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Self-Interest, Social Security, and the Distinctive Participation Patterns of Senior Citizens

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Decades of participation research show that political activity increases with income, but the participation of senior citizens specifically with regard to Social Security poses an exception to this pattern. Social Security-oriented participation decreases as income rises, in part because lower-income seniors are more dependent on the program. The negative income-participation gradient is especially pronounced for letter writing about the program, but even Social Security-related voting and contributing are less common among higher-income seniors. This is an instance in which self-interest is highly influential: Those who are more dependent are more active. It is also an example of lower-class mobilization with regard to an economic issue, something quite unusual in the United States.

It is well established that political participation increases with income, even for activities in which income seems irrelevant, such as voting, or counterintuitive, such as protesting (e.g., Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) suggest several reasons for this pattern. Income is a politically relevant and fungible resource that directly or indirectly facilitates activity; the affluent are more highly engaged with public affairs, as they typically have more at stake in a variety of policy areas; and higher-income individuals are more frequently recruited to political activity. In the United States, which lacks strong labor unions and socialist parties, lower-income citizens are less mobilized, especially on economic issues.

Political activity concerning Social Security may, however, be different. Social Security is not only an economic issue but also a government program. Rather than personalize or "morselize" their fate as in many other domains, citizens can attribute their well-being to government action (Lane 1962, 353; see Sears and Funk 1990). Moreover, political activity is seen as an appropriate vehicle for expressing dissatisfaction or concern about the policy and its operation. Because the program is self-contributory, no welfare stigma or moral bar discourages political activism on the issue, as is the case with other government programs benefiting low-income individuals. More importantly, Social Security is unlike many issues in that the stakes are greater for lower-income recipients, who derive a larger portion of their income from the program. The usual income-interest gradient is reversed. Accordingly, participation based on Social Security may be greater among lower-income than among higher-income seniors, a reversal of the typically positive income-participation relationship.

Poorer seniors may seem incapable of participating at high rates, given their low resources. However, several characteristics of seniors and their programs make their unusual activity concerning Social Security possible. Seniors' resources are offset in a variety of ways and less detrimental to their participation than low resources are to the participation of nonseniors. Also, the political parties mobilize low-income seniors at the same rate as higher-income seniors, and moderate-income elders at even higher rates, again different from the usual pattern, where mobilization increases with income.

A negative relationship between income and participatory activity concerning Social Security would be important in several regards. It would represent an exception to a long-standing regularity in behavioral research—that political participation is more common among the affluent. It would be a rare example of self-interest exerting a significant influence on individual behavior, since the most dependent are hypothesized to be the most active. Finally, this case would add another example to the small but growing literature on the effects of policy on the political behavior and attitudes of mass publics (e.g., Mettler 1998; Mettler and Welch 2001; Soss 1999). Social Security may democratize senior participation by raising the activity levels of lower-income seniors relative to the affluent for the portion of seniors' participation that concerns Social Security.

INCOME AND PARTICIPATION IN AMERICA

Decades of research amply illustrate the higher political participation rates of the affluent and offer several explanations for the traditionally positive relationship between income and political activity. Perhaps the most obvious is that income is a necessary resource for some activities, such as making campaign contributions. Even beyond that, political participation is a luxury good more readily available to higher-income citizens. The affluent are not preoccupied with securing the necessities of daily life and can purchase the labor of others such as gardeners and babysitters to free their time (e.g., Conway 1991, 25; Milbrath and Goel 1977, 98; Rosenstone 1982). They can "simply afford to do more—of everything—than citizens with little money," including political participation (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 12).

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Efforts to recruit citizens to political activity also tend to focus on the affluent. In Europe, socialist parties and labor unions mobilize the lower class, in some countries to levels of political activity rivaling those of the middle class (Powell 1986; Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978). In the United States, in contrast, no labor-based political party emerged in the early twentieth century (Skocpol 1995, 26), and labor unions have been relatively weak. Contemporary mobilization techniques such as direct mail and door-to-door canvassing are directed predominantly toward high-status individuals and neighborhoods (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Low-income Americans are rarely mobilized to political activity, except by religious institutions, which typically focus on moral rather than economic issues (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

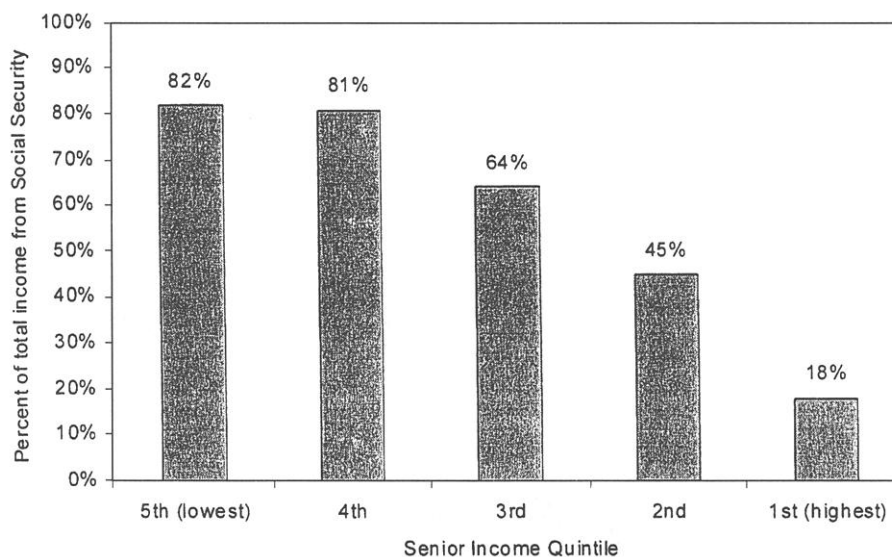
Finally, income affects participation by enhancing individuals' engagement with politics and sense of stake in the system. Higher-income people have a greater stake in many policy areas. Perhaps the best example is tax policy, where those with high incomes have more to win or lose. Affluent homeowners, for example, were more likely than other Californians to support Proposition 13, the 1978 property tax rollback initiative, because of the large tax savings the measure promised them (Sears and Citrin 1982). High-income individuals are also more likely to perceive their great stake; their political interest is stimulated by their high-level jobs, in which they learn how government affects their business and personal lives (Conway 1991). Additionally, they belong to voluntary organizations at high rates. These institutional affiliations provide civic skills, recruitment opportunities, and proximity to other active individuals who both share information about issues and enforce participatory norms (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

