When Does a Group of Citizens Influence Policy?
Evidence from Senior Citizen Participation in City Politics

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Abstract: When does a group of citizens influence public policy? Mainstream American politics research emphasizes the importance of the group’s turnout and presence in the electorate, but there have been few empirical tests of those hypotheses. Meanwhile, other scholars argue that group cohesiveness, organization, and non-voting political activity are potentially more important than voting for shaping policy. These two strands of the literature have largely developed in parallel, however, in part because they tend to employ different empirical methods. In this paper, I attempt to bridge the divide between them and test these ideas within the same empirical framework, using senior citizens and senior-friendly transportation policy as a test case. My results show that senior voting does not unconditionally predict policies friendlier to seniors. Instead, I find that city policies are friendlier to seniors when seniors are a more cohesive, meaningful group, and when they engage in activities other than voting.

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Some of the major questions that have motivated research in American politics are: Who governs? How well does government represent its citizens? And which individuals or groups in society influence public policy? The answers to these questions are almost certainly complex and conditional. Yet for the last few decades, mainstream American politics research has approached them with a somewhat narrow lens: it has mostly focused on citizens and elected officials, their linkages through elections, and the act of voting.

One claim in particular that is pervasive in the literature today is that public policy tends to be biased in favor of groups of citizens who vote at high rates (e.g., Key 1949, Piven and Cloward 1988, Bennett and Resnick 1990, Lijphart 1997). Even if not stated explicitly, the logic underlying this claim is rooted in the Downsian model of political competition and empirical evidence on the predictors of turnout: In Downs’ (1957) theory, the main political actors are individual citizens and candidates, and the core hypothesis is that politicians adopt policy positions in response to those who vote in their elections. Separately, in empirical work, it is well established that individual characteristics like race, education, and age are strong predictors of turnout (e.g., Rosenstone and Hansen 1992)—and that active voters are an unrepresentative subset of those eligible. Considering these two cornerstones of the literature together, it is no great leap to the conclusion that there should be a turnout-policy connection: if some groups of citizens (such as high-income citizens) vote at higher rates than others, then elected officials should favor them in their policy decisions.

But if political science adherence to the idea of a turnout-policy connection is robust, the empirical evidence in support of such a connection is not. As Martin and Claibourn (2013, 59) put it, “very few studies have successfully connected citizen participation with policy or political outcomes. Rather, scholars tend to take a theoretical approach and assume effects.” While there
are some studies that link overall turnout rates to election outcomes, roll-call votes, or federal spending (e.g., Martin 2003, Martin and Claibourn 2003, Hajnal and Trounstine 2005), studies that document a link between the turnout rates of particular groups and policy outcomes in their favor are surprisingly rare (for exceptions, see Hill and Leighley 1992, Anzia 2014).

One can also question the proposed turnout-policy connection on theoretical grounds. For starters, its existence should depend on a group having relatively homogenous policy preferences that are distinct from those of non-group members (see, e.g., Citrin et al. 2003), which might be true for some groups and issues but not others. In addition, for the connection to exist, group members presumably have to vote on the basis of those issues, and policymakers have to know that they are doing so. This, too, may or may not hold: groups vary in their cohesiveness and attentiveness to issues relevant to the group (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960, Arnold 1990, Campbell 2003, Martin 2003, Harden 2016), and the act of voting (by itself) does not clearly communicate those policy preferences to elected officials (e.g., Griffin and Newman 2005, Schlozman et al. 2012). Moreover, some groups are well organized and engage in politics in a variety of ways—not just by voting—while other groups with shared interests remain unorganized and relatively inactive (Schattschneider 1960, Olson 1965). And in recent years, a growing number of scholars have argued that non-voting activity and the efforts of organized groups are probably even more important than voting for explaining variation in public policy (e.g., Bartels 2008, Bawn et al. 2012, Hacker and Pierson 2014, Gilens and Page 2014).

What we have, then, is an open question about American politics: Under what conditions does a group of citizens influence public policy? Conventional wisdom emphasizes the group’s turnout and presence in the electorate, but there are few empirical tests of that conventional wisdom, and many scholars now question whether turnout is the most important factor.
To make headway in answering the question, it is first worth asking why there have been so few empirical studies documenting the hypothesized turnout-policy connection. One likely reason is that American politics scholars tend to study national politics—a context in which it may be difficult to detect a relationship between turnout and policy. As Citrin et al. (2003) explain, the preferences of voters in national elections are not all that different from the preferences of nonvoters. There is also little variation in policy to analyze when the focus is a single policy-making body like the U.S. Congress.¹ It should therefore be easier to detect the hypothesized relationship in state and local governments, because each state and local government has its own policies. Moreover, turnout tends to be lower in local than in national elections, and thus the potential for turnout bias greater (Hajnal and Trounstine 2005). The problem, however, is that even basic data on state and especially local elections are difficult to acquire (Trounstine 2009). And testing the effect of increased turnout by a particular group calls for more than just basic data: it calls for turnout figures disaggregated by group. In principle, researchers could obtain such data by working with individual voter files, but that can be costly and tedious—and many states’ voter files do not even track participation in local elections. Thus, while it might seem that testing the turnout-policy connection should be straightforward—because individual turnout is quantifiable, and one can imagine scenarios in which it is exogenous to policy outcomes—it is actually quite difficult.

Scholars emphasizing the importance of group cohesiveness, organization, and non-voting political activity face even more daunting empirical challenges. First, collecting data on

¹ Roll-call votes provide variation in legislators’ positions, but only on the issues being debated. Actual policies are shaped both by action and inaction (Hacker and Pierson 2014, Moe 2015).
non-voting activities like letter-writing, testimony, endorsements, and lobbying is far more
difficult than assembling data on voting. Second, group activity, organization, and cohesiveness
are almost always *endogenous* to policy. Scholars of organized groups and public policy have
long studied policy feedback as important and theoretically interesting (e.g., Campbell 2003,
Patashnik 2008, Hacker and Pierson 2014), but one implication is that many of the hypotheses
flowing from this theoretical work can’t easily be tested using the causal inference methods that
are de rigueur in American politics research today. Instead, scholars in this tradition have relied
more on qualitative data and non-causal quantitative analyses. As a result, this part of the
literature has developed largely in parallel to the one emphasizing turnout.

