

Author(s): Hansen, John Mark, and Steven J. Rosenstone
Title: Participation Outside Elections
Date: October 24, 1983
Dataset(s): 1983 Pilot Study

Abstract

Hansen and Rosenstone examine the 1983 Pilot Study questions concerning nonelectoral forms of political participation. Pilot Study respondents were asked whether, in the last six months, they had: contacted their congressmen, signed petitions concerned with national issues, joined with others to solve community problems, or attended meeting concerned with school affairs. Hansen and Rosenstone find that: (1) The six-month time frame produces sufficient response variance. (2) The traditional one year time frame question format uncovers few additional participants relative to the six-month time frame format. (3) A respondent's ability to recall having participated in politics is inversely related to the number of months that have elapsed since she last did so. (4) The four forms of nonelectoral political participation examined in the Pilot Study are only moderately associated with each other. (5) A sizeable number of people participate in nonelectoral activities, more so, in fact, than participate in the campaign centered activities traditionally measured on the NES. However, people who engage in one form of nonelectoral activity are only slightly more likely to engage in another mode. (6) The people who participate in electoral politics are not the same set of people who participate in non-electoral activities. (7) Individual political participation patterns change over time. For example, there was little overlap between those who reported contacting their representatives up to 1982 and those who did so in 1983. (8) Variables currently available on the NES do not do a very good job of accounting for why people engage in nonelectoral forms of political participation.

October 24, 1983

To: Board of Overseers, National Election Study
1984 National Election Study Planning Committee

From: John Mark Hansen and Steven J. Rosenstone

Re: Participation Outside Elections

Four new questions asking respondents to report on non-electoral forms of political participation appeared on the Center for Political Studies' Pilot Survey for the 1984 National Election Study. Respondents were asked whether, in the last six months, they had contacted their congressmen, signed petitions concerned with national issues, joined with others to solve community problems, or attended meetings concerned with school affairs. These items were designed to answer two questions about survey measurement of participation: 1) Does a six month time frame, one that is shorter than customary, yield a sufficient number of participants to allow for meaningful analysis of the data? 2) Is non-electoral participation distinct from campaign related participation or do the same people do both?

We take up these two questions in order. The first section begins by outlining the problem of question time frame. We assess the advantages of a six month prompt, report the Pilot Study marginals, and compare them to survey questions asked with longer time frames. The second section examines how responses to the new items are related to each other and whether they are associated with the electoral forms of participation reported by respondents in the November 1982 wave of the survey. We also present probit equations for the new items to demonstrate their discriminant validity. The final section summarizes our conclusions.

The Six Month Time Frame

The Pilot Study marks the first time, to our knowledge, that NES has asked participation questions using a time frame shorter than one year. Two concerns motivated the experiment. The first was theoretical. If we are interested in explaining why people participate we must limit the time span over which the reported behavior may have occurred. Questions that ask whether a respondent had "ever" taken part in some activity make it very difficult to isolate the causes of participation. The respondent's preferences, resources, and circumstances at the time of the interview are likely to differ by quite a bit from his preferences, resources, and circumstances at the time he "ever" wrote his congressman. Opportunities for participation, as well as the political factors that stimulate participation, are short-term effects. Only with a shorter time frame can one hope to isolate the forces that provoke participation.

Second, all available evidence clearly argues that people are not very good at recalling past events and behaviors. After about a year, for example, 44 percent of known signers of a petition in Idaho did not recall having signed it, and 31 percent of them could not even remember hearing about it (Pierce and Lovrich 1982). Similar findings have been obtained in careful studies of

reported versus actual hospitalizations, automobile accidents, crime victimizations, and major home improvement expenditures.¹ A central conclusion of this scholarship is that memories decay very quickly--about half of the occurrences are forgotten within a year.

Our analysis of data collected by the Roper organization yields convergent findings. Since 1973, Roper has conducted ten 2,000 respondent surveys a year (about one survey every five weeks). Twelve participation items, all with one year prompts, have appeared on every one of these surveys. If respondents did indeed remember back over a full year when they answered the questions (and if there were no seasonal differences in the quality of the samples), responses should display a slow moving average over time. Instead, we find a striking amount of seasonality (Hansen and Rosenstone 1983), suggesting that people simply do not remember back as far as interviewers asked them to. Our time series analyses of four of these items--interest in public affairs, petition signing, attending a public meeting on town or school affairs, and writing congressmen or senators--further reveals that in none of the equations do exogenous political factors or events, economic conditions, or media coverage of politics affect participation with a lag longer than two months. Moreover, once those equations are fully specified, the coefficients on lagged dependent variables are zero. Clearly if people were thinking back over the past year when responding to the questions, we would have found either much longer lags on exogenous variables or significant coefficients on lagged dependent variables.