Thus, resource, engagement, and mobilization factors all contribute to the higher participation rates of the affluent. The positive relationship between income and political participation is so pervasive that it appears even in explanations of political activity among disadvantaged groups. Black and Latino political activists, for example, have higher incomes and are less likely to receive government assistance than the groups from which they are drawn (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, chap. 8). The resource mobilization theory of social movements argues that groups with higher levels of resources are more likely to overcome collective action problems and engage in political activity (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Next to education, income is the political resource most important in explaining both conventional and unconventional activity.

SOCIAL SECURITY AND SENIOR PARTICIPATION

For most participatory activities, income operates in the same way for senior citizens: Affluent seniors are more politically active (Campbell 2000). However, in the context of Social Security, income plays a different role—it is an indicator not of “resources” but of “dependence on government transfers.” As shown in Figure 1, poorer seniors derive a higher portion of their income from Social Security. Seniors in the lowest two quintiles get over 80% of their income from the program, compared to just 18% for the highest quintile. Because the stakes in this issue area are greater for lower-income seniors, they should exhibit more interest in Social Security than their more affluent counterparts, and they should be more likely to engage in Social Security-based participation. In this issue domain income measures dependence rather than participatory

FIGURE 1. Percentage of Senior Income from Social Security by Total Income Quintile, 1992



Source: *Older Americans 2000: Key Indicators of Well-Being* (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging Related Statistics 2000, 66).

capacity, and the usually positive relationships between income and political interest and participation are reversed.

Not all political activities would be equally affected. A negative income–participation relationship is most likely for letter writing about Social Security. Citizen-initiated, issue-specific, and independent of the electoral cycle, letter writing is the chief means by which seniors can voice their concerns about Social Security. This activity might include particularized casework requests to solve individual problems, more generalized statements of policy concern, or objections to deleterious reform proposals. In any of these instances, letter writing is the participatory vehicle by which specific issue concerns can be raised, and lower-income seniors should be more likely to write such letters.

There may be spillover effects on voting and contributing as well. For these acts, however, the income–participation relationship is unlikely to be monotonically negative, as is the case with Social Security-based contacting. Contacting is a “purer” act: Letters are usually about a specific topic, so survey respondents’ assertions that they wrote about Social Security are probably accurate. In contrast, individuals vote and contribute for a variety of reasons, and so Social Security-based voting and contributing may be “contaminated” by other issues. Since the income–participation relationship around these other issues is positive, the relationship between income and reported Social Security-based participation will not be monotonically negative. In addition, contributing requires disposable income, suggesting a curvilinear relationship for that activity, with moderate-income seniors who are concerned about Social Security being more likely to contribute with the program in mind than either low-income seniors who cannot afford to or high-income seniors who are not interested in doing so.

DATA AND METHODS

Three data sets are necessary to test these hypotheses about seniors’ interest in Social Security and their participation concerning the program and to describe their pattern of political party mobilization, as no single data set contains all of these dependent variables. Roper Survey 8108 (Roper Organization 1981) asked respondents how closely they follow news of various topics.¹ I use this data set to assess seniors’ interest in Social Security compared to other domestic and international issues. The 1990 Citizen Participation Study (Verba et al. 1995) provides the Social Security-based participation items. Program recipients were asked whether they had ever contacted an elected official to complain about Social Security payments, taken into account a candidate’s position on Social Security in deciding how to vote, or made a campaign contribution based at least in part on concern about Social Security payments. Finally, party mobilization is measured in the 1996 National Election Study, where respondents were asked whether some-

one from a political party contacted them during the election season.

The Citizen Participation Study items measuring Social Security-based participation require a closer look. Not only do the activities themselves differ in their “purity,” as noted above, but also the survey items measuring Social Security-based participation vary in the locus of self-interest. With Social Security-based contacting, the self-interest is in the motivation to write a letter; a senior citizen depends on the program, experiences a problem with benefits or feels concern about a proposed policy change, and chooses to write a letter to an elected official to request assistance or to express the policy concern. The hypothesized relationship is between income and a particular kind of participation, and this participation is higher among lower-income seniors. Social Security-based voting and contributing are a bit different. The question wording for Social Security-based voting places the self-interest not in the motivation to vote, but in vote choice. The item measures (1) whether a respondent voted and (2) whether the respondent felt that Social Security figured into the vote choice. Social Security-based contributing is also a dependent variable with two parts: the act of contributing and the attribution of the motive to Social Security. Thus for voting and contributing in the context of Social Security, the relationship is not between income and a certain kind of participation, as with Social Security-based contacting, but between income and a propensity to attribute the primary motivation to Social Security. However, while these distinctions are important to note, affluent seniors should nonetheless be least likely to engage in these acts, whether the dependent variable is contacting with Social Security in mind or attributing a vote decision or political contribution to concern with the program. The relationship between income and each type of Social Security-based participation should be different from that between income and non-Social Security-based participation.

