295** (0.055)	-0.466** (0.041)
Income 150K or more	-0.298** (0.074)	-0.541** (0.052)
Nonwhite	0.514** (0.058)	0.129** (0.038)
Level 1 N =	18,551	31,941
Level 2 N =	2,335	2,611
Reduction in error variance =	0.13	0.10

Source: NAES 2004; **p<0.001 *P<0.05

Table 4.3. HGLM Results for Health Attitudes in 2008

	Favor Govt Health Insurance 2008	Favor Regulation of Health Industry 2008
<i>Level 2 variables</i>		
Intercept		
Intercept	0.330** (0.027)	0.224** (0.031)
Young age slope		
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	0.006 (0.004)	0.003 (0.004)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	-0.002 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.003)
OASQ	0.014 (0.010)	0.011 (0.010)
Old age (65 to 74) slope		
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	0.011* (0.004)	0.009* (0.005)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	0.012** (0.003)	0.003 (0.004)
OASQ	0.029** (0.008)	-0.004 (0.011)
Old age (75 and above) slope		
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	0.001 (0.007)	-0.011* (0.004)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	0.009* (0.004)	-0.001 (0.005)
OASQ	-0.003 (0.011)	0.005 (0.015)

Table 4.3. HGLM Results for Health Attitudes in 2008, cont.

	Favor Govt Health Insurance 2008	Favor Regulation of Health Industry 2008
<i>Level 1 variables</i>		
Young age	0.046 (0.209)	0.052 (0.222)
Old age (65 to 74)	-1.349** (0.225)	-0.101 (0.274)
Old age (75 and above)	-0.848* (0.285)	0.105 (0.365)
Republican	-1.398** (0.033)	-0.654** (0.039)
Income less than 10K	0.371** (0.076)	0.091 (0.087)
Income 10 to 15K	0.407** (0.076)	0.047 (0.089)
Income 15 to 25K	0.449** (0.055)	0.045 (0.069)
Income 25 to 35K	0.310** (0.052)	0.087 (0.061)
Income 100 to 150K	-0.259** (0.046)	-0.140* (0.049)
Income 150K or more	-0.342** (0.049)	-0.265** (0.054)
Nonwhite	0.362** (0.045)	0.032 (0.045)
Level 1 N =	24,081	15,986
Level 2 N =	2,481	2,212
Reduction in error variance =	0.08	-0.02

Source: NAES 2008 and U.S. Census 2010; **p<0.001 *P<0.05

A glance at the OASQ coefficients indicates that the aged context may be more relevant for the safety net attitudes of younger people than for the older respondents. However, predicted probabilities will aid in the interpretation of the effect of the aged community setting for older and younger adult residents. Figure 4.1 presents the predicted probabilities of support for a wider health care safety net among younger adults nested in counties across the nation. For each of these issues,

younger adults living in places amongst large percentages of older adults are more likely to favor a wider safety net. Young adults surrounded by a large aged population are particularly more likely to support government health insurance (by about 15 to 20 percentage points) compared with people of similar age living in places with fewer older adults.

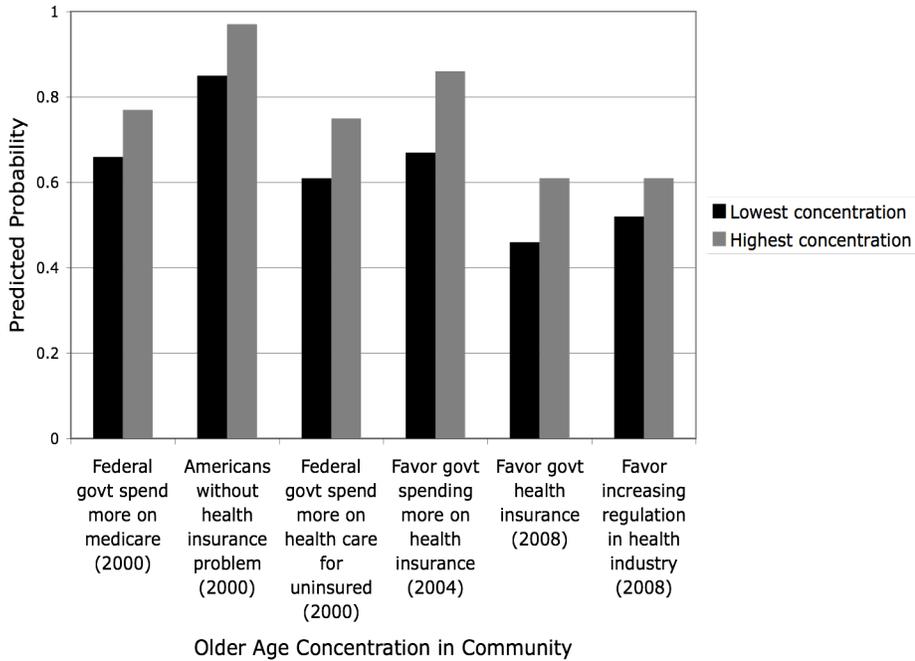


Figure 4.1 – Predicted Probability of Reporting Health Attitudes Among Younger Adults by the Proportion of Older Adults Living in a County

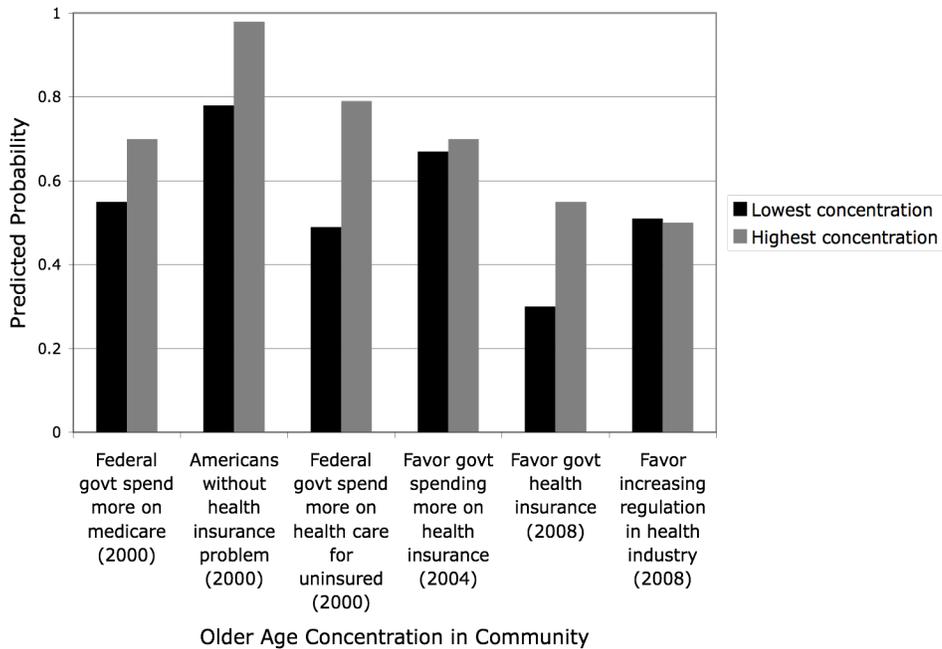


Figure 4.2 – Predicted Probability of Reporting Health Attitudes Among Older Adults by the Proportion of Older Adults Living in a County

Figure 4.2 highlights a similar pattern of results for older adults’ health attitudes, although with more variable effects, depending on the question or year asked. In 2004, the aged context did not seem to influence attitudes much for the older adults (age 65 to 74). Older adults living in aged contexts were just as likely to favor government spending more on health insurance as their peers living in places without the same context. The same non-effect is also apparent for health care industry regulation attitudes. On the other hand, the aged context effects for the older adults are larger than for the younger residents for some measures of support. Older residents living amongst their peers may be especially concerned about Americans without health insurance when compared with their peers living elsewhere.

Figures 4.3 and 4.4 present the predicted probabilities for the financial security positions of the young and old, respectively. As indicated in Figure 4.3, younger adults living amongst overwhelming older populations are, again, more

likely to fall on the side of a larger government safety net for vulnerable populations than their peers living elsewhere. The aged context has a large effect on young people’s attitudes on reducing income differences. Those living among high concentrations of elderly people are around 20 percentage points more likely to agree that the federal government should do something to reduce these inequalities.

Younger people living in aged contexts are also more likely to oppose investing Social Security in the stock market. However, the predicted probabilities of opposing this potential Social Security reform are the lowest among all of the safety net policies examined here for the young respondents. This is consistent with past surveys showing the willingness of younger adults to support such changes to the current system. Finally, the aged context has a much smaller effect for young people and their thinking about poverty as a serious problem.

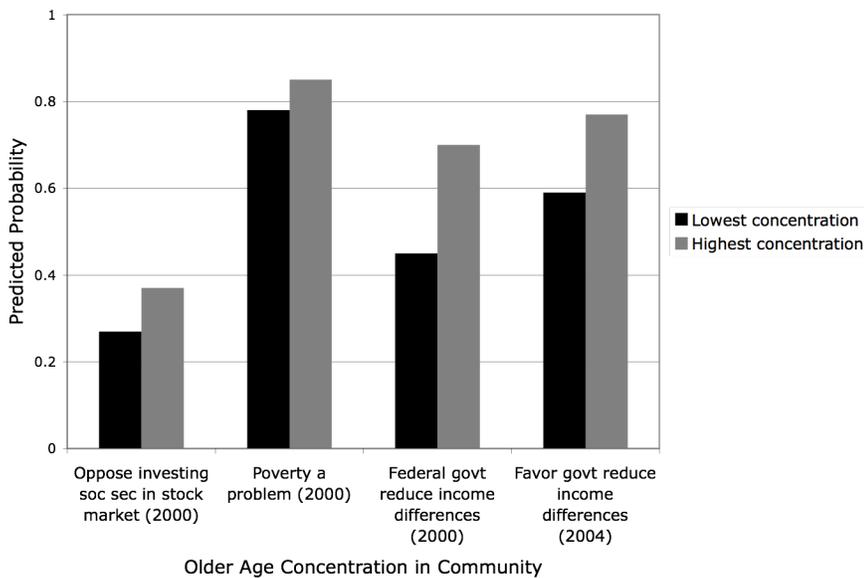


Figure 4.3 – Predicted Probability of Reporting Financial Security Attitudes Among Younger Adults by the Proportion of Older Adults Living in a County

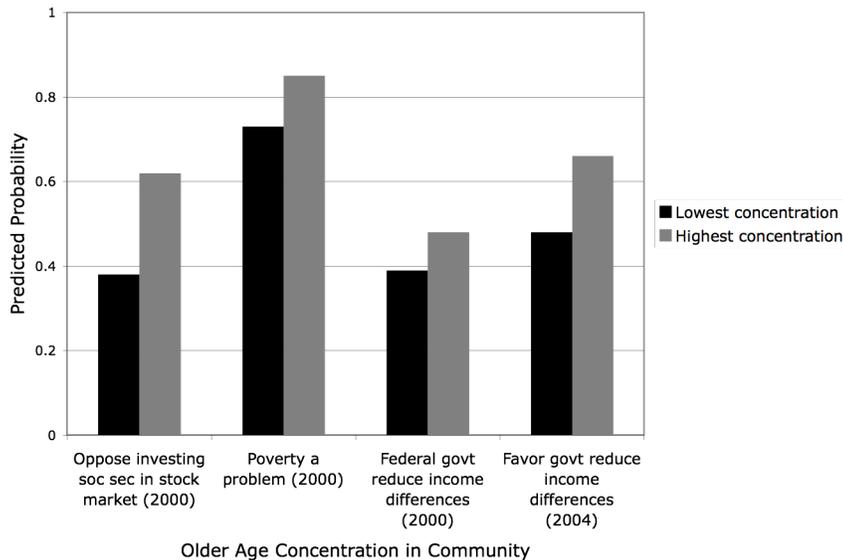


Figure 4.4 – Predicted Probability of Reporting Financial Security Attitudes Among Older Adults by the Proportion of Older Adults Living in a County

Similarly but with a greater effect, older adults living amongst their peers are notably more likely to oppose social security in the stock market than older people living in places without the older context. They are also somewhat more likely to be supportive of federal involvement in reducing income differences than older adults living outside of aged communities.

Discussion

I argue that despite the challenges of an increasing aging population and proposed reforms to social welfare policies, these safety net issues, which have become institutionalized in the 20th Century, are likely here to stay. In this chapter, I examined public opinion for these policies, comparing the attitudes of the young and old residents of aging neighborhoods to their peers of locations with fewer older

adults. Instead of finding a hostile younger population primed for conflict, I show that many social welfare policies enjoy considerable public support among the youngest members of society—especially among the young adults living in aged communities.