Ultimately, though, both of these strands of the literature are interested in the same
question, even if they face different empirical challenges and tend to utilize different methods.
And there is much to be gained from bridging the theoretical and empirical divide between
them—and from adopting a more unified, comprehensive approach.

This paper is an attempt to do that, and to thereby enhance our understanding of what it
takes for a group of citizens to influence policy. As a test case, I focus on the role of senior
citizens in local elections. Unlike many other groups of citizens that could be studied, senior
citizens are present in every locality; moreover, their turnout rates and electoral presence differ
from place to place. Just as importantly for the question at hand, senior citizens in different
communities vary in their cohesiveness, their attentiveness to policy issues, and their non-voting
political activity. Thus, by studying senior citizens, I am able to leverage cross-city variation in
many of factors that have been proposed as important in shaping a group’s influence over policy.

Understanding the impact of seniors’ political participation on public policy is also
important in its own right. Age is one of the strongest predictors of the decision to vote
(Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), and it is well understood that seniors have influence on national policy—and not just because they vote at high rates (Campbell 2003). Yet we know little about how seniors’ political activity affects state and local government,² in spite of the fact that state and local governments account for more than half of all public spending in the United States and are devoting increasing shares of their budgets to programs that largely benefit older Americans (Kiewiet and McCubbins 2014, DiSalvo 2015). Even beyond the methodological advantages of studying seniors in local politics, then, there are potential benefits of increased scholarly attention to age bias in participation and its consequences for public policy.

In what follows, I start with a test of the conventional wisdom that when groups make up a larger share of the electorate, they are more likely to secure favorable policies. I focus on the elections of over 400 cities in California, asking whether cities that have larger shares of senior voters have transportation policies that are friendlier to seniors. My initial findings, it turns out, are not supportive of the conventional wisdom: I find no clear relationship between the senior-friendliness of city transportation policy and the percentage of city voters who are 65 and over. In the second part of the analysis, then, I turn to other arguments about the conditions under which a group of citizens will influence policy—emphasizing the group’s social cohesiveness and policy attentiveness as well as its political activity other than voting. Instead of shifting to a different empirical approach to study these phenomena, I test them in the same quantitative framework. The results suggest that policies are friendlier to seniors when seniors are a more

² There is an education finance literature arguing that the size of the senior population negatively affects public school spending, but the evidence is mixed (see Fletcher and Kenny 2008), and its empirical work does not actually measure the political activity of seniors.
socially cohesive, attentive group, and when they engage in political activities other than voting. Moreover, when seniors are a cohesive group, their share of the electorate does seem to matter to policy outcomes—and therefore there is a turnout-policy connection under certain conditions.

In the end, my analysis highlights both the difficulty and promise of bridging the gap between these two scholarly approaches. It is certainly easier to collect data and carry out causally-oriented quantitative analysis when the theoretical focus is on voting and turnout rather than on groups and non-voting political activity. But if a primary aim of political science is to understand influence, it is not enough to only study voting. We must also learn about the conditions under which voting is influential, the other avenues groups pursue to exert influence, and how all of these come together to shape representation and public policy.

**Testing the Turnout-Policy Connection**

As I discussed above, testing the hypothesized turnout-policy connection calls for turnout data disaggregated by the categories of voters being studied. Mainly for data availability reasons, then, I focus my analysis on California cities. In California, Political Data, Inc., (PDI) collects, cleans, and regularly updates the voter files of all the state’s local jurisdictions that administer elections. I was therefore able to purchase from PDI data on the number of registered voters, by age, who voted in recent municipal elections.

California is a great testing ground for other reasons: it has more than 480 municipal governments, each with its own policies, and also the timing of city elections varies across the state, with some cities holding elections at the same time as national general elections, others holding city races concurrently with state primaries, and still others holding elections on entirely different days (off-cycle). Because the timing of elections has a large impact on overall turnout
rates (Hajnal et al. 2002), the within-state variation in local election timing makes it likely that age bias in participation varies as well (see Hajnal and Trounstine 2005).

In March 2014, therefore, I used local election data provided by the California Elections Data Archive (CEDA) to identify the most recent regular election date for each of the state’s municipal governments. Then, for that list of city election dates, as well as for the dates of recent statewide primary and general elections, PDI provided city-level data on the number of residents who were registered and the number who voted in that election, broken down by age. The resulting dataset therefore includes information on the age distribution of registered and voting citizens in the elections of 433 California cities with more than 1,000 residents.3

Age and Turnout in California City Elections

An important starting point is to simply describe how voting rates vary by age in these cities. First, what percentage of city residents in each age category are registered to vote? To answer that question, I started with the PDI data on the number of registered voters in each age category and city as of the November 2010 election, and then I merged in city-by-age population data from the 2010 U.S. Census to calculate—for each age category and each of the 433 cities—the percentage of the city population registered to vote. The first row of Table 1 presents the average percent registered for two categories of city residents: those between 20 and 45 years old, and those between 65 and 90 years old.4 On average, 57% of the younger group is registered to vote, whereas 74% of the older residents are. Then, of those registered to vote,