In each analysis, the dependent variable is modeled as a function of *income*, *education*, *gender*, *race*, *marital status*, *work status*, and *age* (where available). Income is represented curvilinearly by the inclusion of a squared term except where tests for multicollinearity indicated that income-squared was redundant with income. The models are estimated with ordinary least squares (OLS) or, where the outcome is dichotomous, logistic regression. “Seniors” are respondents aged 65 and over, and “nonseniors” are ages 18 to 64.

SENIORS’ PARTICIPATORY CAPACITY

Before testing the hypotheses about the greater propensity of lower-income seniors to be interested in Social Security and to engage in Social Security-based participation, it is necessary to discuss whether seniors, particularly the less affluent, have sufficient means to participate. Resources such as education and income are among the strongest predictors of participatory activity (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), yet senior citizens have the lowest formal education and household income of any age group. One-third of

¹ This is the most recent Roper survey available assessing Social Security-specific interest. See Appendix A for the news items included.

seniors in the Citizen Participation Study lack a high school diploma, compared to only 9% of respondents aged 35 to 49. The average family income for seniors is just over \$24,000, compared to almost \$46,000 for those aged 35 to 49.

Despite their low resource levels, however, senior citizens in the United States participate at very high rates. In the 1996 National Election Study, seniors were 7% more likely to vote than 35 to 64 year olds, and 27% more likely to vote than persons under 35. Twelve percent of seniors made campaign contributions, compared to 9% of the middle age group and just 3% of the youngest group.

Seniors' active participation suggests that their modest resource levels are counterbalanced in several ways. With retirement, one trades one politically relevant resource, income, for another, free time. Seniors report over 12 hours of free time per day, compared to five hours for respondents aged 35 to 49.² Also, seniors' incomes "go further" than those of nonseniors. Seniors do spend a greater share of their income on health care—12% of their before-tax income, compared to 5% among all households in 1997—but spend less than nonseniors, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of income, in categories such as entertainment, apparel, transportation, and, most notably, personal taxes and mortgage costs (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1999, 471). Seniors also hold less nonmortgage consumer debt (Duensing 1988). They benefit from a variety of financial breaks that are conferred on the basis of age rather than a means test: They are exempt from Social Security and Medicare taxes on earnings; they get an extra deduction on their federal income taxes; they pay taxes on a smaller share of their incomes; and they receive discounts at many retail stores, restaurants, hotels, and so on.³ The mean senior family income is just 53% that of 35 to 49 year olds in the Citizen Participation Study, but adjusting for household size brings seniors' per capita income to 88% that of the younger group.

That seniors have low education levels may be even less relevant for participation than their low incomes since education relative to one's cohort is what matters for many participatory activities (Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996). But even seniors' low absolute levels of formal education are offset in several ways. To some extent, life experience may serve as a substitute for formal education (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Over a lifetime one may absorb participatory norms and values, learn to process political information, and become accustomed to voting through sheer habit (Plutzer 2002; Weisberg and Grofman 1981); a long life in the "school of hard knocks" may impart the same experience with bureaucratic relationships

that helps educated people overcome the procedural hurdles necessary to register and vote (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, 35–36, 60). There may also be cohort differences in education content and quality. Earlier cohorts may have been more steeped in democratic, "American" values in school (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Perhaps greater education quality explains why seniors score as high as the more educated 35 to 49 year olds on the Citizen Participation Study vocabulary test.⁴ Lack of formal education may also be offset by voluntary group and church memberships. Seniors belong to these groups at the same rates as, or higher rates than, younger people and practice many politically relevant skills such as letter writing and speech making.⁵

Thus low resources do not represent the same bar to senior political activity as to nonsenior activity. Many seniors, even the less affluent, have sufficient resources to act on their great interest in Social Security, to which I now turn.

RESULTS

Political Interest

In Roper Survey 8108, respondents were asked whether they follow news of various domestic and international issues closely, follow it casually, or pay no attention. Eighty-one percent of seniors said that they follow news of Social Security closely, compared to 54% of nonseniors. Seniors followed news of Social Security more closely than any other topic. Indeed, the highest level of interest shown by any age group in any issue was seniors' interest in Social Security.⁶

To examine how the dependence gradient influences interest in Social Security, I modeled interest in