Over the past several decades, generations of young people have typically supported such safety net policies, but I show that their likelihood of support increases with their community's proportion of older adults. These attitudes may be tied to their tendency to support policies in line with the Democratic Party, but the findings hold even controlling for political affiliation. The youngest adult generation—the generation furthest from their own retirement concerns and the generation with supposedly the most to lose from supporting such older age benefits—desires a wider safety net for the oldest and neediest members of society compared with their peers living amongst fewer older adults.

I propose that we observe this relationship, not because of young adults being directly socialized by an overwhelming older adult population through intergroup contact, but by the less direct means of an old-age cognitive content. As evidenced in the analysis, older adults living in aging communities are often more likely to support safety net policies as their peers living elsewhere. Even with older adults living in aged communities being uniquely supportive of these policies compared with older peers elsewhere, the opportunities for close personal contact between older and younger adults are much less frequent than for people of the same age.

The more likely scenario is that younger people, living in an aging context, have more casual contact with older adults and that they are exposed to an information supply aimed at this overwhelming group. While this chapter does not

provide concrete evidence for such a claim, I believe the findings point in this direction. Additional, and more qualitative research may be needed to identify casual contact and these less direct means. An information supply intended mostly for older adults may be received by the larger population through 1) candidates focusing on aging issues, 2) a greater aging interest group presence, 3) many more age-related jobs and facilities, or 4) television advertisements focused on the needs of this growing group. Each of these could contribute to an aged cognitive content that young people reference when forming attitudes about aging needs and safety net issues in general.

In conclusion, this research *does not* provide evidence for the popular predictions of widening age gaps for safety net policies and resulting intergenerational conflict. To the contrary, I show that young adults living amid aged populations may support policies focused on the needs of the aging (who are often poor) and other vulnerable populations in society at greater levels than people living in places without the same demographic challenges. This compassion, or humanitarianism, may even be compatible with views that typically limit the role of government in society. Older adults living in aged communities, and Baby Boomers in the next few decades, may benefit from this “window of support for social welfare policies” (Feldman and Steenbergen 2001, 674) among young residents who would not typically be in favor of government intervention but who have become aware of the needs of the elderly and poor in their community and support a wider safety net.

Finally, younger adults, more aware of the needs of older adults, may not see the cost of a wider safety net as a burden or as particularized benefits for older adults

but instead, as policies beneficial to their families. They may be less concerned about their own retirement but supportive of policies, which assure that their aging family members will not experience gaps in health care or great financial need (Shapiro and Young 1989). Perhaps this is part of the reason why young adults in particular seem to be influenced by the aging context—they see the needs of the elderly and the most vulnerable in the community as linked to their own family's needs.

Schulz and Binstock and (2008) argue that the United States may avoid intergenerational conflict with increasing costs of care in hard economic times by reframing safety net policy as family policy. Issues considered in this way promote sensible safety net policies that may enjoy popular support among people of all ages and means (Schulz and Binstock 2008). This chapter's aged context findings certainly provide hope for these promising and peaceful outcomes into the future.

Chapter 5: Political Efficacy in Aged Communities

Introduction

Older adults participate in politics at greater rates than the middle aged or young. Thoughts of the Greatest Generation, as coined by Tom Brokaw, bring to mind veterans of economic depression and war with unmatched feelings of duty and patriotism. A similar active political spirit may be expected as the participatory Baby Boomer Generation marches toward senior citizenry. The senior power model predicts that older adults will be politically efficacious and active, leading them to receive actual and perceived benefits, which promote further political efficacy and activity (A. L. Campbell, 2003).

While conventional wisdom and scholarly research support the senior power notion, others tell a different story of senior efficacy and activity. Related research suggests the appropriateness for an alternative theory, the *senior powerless model*. Older adults may not be as efficacious or willing to act as most people think. This chapter centers on this question of which story of senior power most accurately reflects the political efficacy levels of older adults in the United States?

A better understanding of political efficacy and its development is useful for building knowledge about political participation, the focus of the next chapter. Age continues to be a crucial predictor of political efficacy and participation with seniors participating at high rates and younger adults notorious for non-participation.

Measures of political efficacy have been examined repeatedly (Craig, Niemi, and Silver, 1990; Morrell, 2003; Niemi, Craig, and Mattei, 1991) because of their importance in predicting healthy democracies (Craig et al., 1990). Political “efficacy is citizens’ perceptions of powerfulness (or powerlessness) in the political realm” (Morrell, 2003, p. 589). Whether senior citizens feel powerful or powerless will impact their levels of activity, the attainment of their policy goals, and may even rub-off to influence similar attitudes among others in their community (Huckfeldt, 1986, p. 106).

In this chapter, I examine whether an older age context (measured as a county’s age distribution²⁰) influences individual residents’ political efficacy attitudes. This approach provides an ideal way to test the two theories. If older adults wield significant electoral power or are instead powerless, this should be observable most readily in places with an abundance of senior citizens. Due to the social nature of politics, seniors living among other seniors will be influenced by the age context more intensely than older adults living in locations without a lot of senior citizens (Books and Prysby, 1991; Huckfeldt, 1986). An age distribution skewed toward the elderly may even influence the attitudes of younger residents, potentially boosting or dampening the efficacy levels of these typically non-participating citizens.

²⁰ In other drafts, I have used the zip code as a contextual container to measure the age composition. Results have always been similar. I use the county measure because there are more individuals per county in the NAES data set, and this is helpful for running hierarchical generalized linear modeling. The author may provide the zip-code level results upon request.

Senior Power and Political Efficacy

The notion of *senior power* brings to mind large numbers of older adults in society to coming together to influence local and national politics. The media often portray senior power as one generation dominating another, creating the conditions for generational conflict. “A variety of contemporary commentators” dubbed as the “Merchants of Doom” by Schulz and Binstock (2008, p. 20), activate Baby Boomers by warning them of the impending burden of cutbacks to pensions and health care. On the other end of the age spectrum, younger people may be uneasy about an increasing aged population being unconcerned with issues and policies most beneficial for young adults and young families (Plutzer and Berkman, 2005; Ponza, Duncan, Corcoran, and Gorskind, 1988; Rosenbaum and Button, 1989).

Many argue that the model of senior power is too simplistic when considering the diversity of the aging population (Binstock, 2010; Ponza et al., 1988; Schulz and Binstock, 2008; Street, 1997). However, the claims of senior or gray power continue to be heard and discussed in current news and studies (Binstock, 2010; Cutler, 1977; Rosenbaum and Button, 1989). As mentioned in the introduction chapter, many scholars qualify the model, finding that a major issue must be at stake to observe senior power. Seniors transition from passive to active participation when a local issue affects the entire older community similarly (Andel and Liebig, 2002). The activation of this latent senior power can be observed in particular among older adults with considerable economic and educational resources (Andel and Liebig, 2002; Scholzman, Verba, and Brady, 1999).

Older adults in general tend to be the most efficacious citizens with or without motivating issues (Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, and Delli Carpini, 2006). With long-established habits of participation (Plutzer, 2002), older people get the word out about votes and policies, so elected officials often become concerned with how older adults perceive governing actions (Banaszak-Holl, Levitsky, and Zald, 2010; Binstock, 2010; Campbell, 2003). For older adults, this activity influences policy, which influences efficacy and activity levels in a continuous cycle (A. L. Campbell, 2003).

The major critique of the senior power model is that it cannot account for the lack of particularized benefits for older adults despite high levels of efficacy and participation (Binstock, 1997, 2010; Jennings and Markus, 1988; Jirovec and Erich, 1992; Liebig, 1992; Rosenbaum and Button, 1989; Strate, Parrish, Elder, and Ford, 1989). While not everyone agrees with the extent of the *senior power model*, some find evidence for the opposite effect.

The *senior powerless model* represents findings that older group consciousness decreases efficacy. Older adults who think of themselves as elderly may be less politically engaged than those who do not consider themselves as elderly (Miller, Gurin, and Gurin, 1980). As discussed in the introduction chapter, senior citizens living among their peers may misunderstand their potential influence (Miller et al., 1980). They might also become more aware of this effect as they interact with each other, compounding the politically inefficaciousness in society and generating a general mood of political disenchantment.

Finally, people retired individuals, especially those living in amenity-filled communities, spend considerable time and energy to these leisure activities—with political involvement generally a low priority (unless they feel threatened) (Rosenbaum and Button 1989; Streib and Metsch 2002). These older adults have even been described as retreatist, giving doubt to the reality of increased power and efficacy in aged communities.

Theorizing about the Impact of the Aged Context on Efficacy Attitudes

The *senior power hypothesis* and the *senior powerless hypothesis* propose different ideas about the political mood and involvement of older Americans. Figure 5.1 provides a glimpse at these relationships, showing the percentages of people responding to self-reported measures of efficacy by their age group: younger, middle, or older age. While older adults may be just as likely to respond that politics does not matter as young adults and find politics to be too complicated, they generally have confidence in their local government, care about the national election, and claim interest in government. Consistent with the past research, results are mixed—but fall more in line with the senior power hypothesis.

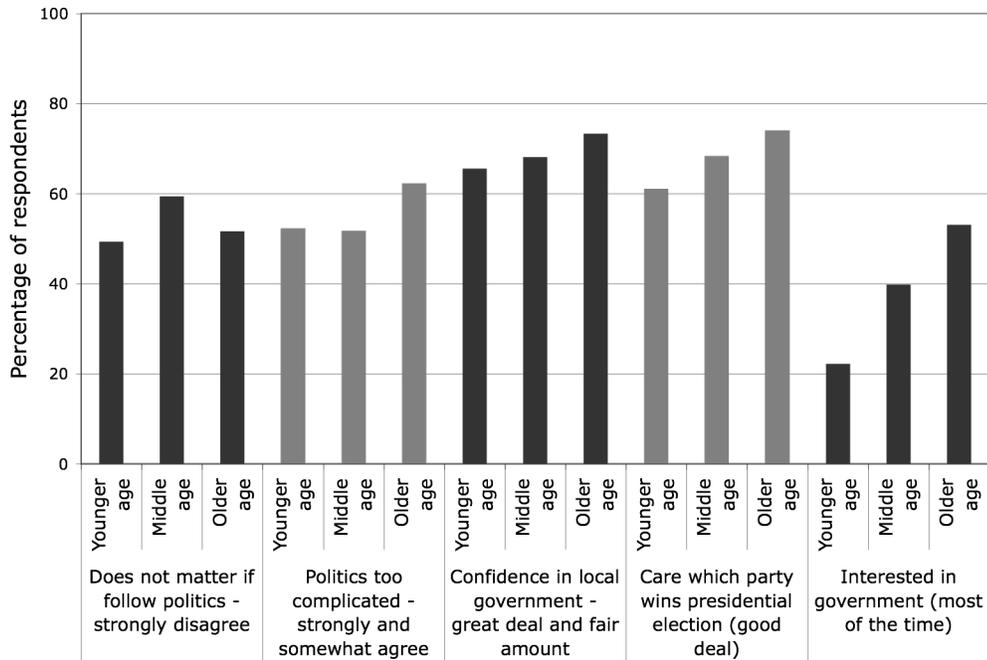


Figure 5.1 – Bivariate Relationships for Age Groups and Political Efficacy Measures

This chapter will further test these hypotheses by examining American communities with variably sized proportions of older adults. How will the older adult context influence the political efficacy of older residents compared with residents in communities with average or lower proportions of seniors? Conventional wisdom, popular journalism, and some social scientists champion the senior power hypothesis. The findings in chapter 3 paint a picture of aged communities as home to a politically engaged older populace, encouraging one another to stay tuned in and accumulate political knowledge. Given this theory and what we know about contextual effects research, we should expect to observe greater levels of political efficacy among older residents in places with the greatest proportions of older adult residents. Seniors should be most aware of their commonalities and shared political stake in locations with concentrated older adult populations.

However, senior power has often been qualified and/or found lacking. The story is not so simple with some others finding evidence for senior powerlessness, despite the efficaciousness of the older adult community in general. Social interaction may even intensify the political inefficacy effect observed for people in locations with large concentrations of older adults. Seniors living amongst others their age may become more aware of this effect, creating a general sense or context of political inefficacy in the elderly community. It may be possible for the older residents of aged communities to be more knowledgeable of political affairs and issues without believing that they or the government can make a positive impact on politics—without being politically efficacious.

The political socialization and contextual effects literatures lead one to also question how the aged context will influence residents from the community's non-dominant group. How will the older adult context influence the viewpoints of young adult residents? Living around "people with higher levels of interest, efficacy, and information might foster similar attitudes, habits, and interest (Huckfeldt, 1986, p. 106). If the dominant group of older adults in the older adult communities remains overwhelmingly efficacious, then the younger adults will be socialized into similarly efficacious attitudes. However, if older adults in these communities become aware of their limitations and exhibit cynicism about their voice, the young may also be socialized into inefficacious attitudes.