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3 I excluded some municipal governments due to small size or lack of data; see online appendix.
4 I limit the data to residents 90 years old and younger, because many cities have small numbers of residents older than 90, and because the figures can be unreliable for those over 90.
what percentage voted in the most recent city election? Those figures are presented in row 2 of Table 1. I find that 47% of the registered 20- to 45-year-olds in the average city voted, compared to 74% of the 65- to 90-year-olds. Thus, in the typical California city, electorates tilt strongly in favor of older residents, both because older residents are more likely to be registered, and because among those registered, older residents vote in local elections at much higher rates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ages 20-45</th>
<th>Ages 65-90</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) % of Population Registered</td>
<td>0.565</td>
<td>0.742</td>
<td>0.177</td>
<td>433</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) % of Registered Voting in City Election</td>
<td>0.473</td>
<td>0.739</td>
<td>0.266</td>
<td>433</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Concurrent with presidential elections</td>
<td>0.614</td>
<td>0.846</td>
<td>0.232</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Concurrent with midterm elections</td>
<td>0.474</td>
<td>0.795</td>
<td>0.321</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Concurrent with statewide primaries</td>
<td>0.223</td>
<td>0.687</td>
<td>0.464</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Off-cycle</td>
<td>0.138</td>
<td>0.451</td>
<td>0.313</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: In all rows, the differences between the registered/voting rates of the older and younger voters are statistically significant at the 1% level.

Does the age gap in turnout depend on when the city election is held? I explore this in rows 3-6, where I calculate the percentage of registered voters in each age category who voted in the most recent city election, broken down by election timing. Rows 3-6 show not only that overall turnout is highest in city elections held concurrently with presidential elections, but also that the turnout gap between the two age groups is smallest in those cities. Specifically, in row 3, the age gap is 23 percentage points. Yet it is 32 points during midterms, 31 points during off-cycle elections, and 46 points during statewide primaries. Therefore, age bias in turnout does depend on the timing of city elections.

What does this mean for the composition of the electorate in city elections? After all, a high turnout rate among a small group of citizens might not weigh heavily on the decisions of election-oriented politicians. High turnout by a large group, by contrast, should matter a great deal. Because my goal in this first round of tests is to assess whether elected officials are more
responsive to groups that make up a larger share of the voting electorate, the quantity of greatest interest here is the percentage of city election voters who are senior citizens.

For each city, therefore, I calculate the percentage of city election voters who are between 65 and 90 years of age—a variable I call Percent senior. The distribution of Percent senior in the dataset ranges from 10% to 62% and is shown by the solid line in Figure 1. That figure also shows the distributions of two other variables: the percentage of the city voting-age population between 65 and 90 (the dotted line) and the percentage of city registered voters between 65 and 90 (the dashed line). In the median city, seniors make up 15% of the voting-age population, but they make up 19% of those registered and 25% of voters. There is also right skew in the distribution of Percent senior: in 104 of the 433 cities, for example, more than a third of the voters are senior citizens. Therefore, seniors’ share of the electorate tends to be much higher than their share of the population, but their electoral presence varies considerably across cities.
City Transportation Services for Senior Citizens

To test whether seniors’ electoral presence helps to explain variation in city policy, it would be useful to have city-level measures of seniors’ policy preferences. With those data in hand, and with data on what cities actually do in those policy areas, I could test whether city policies are more aligned with seniors’ preferences when seniors make up a greater percentage of city voters. Unfortunately, there are no public opinion data detailing the preferences of senior citizens on local policy issues in each of these 433 cities. An alternative approach is to ask whether there are local policies for which it is safe to assume that seniors have certain preferences—and, moreover, preferences that diverge from those of non-seniors.

A good candidate for that approach, I argue, is local transportation policy—specifically, local transportation services for senior citizens. Many local governments provide demand-response (DR) service, which is defined by the Federal Transit Administration as “a transit mode comprised of passenger cars, vans or small buses operating in response to calls from passengers or their agents to the transit operator, who then dispatches a vehicle to pick up the passengers and transport them to their destinations.” DR service is therefore different from standard public transportation in that it usually does not follow a fixed route or operate on a set schedule; instead, it picks up and drops off users in the locations users request. Local governments that provide DR service typically provide it for senior citizens, disabled citizens, or both. My assumption, then, is that seniors would rather have access to DR service than not, and that they would rather have a

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service exclusively for them (and the disabled) than a service open to the public. Non-seniors, by contrast, do not directly benefit from DR service (unless it is available to the general public), and so we should expect them to be less strongly in favor of DR service for seniors.\textsuperscript{6}

With this logic as motivation, I collected data on the DR services available to senior citizens in each California municipality as of spring 2014. Most of the information was available on the websites of California’s local governments, but when needed, I followed up with phone calls to the relevant agencies. Over the course of two months, I mapped out which DR services were available to seniors living in each municipal government. The result was a dataset of all the public DR services available to senior citizens in California.

In roughly a third of the 433 cities, senior citizens have no access to public DR service, but in the cities where they do, the most common provider is the city government itself (172 cities). In addition, there are 88 cities where seniors have DR service provided by regional transit authorities or districts, as well as 83 where it is provided by the county. (Also, some cities have more than one DR service.) If only cities could provide DR service, then testing for the turnout-policy link in city government would be straightforward. But how to deal with cities that receive service from a transit authority or county? On the one hand, there is reason to expect transit authority boards to pay attention to voters in city elections, because these boards are typically made up of city and county legislators from the areas served. In contrast, there is little reason to expect a link between city elections and policies made by counties. I therefore categorize cities according to whether they receive DR service from either city agencies or transit...

\textsuperscript{6} Most city policy areas do not have these features. Many city services—such as street sweeping and refuse collection—are distributed relatively equally among city residents (Oliver 2012).
authorities. The dependent variable *DR service* equals 0 if the city’s seniors have no access to DR service from a city or transit authority (183 cities), 1 if seniors have access to a DR service that is also available to the public (83 cities), and 2 if seniors have access to DR service that is exclusively for seniors (167 cities).

To test whether the percentage of seniors in the electorate affects the senior-friendliness of city transportation policy, I regress *DR service* on *Percent senior* using an ordinal logit model.\(^7\) If the hypothesis implied by the turnout literature is correct, then the coefficient on *Percent senior* should be positive: cities where a larger percentage of city election voters are seniors should be more likely to provide DR service to their senior residents.