Although the rapidity with which a person's memory decays means that shorter time frames will produce less error in the measurement of participation, the obvious constraint is that one must be certain that there are enough occurrences for data analysis to proceed. A question asking whether the respondent has written his representative in the last week most likely would not yield much variance. Most forms of political participation are rare enough that very few people take part in them in any given week. Therefore, we are concerned with whether a six month prompt elicits sufficient variance and how much variance we lose by using the shorter, though likely more reliable, time frame. We are not in a position to say whether the six month time frame is the optimal prompt for participation questions; we can only judge whether or not it is feasible and more reliable than the one year format.

A lot of people participate in non-electoral political activities and we are easily able to detect this when questions are posed with a six month time frame. As shown in table 1, 15.3 percent of the Pilot Study respondents say they had contacted their U.S. representatives in the last six months; 14.4 percent say they had signed a petition for or against something the national government has done, may do, or should do; 26.3 percent say they had worked with others or joined an organization to do something about some community problem; and 17.5 percent say they had attended a school board meeting or other meetings at which public school policies were discussed.

People seem to have had no trouble answering questions posed with a six month time prompt. There are no missing data on three of the items; only one respondent failed to report whether he had signed a petition.

¹ Cannell, Marquis, and Laurent n.d.; Penick 1976; Neter and Waksberg 1964.

Table 1
Participation Outside Elections
(Percentages)

V2204: During the past six months, have you contacted your U.S. Representative that is your Representative to the U.S. Congress, or anyone in your Representative's office?

Yes	15.3	
No	84.7	N=314

V2205: In the past six months, have you signed a petition either for or against something that the national government has done, may do, or should do?

Yes	14.4	
No	85.6	N=313

V2206: How about activities in your local community? In the past six months, have you worked with others or joined an organization to do something about some community problem?

Yes	23.6	
No	76.4	N=314

V2207: Also during the past six months, have you attended a school board meeting or other meetings in which public school policies were discussed?

Yes	17.5	
No	82.5	N=314

We should keep in mind that these estimates are probably a bit on the high side. Pilot Study interviews were conducted on a subsample of respondents to the 1982 National Election Study. The 1982 NES sample was more educated, older, and more likely to have voted than the general public. The Pilot subsample is even more unrepresentative: more affluent, better educated, more interested in politics, and more likely to have voted than even the full 1982 NES sample. Second, many forms of participation are seasonal: they peak in the summer. Judging from our analysis of ten years of monthly Roper data, participation is about 1-2 points higher in the summer than in other months. In short, we suspect that the actual incidence of participation in the voting age citizen population may, on average, be several points lower than the NES Pilot Study estimates.

The six month format uncovers nearly as many participants as questions that employ a one year or even "ever" time frame. Whereas 15.3 percent of Pilot Study respondents had written their representatives in the last six months, 14.2 percent of the 1982 NES respondents reported ever having written their Representative.² When we focus only on Pilot Study respondents, (to control for differences between the pilot sample and the full 1982 NES sample), we find that 16.9 percent reported ever contacting their congressman in 1982--only 1.6 percent more than when the six month prompt is employed.

Further evidence that we do not lose much with the shorter time frame is provided in table 2. At the same time that the NES Pilot Study was in the field (75 percent of the respondents were interviewed between 2 July and 14 July), the Roper organization (9-16 July) was polling a national sample of 2,000 people about their political activities. Table 2 displays the marginals for the Pilot Study and the weighted marginals for several of the Roper items. The questions most closely worded concerned contacting representatives and attending local meetings. Roughly the same percentage of people in both surveys claimed to have written their congressmen, despite Roper's question explicitly mentioning Senators too.³ The same holds for attending meetings about school issues: 17.5 percent of the NES respondents attended a school board meeting or other meetings in which public school policies were discussed; 16 percent of the Roper respondents attended a public meeting on a town or school affair. The slightly higher NES estimate may reflect sampling error or the sample biases, but it may also result from the question not confining the meetings to public ones as the Roper question does. The similarity between the NES and Roper marginals suggests that most of the town meetings people attend focus on public school issues.

² The 1982 NES did not, unfortunately, pose this question to respondents who lived in districts with no incumbents running.

³ The similarity of the marginals suggests to us that people may use "congressman" or "representative" to refer generically to someone in Congress, whether Senator or House member. The true difference in the estimates, however, may be slightly greater: there is no correction for the selection biases in the NES Pilot Study sample, while the Roper estimates are based on a weighted sample.

