Does Age Matter?

Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

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A number of socioeconomic and demographic characteristics have great importance in the level of people’s engagement in the political process. We hypothesized that age may have an impact on political engagement. For the overall national population, those of the 65 to 74 age group are most likely to take an interest in voting and indeed in participating in a variety of civic activities. It is presumed that they have more time and - given that many have a fixed income - more of an interest in advocating for a variety of social services.

In contrast, it has been hypothesized that in immigrant communities, youth either born or raised in the United States may be the ones who take the lead in engaging since they are often the powerbrokers between their immigrant parents and society at large. There is some evidence that this is the case for youth who are leaders (Torres 2007). Additionally, for Latino youth, political engagement has tended towards a protest politics (Marcelo, et al 2007), which can further be exemplified by the youth-dominated immigration marches in Chicago (Pallares, et al 2006).

The relationship between political participation and age should be explored within a broader framework and scholars have suggested that life-cycle effects, coupled with generational and period (historical) impacts may be a more comprehensive way of understanding this relationship. Period and generational effects have linkages to one another. Period effects refer to events that are embedded in an individual’s consciousness and shape sociopolitical orientations throughout the life span. With regard to generational effects, persons of the same general age cohort are often influenced by the events of a particular period and thus can develop a sense of group identity (Taylor 2000).

Braungart and Braungart (1986) stress the distinction between political “generations” and “cohorts,” stating that while cohorts refer to persons born at the same general time maturing together, a generation has this distinction in addition to an age-group consciousness that differs from other groups in society. According to the authors, “A cohort becomes transformed into a political generation when many of its members become aware that they are bound together by a shared age-group consciousness and mobilize as an active force for political change” (217).

Researchers of the generational approach to political participation point to the American “Protest Generation” as a unit for study. Jennings (1987) found that over a span of years, the protest generation remained a somewhat distinctive political force. Despite this finding, Jennings emphasizes that while the population differs ideologically from other cohorts, it nevertheless is a rather small group that can be susceptible to influences over the life course. Period (historical) effects can be closely related to generational effects in an analysis of political participation and age. For certain age groups to develop a group consciousness that sets them apart from others, specific historical events must occur to shape ideology across the sociopolitical continuum. Period effects may also differ across the United States, as regional influences determine political mobilization and action. With regard to distinct periods of political action, the 1960’s and early 1970’s have been characterized as a unique time in America, when younger generations were more politically active than older age groups (Beck and Jennings 1979). Let us see what the age related data in Pilsen suggests.

AGE AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN PILSEN
The NSF survey utilized the following groupings: 18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, and 66+. The findings of the NSF survey data does confirm that age is significant in determining respondents’ level of engagement, and the 46-55 age range surpassed all others in its level of political engagement.

While controlling for all other variables, there was an overall effect for age, with the 46 to 55 age group more politically engaged than the remaining groups. The error bar chart below consists of the plotted estimated 95 percent confidence intervals, illustrating the estimated standardized political scores for each age group. Please refer to Tables 3, 4 and 5 in the Appendix for the raw data and comparisons.

Further descriptive data from the NSF report indicates that while there was not much overall interest in politics, the group most interested was the 46-55-age cohort. This is yet another indicator
related to engagement, which further suggests that this age group is inclined to participate more than others. An interesting thing to note is that while this age group is most inclined towards political engagement in the Pilsen neighborhood, it is not the age group most likely to do so on a larger, national scale.

Another interesting descriptive indicator from the data is that the 46-55 age group is the one that most strongly identifies as "Mexican." While most respondents also choose a pan-ethnic label as one of their ethnic identifiers, this group had a stronger preference for Mexican.

These combined findings suggest that the generational perspective may provide a way to understand civic engagement in Pilsen, albeit it differently than the national benchmark. The 46-55 year olds came of age when Pilsen was in transition to becoming a Mexican neighborhood. They contributed to making Pilsen a Mexican community. This did not only infuse residents with ethnic pride, they also created a vehicle of political empowerment. An ethnically identifiable neighborhood is the means to have voice in Chicago's politics.

This group is part of the "protest generation" that Beck and Jennings studied decades ago, that has remained politically active – more so than older or younger generations. As unique as the political experiences of Chicago's Latinos may have been in the 1960s and early seventies, they were part of overall changes in American society in general. The civil rights movement played out in the streets, as residents demanded a place at the table of politics. Immigrant serving organizations became vehicles through which the community in general organized and mobilized. This political moment forged a generation of activists who continue to be involved in their community.

In regards to the younger age group, they, along with the 46 to 55 age group do not think that politics is too complicated. This is important in that lack of understanding about how politics works is often an obstacle to engaging.

Furthermore, it does position a younger generation to be ready to participate if the moment arises. And indeed the data shows that in regards to volunteer work, thirty-six percent of 18-25 year-old reported having volunteered, as did more than 30 percent of all age cohorts under 55. In contrast, only 14 percent of persons 55-64 volunteered, as did only 4 percent of persons 65 and older.

In recent years there has been a rise in youth activism in the Latino community (Kirby and Ginsberg 2009). More specifically, recent studies of the immigration reform marches suggest that youth have been active in the organizing of a variety of activities around immigration reform. Pallares, Flores-Gonzales, Herring and Krysan found that of those interviewed during the Chicago Immigration March of 2006, 53 percent were under the age of 30 with a median age of 284 (Pallares et al. 2006).

**AGE OF MARCH PARTICIPANTS**

This may be the civil rights movement of a younger generation of Latino activists who are being forged at a crossroads where questions of rights and belonging in an age of globalization are at the center of their movement. Whether or not they too will continue to make contributions to the political life of their communities may depend on critical policy changes in regards to immigration reform that will allow them to become full citizens. For now we can take note that there is evidence of the staying power of political generations forged during peak political moments.

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**NOTES**

1 According to data retrieved from the Census Bureau's document "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2008 – Table 1: Reported Voting and Registration, by Sex and Single Years of Age: November 2008 the citizen age group with the highest percentage of both reported registration and voter turnout is the 65-74 group. The reported registration is 78.1 percent and reported voted is 72.4 percent. URL: http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/p20/2008/tables.html

2 Jennings analyzed findings from a three-wave panel study of young adults who were surveyed during the mid-sixties and early seventies.

3 These are estimated values based on the regression analysis. The raw scores cannot be lotted because in the regression model, the results are significant after controlling for other variables, hence, using raw scores without taking into consideration the control variables would not highlight the age group difference.

4 Because the research team attempted to survey youths over the age of 16, there is no data regarding the thousands of children who participated.

**REFERENCES**


Contact MARIA DE LOS ANGELES TORRES: torresma@uic.edu