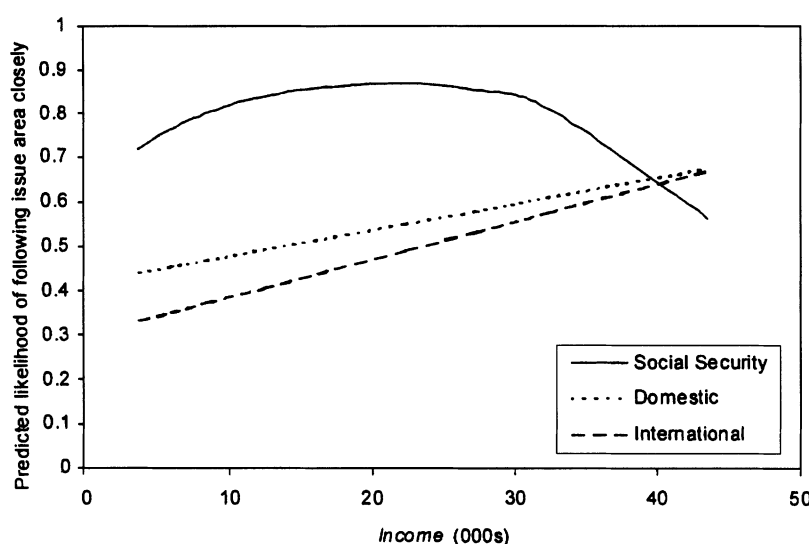
⁴ On a 10-item test, seniors got 6.3 definitions correct on average, compared to 6.6 for the younger group.

⁵ In the Citizen Participation Study, respondents were asked whether they had engaged in the following activities in the last six months as part of their job, organizational involvements, or church activities: written a letter, come to a meeting where they took part in making decisions, planned or chaired a meeting, or given a presentation or speech. The job skill questions were asked of those who were employed. The church skill questions were asked of those who were active members of their churches or who had served on their church board in the past five years. The organization skill questions were asked of respondents' "main" organization, and only skills exercised in nonpolitical organizations are analyzed here (see Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995, Appendix B.9, for further explanations of the skills variables). Seniors are just as likely to belong to nonpolitical organizations as 35 to 49 year olds (74 to 72%) and practice the same number of skills there, 1.3 of a possible four. Seniors are even more likely to be members of a religious institution or to attend religious services two or more times per month—79%, vs. 67% of 35 to 49 year olds—and, again, practice as many skills, 1.6 on average. Only 10% of seniors work, and the survey did not ask about skills acquired on the job before retirement.

⁶ Senior interest in Social Security remains strong contemporarily. In the 1998 midterm election exit poll administered by the Voter News Service, seniors were most likely to cite Social Security as the issue that mattered most in deciding their vote for the House of Representatives (Toner 1999, A10). Thirty-one percent of seniors chose Social Security as the issue that mattered most, followed by "moral and ethical standards" (20%), education (14%), taxes (11%), the economy/jobs (10%), health care (8%), and the Clinton/Lewinsky matter (6%). The "most important problem" mentioned most frequently among seniors in the 2000 NES was Social Security; among nonseniors, it was education.

² In the Citizen Participation Study, free time is defined as time not spent working, doing housework, studying, or sleeping. The largest difference between seniors and nonseniors is time spent working. Retired senior men have even more free time, 14 hours per day.

³ The median senior couple with an income of \$25,000 would owe \$294 in federal taxes, or 1.15%, whereas the median nonsenior couple with an income of \$45,000 would owe \$5,164, or 11.5%. On an income of \$40,000, seniors would pay \$2,664, or 6.6%, in federal taxes, compared to \$4,414 or 11.0% for nonseniors (Moon and Mulvey 1996, 25).

FIGURE 2. Predicted Interest in Social Security, Domestic, and International Issues among Seniors by Income

Source: Roper Survey 8108 (Roper Organization 1981).

Note: Interest in Social Security estimated with logistic regression; interest in domestic and international issues, with OLS.

domestic topics, international topics, and Social Security as a function of income and other covariates.⁷ I scored interest in Social Security as a dichotomous variable—one for those following news of the program closely, zero for those following it casually or not at all—and estimated the model with logistic regression. I constructed scales for interest in domestic and international issues by adding the number of issues each respondent followed closely (zero to five), which I recoded to zero to one and estimated with OLS.⁸

Figure 2 shows the effect of income on issue interest among seniors with the other covariates held to their means. Interest in domestic and international issues increases with income, the traditional pattern.

In contrast, interest in Social Security falls at high income levels. Strictly, I predicted a monotonically negative income–interest relationship, while the results here are curvilinear. It could be that the income variable in the Roper data picks up some of the (positive) effects of education even when education is controlled for.

⁷ A factor analysis on the news items produces two scales, with the domestic issues (prices, income taxes, interest rates, air traffic controllers' strike, and the Conoco buyout) producing one scale with a Cronbach's α of .58 and international issues (royal wedding, Arab-Israeli relations, Polish situation, English riots, Irish hunger strikes) producing another with a Cronbach's α of .75.

⁸ The news interest items are ordinal variables. I could have estimated each with ordered logit, but I wanted to combine the domestic and international items, and doing so other than by this method would impose a metric on them. While scoring close interest as 1 and casual or no interest as 0 loses some information, the basic result—that interest in domestic and international issues rises with income while interest in Social Security falls at higher income levels—remains the same whether (1) the items are estimated as shown; (2) interest in the domestic and international items is scored 1, 2, 3 and combined into additive scales that violate the ordinal nature of the variables, or (3) the percentage of respondents who closely follow each item is averaged across domestic and international issues and Social Security by income level (a bivariate model).

Alternatively, it may be that self-interest is a weaker influence on attitudes than participation, for acting on an issue is more costly than voicing an opinion on a survey, and so typically only the self-interested act (Citrin and Green 1990). In any case, even with issue interest, Social Security has a different pattern vis-à-vis income than other domestic and international issues. These effects are even more pronounced in participation.