Data and Methods

Hierarchical generalized linear modeling (HGLM) is employed to model the relationship between the older age distribution at the county level and political efficacy attitudes of individual survey respondents. National Annenberg Election Studies (NAES) provide individual-level attitudinal measures from 2000 and 2004. United States Census data from 2000 and county-level data from the 2004 NAES provide county-level population information for the primary explanatory variable, the *older adult saturation quotient* (OASQ). As with the previous chapters, I divide the number of older adults in a county (age 65 and over) by the total population for the county to calculate the OASQ measure.

I use a number of items to measure individual residents' political efficacy attitudes (*following politics importance, politics too complicated, confidence in local government, care which party wins the presidential election, and interested in government*) (see Appendix 5.1 for dependent variable question wording and descriptive information). Individual-level controls for *party identification, income* and *race* are also included in the models. I also control for the size of the local population and median household income at the aggregate level (level 2) to account for the different types of aged communities.

Results

Table 5.1 presents the findings for the hierarchical models. Identifying as a Republican and having a high level of household income do a good job of predicting political efficacy, aside from the measure for confidence in local government. Results

are mixed for the relationship between the older adults and the measures of political efficacy—sometimes predicting higher efficacy, sometimes lower efficacy and other times, no relationship at all. There is no significant relationship between being a young adult and reported political efficacy attitudes. However, I am most interested in the *effect of the aged community setting* on efficacy attitudes for older and younger adults. I examine these effects by modeling the age category slopes in the HGLM (using logistic regression) analyses with the OASQ measures. These models allow for the comparison of the effect for an age group living in a place without the aged context (2 to 4% of population made up of seniors) to the efficacy attitudes of their peers living in places with the highest proportions of seniors (33 to 35%).

Table 5.1. HGLM Results for Political Efficacy Attitudes

	Following politics importance (2004)	Politics Too Complicated (2004)	Conf. in Local Govt (2004)	Care Who Wins (2000)	Interested in Govt (2000)
<i>Level 2 variables</i>					
Intercept					
Intercept	0.312** (0.033)	0.144** (0.019)	0.712** (0.063)	0.481** (0.020)	-0.621** (0.018)
Young age (18 to 24) slope					
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	-0.002 (0.007)	0.002 (0.005)	-0.004 (0.019)	-0.000 (0.004)	0.015* (0.006)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	0.012 (0.007)	-0.001 (0.003)	-0.005 (0.014)	0.002 (0.003)	-0.003 (0.004)
OASQ	0.006 (0.021)	0.012 (0.011)	-0.110* (0.043)	-0.013 (0.009)	-0.029* (0.014)
Old age (65 to 74) slope					
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	-0.006 (0.008)	-0.006 (0.005)	-0.012 (0.014)	0.009 (0.006)	-0.003 (0.006)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	-0.002 (0.005)	-0.012* (0.003)	0.001 (0.010)	0.002 (0.004)	0.005 (0.003)
OASQ	-0.028+ (0.015)	-0.011 (0.009)	-0.033 (0.030)	-0.017+ (0.009)	-0.002 (0.008)

Table 5.1. HGLM Results for Political Efficacy Attitudes, cont.

	Following politics importance (2004)	Politics too complicated (2004)	Conf. in local govt (2004)	Care who wins (2000)	Interested in govt (2000)
Old age (75 and over) slope					
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	-0.000 (0.006)	-0.018** (0.003)	-0.005 (0.026)	0.009 (0.008)	0.003 (0.009)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	0.015* (0.006)	-0.008* (0.003)	-0.015 (0.012)	0.008 (0.005)	0.004 (0.005)
OASQ	0.017 (0.016)	-0.007 (0.010)	-0.026 (0.033)	0.005 (0.011)	-0.007 (0.010)
<i>Level 1 variables</i>					
Young age (18 to 24)	-1.146* (0.491)	-0.087 (0.238)	1.573 (0.991)	-0.318 (0.195)	-0.269 (0.285)
Old age (65 to 74)	0.565 (0.362)	0.884** (0.201)	0.657 (0.728)	0.633* (0.251)	0.845** (0.215)
Old age (75 and above)	-1.189* (0.398)	0.857** (0.250)	1.499 (0.854)	0.091 (0.296)	1.144** (0.279)
Republican	0.189** (0.040)	-0.080** (0.022)	0.139 (0.079)	0.745** (0.029)	0.168** (0.022)
Less than 10K	-0.764** (0.084)	0.801** (0.049)	-0.181 (0.171)	-0.231** (0.042)	-0.726** (0.047)
10K to 15K	-0.627** (0.089)	0.679** (0.048)	-0.273 (0.164)	-0.217** (0.043)	-0.708** (0.046)
15K to 25K	-0.481** (0.062)	0.561** (0.034)	-0.080 (0.133)	-0.226** (0.032)	-0.568** (0.034)
25K to 35K	-0.332** (0.056)	0.416** (0.032)	0.078 (0.117)	-0.096** (0.029)	-0.345** (0.030)
100K to 150K	0.344** (0.065)	-0.533** (0.034)	0.149 (0.130)	0.165** (0.043)	0.473** (0.038)
150K or more	0.637** (0.084)	-0.844** (0.042)	-0.045 (0.172)	0.258** (0.056)	0.764** (0.047)
Nonwhite	-0.218** (0.051)	-0.002 (0.028)	-0.250* (0.098)	0.313** (0.036)	-0.091* (0.029)
Level 1 N =	13,637	47,936	3,659	48,782	48,782
Level 2 N =	2,156	2,792	1,234	2,810	2,810
Reduction in error variance =	0.02	0.05	0.02	0.05	-0.01

Source: NAES 2004, 2000

+p < 0.10 *p < 0.05 **p < 0.001

Beginning with the younger of the aged categories, older adults age 65 to 74 are less likely to think that following politics is important (p-value is 0.057) and less likely to care which party wins the presidential election (p-value is 0.078) than their peers living in places with lower concentrations of older adults. The other relationships are negative but not close to statistical insignificance. The aged context does not matter much if at all for the oldest residents. However, younger adults are affected. Residents age 18 to 24 are less likely to hold confidence in the local government (p-value is 0.010) and less likely to be interested in government (p-value is 0.048) than their peers living elsewhere.

Figures 5.2 and 5.3 present substantive results of political efficaciousness for the older and younger residents, respectively. These figures compare the predicted probabilities for residents in communities with very few older adults to communities with the highest concentrations of older adults. Older adults (aged 65 to 74) in aged communities are less likely to say that following politics is important (by 21 percentage points), less likely to have confidence in the local government (by 27 percentage points), and are less likely to care which party wins the presidential election in 2000 (by 11 percentage points) than their peers living in the places with very few older adults (see Figure 5.2). However, these same older adults in aged communities are slightly less likely (by 8 percentage points) to think that politics are too complicated—a politically efficacious effect.

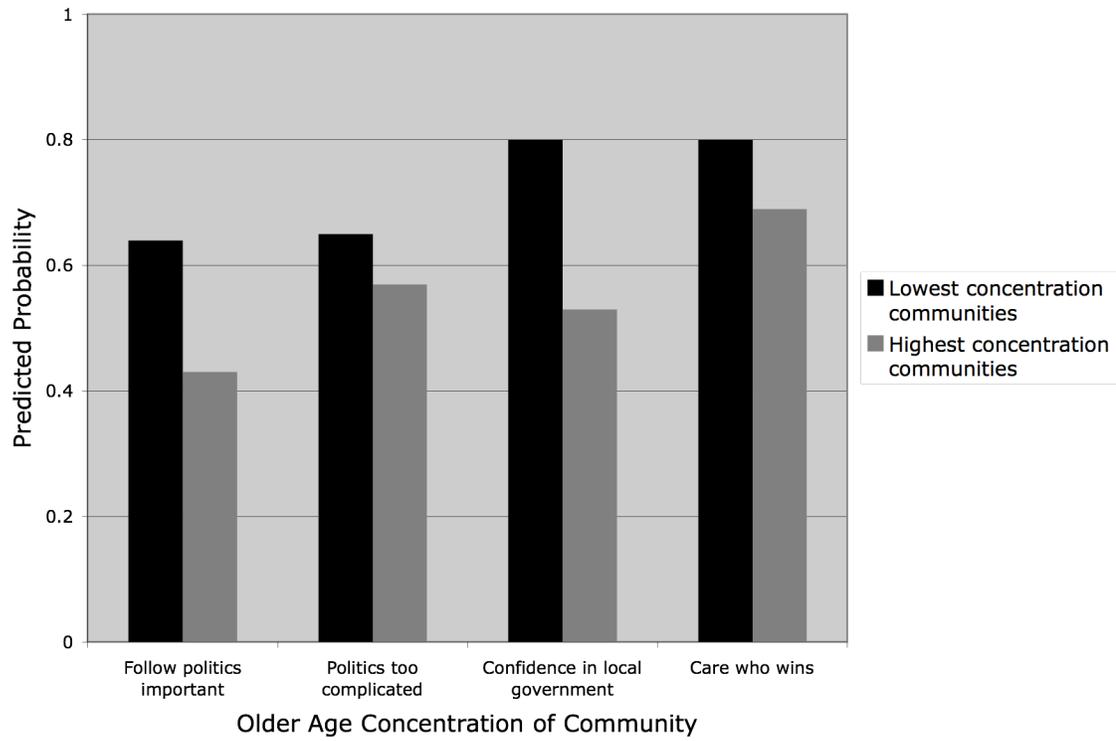


Figure 5.2 – Predicted Probabilities of Political Efficacy for Older Adults (aged 65 to 74)

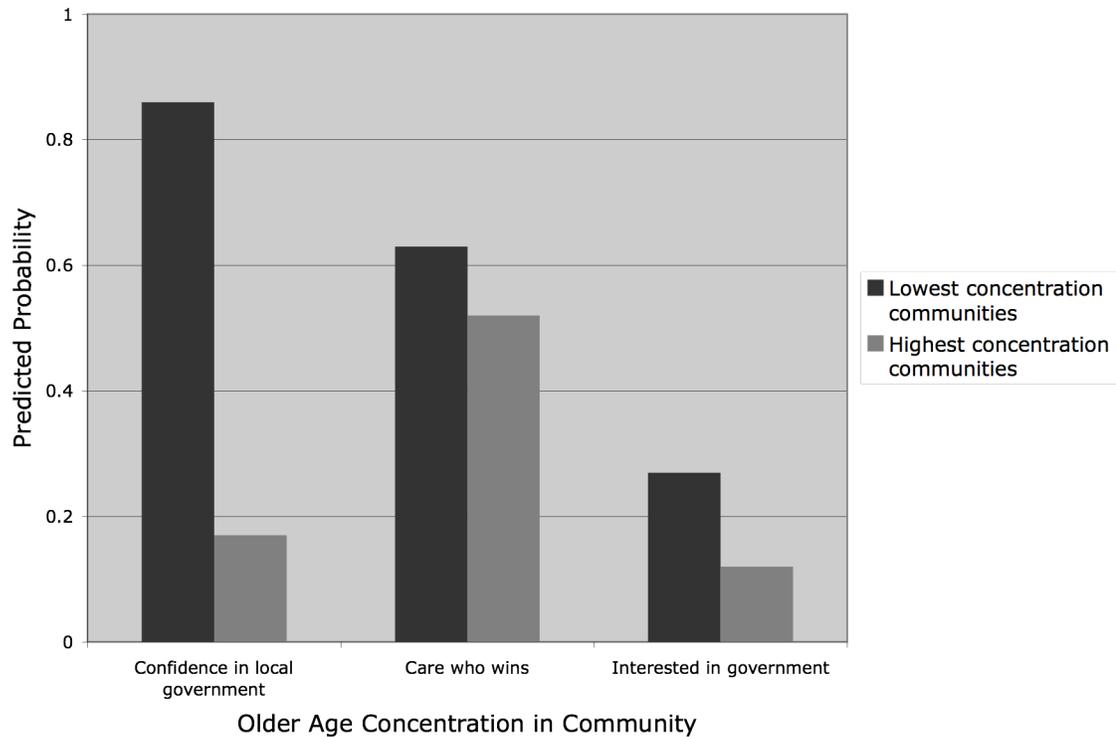


Figure 5.3 – Predicted Probabilities of Political Efficacy for Young Adults (aged 18 to 24)

Younger adults, aged 18 to 24, living in aged communities are less likely to hold confidence in local government (by over 60 percentage points²¹), less likely to care which party wins the presidential election (by 11 percentage points), and less likely to be interested in government (by 15 percentage points) than their peers living in places without the aged context. In sum, individual characteristics go a long way in predicting political efficacy attitudes, but context also counts.

²¹ This effect is great but may be based on small samples of young people living in some of the counties examined in the analysis.