Even if this hypothesis is correct, there may be city characteristics correlated with both the percentage of seniors in the electorate and the senior-friendliness of transportation. For example, perhaps larger cities, or cities with greater density, have lower percentages of seniors in the population (and in the electorate), but also have greater capacity to provide DR service. I therefore include log city population and log population density in the model (as measured by the 2010 U.S. Census), expecting them to have a positive relationship with *DR service*. Income may be a factor as well if cities with high percentages of seniors tend to be less affluent and less able to afford DR service. Thus, I include log per capita income in the model.\(^8\) In addition, perhaps liberal cities provide a wider array of services and also have younger populations, so I include the percentage of the city’s two-party vote for Barack Obama in November 2012. Finally, city officials are probably less inclined to provide DR service if the county already provides it, so I

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\(^7\) My results are substantively similar when I use OLS or multinomial logit. See online appendix.

\(^8\) The data are from the American Community Survey; I use the five-year estimates from 2013.
control for the senior-friendliness of DR service provided by the county: mirroring the dependent variable, it equals 0 if the county provides no DR service to the city, 1 if it provides DR service to the general public, and 2 if it provides DR service exclusively for seniors.

This last variable addresses how city officials’ decisions might be influenced by the services counties provide, but it also raises the question of whether cities within the same county share other important characteristics in common. For example, many counties provide transportation funding to their cities and transit authorities, and they are often charged with distributing state money to local governments within their boundaries. If so, and if I estimate a positive coefficient on \textit{Percent senior}, it may not be that city officials are responding to city voters. Instead, one could argue, it might be driven by counties with large senior populations that have relatively large budgets for transportation.

I deal with this concern in two ways. First, I cluster the standard errors by county to address correlation of the errors of cities in the same county. Second, I estimate models both with and without county fixed effects. Including 53 dummy variables in a model with 433 observations places heavy demands on the estimation, but including county fixed effects allows me to account for city features that are constant for cities within the same county.

\textit{Empirical Results}

In Table 2, I begin with the basic models: regressions of \textit{DR service} on \textit{Percent senior} and the city-level control variables, first without county fixed effects (column 1), then with county fixed effects (column 2). Both models show that larger cities are more likely to have DR service, as expected. But does it look as though local transportation policy is friendlier to seniors when seniors make up a larger share of the electorate? Actually, the answer is no. In both
models, the coefficient on Percent Senior is statistically indistinguishable from zero—suggesting no clear association between senior turnout and senior transit provision.

Given that this null finding is not what the turnout literature leads us to expect, what can explain it? Could it be, perhaps, that the operationalization of the dependent variable is problematic? To evaluate this possibility, in column 3, the dependent variable equals 1 if a city’s seniors have access to any DR service from a city or transit authority, regardless of who else can use it; it equals 0 if the city has no DR service.⁹ In column 4, the dependent variable equals 1 if seniors have access to DR service from the city government (not transit authorities). Even in these logit models, however, I find no significant effect of senior turnout on policy.

Another possibility is that it may be difficult to detect a positive relationship (if one exists) using cross-sectional data. Percent senior captures the importance of seniors in recent city elections, even though several cities’ DR services were started years ago. Is it possible, then, that in the years leading up to DR service adoption, cities had much higher senior turnout—and that that higher senior turnout motivated city officials to enact senior-friendly policy?

To test this, one would like to have panel data on city DR service provision as well as historical city election turnout data broken down by age. Unfortunately, there is no way to acquire reliable panel data on city DR service provision in California,¹⁰ and even if I could, obtaining historical city election turnout data broken down by age for 433 cities is prohibitively

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⁹ The county DR variable in this model is a binary indicator.

¹⁰ I attempted to collect information on when each DR service began, but I could only determine a date—sometimes approximate—for 57% of them. Some services date back to the 1970s and 1980s, but the majority began during the 1990s and 2000s. See online appendix.
difficult. However, by turning to historical data on city election timing, one can make reasonable assumptions about how well Percent senior represents the share of seniors in the electorate in past elections. As I discussed earlier, the importance of seniors as voters depends on when city elections are held. And as I show in the online appendix (using additional data from PDI), for cities that don’t change their election schedules, Percent senior fluctuates little from election to election. Given that most of the cities in this dataset have had the same election schedules since 1996—the first year that CEDA began compiling local election data—Percent senior in recent elections is probably a good measure of seniors’ voting presence in past elections. That said, there are 46 cities in the dataset that have changed their election schedules since 1996, and for seven of them, I was able to obtain PDI turnout data by age for the city’s final elections before they switched to the new schedule. As I show in the online appendix, these cities did experience a large change in Percent senior from before to after the election timing change.

As a next step, then, I return to the original model from column 1 but make an adjustment for the 46 cities that switched their election schedules: I exclude the 39 cities for which I don’t have Percent senior from an election before the switch, and for the seven cities for which I do, I use the value of Percent senior from the last election before the change. The results are presented in column 5 of Table 2. Even with this adjustment, I find no clear association between senior presence in the electorate and the senior-friendliness of city transportation.

A final possibility is that perhaps there is something about DR service as a dependent variable that makes it difficult to uncover a positive relationship—and that it might be better to look at a broader policy outcome such as cities’ expenditures on public transportation. However, it is not clear whether seniors would be more in favor of public transportation spending than non-seniors, and so DR service offers a cleaner test of the hypothesized turnout-policy connection.
Even so, in column 6 of Table 2, I use OLS to model each city’s logged per capita public transportation operating expenditures from 2014, using data from the California State Controller’s Office. I include county fixed effects, because if counties with relatively large senior populations also happen to have large budgets for transportation—a portion of which is distributed to cities within the county—then any positive relationship between Percent senior and transportation spending might simply reflect those cross-county differences rather than city officials’ different responses to their electorates. However, even when I look at public transportation spending, I do not find an effect of the share of senior citizens in the electorate.
As I discussed earlier, this is a context in which it should be relatively easy to detect the hypothesized relationship between the importance of a group as voters and public policies responsive to that group. My empirical design allows me to compare hundreds of governments, each with different policies. It focuses on a group of citizens known to have influence on national policy (Campbell 2003). And instead of assuming something about the importance of seniors as voters in elections, I have measured it—and tested whether it can explain variation in policies friendly to seniors. Yet I have not found the expected relationship.