Political Participation

Table 1 shows the three types of Social Security-based participation modeled as a function of income, income-squared, and other covariates. As hypothesized, income has a negative influence on contacting based on Social Security, the opposite of its usual sign (column 2). The relatively small number of cases prevents the coefficient for income from achieving statistical significance itself, but a log likelihood test shows that income and income-squared are jointly significant ($p < .001$).⁹ Figure 3a illustrates the probability by income that a senior citizen will write a letter complaining about Social Security, and it falls precipitously, in great contrast to the typically positive income–participation gradient.

As predicted, the results for Social Security-based voting and contributing are somewhat different. The likelihood of voting on the basis of Social Security first rises with income and then decreases at higher income levels (Figure 3b). If the Social Security voting item truly measured only Social Security-oriented voting and was not contaminated by other issues (people vote for many reasons even when they say they voted with regard to Social Security), the line would drop

⁹ While the Citizen Participation Study had, 2,517 respondents, the Social Security-specific participation items were asked of Social Security households, including 235 senior respondents.

TABLE 1. Explaining Social Security-Based Participation by Seniors

Independent Variable	Social Security-Based Participation		
	Contacting	Voting	Contributing
Income	-0.014 ^a (0.024)	0.017 ^a (0.014)	0.095 ^a (0.068)
Income-squared	0.00002 ^a (0.0001)	-0.00009 ^a (0.00008)	-0.001 ^a (0.001)
Education	0.391** (0.144)	0.090 (0.097)	0.126 (0.166)
Male	1.310* (0.610)	1.215** (0.379)	-0.354 (0.614)
Married	-0.829 (0.566)	-0.020 (0.323)	-0.073 (0.608)
Black	-0.071 (1.050)	-0.367 (0.604)	0.988 (0.899)
Working	1.243 (1.408)	-1.830** (0.678)	0.252 (1.223)
Retired	1.233 (1.122)	-1.330*** (0.399)	0.933 (0.755)
Age	0.023 (0.042)	-0.043 [#] (0.027)	0.005 (0.047)
Constant	-6.838* (3.341)	1.934 (1.999)	-5.403 (3.745)
N	235	232	234
% predicted	94.1	70.4	94.3
Cox & Snell R ²	0.07	0.09	0.02

Source: 1990 Citizen Participation Study (Verba et al. 1995).

Note: Figures in cells are logistic regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses. Results are for respondents aged 65 and over. In OLS estimates of the same models, the tolerances for each predictor are greater than .10, indicating that multicollinearity is not a problem. [#] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-sided). ^aLog-likelihood tests show that income and income-squared are jointly significant in each of the models ($p < .001$).

monotonically with income. Even so, Social Security is less common at high income levels, different from the usual participation pattern.

Social Security-based contributing also rises at first with income and then drops. Making contributions of any kind, even those based on a concern with Social Security, is unlikely at low income levels, where interest in the issue is great but activity limited by income constraints. Such activity becomes more likely at moderate income levels, where there is more disposable income but still substantial dependence on Social Security. As predicted, participation falls at high income levels (Figure 3c). Although voting and contributing do not fall monotonically with income as does contacting, both are less common among high-income than among low- and moderate-income seniors.

Mobilization

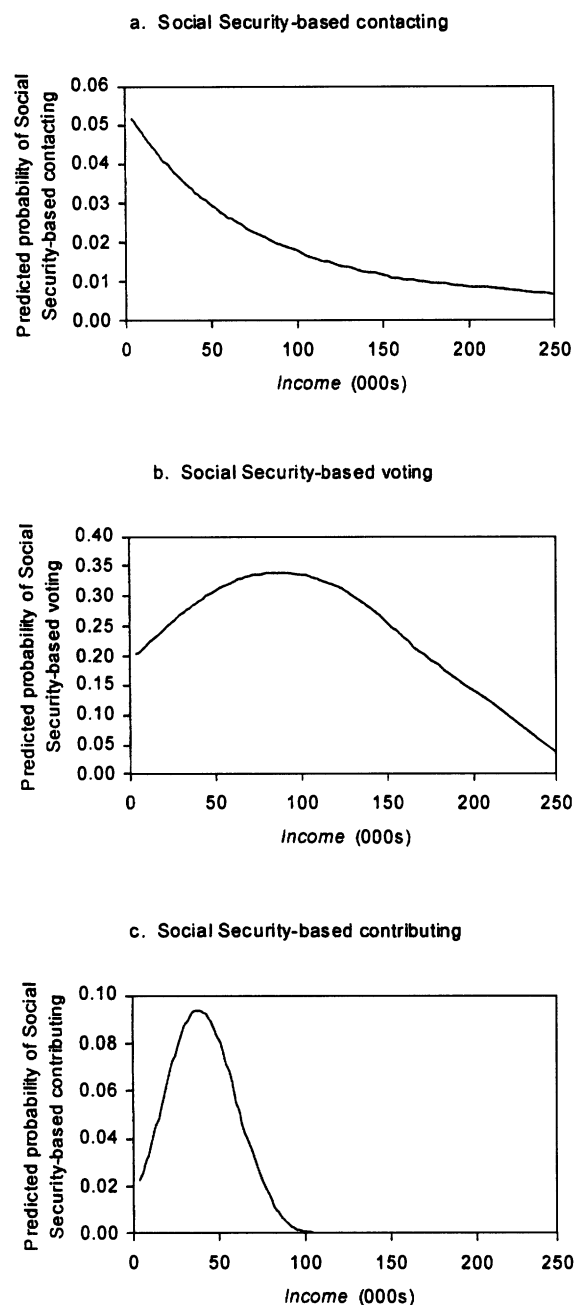
Social Security may be of such importance to low-income seniors that they recognize their interest in the program without being prompted by other political actors. Perhaps the impact of government action is as "transparently obvious" to seniors as it is to government employees and farmers, who recognize the effects of government policies on their well-being and who participate at rates higher than predicted by their socioeconomic status (Lipset [1959] 1981, 196-97; see Lewis-Beck 1977 and Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