Discussion

Counties with large concentrations of senior citizens hold the potential to be prime spots for collective action by and for older adults. Older adults living in the aged contexts know more about the political system and senior-related issues than their peers elsewhere (Bramlett, 2011). Consistent with this work, substantive results from the present study indicate that the older people living in the aged communities are somewhat less likely to say that politics is too complicated. Unfortunately for seniors, the political savvy of the older adults living amongst their peers may not translate into political power.

Despite the general efficaciousness of the older adult population, older and younger residents living in locations with large proportions of seniors often claim *less political efficacy* than their peers living in places with lower concentrations of the elderly. This finding is counter to conventional wisdom and provides additional evidence for a theory of senior powerlessness. Past work suggests a number of explanations for why concentrations of politically able older adults may not translate into politically efficacious communities.

Some suggest that residents of retirement communities do not want the mess of politics to interfere with their golf game, puzzle club, or any other leisure activity. However, this explanation fails to account for older adults who choose not to lead lives of leisure in older age. With limited funds, some have no choice in the matter. Others suggest that older adults lack resources and do not understand their potential for influence (Miller et al., 1980). Both of these explanations speak to limited definitions of older age. The results for political inefficacy hold even when

accounting for the size of the aged community and the wealth of the aged community residents.

Residents of counties with concentrations of elderly people are probably less politically efficacious due to a combination of factors. First, older people often experience the very real life cycle effects of increased health challenges and physical impairments as they move into the later years of life. Senior citizens interacting in these locations may simply become more aware of these common developments associated with old age, encouraging a generally inefficacious outlook.

Second, in contrast to the idealism of youth, older people may display a certain degree of inefficacy, or cynicism concerning political action and change. They have spent much of their lives being politically active and then being disappointed by the results. While this inefficacy is not observed among older people in general, seniors living amongst others their age may become more aware of the effect, creating an environment of political inefficacy across the entire community.

The above explanations focus primarily on the social influence of the older age context for older adults but do not yet address why the aged context also influences the attitudes of younger residents. While explanations of social interaction make sense for older adults, the efficacy attitudes of younger residents may not be influenced in these ways. While younger residents have increased opportunities for contact with older adults in counties with large concentrations of seniors, it is unlikely that the contact involves meaningful political discussion capable of socializing efficacy attitudes. A reference group (Huckfeldt, 1986), or cognitive content (Burbank, 1995), explanation may be more appropriate for understanding the

socialization of efficacy attitudes for young residents. Even “casual and impersonal interactions within a context” may be “involuntary and inescapable” and thus, influential for political attitudes of all neighbors regardless of age (Huckfeldt, 1986, pp. 20, 23).

The effects are consistent for younger and older residents of older adult counties, but it is crucial to note that their consequences may be different. Younger adults living in places with large concentrations of older adults were less likely to indicate campaign interest and slightly less likely to hold confidence in their local governments, less likely to care which party won the presidential election, and less likely to be interested in government. Lower levels on these efficacy measures may also indicate less interest for other political activities among the young residents. People exposed to politically disagreeable social networks exhibit lower levels of participation (Mutz, 2002). The consequences for these young residents are great given their typically low levels of participation (Zukin et al., 2006) and ripeness for political socialization. Behaviors learned among the young in these locations may last a lifetime.

Chapter 6: The Act of Voting in Aged Communities

Introduction

The definition of democracy assumes an active populace. Any government by the people requires those people to engage with their government. Individuals and groups communicate their preferences by participating in government, selecting leaders and then seeking to influence what these leaders do once elected (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). America has a rich history of representative democracy with periods of intense activism and electoral turnover. However, American democracy certainly is not perfect. First, many point to lower participation trends in recent decades as risky for the future of American democracy (Macedo 2005). The fear is that when people are not engaged in political activity, they are not communicating their preferences to lawmakers and/or they are not providing an accountability check on these elected officials—undermining both major tenets of representative government. Second, America most often does not live up to the ideals of participatory equality—some citizens participate regularly and others do not (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

Age has long divided the politically active from the politically inactive. Different parts of the life cycle lend themselves to varying levels of activity. Civic engagement and political activities often increase with age but drop off into the later years in life (Burr, Caro, and Moorhead 2002; Glenn and Grimes 1968; Jennings and Niemi 1981; Milbrath and Goel 1977; Verba and Nie 1972). With a very large cohort

of Baby Boomers now entering their senior years, studying the imbalances in participation among older and younger adults is more important than ever.

Older adults are more active than ever, and the entitlement policies of the New Deal Era essentially spurred the activity levels observed today (Campbell 2003a). The government run programs of Medicare and Social Security contributed to improved financial states and physical capabilities of the older adults of the 21st Century while also giving them reason to pay special attention to the encompassing politics of these programs (Burr, Caro, and Moorhead 2002; Campbell 2003a). This is especially important to note given the imminent aging of the Baby Boomers into older adulthood.

In this chapter, I consider the theories of senior power as discussed in previous chapters, and compare places with varying age distributions across the United States to see whether the locales with high concentrations of older adults encourage increased or decreased participation. I argue that recent data and a focus on one particular activity, voting, still easily accomplished by older adults will help to sort out some of the mixed findings in previous research.

Aging and Political Activity

Political engagement and activity often follow a pattern of rising with advanced age and then dropping off into the latest years of life, taking on the familiar inverted U shaped curve (Burr, Caro, and Moorhead 2002; Glenn and Grimes 1968; Jennings and Niemi 1981; Milbrath and Goel 1977; Verba and Nie 1972). Activism may include voting, donating money to campaigns and organizations, volunteering,

attending political meetings, and running for and then holding office (Burr, Caro, and Moorhead 2002; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). However, across the age distribution, people participate in some of these activities more than others. Very few people actually participate in the most demanding forms of participation (attending political meetings, volunteering, serving in public office), but many more participate by making a monetary contribution or by voting, more passive behaviors that require less time, knowledge and effort (Burr, Caro, and Moorhead 2002).

This chapter focuses on predicting turnout, a more passive behavior, because 1) more people do it, and 2) more older adults do it (i.e. it is a relatively easy form of participation). Past research has found repeatedly that involvement in more active forms of political participation drops off into older age, even when controlling for generational and period effects (W. A. Anderson and N. D. Anderson 1978; Binstock 1972; Jennings and Markus 1988; Jirovec and Erich 1992; Miller, P. Gurin, and G. Gurin 1980; Strate et al. 1989; Streib and Schneider 1971; Streib, Folts, and La Greca 1985). Older adults, especially those reaching the most advanced ages are more likely to suffer from a number of physical limitations and ailments that may prevent them from participating in more physically demanding and energy intensive activities (Hamerman 1999; Hebert 1997).

Many of these same studies show that high voter turnout continues into older adulthood. Jirovec and Erich (1992), Streib, Folts, and LaGreca (1985) and Anderson and Anderson (1978) show this to be true for their samples of communities of older adults. Senior citizens may be able to continue with such activity because the act of voting consumes less time and physical energy. Additionally, their continued turnout

at the polls may reflect a habit of voting rather than motivated, purposeful behavior (Streib and Schneider 1971). Voting is one relatively easy way for older adults to assert their influence and importance in society during a period of life that might otherwise leave them feeling politically powerless (Agnello 1973; Andel and Liebig 2002).

Senior Power One More Time

Although senior citizens seek to maintain their influence through the ballot box, turnout as an indicator of political power may be misleading since it is often done with little effort and/or purpose (Andel and Liebig 2002). In addition, there has been little evidence showing that older adults have appreciably different preferences than younger adults (Binstock 1992, 2010). Even with shared goals, the majority of their activity may lack organization and direction that would advance elderly interests (Andel and Liebig 2002; Binstock 1972, 2010).

Yet, some policy and political researchers remain convinced that senior power expressed through bloc voting and other purposeful activities will achieve elderly policy goals at the local and national levels of government (Andel and Liebig 2002; Cutler, Pierce, and Steckenrider 1984; Cutler 1977; Hudson 1988). They base their predictions mainly on such factors as the large projected aged population relative to younger cohorts and on the historically high voting levels of senior citizens and particularly, among Baby Boomers, who were socialized during the activist period of the 1960s. As noted in earlier chapters, several studies have shown that older adults may come together for political action when there is some sort of threat to programs

on which they rely (Andel and Liebig 2002; W. A. Anderson and N. D. Anderson 1978; Campbell 2002, 2003a, 2003b; Jennings and Markus 1988; Streib, Folts, and La Greca 1985).

Aged Context and Participation

Much of the quest for evidence of senior power is focused on geographic centers of elderly living, locations with large numbers of older residents, relative to other age groups. Studies on the aged neighborhood context have increased and achieved some prominence in the last few decades with the ongoing projections of an expanding elderly population. Arnold Rose began the theorizing about a context of older adults as far back as the 1960s in *Older People and Their Social World*. Rose (1965) argued that concentrations of older adults with increased social interaction should stimulate a culture of civic and political participation.

This prediction of an *aged subculture* became the focus of other studies examining the group consciousness of concentrated older adults and how this might (or might not) be harnessed for political influence (Longino, McClelland, and Peterson 1980; Sherman, Ward, and Lagory 1985). However, according to these studies, Rose's (1965) predictions for an especially active subculture in aged communities have been unfulfilled thus far. While older adults living amongst their peers are more socially integrated, their participation levels do not live up to the standard of activism but rather, *retreatism* (Longino, McClelland, and Peterson 1980). A similar study found that older adults living in an aged context were knowledgeable

about services in the neighborhood, but again, were not particularly associated with greater political involvement (Sherman, Ward, and Lagory 1985).

These studies point toward the theory of senior powerlessness. Older adults may be without the energy and endurance to take on some of the more arduous forms of political activism such as protest activity or lobbying. It may be that past work simply has not focused on a form of participation most available to senior citizens when thinking about the political power of an aging community. If findings indicate that seniors living in places with higher percentages of older adults vote at higher rates than their peers living elsewhere, this could be quite consequential for local and national politics, shaping issues in political campaigns as well as determining electoral outcomes.

However, my expectation is that, despite the relative ease of voting, elderly-concentrated locations may be significantly associated with *lower* levels of political participation. While more politically knowledgeable on many issues, seniors living amongst their peers report lower political efficacy than older adults living in communities with a more mixed age distribution (Bramlett 2011). These findings are in line with past findings discussed above which point to more retreatist attitudes in the locations with concentrated elderly populations. Older adults may be living in retirement communities and less preoccupied with the outside world's messy politics. In addition, older adults have experienced a lifetime of politics, and it is possible that the shared, seemingly self-sufficient, elderly community yields a distinctive disenchantment with government action.

Participation and political efficacy are inextricably linked with each begetting the other in a continuous cycle (Campbell 2003a; Finkel 1985, 1987; Vecchione and Caprara 2009; Zimmerman 1989). I argue that if the elderly-concentrated locations are home to politically inefficacious older adults, the older residents may also be less likely to participate in the act of voting—especially in voting that requires additional effort, as with primary elections.

In this chapter, I look at voting turnout for both general and primary elections because they require different levels of motivation, capacity, and persuasion. It is well known that many more people (of all ages) vote in general elections than primary elections. The lower rates of turnout for primary elections most likely occur for a number of reasons, including: the closed nature of some primary elections, the non-holiday status of primary elections, and the less publicized dates of primaries (Schaffner 2011). Even though they are often strong partisans likely paying attention to primary election information, the health challenges and limitations faced by many older adults may hinder their participation in primaries.

Finally, and as with the previous chapters, the present work also diverges from past work by looking at the effects of an old age context on different age groups: the younger-old adults (65 to 74), the older-old adults (75 and above), and the very youngest voters (18 to 24). As noted above, the oldest members of society have a greater likelihood of facing additional cognitive (Bramlett 2011; Lau and Redlawsk 2008), physical and logistical challenges that may hinder even the relatively easy political activity of turning out to vote. Young residents may acquire voting behaviors associated with these aged communities through the mechanisms of increased social

interaction with older adults or by soaking up the elderly cognitive content of the community (Burbank 1995; Huckfeldt 1986). Young people are moved to action by a context of younger adults (Hart et al. 2004), but the same may not be true for young people living in an older context if that community is largely inefficacious.

Theorizing about the Impact of the Aged Context on Political Action

Much of the contextual research in the social sciences focuses on a couple of mechanisms (briefly mentioned above) for how people's environments influence their individual attitudes and behaviors. Residents directly receive influential messages from others in their community via social interaction and/or through the less direct cognitive content of the community context (Burbank 1995; Huckfeldt 1986).

Both mechanisms undoubtedly stimulate political action, however it may be that social interaction in particular is at work behind any association between elderly contexts and heightened or depressed political behavior. People become active in politics because they are motivated and have the capacity—but they must also be asked (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Motivation and capacity may come through both mechanisms, but the *meaningful asking*²² relies on some sort of direct social contact with more active participants. Given the important mechanism of social interaction for participation (and for primary election turnout in particular, which likely requires more asking and social peer pressure), turnout may be especially depressed for the older adults living in a political inefficacious elderly context.