**Group Cohesiveness and Non-Voting Political Activity**

If the group’s voting presence does not make a difference in this case, then what does explain variation in policy outcomes? Beyond high turnout, what conditions have to be met in order for a group of citizens to influence policy?\(^{11}\)

As a start, I propose that we distinguish between the substance of citizens’ preferences and the *focus* of the citizens who hold those preferences. Even if citizens are able to state a preference on a policy issue when asked, that issue may or may not actually be important to them (Krosnick 1990). As Arnold (1990) explains in his discussion of “attentive publics,” some groups of citizens feel passionately about a particular issue and weigh that issue heavily in their vote decisions, whereas others—even if they can state an opinion—are less attentive to the issue and vote on the basis of other factors (see also Martin 2003). One possibility, then, is that having

\(^{11}\) One response, discussed above, is that group members must have policy preferences distinct from those of non-group members (Citrin et al. 2003). But I chose to examine senior transportation *because* it is safe to assume that seniors’ preferences on the issue look different than those of non-seniors. Therefore, it is difficult to see how this could explain the null finding.
distinct preferences on an issue is not enough for a group’s turnout to affect policymakers’
decisions. In addition, the group has to be focused on the issue and willing to vote on that basis.

If that’s the case, then the logical next question is: what makes certain groups of citizens
focused on particular issues and others less focused? In the mainstream American politics
literature today, this is not a central research question, but several decades ago, it was a core
concern of scholars studying political behavior. And some of the classics of American politics,
such as Berelson et al. (1954) and Campbell et al. (1960), argue that individuals’ political views
and behaviors are heavily shaped by their social interactions and group memberships. More
recently, scholars have built on these insights using newer data and more sophisticated
methodology, providing evidence that social networks do influence political behavior (Nickerson
2008, Gerber et al. 2008, Sinclair 2012). And while it is true that American society has seen
decline in group memberships that involve social interaction (Putnam 2000, Skocpol 2003), there
are still many forums—such as workplaces—in which social interaction helps to shape people’s
preferences and political orientation (Mutz and Mondak 2006, Hertel-Fernandez 2017).

So far, though, this newer work has focused on evaluating the effects of social networks
on political actions such as turning out to vote and contributing money to campaigns; it has not
explored how social networks shape individuals’ preferences on particular policy issues, the
intensity with which they hold such preferences, or their willingness to take political action on
the basis of those preferences. But social networks probably affect these things as well. If social
ties to a group make an individual more likely to vote or contribute money, they probably also
influence, reinforce, and intensify the individual’s views on policy issues—especially the policy
issues most relevant to the group. And thus it may well be that groups of citizens who regularly
interact, who are part of what Campbell et al. (1960) call “self-conscious groups,” and who are part of tightly-knit social and political networks, have more focused preferences on issues relevant to the group, and are more likely to vote and participate in politics on the basis of those preferences. Furthermore, it may be that this factor counts for more in influencing policy than the sheer number of voters of a particular “type” in a community.

However, it is very difficult to measure the social interactions of groups on a large scale (see Sinclair 2012, 17-18)—a prime example of the data availability and measurement issues that come with studying groups. In the specific case of senior citizens in California cities, there aren’t any existing data on the interactions and group-focus of seniors in each of the 433 cities in my dataset. The question, then, is how we might identify communities where seniors interact a great deal and are politically focused on senior issues—and distinguish them from communities where seniors interact less, have less focus, and vote on the basis of other matters.

I propose that one reasonable way of doing this is to differentiate between cities with and without senior centers. Senior centers provide services to communities’ seniors, but they are also places where seniors interact socially as a group. On average, then, I expect that seniors in cities with senior centers should be more attentive to local senior issues than those in cities without senior centers. If that is true, and if the group-oriented focus of a community of citizens matters

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12 Campbell et al. (1960, 293) distinguish between “self-conscious groups, such as racial or ethnic communities, and those groups that emerge from certain formal categories, such as the age cohort of people over 60 years old or such as women.” For the former, individuals are “part of a group conscious of itself as a group” (ibid, 473)—or members. The latter simply have some shared demographic characteristic.
for their political influence, then cities with senior centers should also be more likely to have senior-friendly transportation. Following this logic, I used information on the Congress of California Seniors’ website, cross-checked with cities’ official websites, to create an indicator equal to 1 if the city has a senior center (360 cities) and 0 if it does not (73 cities). I use this variable to test whether a group of citizens whose members are focused on issues relevant to the group are more likely to receive favorable policies.

This, then, is one way of answering the question about the conditions that must hold for a group of citizens to have influence. Another possibility is that other forms of political activity can be more important for influencing policy than voting. After all, a citizen’s vote for a candidate, by itself, does not clearly communicate policy preferences. Especially in local politics, where there are few public opinion polls, elections are usually nonpartisan, and politics is less ideological than at the national level (Oliver 2012), elected officials may not actually know what citizens want—even if those citizens vote at high rates. If so, then political activities that do convey citizens’ preferences on issues—such as contacting officials, testifying at hearings, or lobbying as a group—might be key to whether a group of citizens secures policy outcomes it favors (see Martin 2003, Griffin and Newman 2005, Schlozman et al. 2012).