As it turns out, the unusual pattern of seniors' interest in Social Security is reinforced by a distinctive mobilization pattern: Low-income seniors are as likely as their higher-income counterparts to be mobilized by the political parties, and moderate-income seniors are even more likely.

Figure 4 shows the likelihoods that seniors and non-seniors at various income levels were contacted by a political party during the election season, after controls for other demographic characteristics. For nonseniors, the likelihood of being mobilized rises with income. This is the pattern found in past research: High-income individuals are more likely to be asked to participate than their low-income counterparts.

Once again, senior citizens are different. The likelihood of party mobilization during the campaign season rises with income to a point but then falls at high income levels.¹⁰ Parties may appear to be acting rationally, conserving limited resources by declining to

¹⁰ This pattern is most pronounced for mobilization by the Democratic party. The likelihood that a senior respondent is mobilized by the Democratic party rises from .05 at low income levels to .13 at moderate incomes, falling to nearly zero among the most affluent. The pattern of mobilization by the Republican party is much flatter, and the curve, although much more shallow, opens upward: the likelihood of mobilization by the Republican party is .08 at low income levels, decreasing slightly, to .06, at moderate incomes, and increasing to .08 among the affluent. In neither case are affluent seniors mobilized at higher rates than poorer seniors.

FIGURE 3. Social Security-Based Participatory Activity among Seniors by Income

Source: 1990 Citizen Participation Study (Verba et al. 1995).

mobilize high-income seniors, who already vote at high rates. Presumably mobilizing highly participatory affluent nonseniors would be a waste as well, yet that is precisely what the parties do, making the different pattern for seniors all the more notable. Thus lower- and moderate-income seniors are more likely to participate with regard to Social Security not only because of their great interest in the program, but also because they are mobilized to politics at high rates.

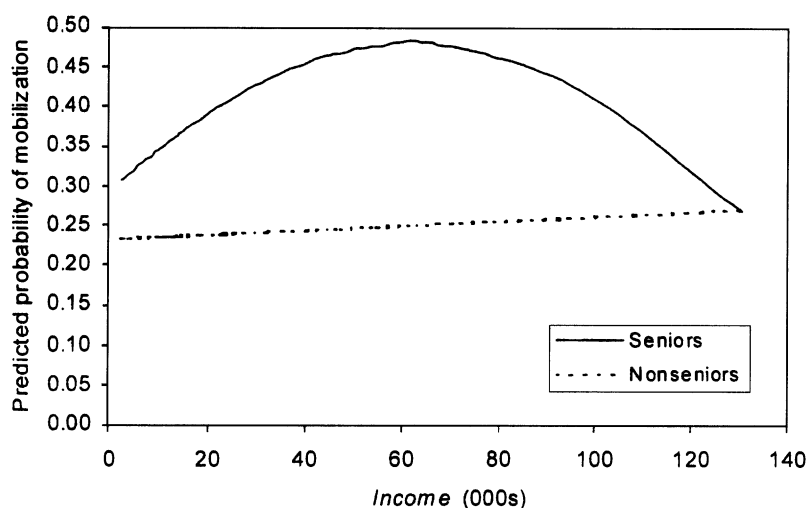
DISCUSSION

The role of Social Security helps explain the high rates of political participation by seniors. Among nonseniors, the extremely modest activity levels of the less affluent pull down the overall participation rate. In contrast, low-income seniors participate at higher rates than would be predicted by their resource levels because of their dependence on Social Security. On average, seniors receive almost half their income from Social Security (Moon and Mulvey 1996, 29). Like some other special societal groups—farmers and government employees—seniors have a large stake in government action. Social Security is especially important to poorer seniors—the 40% of seniors who receive four-fifths of their income from the program. Their dependence on Social Security boosts their participation and works against the usually positive income-participation gradient.

Social Security's role is both important and unusual. The Social Security-based participation of low-income seniors is a rare instance in which self-interest is highly influential. Researchers often have difficulty detecting self-interested behavior (Citrin and Green 1990). People fail to act in their self-interest because of informational or cognitive limitations (Simon 1983) or because they choose as social creatures to act altruistically (Sen 1977; Stoker 1992; Wildavsky 1987). With Social Security, though, the stakes are "visible," "tangible," "large," and "certain" (Citrin and Green 1990, 18), and there is no moral prohibition on the exercise of their self-interest.¹¹ Social Security is a non-means-tested entitlement program to which recipients or their spouses contributed during their years in the workforce. Although academics and policy experts may assert that the system is really a pay-as-you-go intergenerational transfer program and that the relationship between one's contributions and one's benefits is indirect, the program is popularly understood as an insurance program. As Franklin D. Roosevelt said, Social Security's self-contributory design gives recipients a "legal, moral, and political right" to their benefits (quoted in Schlesinger 1958, 309).