Considering these factors, I hypothesize that:

²² I am not talking about an impersonal direct mailing, for example.

1. Younger elderly adults (65 to 74) living in a context of older adults will be *less likely* to turnout in primary elections than their peers living elsewhere. They will also be *less likely* to turnout in general elections compared with their peers living elsewhere, but to a lesser degree.

Because the oldest adults in general and regardless of context face more physical and cognitive impairments and have less opportunity for social interaction in the aging communities, I hypothesize that:

2. The oldest residents (75 and over) living in a context of older adults will be *unaffected by context*, and exhibit the same level of turnout in primary and general elections compared with their peers living elsewhere. Context will be mostly irrelevant to their participation.

Finally, the elderly context makes it more likely that a young resident will come into contact with an older adult than for their young peers living elsewhere and be socialized into the distinct politics of the overwhelming elderly population. Even if they are not engaging in meaningful political discourse with their elderly neighbors, their likelihood of political activity may be lessened by the inefficacious cognitive content permeating the local community. Their turnout may be depressed for both types of elections since they are relatively inexperienced voters, but the effect will be greater for primary elections where the costs are higher. I hypothesize that:

3. Younger adults (18 to 24) living in a context of older adults will be *less likely* to turnout than their peers living elsewhere. They will also be *less likely* to turnout in general elections compared with their peers living elsewhere, but to a lesser degree.

Data and Methods

The National Annenberg Election Surveys (NAES) and Cooperative Congressional Election Studies (CCES) typically ask respondents whether they voted in certain elections. The electoral climate can differ greatly from one election cycle to another, so I examine a number of them to assess the steadiness of any observed relationships over time. I use data from the 2000 NAES as well as from the CCES 2006, 2008, and 2010 to gauge reports of turnout²³ (for general elections in 2000, 2006, and 2008 and primary elections in 2000 and 2008). These data are especially useful when studying contextual effects because of their very large samples, which provide some population variation within the nation's 3,141 counties.

United States Census data from the relevant years are used for the contextual measures of the old age context, the older adult saturation quotients (OASQ). I divide the local population of people age 65 and older by the total local population and the resulting county-level OASQ measures range from 2 to 35% in 2000, 4 to 51% in 2006, 2 to 30% for 2008 and 2010.

Hierarchical generalized linear modeling (HGLM) is used to model the relationship between the older age distributions at the county level and individual

²³ Keep in mind that people tend to over report their voting behavior; reported numbers of voting behavior are generally higher than actual voting behavior. However, it is unlikely that the degree of over reporting varies much from election to election.

community residents' self-reports of election turnout.²⁴ Additional individual and community characteristics will be accounted for in the analyses. At the individual-level, I control for *partisan strength*, *income*, *education*, *retirement status*, and *length of residency*. These characteristics are regularly predictive of the act of voting, often determining whether individuals have the resources necessary for such basic political action (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

At the county level, I control the local party competition in addition to the population density and median household income, as in the previous chapters. People may be more moved to turnout when election results hang in the balance, in locations where there is greater political competition or an even balance of party identification. Controlling for this electoral characteristic is important so as not to mistakenly attribute turnout likelihood to the age context.

Results

Table 6.1 presents the results for the hierarchical models for the four dependent variables, measuring turnout for general elections in 2000, 2006, 2008 and 2010. Table 6.2 displays results for primary elections turnout in 2000, 2008, and 2010.²⁵ Looking first at the control variables in the models, retirement status, education, partisan strength, individual household income, and length of residency clearly predict people's self-reports of turnout. Retired persons were more likely to

²⁴ These are dichotomous variables asking respondents whether they voted or not.

²⁵ The CCES 2006 data set did not include information on primary elections turnout.

report voting than workers, which makes sense given the time that retirement frees up for personal activities and hobbies.

Consistent with past research, more educated and partisan individuals were more likely to report that they voted across all of the elections. Income is also highly predictive of voting, with the less wealthy (those with less resources) reporting lower participation, compared with the more resource-rich survey respondents. Finally, residing in a location for five years or more is associated with higher reports of voting. These residents may have greater ties to and stakes in the community and are more likely to be registered in the first place. These relationships are commonly found in previous research, and provide a strong measure of confidence that the models are properly specified at level 1.

Individual age is also typically a good indicator of voter turnout, with older people voting at higher rates than young people. Controlling for all of the other characteristics included in the models, the typical relationships found in other surveys also hold here. However, I am most interested in the *effect of the aged community setting* for the voter turnout of older and younger residents. To examine these particular effects, I model the age category slopes in the HGLM (using logistic regression) analyses with the OASQ measures. This modeling choice allows for the comparison of the effect for older adults, for example, living in places ranging from an insignificant aged context (2% in 2008) to the voter turnout of their peers residing in locations with the highest proportions of older adults (30% in 2008).

Table 6.1. HGLM Results for General Election Turnout

	2000 Turnout	2006 Turnout	2008 Turnout	2010 Turnout
<i>Level 2 variables</i>				
Intercept				
Intercept	-1.196** (0.057)	0.729** (0.058)	0.702** (0.032)	0.198** (0.034)
Young age (18 to24) slope				
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	-0.010 (0.018)	0.037 (0.024)	0.000 (0.008)	0.007 (0.009)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	-0.015 (0.008)	-0.002 (0.009)	-0.008 (0.004)	-0.004 (0.005)
Party competition (vote share)	-1.752 (1.338)	-0.545 (1.206)	-0.121 (0.639)	0.477 (0.766)
OASQ	-0.023 (0.025)	-0.014 (0.026)	-0.317 (1.957)	-6.880* (2.471)
Old age (65 to74) slope				
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	0.003 (0.011)	0.045 (0.042)	-0.027* (0.009)	0.012 (0.015)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	0.001 (0.007)	-0.011 (0.016)	0.009 (0.006)	0.008 (0.006)
Party competition (vote share)	0.605 (1.192)	-3.404 (1.760)	0.317 (0.793)	-0.919 (0.705)
OASQ	-0.034 (0.019)	0.038 (0.030)	1.394 (1.966)	0.063 (1.765)
Old age (75 and over) slope				
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	-0.027 (0.035)	0.010 (0.046)	-0.012 (0.027)	-0.033* (0.013)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	-0.003 (0.010)	-0.054* (0.022)	0.008 (0.013)	0.009 (0.011)
Party competition (vote share)	-0.642 (1.427)	-9.128* (3.583)	1.729 (1.930)	1.809 (1.578)
OASQ	-0.010 (0.023)	-0.066 (0.045)	1.328 (4.187)	2.363 (3.543)

Table 6.1. HGLM Results for General Election Turnout, cont.

	2000 Turnout	2006 Turnout	2008 Turnout	2010 Turnout
<i>Level 1 variables</i>				
Retired	0.145 (0.083)	0.814** (0.132)	0.535** (0.055)	0.659** (0.052)
Young age (18 to 24)	1.008 (0.564)	-0.382 (0.654)	-0.709* (0.324)	-0.767* (0.390)
Old age (65 to 74)	0.469 (0.489)	1.282 (1.066)	0.442 (0.415)	0.709 (0.383)
Old age (75 and over)	0.668 (0.634)	5.735* (1.855)	0.758 (0.909)	0.290 (0.758)
Four year college degree and post graduate	0.132* (0.047)	0.759** (0.091)	0.969** (0.036)	0.677** (0.032)
Partisan strength	0.281** (0.042)	0.955** (0.072)	1.112** (0.033)	0.835** (0.031)
Less than 10K	-0.512** (0.101)	-	-0.903** (0.061)	-0.728** (0.072)
Income 10 to 15K	-0.326** (0.095)	-0.455** (0.143)	-0.642** (0.064)	-0.464** (0.073)
Income 15 to 20K	-0.201* (0.069)	-0.596** (0.128)	-0.585** (0.063)	-0.604** (0.067)
Income 20 to 25K		-0.426** (0.109)	-0.448** (0.058)	-0.383** (0.061)
Income 60 to 70K	0.172* (0.067)	0.307* (0.110)	0.214** (0.060)	0.245** (0.058)
Income 70 to 80K		0.690** (0.123)	0.531** (0.065)	0.434** (0.059)
Income 80 to 100K		0.857** (0.125)	0.626** (0.064)	0.454** (0.056)
Income 100 to 120K		0.638** (0.149)	0.909** (0.083)	0.799** (0.072)
Income 120 to 150K	0.250* (0.080)	1.221** (0.225)	0.967** (0.100)	0.749** (0.081)
Income 150K or more		1.034** (0.208)	1.029** (0.099)	0.993** (0.085)
Resident for 5 years or more	0.206** (0.044)	0.623** (0.057)	0.718** (0.030)	0.942** (0.029)
Level 1 N =	12,982	10,580	54,390	44,368
Level 2 N =	2,000	1,767	2,642	2,559
Reduction in error variance =	0.02	-0.01	0.02	0.05

Sources: NAES 2000; CCES 2006, 2008, 2010; and U.S. Census 2000, 2006, 2008, 2010 population estimates; **p<0.001 *p<0.05

Table 6.2. HGLM Results for Primary Election Turnout

	2000 Primary Turnout	2008 Primary Turnout	2010 Primary Turnout
<i>Level 2 variables</i>			
Intercept			
Intercept	-1.170** (0.028)	-0.545** (0.031)	-0.840** (0.027)
Young age (18 to24) slope			
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	-0.005 (0.008)	-0.010 (0.006)	0.004 (0.009)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	-0.005 (0.005)	0.004 (0.004)	-0.004 (0.005)
Party competition (vote share)	0.708 (0.765)	-0.275 (0.598)	-0.518 (0.728)
OASQ	-0.010 (0.016)	1.331 (1.748)	-4.132 (2.350)
Old age (65 to74) slope			
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	-0.013 (0.007)	-0.018** (0.003)	-0.003 (0.006)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	0.001 (0.004)	-0.007 (0.004)	-0.001 (0.003)
Party competition (vote share)	0.626 (0.601)	0.830 (0.587)	0.731* (0.362)
OASQ	-0.022* (0.010)	-1.951 (1.543)	-2.692* (0.849)
Old age (75 and over) slope			
Population density (1000 per sq mile)	-0.001 (0.010)	-0.026** (0.006)	-0.005 (0.009)
Median household income (in \$1000s)	-0.000 (0.005)	0.008 (0.006)	-0.006 (0.005)
Party competition (vote share)	-1.972* (0.752)	0.416 (0.922)	-0.022 (0.693)
OASQ	-0.028* (0.012)	-0.440 (1.868)	-2.964* (1.461)

Table 6.2. HGLM Results for Primary Election Turnout, cont.

	2000 Primary Turnout	2008 Primary Turnout	2010 Primary Turnout
<i>Level 1 variables</i>			
Retired	0.292** (0.043)	0.242*8 (0.048)	0.324** (0.031)
Young age (18 to 24)	-0.475 (0.344)	-1.009** (0.310)	-0.422 (0.370)
Old age (65 to 74)	0.700* (0.260)	0.940* (0.298)	0.817** (0.183)
Old age (75 and over)	1.020* (0.336)	0.370 (0.422)	1.327** (0.324)
Four year college degree and post graduate	0.339** (0.025)	0.548** (0.033)	0.292** (0.021)
Partisan strength	0.533** (0.022)	0.871** (0.029)	1.038** (0.020)
Less than 10K	-0.614** (0.052)	-0.343** (0.075)	-0.578** (0.060)
Income 10 to 15K	-490** (0.050)	-0.451** (0.070)	-0.424** (0.057)
Income 15 to 20K	-302** (0.037)	-0.323** (0.065)	-0.360** (0.054)
Income 20 to 25K		-0.164* (0.060)	-0.337** (0.048)
Income 60 to 70K	0.178** (0.036)	0.197** (0.048)	0.074 (0.039)
Income 70 to 80K		0.369** (0.049)	0.220** (0.039)
Income 80 to 100K		0.413** (0.045)	0.231** (0.036)
Income 100 to 120K	0.183** (0.043)	0.455** (0.054)	0.404** (0.042)
Income 120 to 150K		0.498** (0.066)	0.372** (0.047)
Income 150K or more	0.217** (0.055)	0.581** (0.057)	0.382** (0.045)
Resident for 5 years or more	0.744** (0.023)	0.427** (0.028)	0.671** (0.021)
Level 1 N =	39,198	32,455	52,348
Level 2 N =	2,734	2,543	2,545
Reduction in error variance =	0.01	-0.01	0.01

Sources: NAES 2000; CCES 2008, 2010; and U.S. Census 2000, 2008, 2010 population estimates; **p<0.001 *p<0.05

First I consider the models of *general* election turnout. The coefficients suggest that the old age context does not predict turnout for the younger group of older adults (65 to 74) in general elections, at least in recent years. The results for the 2000 general election appear to be the anomaly with turnout significantly lower for the older adults living in aged communities. However, the same relationship is not observed for the general elections in 2006, 2008 or 2010. Figure 6.1 presents predicted probabilities to give an idea of the substantive significance of the context effect. Again, the effect for 2000 is unique among these results. In other years, likelihood of turnout is high for these older adults—regardless of the local age distribution.