As an example of what a more comprehensive model of political influence might look like, consider Campbell’s (2003) study of senior citizens and Social Security. Voter turnout is certainly part of the story: prior to the expansion of Social Security, senior citizens participated at rates similar to or even lower than young citizens, and when the program expanded, their turnout increased. But the expansion of Social Security did more than increase seniors’ numbers as voters. It also enhanced the content and meaning of their participation, through several channels. Seniors increasingly wrote letters to policymakers to communicate their preferences,
and their preferences became more intensely focused on Social Security. They also gained clout through the AARP, and political parties began to mobilize them around the issue. Seniors’ voices also found a place within government itself: key government agencies, such as the Social Security Administration and the Agency on Aging, became important vehicles for communicating the interests of seniors to policymakers. And so while seniors’ voting rates did increase after the expansion of Social Security, there were many other changes that also contributed to their enhanced political clout and policy success.

 Turning back to seniors in California cities, this implies that there could be many ways that seniors might influence policy at the local level. Seniors might attend city council meetings or contact their elected officials. They might be active through interest groups or political parties. The problem, however, is that these channels are either hard to measure on a large scale or are likely irrelevant: there are no records of city council meeting attendance that note the ages of those testifying, local elections in California are formally nonpartisan, and most cities across the United States feature little political activity by formal organizations of senior citizens. There is, however, one type of institution that is easier to measure and could be an important way that seniors voice their preferences to elected officials: senior commissions.

 Nearly all U.S. municipal governments have citizen authorities, boards, or commissions, most of which have appointed members who advise the city council on designated issues. Senior commissions, in particular, are set up to consider and advise city officials on matters of interest to seniors. These commissions are therefore a potentially important way in which a community’s seniors can exercise influence. To test whether that is the case, for each of the 433 cities in my dataset, I used information on cities’ websites—following up with a phone call if necessary—to establish whether or not each city has a senior board or commission. I
hypothesize that the 106 cities that have senior commissions will be more likely to provide senior DR service than cities without senior commissions.

**Empirical Results**

Returning to the city dataset, I once again start with the simplest model that includes all 433 cities and excludes county fixed effects, but this time I add **Senior center** as a measure of senior social cohesiveness and **Senior commission** as a measure of seniors’ non-voting political activity. The estimates are presented in column 1 of Table 3. Both of the new variables have positive, significant relationships with **DR service**. To illustrate the magnitude of the effects, in Table 4, I use Clarify (Tomz et al. 2003) to calculate the predicted probability that a city will have DR service exclusively for seniors, setting the continuous variables at their means and **County DR** at zero. The top panel shows that the predicted probability in a city with no senior center and no senior commission is 25%. Cities with senior centers (but no senior commissions) are predicted to have exclusive DR service 39% of the time—a 14 point increase. The same is true of cities with senior commissions but no senior centers. And in cities with both senior centers and senior commissions, the model predicts that 55% will have exclusive DR service.

In column 2 of Table 3, I estimate the same model without the cities that recently changed their election schedules. Again, having a senior center and a senior commission are both positively associated with having DR service. In column 3, where I add county fixed effects, I find the same pattern. Even when I focus on variation within counties, then, I find that cities with these institutions are more likely to have senior-friendly transportation.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{13}\) I find similar patterns when I use OLS and multinomial logit. See online appendix.
### Table 3: Turnout, Group Cohesiveness, and Non-Voting Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Demand Response Service for Seniors</th>
<th>Transit Expend.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent senior</td>
<td>0.595</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.861)</td>
<td>(1.687)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-1.302</td>
<td>(1.328)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.415</td>
<td>(1.478)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.088</td>
<td>(1.606)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-4.05</td>
<td>(3.986)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.133</td>
<td>(1.155)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior center</td>
<td>0.634</td>
<td>0.608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.299)</td>
<td>(0.315)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>(0.379)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>(0.322)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.898</td>
<td>(0.835)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.813</td>
<td>(0.294)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior commission</td>
<td>0.616</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.195)</td>
<td>(0.185)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.848</td>
<td>(0.266)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.795</td>
<td>(0.205)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.871</td>
<td>(0.210)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.807</td>
<td>(0.208)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.337</td>
<td>(0.203)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ln(Population)</td>
<td>0.228</td>
<td>0.235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.104)</td>
<td>(0.112)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>(0.164)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.202</td>
<td>(0.124)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.247</td>
<td>(0.118)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.194</td>
<td>(0.124)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.262</td>
<td>(0.105)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ln(Population density)</td>
<td>0.304</td>
<td>0.309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.147)</td>
<td>(0.150)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.066</td>
<td>(0.204)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.383</td>
<td>(0.157)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>(0.153)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>(0.164)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.343</td>
<td>(0.186)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ln(Income per capita)</td>
<td>-0.207</td>
<td>-0.184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.328)</td>
<td>(0.328)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.372</td>
<td>(0.455)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.198</td>
<td>(0.354)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.234</td>
<td>(0.356)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.113</td>
<td>(0.366)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.371</td>
<td>(0.296)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dem. presidential vote</td>
<td>-1.163</td>
<td>-1.203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.072)</td>
<td>(1.058)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.611</td>
<td>(1.403)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-1.344</td>
<td>(1.027)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-1.458</td>
<td>(1.032)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-1.439</td>
<td>(1.048)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.885</td>
<td>(1.422)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County DR</td>
<td>-0.329</td>
<td>-0.298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.324)</td>
<td>(0.312)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.263</td>
<td>(0.309)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.308</td>
<td>(0.290)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.263</td>
<td>(0.306)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior population, 1980</td>
<td>-2.328</td>
<td>-1.788</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.328)</td>
<td>(1.788)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-2.576</td>
<td>(1.788)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.291</td>
<td>(1.426)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ln(Commissions)</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>-0.228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.216)</td>
<td>(0.215)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.237</td>
<td>(0.214)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.085</td>
<td>(0.169)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of senior center</td>
<td>0.243</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.097)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior center * Percent senior</td>
<td>7.251</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.986)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Notes: Standard errors clustered by county in parentheses.
Table 4: Predicted Probability of Exclusive DR Service