Social Security also is distinctive in American politics as a mobilizer of a low-income group. To the extent that economic self-interest influences behavior, it often simply augments the high participation rates of the most active segments of the citizenry. Those affluent homeowners who opposed Proposition 13 were "the most politicized and vocal" portion of the population to begin with (Sears and Citrin 1982, 220). It is low-income seniors, however, who are most active on the basis of Social Security, able to be so because of their sufficiently high participatory capacity, interested in doing so because of their great stake in the program,

¹¹ In addition, the self-interest that is influential here is the rarest and most rigorous type: "narrow" self-interest, the pursuit of "relatively short-run material benefits for the actor or his immediate family," to use David Sears's definition (found in Citrin and Green 1990, 4). Usually scholars are unable to detect the influence of self-interest even when it is more broadly defined.

FIGURE 4. Political Party Mobilization of Seniors and Nonseniors by Income

Source: 1996 National Election Study (Rosenstone et al. 1998).

and recruited to do so in part because Social Security creates a basis for mobilization.

Indeed, this bottom-up self-interest story is augmented by a top-down mobilization process. Senior citizens are one of the few groups in American society in which both the high- and the low-income members are mobilized with regard to economic issues, and not only by the political parties as shown here, but also in other venues. One of every two seniors belongs to the AARP, and as with voluntary group membership in general, AARP members are more educated, affluent, and white than nonmembers (Campbell 2000). However, poorer seniors, unlike many other low-income groups, also have sources of mobilization, political information, and political discussion. Thousands of senior centers and nutrition programs across the country, many run by the Administration on Aging, attract lower-income seniors. Inevitably seniors hear political discussion and policy news. One study from the 1960s found that although seniors active in old-age social welfare clubs were demographically similar to nonmembers, club members were more likely to talk about health and medical care (25% versus 2%) and other problems of old age (16% to 5%), were more likely to believe that “older people ought to organize to demand their rights” (68% to 39%), and were more likely to believe that older people ought to be more active in politics (74% to 48%) (Rose 1965). Hence, low-income seniors both take a keen interest in government policy and learn in these group settings how to make their preferences heard in the political arena.

CONCLUSION

According to Lipset ([1959] 1981, 190), one factor affecting turnout is the “relevance of government policies to the individual.” Groups that see a visible effect of government policy on their well-being—including government employees, farmers, veterans, and, as shown

here, Social Security recipients—have a great stake in government activity and participate at higher rates than would otherwise be expected (Lipset [1959] 1981, 190–94; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

The Social Security case is also unusual and important because the program’s participatory effects are most pronounced for low-income seniors. Ordinarily it is difficult to mobilize poorer individuals, but lower-income seniors’ dependence on Social Security is so great and so obvious that seniors are able to act in a self-interested manner, protecting their Social Security benefits. Social Security thus provides an important instance of self-interest significantly influencing participatory behavior. It would not be an exaggeration to conclude that the program is largely responsible for the creation of the senior constituency and its electoral significance.

APPENDIX A: ROPER SURVEY 8108 QUESTION WORDINGS

Issue-specific interest. Of course, everyone is more interested in some things being carried in the news than in others. To take some different kinds of examples—Is news about [each item in turn] something you have recently been following fairly closely, or just following casually, or not paying much attention to? Which prices are going up or down and how much?: the legislation to reduce income taxes; the legislation to deal with changes in Social Security; interest rates being charged by banks; attempts by Seagrams, Mobil, Texaco, DuPont, and others to buy Conoco; the marriage of Prince Charles and Lady Diana; the hunger strikes by Irish prisoners; the riots in England; relations between Israel and the Arab countries; the situation in Poland; the air traffic controllers’ strike. (Coded 1 if followed closely, 0 if followed casually or not much).

Income. Now here is a list of income categories. Would you call off the letter of the category that best describes the combined annual income of all members of this household, including wages or salary, pensions, interest or dividends, and all other sources? Nine-category variable.

Race. Recorded by interviewer. Coded 1 if black, 0 otherwise.

Gender. Coded 1 if male, 0 if female.

Marital status. Are you married, single, widowed, separated, or divorced? Coded 1 if married, 0 otherwise.

Work status. Are you at present employed, either full-time or part-time? [If no]: Are you a housewife, unemployed, a student, retired, or what? Coded 1 if working, 0 otherwise.

Education. What was the last grade of regular school that you completed—not counting specialized schools like secretarial, art, or trade schools? Seven-category variable.

APPENDIX B: CITIZEN PARTICIPATION STUDY QUESTION WORDINGS

Social Security voting. In the past five years, have you taken into account the position of a candidate in relation to Social Security Payments in deciding how to vote? Coded 1 if yes, 0 if no.

Social Security contacting. In the past five years, have you contacted a government official to complain about Social Security Payments? Coded 1 if yes, 0 if no.

Social Security contributing. In the past five years, have you given a campaign contribution based, at least in part, on your concern about Social Security Payments? Coded 1 if yes, 0 if no.

Income. Which of the income groups listed on this card includes the total 1989 income before taxes of all members of your family living in your home? Please include salaries, wages, pensions, dividends, interest, and all other income. [If uncertain: What would be your best guess?] Sixteen-category variable.