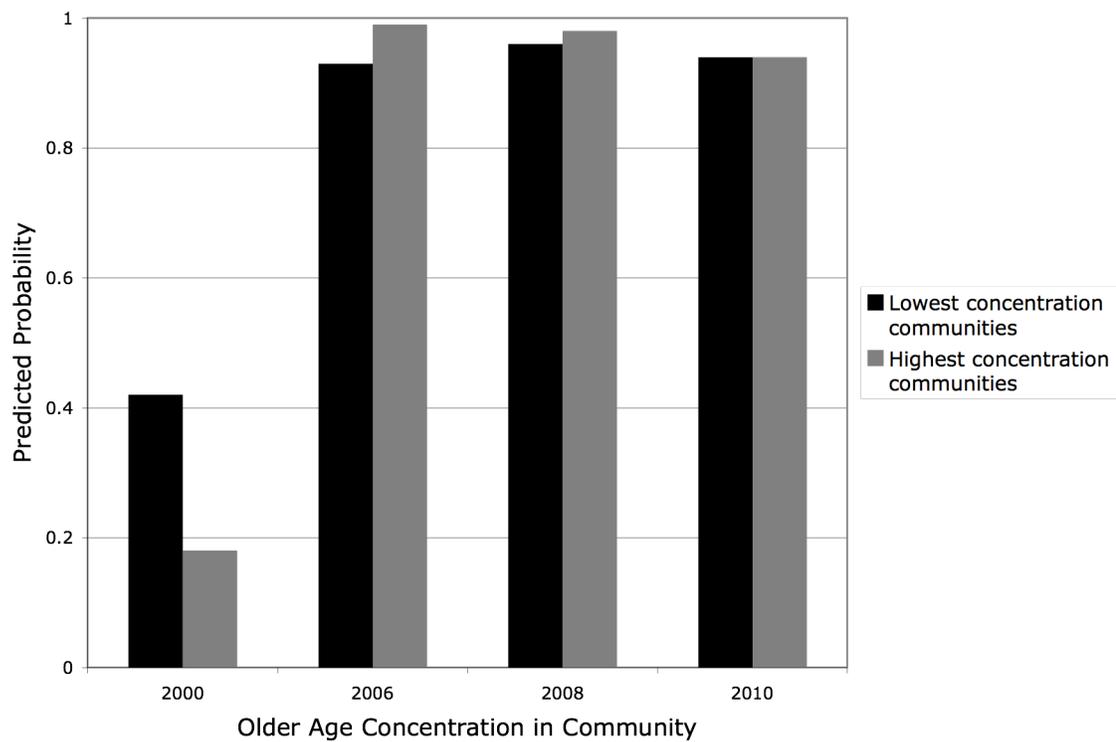


Figure 6.1 – Turnout for General Elections (for ages 65 to 74) by Old Age Distributions

The primary election turnout results in Table 6.2 suggest a negative relationship between the aged context and turnout for the 65 to 74 year old group. Older people living amongst their peers are less likely to say that they voted in a primary election than people of the same age living elsewhere. Figure 6.2 provides a glimpse of the substantive results, showing a sizeable effect for all three years examined. In 2000, people in the 65 to 74 age group living amongst very high concentrations of older adults were 19 percentage points *less likely* to report turnout in their primary election than people living in places with only a few older adults—controlling for all of the other individual and community level characteristics. Similarly in 2008 and 2010, the younger elderly adults were 10 and 18 percentage points, respectively, less likely to report turnout in their primary election than people of the same age living among much lower concentrations of older adults. Aged contexts may have a demobilizing impact on some of the oldest Americans in these cases.

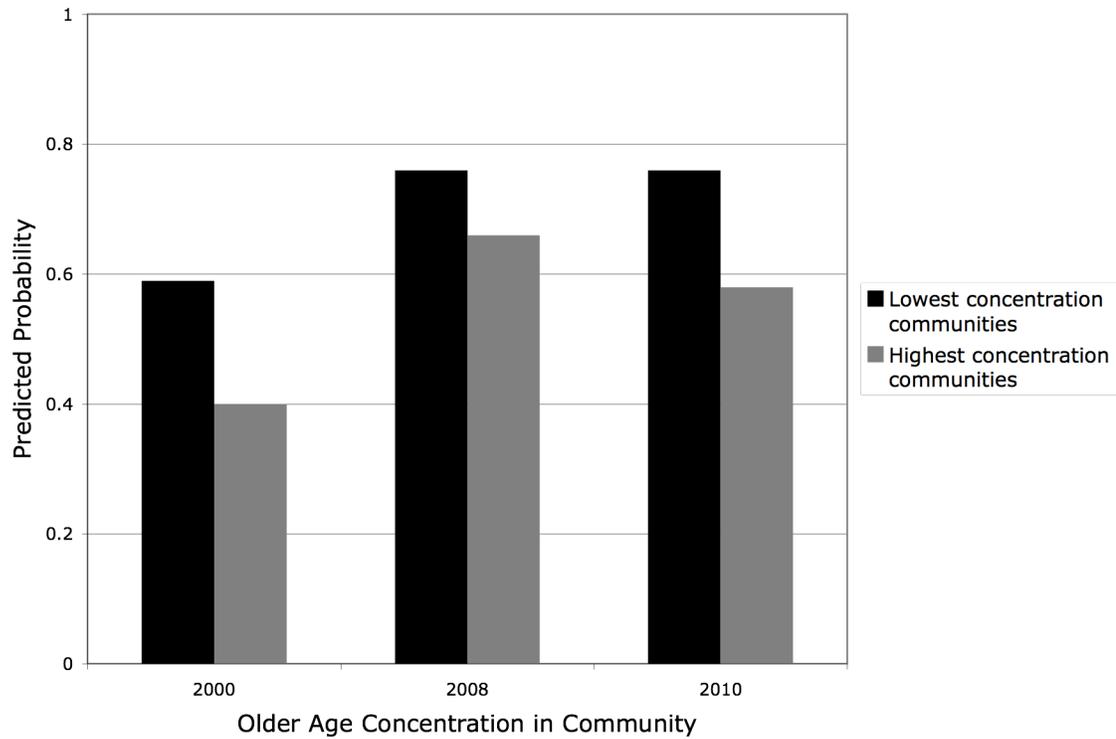


Figure 6.2 – Turnout for Primary Elections (for ages 65 to 74) by Old Age Distributions

Results are very similar for the oldest adults (75 and older) in general elections. The aged context does not appear to influence general election turnout but a depressing effect is evident for these oldest citizens turning out in primary elections. Findings are pretty consistent for the youngest voters with negative signs for all of the coefficients measuring the effect of the aged context. However, these relationships fail to reach statistical significance for all of the elections but one, the general election in 2010.

Discussion

The findings indicate that living in a place with high concentrations of senior citizens is associated with *lower levels* of primary voting for older residents, including the more able younger elderly and the more limited older elderly. This is an important finding given that much of the past research has predicted a *positive relationship* but found *no relationship* between living in an aging location and the participation of individual residents. Primary elections already suffer from lower turnout, so it is disturbing to find depressed turnout among these typically active citizens living in the fast growing numbers of aged locales across the United States.

Other findings are largely supportive of the null results for related past work—and this may be a good thing for the future of American democracy. Results from this study largely suggest that the younger older adults (age 65 to 74) living in aged communities were just as likely to vote in general elections as their peers living in other places with younger age distributions. Although primary elections are quite important, given their function of narrowing down the candidate pool, the results for general election turnout suggest good news for those concerned about current levels of participation (Macedo 2005). These older adults are still participating in great numbers at the general election phase if not in the primaries.

Second, the aged context appears to influence the oldest adults just as with the and more able elderly—although, I hypothesized that the local aged distribution of a community would have no effect on the oldest Americans because of their mounting physical and cognitive challenges (Hamerman 1999; Hebert 1997) and thus, less

interaction with the political community. Without this interaction, I hypothesized that they would be unaffected by an inefficacious context. It may be that voting is so habitual for this age group and still relatively easy to complete for the oldest residents that I overestimated the toll that health-related concerns might take on their interaction with the community. If they are still likely to be tuned into the messages of mobilization and encouragement to vote in their locales, then they may certainly be influenced by an inefficacious community context.

Finally, the youngest voters living in places with the high concentrations of older adults are just as likely to vote as their peers living elsewhere – aged context doesn't matter. This finding is only somewhat encouraging, given the overall low levels of voting among young people (Wattenberg 2008). In many cases, the greater part of the population (older adults for this dissertation) can have a significant effect, socializing minority residents (younger adults) into similar attitudes and behaviors (Bramlett 2011; Burbank 1995; Huckfeldt 1986). Younger residents may not be socialized into habits of non-participation in these aged communities because most of their interaction with the large population of older adults is casual and not conducive to discussions of the merits or downsides of political activity. Young people may come into contact with their older neighbors while out in the community or working for older adult services, but they probably are not discussing politics with them at the local civic or gardening club.

These findings contribute to the decades-long discussion over the legitimacy of a senior power model of political influence. Although senior citizens are often equipped with the experience and resources that encourage participation in the

political system, they may only exert this power when their welfare is particularly threatened (Andel and Liebig 2002; Campbell 2002, 2003b). The current findings on turnout in aged locales support Binstock (2000, 2010) when he suggests that seniors have benefited from the misguided perception that older adults are a politically powerful group, ready to vote en masse and in self-interest because of their higher rates of turnout.

The present research indicates that seniors are not participating at higher levels when living in aged communities as predicted by the earlier work on the subject (Rose 1965). Much of the time the unique social interaction occurring in aged communities may have little to no effect on political activity for the elderly because they are already exceptionally participatory and dutiful about voting. However, primary elections are different.

Older adults in the aged communities may be less likely to turnout for these earlier elections than their peers in other places. These results support earlier work, which proposes a retreatist (rather than activist) political outlook for older communities (Longino, McClelland, and Peterson 1980). I posit that the results for the primary elections may also be especially related to the lower levels of political efficacy among these same older adults (Bramlett 2011).

Primary elections differ from general elections in that they have lower turnouts and for a number of reasons (Schaffner 2011). One particularly relevant reason is that primary elections occur on different days, depending on the state. If older adults in the aged communities are already less politically efficacious than their

peer elsewhere, even the dutiful voters may not pay sufficient attention to know when and where to vote in their primary election.

In sum, as many past studies have shown, seniors may have the potential for powerful political action, but this power often remains dormant and unrealized in locations of elderly concentration. The results are quite robust and substantively important, as I consider the different types of aged communities, controlling for population density, median household income, and local party competition—all of which may predict turnout in their own right. These findings should encourage further examination of common elderly political activities (such as political financial contributions) that might also be decreased among large older populations. Individual characteristics are still essential when predicting turnout, but the aged context also counts.

Chapter 7: Final Thoughts on Aging and the Politics of Aged Communities

Introduction

This project answers the question of whether there are differences in political attitudes and behaviors in aged communities that cannot be attributed simply to the age or other individual characteristic of residents—but to the concentration of older adults in the local population. The answers to this question are consequential for local and national politics as the Baby Boomers move into retirement age, providing a picture of either pockets of senior activism or retreatism all over the United States. This work contributes to the ongoing research on the aged context but also to the broader research that examines the socializing influence of environment.

In this final chapter, I summarize the findings of the previous chapters by discussing the important contributions this work makes in a number of areas of study, how the present research provides new understanding for these subjects, and some final thoughts on the aged communities and what it means for politics in and among the citizens of these locations.

The Distinct Politics of Aged Communities

Each chapter in this dissertation project tells us more than we knew before about aged communities and their impact on individual residents' political attitudes and behaviors. Chapter 2 defined the aged communities, describing their

characteristics and where they are located. In reality, older adults live near their peers in aged communities located all over the United States, resulting in locales with large elderly populations, relative to the other age groups in society. Communities with concentrations of senior citizens, those with an *aged context*, will only increase in number as Baby Boomers enter retirement and many of them decide to age in place.

