Political Participation and Neighborhood Social Context Revisited

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This research note reports the results of an extension of Huckfeldt’s study of the effects of neighborhood status on political participation. Using survey responses from the 1972 American Election Study, Huckfeldt’s distinction between individually and socially based participation (1979), and composite measures of respondent and neighborhood social status, we find: (1) that neighborhood social status is related to socially based participation; but (2) that it is unrelated to individually based participatory acts; and (3) that the effect of neighborhood social status on participation is not consistent for respondents of different levels of social status.

In a recent article in this journal, Huckfeldt (1979) examined the effects of neighborhood social status on political participation. Huckfeldt’s work is especially interesting because of his distinction between individually based participation (e.g., letter writing) and socially based participation (e.g., informing others about politics). Since the linkage between the context and the individual is assumed to be through social interaction, Huckfeldt hypothesized that socially based participation would be affected by neighborhood status but individually based participation would not. As expected, Huckfeldt found only socially based participation to be affected by neighborhood status, though the relationship varied with the status of the individual. Higher status contexts encouraged socially based participation among high status respondents and discouraged such activities among low status respondents.

This study reexamines the effect of neighborhood social context on individual level political participation. While the substantive focus is the same as Huckfeldt’s, this work differs in two important ways. First, Huckfeldt analyzed data from a single research cite—Buffalo, New York. Such research requires replication to insure that environmental peculiarities do not mask or otherwise alter important relationships. This study avoids the locational problem by employing a representative national sample.

Second, contextual effects are often criticized as actually the residue of poorly specified individual level relationships (Hauser, 1974). Huckfeldt attempts to deal with this issue by using multiple indicators for individual level status. While this is an improvement over much of the research in the field, it may be insufficient to cope adequately with the problem. Rosenstone and Wolfinger (1978) report that individual status
has a positive effect on political participation and that the size of that effect increases as social status increases. Thus, the effect of an additional year of college education on political participation is much greater than the effect of an additional year of elementary school education. It may be that Huckfeldt's findings of contextual effects are the result of a failure to specify and control for the nonlinear effects of individual status on political participation.

Data

Individual level data on political participation and social status are drawn from the 1972 American Election Study conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan. The present study focuses on the 1,396 white respondents identified as residing in census tracts.

The survey included measures of participation that parallel those used in the Buffalo study. These items have been separated into measures of individually based and socially based participation. A simple summed score was computed for the items in each dimension. Three indicators of respondent social status (family income, last school year completed, and Duncan decile occupational score) were combined through composite factor scores to measure individual socioeconomic status.

A composite measure of neighborhood status was constructed by factor analyzing census tract median income, median education, and percent employed in white collar occupations, and by computing a standardized factor score. This measure was added to the survey data and is treated as an individual level trait variable. The use of factor scores as indicators of contextual and individual social status allows a refined measure of status while avoiding the problems that result from the use of strongly correlated variables in a regression model.

1 Individually Based Participation
(SRC 471) Did you wear a campaign button or put a campaign sticker on your car?
(SRC 474) Have you ever written a letter to any public officials giving them your opinion about something that should be done?
(SRC 475) Have you ever written a letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine giving any political opinions?
(SRC 477) Did you vote in the 1972 election?

Socially Based Participation
(SRC 468) During the campaign, did you talk to any people and try to show them why they should vote for one of the parties or candidates?
(SRC 469) Did you go to any political meetings, rallies, dinners or things like that?
(SRC 470) Did you do any other work for one of the parties or candidates?
(SRC 472) Did you give any money to a political party this year?
TABLE 1
Regression Coefficients* for Individual and Neighborhood Status on Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Individual Status</th>
<th>(Individual Status)$^3$</th>
<th>Neighborhood Status</th>
<th>Interaction</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individually Based Participation:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EQ. 1A:</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>.174</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.314)</td>
<td>(.037)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2A:</td>
<td>1.534$^{**}$</td>
<td>.063</td>
<td>.287</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.322)</td>
<td>(.013)</td>
<td>(.058)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3A:</td>
<td>1.650$^{**}$</td>
<td>.296$^*$</td>
<td>.106</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.346)</td>
<td>(.069)</td>
<td>(.023)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4A:</td>
<td>1.638$^{**}$</td>
<td>.230</td>
<td>.545</td>
<td>.170</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.344)</td>
<td>(.054)</td>
<td>(.011)</td>
<td>(.034)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Socially Based Participation:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1B:</td>
<td>1.04$^{**}$</td>
<td>.578$^{**}$</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.230)</td>
<td>(.130)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2B:</td>
<td>1.099$^{**}$</td>
<td>.401$^*$</td>
<td>.449$^{**}$</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.242)</td>
<td>(.090)</td>
<td>(.095)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3B:</td>
<td>1.30$^{**}$</td>
<td>.504$^{**}$</td>
<td>.462</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.287)</td>
<td>(.125)</td>
<td>(.104)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4B:</td>
<td>1.285$^*$</td>
<td>.411$^{**}$</td>
<td>.389$^*$</td>
<td>.240</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.283)</td>
<td>(.102)</td>
<td>(.088)</td>
<td>(.051)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Standardized coefficients in parentheses.

$^*$ Significant at .05.

$^{**}$ Significant at .01.

**Analysis**

The effects of individual social status, neighborhood social status, and their interaction on participation are displayed in equations 2A and 2B of Table 1. These equations replicate Huckfeldt's analysis. As we expected, individual social status has a significant effect on both individually and socially based participation. And our findings are consistent with Huckfeldt in that neighborhood social status is related to socially based participation but unrelated to individually based participation. While the Buffalo data indicated that socially based participation decreased with declining neighborhood status, our analysis finds a positive
effect. Since both analyses show significant positive interaction effects, the differences in the sign of the main effects of neighborhood social status indicate that the structure of the effect of neighborhood status differs in the two samples.