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Without Senior Commission</th>
<th>With Senior Commission</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Without Senior Center</td>
<td>0.254</td>
<td>0.388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Senior Center</td>
<td>0.391</td>
<td>0.546</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Without Senior Center</td>
<td>0.172</td>
<td>0.318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Senior Center, Low Percent Senior</td>
<td>0.287</td>
<td>0.475</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Senior Center, High Percent Senior</td>
<td>0.502</td>
<td>0.692</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These data and models overcome one significant hurdle in the study of groups and non-voting political activity—the challenge of data and measurement—but they do not address the other: the potential for endogeneity. As the policy literature makes clear, policy feedback effects are common. It is possible, for example, that the availability of senior transportation increases seniors’ attentiveness to the issue, or that it increases seniors’ participation through commissions or other channels. It could also be that some unobserved city characteristic, such as historical senior activism, explains the presence of senior centers, senior commissions, and senior transportation. If so, we could not conclude that senior centers and senior commissions cause the policy variation.14

Addressing the endogeneity concern requires an understanding of why certain cities got these institutions and others did not. For senior centers, this is relatively straightforward: many senior centers were established during the 1970s and 1980s following the passage of the national Older Americans Act (OAA) of 1965. The OAA created a series of federal grants to address the

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14 It is important to point out that even if senior activism is a predictor of senior-friendly transportation, that only strengthens my conclusion from earlier that senior voting is not the most important consideration, because presumably “activism” implies activities other than voting.
needs of older people, and one of those grants—started in 1972—was specifically for the purpose of building local senior centers. Thus, not only are most senior centers quite old—dating back to the 1970s and 1980s, before the adoption of most DR services—but also the assignment of senior centers to cities was determined in part by formula, based on local characteristics such as the size of the local senior community at the time.

It is less clear why some cities created senior commissions. One possibility, raised above, is that the availability of senior transportation made it more likely that those cities would eventually establish a senior commission. While I cannot rule this out, I collected recent meeting minutes and agendas for a sample of 20 senior commissions, and I found that more than half of them discussed transportation issues—suggesting that it’s at least plausible that the commissions played a role in getting the transportation services established. Another possibility is that cities with more politically active seniors might be more likely to get commissions, or perhaps more progressive cities are more inclined to invite citizens to participate in the policymaking process—and perhaps also provide a wider array of services. If accurate, these accounts would call into question whether having a senior commission affects city DR service.

In an attempt to address these concerns, I add two variables to the model in column 4 of Table 3. The first is the share of the city’s population that was 65 or older as of the 1980 Census of Population.\textsuperscript{15} Because the allocation of OAA grant funding was dependent on the number of seniors in a community, this variable is strongly correlated with the presence of a senior center. It is also a rough indicator of historical senior activism in the city—certainly not a perfect measure, but the best available. In addition, I include the log of the total number of citizen

\textsuperscript{15} This variable is missing for 16 cities out of the 394 included in column 3.
commissions, committees, and boards in each city as a predictor, using data I collected from cities’ websites. Some cities have no commissions, others have a few, and still others have twenty or more. If some cities encourage greater citizen participation and also provide more services, then the number of city commissions should help to capture that.16

The estimates of this model are in Table 3, column 4. The coefficients on the two new control variables are both statistically insignificant: having a larger senior population in 1980 and more commissions are not significantly associated with the availability of DR service. However, with these controls added, the coefficients on Senior center and Senior commission remain strong and positive. The findings are therefore consistent with expectations: when seniors are a cohesive group with focused preferences, and when seniors’ voices are heard through participatory channels other than voting, policy outcomes tilt in their favor.

In column 5, I test another implication of my argument. That is, if senior centers give a community’s seniors an opportunity to become more politically focused as a group, then cities that have had senior centers for a longer time should have more focused and effective seniors than cities with newer senior centers. To test this, I set out to collect the establishment dates of all 876 senior centers in the Congress of California Seniors’ directory; I then coded each city according to its oldest senior center. In column 5 of Table 3, I replace the senior center indicator with the log of the number of years a city had had a senior center as of 2014; it equals zero for cities without senior centers. Consistent with expectations, the coefficient on senior center age is

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16 See the online appendix for analysis of the city characteristics that explain Senior center and Senior commission. Notably, Percent senior is not significantly associated with either one.
positive and significant. Thus, compared to cities with no senior centers or newer senior centers, cities with older senior centers are more likely to have DR service.

In all of these models, the coefficient on Percent senior remains statistically insignificant. One additional possibility worth testing, however, is that the size of the senior voting bloc does matter under certain conditions—in particular, when seniors are a cohesive group focused on issues relevant to seniors. The hypothesis then, is that the percentage of seniors in the electorate will have a positive effect in cities with senior centers, but no effect in cities without them.

In column 6 of Table 3, I test this by interacting Senior center with Percent senior. The coefficient on Percent senior is statistically insignificant, indicating that in cities without senior centers, seniors’ presence in the electorate has little effect on the availability of senior-friendly transportation. To understand the effect of seniors’ electoral presence in cities that do have senior centers, I combine the coefficients on Percent senior and its interaction with Senior center, with the results shown at the bottom of column 6. There, we can see that the effect is positive—the expected direction—and significant at the 5% level. This suggests that seniors’ turnout does matter in some contexts: in the contexts where seniors interact regularly and are more likely to be focused on issues relevant to the group.