Throughout the dissertation, the aged context is measured in terms of the county (and sometimes zip code) population age distribution. One of the major findings of this work and important for contextual effects research is that the social effects of the aged context can be observed even when using geographic areas as large as zip codes and even as expansive as counties. In general, results for all of the chapters were very similar across these two geographic measures of context, despite the more diverse populations in the larger counties. Past work on the aged context traditionally examines context at the Census tract level or by the city block and raised doubts about whether effects would hold up for the more diverse populations present for the wider reach of counties (Clarke et al. 2011; Subramanian et al. 2006; Ward, LaGory, and Sherman 1985).

The previous chapters have shown plenty of evidence for the aged community impact on older residents. Living in a place surrounded by elderly peers influences the political knowledge, efficacy, attitudes and activity of older adults, especially those who are still relatively in good health and active, aged 65 to 74. In some cases, the younger adults are also influenced by the aged context. However, the oldest adults (aged 75 and over) rarely and inconsistently exhibit different attitudes and behaviors

from their peers living in other places. These differences in effects by age group may in part be attributed to the mechanisms fundamental to the aged context.

In Chapter 3, we saw that older adults living among their peers have greater levels of political knowledge than seniors living elsewhere. The evidence is particularly strong for knowledge related to senior issues like Social Security and prescription coverage. However, the aged context effect on political knowledge is not evident for people of very advanced age as mentioned above.

Chapter 4 provides evidence for a senior citizenry with cohesive and supportive preferences for safety net policies when they reside in the aged communities. They are more supportive of policies that push for a wider safety net than their peers living in other places without an aged context. These findings make sense given their greater likelihood of knowing about candidates' positions on senior-related issues. In addition, the aged context also influences attitudes on these safety net policies for the young residents of aged communities.

Although knowledgeable and cohesive for aged-relevant issues, senior citizens living amongst their peers may not actually be very efficacious or active. Older adults (age 65 to 74) living in places with high concentrations of their peers are less politically efficacious than seniors living elsewhere. These senior citizens are not as likely to say that following politics is important, report confidence in their local government, or care which party wins the presidential election. However, they are slightly less likely to find politics complicated. This finding is also congruent with the findings in Chapter 3, showing that seniors living amongst their peers generally have higher levels of political knowledge. As with the previous chapter measuring safety

net attitudes, young adults living in an aged context are influenced by the efficacy attitudes of the relatively large population of older adults. However, the consequences are greater given the generally inefficacious attitudes of younger adults no matter where they live.

Living in an aged community even has some impact on the political participation of its older residents. The aged contextual effect is evident for primary voting turnout for the older residents (age 65 to 74), but has no effect on general election turnout for this group. Interestingly, the effect for primary turnout is negative. Older residents of aged communities appear to be less likely to go to the polls than peers living elsewhere. Given the less efficacious attitudes of this population, these findings are not entirely surprising and tell a consistent and interconnected picture of what is occurring in many aged communities. They are not hotbeds of participation as some times thought.

Finally, all of these contextual effects of the aged environment rely on a couple of primary mechanisms: social interaction and/or the cognitive content. Concentrations of senior-related resources (such as senior or health centers) may also facilitate the social interaction among older adults. However, the results point toward the conclusion that older and younger residents may not be influenced by these mechanisms to the same degree. While social interaction may be the primary means of influence for the older residents, young adults, much less likely to engage in meaningful interaction with older adults on a frequent basis, may be influenced by the more casual and less direct, aged cognitive content. These differences have

implications for the attitudes and behaviors potentially influenced by a person's social environment.

Contributing to the Study of Aging and Context Effects for Political Behavior

Departing from Past Work

This dissertation differs from previous work on aging and political behavior in a number of important ways. First, I update the past research, much of which relies on decades-old data, by considering the preferences and behaviors of the current aging population. I use survey data from 2000, 2004, 2006, 2008, and 2010 to address my research questions.

Second, I build and expand upon the aged context literature, in particular, by considering a greater range of political attitudes and behaviors than past work, which often focuses on elderly group consciousness in aged communities. I find that the aged context fosters many unique political attitudes and behaviors, ensuring a distinct political culture in locales with concentrations of older adults. This political culture includes higher levels of political knowledge, less political efficacy, more support for safety net policies, and lower levels of turnout for primary elections among older adults living in the older communities compared with their peers living elsewhere.

In the aged communities we find a distinctive mix of high political knowledge and low efficacy, with unimpressive turnout levels. It is possible that older adults have the abilities to remain engaged and up to date with political information but lack the same level of physical capability that might encourage increased political activity

in aged communities. Limited physical capacity in itself might influence personal efficacy in a number of areas, including political efficacy, of life.

While I think it is likely that physical challenges faced by older adults may contribute to this disenchantment with politics, I also think that the aged communities just encourage a retreatist and politically pessimistic outlook among many residents. In many of the communities, there are plenty of other leisure activities to take up energy that do not directly involve politics, for instance, golf or gardening. In addition, older adults have experienced politics for many generations and perhaps have held onto some of the negative and unresponsiveness aspects of political leaders—resulting in distaste for government. The social interactions and cognitive content in these aged communities may just compound those sentiments for residents.

Young people living amongst youthful peers have low levels of political knowledge but tend to act quickly and some times radically (Fuller and Pitts 1990; Goldstone 2002; Hart, Atkins, and Youniss 2005; Hart et al. 2004; Urdal 2008). Oppositely, older adults living amongst their elderly peers express high levels of political knowledge but are slower to act. It may be that the more knowledgeable older adults, with their collective experience and wisdom, use very careful judgment before displaying any thing that looks like gray power. They are just too familiar with the limits of government and their own limits to take action without thorough consideration.²⁶

²⁶ Some of the myths of an all encompassing gray power may come from the ideas that people have about older interest groups. It may be that gray power may be limited for the older adults living in aged communities but not for the wealthy interest groups.

Third, the differences in attitudes and behaviors observed in the aged locales cannot simply be attributed to individual characteristics of people who live in particular places or to other community qualities, which may be related to certain concentrations of political dispositions. Using hierarchical modeling to control for these factors, I can be confident that the distinct political attitudes and behaviors of aged context residents may be attributed to the *concentration of older residents*. This modeling technique is not new but is has been applied in only a limited number of recent studies on the effect of varying age distributions. My work builds on this research and substantially adds to it by highlighting many important contextual effects.

My work also considers the differences between the types of aged communities. In Chapter 2, I discuss the two main types of elderly communities (active retired and small town) and the different factors, which lead to the skewed population distributions. By controlling for the size of the population and the median household income of the community, I gain confidence that results from the analyses are due to social effects related to the aged population of the community rather than differences in the populations making up these two types of aged locales. Past work on the aged context pays little attention to the differences between aging communities, and aging individuals, and the aging politics scholarship and especially journalism too often assume that the elderly belong to one gigantic indistinct group.

Fourth, my work adds an additional element of inquiry by examining the aged context impact for the oldest and youngest adults in society. Most aging contextual studies focus on the impact of this setting for older adults at large, generally defining

older adulthood as aged 65 and older. I build from the work on aging and political knowledge by Lau and Redlawsk (2008), which finds evidence for different effects depending on whether an older adult is a *younger* older adult or an *older* older adult. This distinction has become increasingly relevant as people live longer and will become even more important into the future (Neugarten 1974, 1979, 1982).

Sixty is the new fifty for many, and the prime of life. People spend more time as empty nesters and are still relatively healthy and able well into their 60s and often later. However, physical and cognitive abilities will decline in the latest years, making social and casual interaction with the community more difficult and thus, less frequent. Without the same opportunities for interaction with the community, the unique qualities of the aged context will have little to no influence on the oldest within the population.

I also consider the impact of these skewed age distributions in communities by examining the impact of the youngest voters in society, often still politically unsettled and beginning to establish political predispositions. Past work on contextual research led me to hypothesize that the politics of minorities within the population may be influenced by the politics of those with the greatest numbers. For the current work, the overwhelming presence of the older adults in society have made an impact on the younger generation of residents living among them by influencing their attitudes on safety net policies and their political efficacy—political characteristics that may be influenced without much direct contact but by simply living in a place with a certain aged cognitive content. This contextual effect on the young is likely limited by the fact that young people do not interact much with older adults in meaningful ways that

encourage discussion on politics. Any increased contact between generations within these communities may be attributed to more casual contact or by exposure to age-related media and aged community-targeted campaigns.

Weighing in on Senior Power Theories

In addition to some of the innovative techniques used and considerations made in this dissertation, each chapter also adds to a body of work, which addresses claims of a powerful senior citizenry and the fewer studies, which question and qualify such assertions. Many have made the logical leap, supposing that concentrations of socially interactive older adults who are generally politically knowledgeable, efficacious, tuned-in, and able should result in a politically exceptional and powerful geriatric populace.

My work supports and adds to the less sensational but incredibly important work that tells a different story. In the rising numbers of aged communities, older residents are not forming politically cohesive and powerful blocs of voters—when considering this dissertation’s findings. While older adults living amongst their peers are truly exceptional in the amount of political knowledge they hold and maintain, it may not be enough to overcome the hurdles of a discouraged outlook on politics and only average to lower levels of political action—not a very powerful sounding description. Most of the time, older adults living in an aged community will 1) behave like other senior citizens across the country or 2) may be less likely to believe that political action will accomplish much due to inefficacious attitudes and then less likely to act at all. In addition, the aged context is relevant only some of the time for the oldest senior citizens, which make up nearly half of the population 65 and over.

I think that the findings in this dissertation show that older adults are certainly capable of becoming a powerful force in local and national politics when motivated by a threat to their livelihood. Past work has shown this to be the case in many communities with the right mix of circumstances. This is of course the case in a pluralistic society for many groups with generally high levels of political skills and resources. However, older adults in the United States may have additional support in the aged communities from some unexpected allies. Along with the older residents, younger adults living in the aged locations are also more likely to support policies, which many elderly Americans rely on for their wellbeing. This extra support for such policies may provide cushioning against any threats to these programs that older adults (within and outside of the aged communities) perceive—perhaps removing the occasion for displays of senior power.

Bolstering Contextual Effects Research

This dissertation research also adds to the large body of work on contextual effects in two final and important ways. First, my work shows that contextual effects are evident when considering the dense geographic area of the zip code and even as large as the county. My work is definitely not the first to present such findings for contextual research in general, but studies of aged context effects have mostly relied on neighborhood effects for other areas, looking at urban area census tracts or city blocks. As mentioned above, some have even doubted that aged community effects exist at all at wider geographic levels of measurement (Ward, LaGory, and Sherman 1985). This suggests that contextual characteristics can be quite important for a geographically wide-range of residents.

Additionally, I have shown that effects remain fairly consistent across the two measures. This is likely due to the fact that the measures, while capturing different ranges of age distributions, may differ mostly at their extremes. For instance, when considering the thousands of aged communities across the country, there are only relatively few that maintain their own zip code with 97% of residents at or over the age of 65. It is likely that the county and zip codes measures are often capturing the same areas, with zip codes just measuring the smaller land area within the aged county. By referring back to the tables of the top 20 aged locales for each measure of context in Chapter 2, one can see that the top 20 zip code OASQs cover a much larger range than the county measure. A comparison of the top 50 or 100 locations will exhibit more overlap between the measures—with the counties of many of the zip codes making the list.

Second, the findings in the four substantive chapters of this dissertation point to support for the two most common mechanisms proposed for the associations between community characteristics and individual attitudes and behaviors: direct social interaction and more casual influence through the cognitive content (for example, messages sent via local media and/or mass communication). These mechanisms are difficult to test and to separate, and that is not what I attempt to do with this dissertation. However, coupled with evidence from past work, the present findings add to the conversation by painting of picture of what may be going on in these aged contexts.

The differences in contextual effects for the various age groups examined throughout the dissertation provide support for a mechanism of direct contact and for

one of indirect or more casual contact. The oldest adults are much less socially engaged and thus are not influenced by the context much or at all. Younger adults do not have nearly as much direct contact with older people as with their peers, yet the aged context still makes an impact on their political attitudes through less direct means.

This last observation supports the idea that contextual effects often depend on the attitude or behavior measure of interest. Some attitudes and behaviors are more easily influenced by environment than others and by less direct means. My work suggests that while political action may require encouragement from others and political knowledge, engagement and discussion, the same effort may not be involved for political attitudes. Context may influence political attitudes via direct and casual mechanisms. The findings in this dissertation support these ideas, suggesting that attitudes—ranging from policy preferences to attitudes about personal political and government ability—may be influenced by social interaction *and* through access to the wider net of the cognitive content.

Varying Dependence on the Aged Context in Aged Communities

A survey of this dissertation's findings and contributions add to the discussion above iterating that some age groups are also more dependent on the aged context than others and for some attitudes and behaviors but not others. I find that the aged context generally influences the most active older residents but only some times influences the oldest residents (aged 75 and over) or the younger adult residents. These differences in effect may be due to differences in the ways that the

citizens of various ages interact with the community—relying on different mechanisms.