The presence of significant main and interaction effects for neighborhood status in equation 2B may result from the failure to account for nonlinearity in the effects of individual level status. Equations 1A and 1B contain the main effects of individual and neighborhood status. In equations 3A and 3B a quadratic term for individual status is added to the basic main effects model. In both cases the quadratic term has a significant positive coefficient indicating that the effect of individual social status on political participation increases with each increment in status. Accounting for the nonlinear effects of individual status reduces the size of the regression coefficient for neighborhood status. Thus, some of the effects attributed to contextual status in equations 1A and 1B are more properly attributed to individual social status. Nevertheless, neighborhood status continues to have a significant effect on socially based participation even with the nonlinearity of individual status effects taken into account.

TABLE 2

Regression Coefficients\(^a\) for Individual Status and Neighborhood Status within Categories\(^b\) of Individual Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Status</th>
<th>(Individual Status)(^2)</th>
<th>Residential Status among Low Status Respondents</th>
<th>Residential Status among High Status Respondents</th>
<th>(R^2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individually Based Participation:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.66(^*)</td>
<td>.244</td>
<td>-.285</td>
<td>.263</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(.349)</td>
<td>(.057)</td>
<td>(-.032)</td>
<td>(.047)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Socially Based Participation:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.319(^**)</td>
<td>.429(^**)</td>
<td>-.105</td>
<td>.689(^**)</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(.291)</td>
<td>(.106)</td>
<td>(.012)</td>
<td>(.129)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Standardized coefficients in parentheses.

\(^b\) High = above the mean for individual status.

Low = below the mean for individual status.

\(^*\) Significant at .05.

\(^**\) Significant at .01.
In equations 4A and 4B the quadratic terms for individual status are added to the equations containing the main and interaction effects of individual and neighborhood status. With the nonlinear effects of individual social status controlled, the interaction term is no longer significant, suggesting that the effect of neighborhood status does not vary significantly with individual status. However, a nonsignificant interaction term is no assurance that all forms of interaction are absent. In fact, the presence of nonlinearity in an interactive variable makes the interpretation of such a term difficult.

Table 2 provides a more direct assessment of Huckfeldt's findings. Here the effect of neighborhood social status is assessed separately for respondents above and below the mean of individual social status. Like Huckfeldt's, this analysis indicates that neighborhood social status has a negative effect on lower status respondents, though this effect is not statistically significant for either socially or individually based political participation. The effect of neighborhood social status is positive and statistically significant for socially based participation among high status respondents.

Since multicollinearity is a potential problem, the correlations among the items were examined. None of the correlations exceeded .43.

The model portrayed in Table 2 is:

\[ Y = a = b_1x_1^2 + b_3(D_1x_3) + b_4(D_2x_1) + e \]

where:

- \( Y \) = a measure of participation (social or individual);
- \( x_1 \) = the composite measure of individual level status;
- \( x_1^2 \) = squared composite measure of individual level status;
- \( x_3 \) = the composite measure of residential status;
- \( D_1 \) = 1 if individual status score is higher than the mean; otherwise, 0;
- \( D_2 \) = 1 if individual status score is lower than the mean; otherwise, 0;
- \( a \) = intercept;
- \( b \) = appropriate regression coefficient;
- \( e \) = residual.

The variance in social participation explained in Table 2 is a small but statistically significant increase over that explained by equation 3B in Table 1. Thus, allowing the effect of neighborhood social status to vary across respondent status levels provides a better fit to the data.

The significance of this difference was tested using the method suggested by Wright (1976, p. 361):

\[ F = \frac{(.11127-.10569)/2}{(1-.11127)/971} = 3.07, \text{ significant at .05 with 2 and 971 df.} \]

.11127 = \( R^2 \) for equation B in Table 2

.10569 = \( R^2 \) for equation 3B in Table 1

2 = additional parameters in the equation

971 = degrees of freedom in equation B of Table 2
Conclusion

This analysis suggests that continued exploration of the joint effects of individual and environmental variables on politically relevant behaviors is warranted. More importantly, it suggests that future research must carefully attend to conceptual and measurement refinements. Specifically, the results support the fruitfulness of Huckfeldt's (1979) dichotomization of political acts into those that are individually based and those that are socially based. Like Huckfeldt, we find neighborhood status unrelated to individually based participation but positively linked to socially based participation among high status respondents. This contextual effect remained even with the nonlinearity of individual status taken into account. However, we are unable to confirm Huckfeldt's finding of a negative effect for neighborhood status among low status respondents. Although a negative relationship was present within this group, it was not statistically significant. These results clearly indicate that contextual as well as individual status must be considered in assessments of political participation. Indeed, it may be that extensions of Huckfeldt's conceptualization of behavioral categories or even alternate conceptualizations must be employed if we are to adequately account for observed variances in participation.

This analysis provides additional insight into the advantages enjoyed by high status individuals in the political arena. Not only do their greater personal resources (e.g., higher levels of education and income) enhance their participation and power, but their participation is further enhanced by residence in higher status contexts where they interact with others of similar status. Thus, the effects of increased status are mutually reinforcing. Indeed, high status respondents are well served by social segregation, as their neighbors are less likely to be "free riders" and (assuming notions regarding group pressure affecting political outcomes are appropriate) their needs and preferences are more likely to be articulated even on occasions when they (as individuals) choose not to participate. It appears that political access may mimic the old adage about money—the more you have, the more you get.

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REFERENCES