Race. What is your race? [Which category describes your racial background?] Coded 1 if black, 0 otherwise.

Gender. Coded 1 if male, 0 if female.

Marital status. Are you currently married, living in a marriage-like relationship, widowed, divorced, separated, or have you never been married? Coded 1 if married, 0 otherwise.

Work status. Last week, were you working full-time for pay, working part-time for pay, going to school, keeping house, or something else? Coded 1 if working, 0 otherwise.

Education. What is the highest grade of regular school that you have completed and gotten credit for? If necessary say: By regular school we mean a school that can be counted toward an elementary or high school diploma or a college or university degree. Did you get a high school diploma or pass a high school equivalency test? Do you have any college degrees—that is, not including degrees from a business college, technical college, or vocational school? What is the highest degree that you have earned? Eight-category variable.

Age. Calculated from year born.

APPENDIX C: 1996 NATIONAL ELECTION STUDY QUESTION WORDINGS

Party mobilization. As you know, the political parties try to talk to as many people as they can to get them to vote for their candidate. Did anyone from one of the political parties call you up or come around and talk to you about the campaign this year? (v961162; coded 1 if yes, 0 if no.)

Income. Please look at page 21 of the booklet and tell me the letter of the income group that includes the income of all members of your family living here in 1995 before taxes. This figure should include salaries, wages, pensions, dividends, interest, and all other income. Twenty-four-category variable.

Race. (v960067; coded 1 if black, 0 otherwise).

Gender. (v960066; coded 1 if male, 0 if female).

Marital status. Are you married now and living with your (husband/wife)—or are you widowed, divorced, separated, or have you never married? (v960606; coded 1 if married, 0 otherwise).

Work status. We'd like to know if you are working now, temporarily laid off, or are you unemployed, retired, permanently disabled, a homemaker, a student, or what? (v960616; coded 1 if working, 0 otherwise.)

Education. What is the highest grade of school or year of college you have completed? Did you get a high school diploma or pass a high school equivalency test? What is the highest degree that you have earned? I used the summary of the above three questions (v960610). Seven-category variable.

Age. Calculated from year born (v960605).

APPENDIX D: PREDICTING ISSUE INTEREST AMONG SENIORS AND PARTY MOBILIZATION OF SENIORS AND NONSENIORS

TABLE A1. Predicting Issue Interest among Seniors (Figure 2)

Independent Variable	Social Security	Domestic Issues	International Issues
Income	0.135 [#] (0.075)	0.006* (0.002)	0.008** (0.003)
Income-squared	-0.003* (0.001)		
Education	0.176 (0.151)	0.034* (0.016)	0.045* (0.019)
Male	0.078 (0.440)	0.064 (0.051)	0.010 (0.061)
Married	-0.261 (0.407)	0.031 (0.046)	0.034 (0.055)
Black	0.314 (0.599)	-0.030 (0.069)	-0.023 (0.082)
Working	0.158 (0.779)	0.046 (0.086)	0.074 (0.106)
Retired	-0.001 (0.502)	-0.008 (0.059)	0.048 (0.071)
Constant	-0.089 (0.670)	0.254*** (0.073)	0.078 (0.087)
<i>N</i>	202	196	196
% predicted	78.2		
<i>R</i> ²	0.04	0.14	0.15
<i>F</i> -test		<i>p</i> < .001	<i>p</i> < .001

Source: Roper Survey 8108, August 1981 (Roper Organization 1981).

Note: For Social Security, figures in cells are logistic regression coefficients predicting whether respondents followed news of the program closely. For domestic and international issues, figures in cells are OLS coefficients predicting the number of issues respondents followed closely (0 to 5, rescaled to 0–1). Standard errors are in parentheses. Results are for respondents aged 65 and over; age within the senior group is not available in this data set. Cox and Snell *R*² shown for logistic regression results. Income-squared was eliminated from the domestic and international equations because a check for multicollinearity revealed a high correlation with Income. The tolerances for the predictors in the models shown are greater than .10, indicating that multicollinearity is not a problem. [#]*p* < .10; **p* < .05; ***p* < .01; ****p* < .001 (two-sided).

TABLE A2. Predicting Party Mobilization of Seniors and Nonseniors (Figure 4)

Independent Variable	Nonseniors (18–64)	Seniors (65+)
Income	0.002 (0.003)	0.025 ^a (0.018)
Income-squared		–0.0002 ^a (0.0002)
Education	0.190*** (0.049)	0.063 (0.093)
Male	–0.166 (0.146)	0.030 (0.293)
Married	0.454** (0.162)	0.096 (0.305)
Black	–0.370 (0.271)	–0.149 (0.501)
Working	–0.002 (0.203)	1.206* (0.611)
Retired	0.261 (0.376)	0.703 (0.486)
Age	0.020** (0.007)	0.004 (0.019)
Constant	–2.967*** (0.380)	–2.072 (1.562)
N	1,113	281
% predicted	73.9	63.3
Cox & Snell R ²	0.05	0.04

Source: 1996 National Election Study (Rosenstone et al. 1998).

Note: Figures in cells are logistic regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses. Income-squared was eliminated from the nonsenior equation because a check for multicollinearity revealed a high correlation with Income. In OLS estimates of the models shown, the tolerances for the predictors are greater than .10, indicating that multicollinearity is not a problem. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-sided). ^aLog-likelihood test shows that income and income-squared are jointly significant ($p < .001$).

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