Older adults are probably influenced by both social interaction and cognitive content within the aged community. However, the context does not seem to matter for them in couple of cases examined here: knowledge of general campaign positions and general election turnout. In these cases, it may just be that all older people, despite context, are likely to pay attention to a wide array of candidate campaign issue positions and are likely to turnout in the general election. These activities do not rely so much on the unique social interactions and cognitive content occurring in the aged communities—they are just ingrained and have become habits of older adults in general, having experienced decades of political life.

The aged context influences younger adults most likely via the less direct mechanism of cognitive content. Although they have more opportunities for contact with older adults than their peers living elsewhere, the younger people living in the aged communities are probably not interacting with older adults in meaningful political discourse that would encourage the accumulation of political knowledge or turning out to vote. However, their attitudes (in the case of this study, efficacy and social welfare attitudes) may be influenced by the less direct but still present, aged cognitive content. Finally, the aged context may have little influence on the older adults of very advanced age because they are just more limited in the exposure to either of the aged contextual mechanisms – social interaction with peers or older focused cognitive context – they receive.

The Present and Future Impact of Aged Communities

This dissertation examines a local phenomenon, a skewed age distribution with overwhelming numbers of old adults in a community, and considers it in light of the nation's rapidly aging population. Reflection on the findings in each chapter leads us to question some of the conventional wisdom about our aging nation and the consequences for a range of political attitudes, behaviors, and policies.

In sum, a recession, uncertain fiscal politics, media hype, and other organized interests may concern older adults (and those on the cusp of retirement), with their projections of major cuts or the ruin of programs that support the oldest members of society—but not enough. The safety net policies remain popular among large segments of the population and will likely enjoy that support well into the future because of the support provided by the youngest generation. Attitudes and preferences formed early in life may not be easily swayed in later years. Safety net programs may need to be altered to ensure their sustainability but they are unlikely to be dismantled entirely given their support among liberal, conservative, old and young.

Even with the unique knowledge of the aged living among a population of peers, this may not be enough to produce senior power, to the expense of other age groups, primarily the young. They do not exhibit a consistent activism but instead are generally less likely to have any faith that personal or government action will make very little difference in achieving their policy goals. Although older adults have been moved to action in particular aged communities when motivated by a threat to their welfare, these instances may be very rare and threats fairly unlikely on a local and

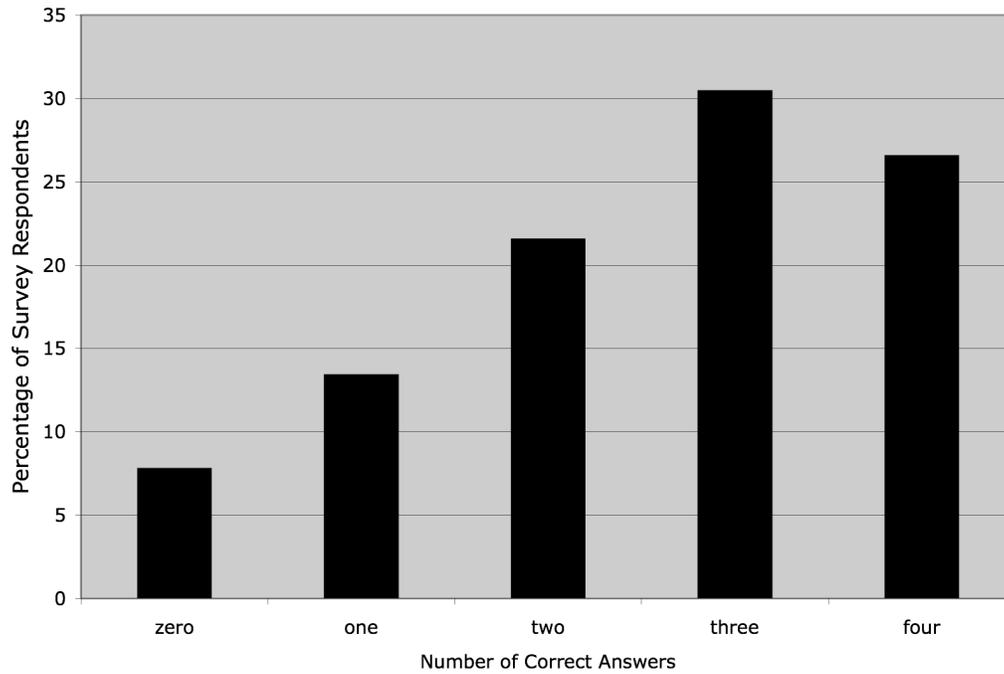
national level—given the support that young people living amongst elderly people hold for policies which benefit the oldest members of society.

As for future generations of older Americans, the local aged context will continue to be an important factor at the local and national level even as less booming generations age. There will always be locations, which draw or repel people of certain ages, creating places with skewed populations. With older adulthood established as a politically engaged part of the life cycle, large numbers of seniors may always have the potential for great displays of power if motivated to come together, especially at the local government level. As American politics and issues evolve, senior citizens may feel particularly threatened and wield their influence and power—just not any time soon.

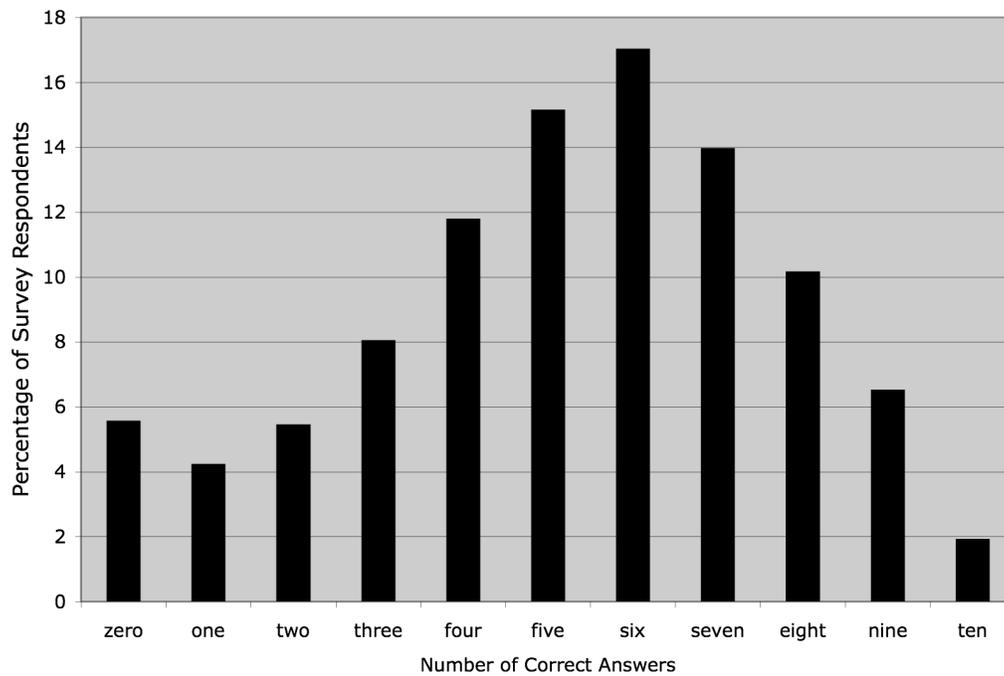
Appendices

Appendix 3.1. Dependent Variable Question Wording and Descriptive Information

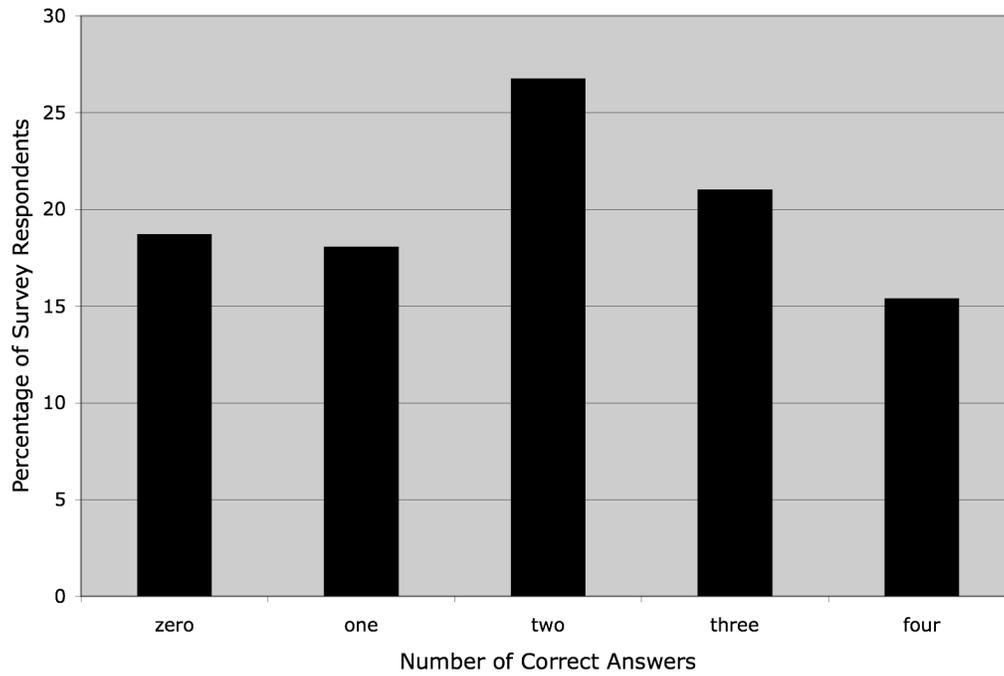
2004	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
Political system knowledge index	0	4	2.55	1.23
Questions included:	Know Cheney is Vice President Know Supreme Court determines constitutionality of laws Know two-thirds majority overrides veto Know Republicans are majority party in House			
2000	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
Candidate issue positions index	0	10	5.23	2.48
Questions included:	Bush favors investing Social Security in stock market Gore favors investing Social Security in stock market Bush favors school vouchers Gore favors school vouchers Bush favors universal health care for children Gore favors universal health care for children Bush favors death penalty Gore favors death penalty Bush favors gays in the military Gore favors gays in the military			
2000	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
Candidate senior issue positions index	0	4	1.96	1.33
Questions included:	Bush favors investing Social Security in stock market Gore favors investing Social Security in stock market Bush position on prescription coverage for seniors Gore position on prescription coverage for seniors			



Appendix 3.2 – Survey Respondent Distribution for Dependent Variable: Political System Knowledge Index



Appendix 3.3 – Survey Respondent Distribution for Dependent Variable: Candidate Issue Position Knowledge Index



Appendix 3.4 – Survey Respondent Distribution for Dependent Variable: Candidate Senior Issue Position Knowledge Index

**Appendix 4.1. Dependent Variable Question Wording
(NAES 2000, 2004, and 2008)**

Variable	Question wording
Spend More Medicare (2000)	Federal government should spend on Medicare
Recoding	Federal government should spend MORE on Medicare
Without Health Insurance a Problem (2000)	Americans without health insurance a problem Americans without health insurance an EXTREMELY SERIOUS or SERIOUS problem
Recoding	
Spend More on Health Care (2000)	Federal government should spend on health care for uninsured Federal government should spend MORE on health care for uninsured
Recoding	
Oppose Soc Sec Stock Market (2000)	Favor investing social security in stock market OPPOSE investing social security in stock market
Recoding	
Poverty a Problem (2000)	Poverty a problem Poverty an EXTREMELY SERIOUS OR SERIOUS PROBLEM
Recoding	
Reduce Income Differences (2000)	Federal government should reduce income differences Federal government should reduce income differences (YES)
Recoding	
Spend More on Health Insurance (2004)	Favor government spending more on health insurance Favor government spending MORE on health insurance
Recoding	
Reduce Income Differences (2004)	Favor government trying to reduce income differences STRONGLY AND SOMEWHAT FAVOR government trying to reduce income differences
Recoding	
Favor Government Health Insurance (2008)	Favor government health insurance or current private system Favor ONE GOVERNMENT health insurance PROGRAM
Recoding	
More Regulation for Health Industry (2008)	Increase competition or regulation in health care industry INCREASE REGULATION in health care industry
Recoding	

Appendix 5.1. Dependent Variable Question Wording and Descriptive Information

NAES 2004	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
Following politics importance: "Does not matter if do not follow politics" - strongly disagree (cmb13)	0	1	0.546	0.498
Politics too complicated: "Politics too complicated" - strongly and somewhat agree (cmb10)	0	1	0.539	0.499
Confidence in local government: "Confidence in local government - great deal and fair amount (cmb09)	0	1	0.682	0.466
NAES 2000	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
Care who wins: "Care which party wins presidential election" - good deal (ck04)	0	1	0.663	0.473
Interested in government: "interested in government" - most of the time (ck01)	0	1	0.350	0.477

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