The second panel of Table 4 shows the predicted probabilities. The probability of exclusive DR service in cities without senior centers or senior commissions is 17%. Next, I calculate two different probabilities for cities with senior centers (and no senior commissions): those with low senior turnout—where seniors make up 15% of city electorates (the 5th percentile)—and those with high senior turnout—where seniors make up 44% of the electorate (the 95th percentile). For the low-turnout cities, the probability of exclusive DR service is 29%. For high-turnout cities, it is 50%. The pattern is similar for cities with senior commissions. In
particular, in cities with senior commissions, senior centers, and high senior turnout, the probability of having exclusive DR service is 69%. Thus, there is evidence of a turnout-policy connection for seniors in city politics, but that connection is conditional. For a group to be influential as a voting bloc, it has to be a cohesive group—and one that is politically focused on issues relevant to the group.

In a final test, I return to the alternative dependent variable from earlier. In column 7, I regress each city’s public transportation expenditures on the same variables as in column 4 plus county fixed effects. The results are consistent with those of the earlier models. The effect of Percent senior is insignificant, as before. But I find that cities with senior centers spend more than twice as much per capita on public transportation, and I also find that having a senior commission is associated with a 40% increase in public transportation expenditures ($p=0.103$). Thus, even focusing on this broader dependent variable, the presence of senior centers and senior commissions appears to matter a great deal.

**Discussion**

This paper poses an important question about American politics: When does a group of citizens influence public policy? In recent decades, American politics research has focused heavily on voter turnout, and so have many scholars’ answers to the question. Today, a common claim in the literature is that groups of citizens who make up a larger share of the electorate are more successful in securing favorable policies than groups with a smaller voting presence. But for an idea so widely referenced by scholars of American politics, it has been subject to surprisingly little testing. In the first part of this paper, then, I exploited variation in over 400 California city governments to test whether transportation policy is friendlier to senior citizens in
cities where seniors make up a larger percentage of voters in city elections. Contrary to the expectations of the literature, I did not find evidence of that relationship.

To understand why, I proposed that we should turn to the literature on organized groups and the politics of public policy—which asks the same general question but approaches it with a different theoretical lens and usually different empirical methods. Scholars in this tradition have emphasized the importance of non-voting forms of political activity, group cohesiveness and attentiveness, and organization. In the second part of the paper, then, I draw on these ideas to make a two-part argument. First, a group of citizens that is focused on issues relevant to the group will have more success in getting policies they favor, compared to a group with less focus. (And while many factors likely contribute to a group’s focus, the amount of social interaction in the group is an important one.) Second, in part because voting is not a very precise way of communicating a group’s preferences to elected officials, other forms of political activity may actually have greater effect.

I then attempted to test this argument within the same empirical set-up as the test of the turnout hypothesis. Using senior centers as a measure of seniors’ social cohesiveness at the municipal level, my results suggest that group cohesiveness is positively associated with policies friendly to the group. Moreover, in the cities that have senior centers (and where seniors regularly interact), I find that seniors’ share of the voting electorate is associated with senior-friendly policies. I also used the existence of senior commissions, which are charged with advising city councils on matters of interest to seniors, as a rough measure of seniors’ non-voting political activity in each city. My results show that the presence of senior commissions is also associated with city policies more favorable to the group.
These results highlight the potential payoffs of bridging the divide between these two strands of the literature. But there are also some downsides and challenges of testing these ideas using local governments. First, because I am focusing on a large set of local governments, it is not possible to acquire reliable over-time data on some of the variables for all cities, such as senior commissions. This makes it difficult explore policy feedback effects in a thorough manner. It is also more difficult to satisfactorily address concerns of omitted variable bias with cross-sectional data. My inclusion of key controls—cities’ senior populations in 1980, and the number of citizen commissions—helps to address these concerns, but more work needs to be done to develop better measures of historical senior activism and other possible contributors.

Along with these downsides of my approach, however, come significant advantages: By testing hypotheses about turnout, group cohesiveness, and non-voting activity within the same framework, we can compare the explanatory effects of each—and the extent to which they interact. We learn, for example, that there is evidence of a turnout-policy connection, but only when the group in question is a cohesive, meaningful group. We also learn that voting is not the only factor worth considering, and that it is necessary to examine non-voting political activity if the goal is to explain policy variation.

One point worth underscoring is that these findings do not imply that turnout never matters for policy. As I discussed earlier, there is already some evidence that turnout does shape policy in particular contexts for particular groups. Hill and Leighley (1992) find that turnout bias in favor of high-income voters leads to less generous state welfare policies. Anzia (2014) shows that in off-cycle elections, in which overall turnout is low, organized groups with a big stake in the election outcome make up a disproportionately large share of those voting—and are more likely to get policies they favor. Instead, by testing the turnout-policy connection in a new
context with a new group, we learn something important about the conditions under which that connection will exist. Consider Hill and Leighley (1992): If high-income voters in state elections are focused on welfare policy, or on public policy more generally (see Harden 2016), it makes sense that state policies would be correlated with their numbers in the electorate. Similarly, organized groups such as teacher unions and municipal employee unions—central to Anzia’s (2014) empirical work—are focused on the policy issues of interest to their members. Thus, nothing in my findings contradicts those conclusions. In fact, testing the turnout-policy connection in a new context has enabled me to take a theoretical step forward—enhancing our understanding of the conditions under which a group’s turnout will matter.

In the future, American politics scholars should pursue other tests of the turnout-policy connection and the conditions that create such a connection. They should also devote greater attention to what makes certain groups attentive publics and others not—and do more to understand the policy effects of political activities other than voting. After all, as Harold Lasswell (1958, 7) wrote, “the study of politics is the study of influence and the influential.” If a primary aim of political science is to understand influence, it is not enough to only study voting. We must also learn about the conditions under which voting is influential and also the other avenues groups pursue to exert influence. It is true that collecting data on voter turnout is easier than measuring testimony at government hearings, lobbying interactions, letter-writing to elected officials, and the social interactions of groups. But even if these phenomena are harder to measure and raise thorny issues of identification, they stand to play an important role in shaping public policy and representation—and their effects need to be understood.
References


http://www.dcfn.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R_302ZHR.pdf