Table 2
Six Month Versus One Year Time Frames:
NES and Roper Questions, July 1983
(Percentage Yes)

NES Pilot Study <u>In the past six months have you:</u>	Roper Survey <u>In the past year have you:</u>
Contacted your representative 15.3	Written your congressman or senator 17
Attended a school board meeting or meeting that discussed school policies 17.5	Attended a public meeting on a town or school affairs 16
Signed a petition directed at the national government 14.4	Signed a petition 36
Worked with others or joined an organization to do something about some community problem 23.6	Served on a committee for a local organization 7
	Served as an officer of a club or organization 8
	Been a member of a group for better government 4
(None of the four activities) 56.0	(None of twelve activities) 50

There is, of course, a sizable difference between the two samples in reports of petition signing and collective action, but the gaps are what one would expect given the differences in wording between the NES and Roper items. One would anticipate more people to have signed a petition of unspecified content than to have signed a petition concerned only with a national problem. On the other hand, we would expect more people to have worked with others, or to have joined an organization to do something about a community problem (encompassing formal and informal associations) than to have served as an officer or committee member of a formal group, or to have belonged to a good government group.

A final possibility is that the similarity indicates merely that the people who take part in an activity keep doing so. It may be, for instance, that the same group of people sit down every six months and write their representatives. But this is not the case, at least for those who contacted their congressmen. Of the 25.7 percent of the population who indicated in response either to the 1982 or 1983 question that they had written their congressmen, less than one in four (5.9/25.7) were repeaters (table 3). Thus, there is astonishingly little overlap between the two groups. Only 5.8 percent of the respondents were repeat letter writers--a smaller proportion than the people who reported writing either in 1982 or in 1983.

This suggests, then, that the universe of participants changes rapidly over time, despite participants being recruited disproportionately from a set pool of citizens--the highly educated, the affluent, the middle aged, and so forth. As the political environment changes and as the issues that appear before Congress change, so too do the incentives for people to contact their representatives in Washington. And a changing environment changes the incentives for groups to spur their members and sympathizers to convey their preferences to their representatives.

It appears, then, that the six month time frame not only produces sufficient response variance, but that a longer time frame uncovers few additional participants. A respondent's ability to recall having participated in politics is inversely related to the number of months that have elapsed since he did so. Few people seem to recall behavior that occurred more than six months ago.

The Distinctiveness of Non-Electoral Participation

The four forms of non-electoral political participation measured on the Pilot Survey are only moderately associated with each other (table 4). In every one of the six crosstabs, respondents are more likely to engage in one activity but not the other, rather than to have engaged in both. (The northwest cell in each table is smaller than either the northeast or southwest cells.) For example, 8.3 percent of the sample signed a national petition but did not write their congressman; 9.3 percent wrote their congressman but did not sign a petition; only 6.1 percent of the respondents did both. Fifty-five percent of those who engaged in any of the activities participated in only one of them; only 3.0

⁴ What difference it makes that the 1982 question was asked only of people in districts with an incumbent running obviously depends upon whether people are more or less likely to write new congressmen than to write long time incumbents.

Table 3
 Present and Past Contacting of Representatives:
 (Total Percentages)

		Present Contacting:	
		Yes	No
Past Contacting:	Yes	5.9	11.0
	No	8.8	74.3
Have you ever contacted your House incumbent (Nov. 1982-Jan. 1983)			
N=272		r=.26	

Table 4a
Associations Between Pilot Study Items:
(Total Percentages)

		V2204 Contacted Representative		V2205 Signed National Petition		V2206 Worked with Others on Local Problem	
		<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
V2205	Yes	6.1	8.3				
Signed	No	9.3	76.4				
National		r=.31					
Petition							
V2206	Yes	7.0	16.6	6.7	16.9		
Worked with	No	8.3	68.2	7.7	68.7		
Others on		r=.22		r=.22			
Local Problem							
V2207	Yes	3.8	13.7	4.2	13.4	7.3	10.2
Attended	No	11.5	71.0	10.2	72.2	16.2	66.2
School		r=.08		r=.12		r=.20	
Meeting							

Table 4b
Concentration of Non-Electoral Participation

<u>Percentage Engaging in:</u>	<u>Percentage of</u>	
	<u>Respondents</u>	<u>Participants</u>
No non-electoral activities	56.0%	--
One non-electoral activity	24.2	55.0%
Two non-electoral activities	14.0	21.8
Three non-electoral activities	4.5	10.2
Four non-electoral activities	1.3	3.0
Total:	100.0%	100.0%

percent of the participants (1.3 percent of the sample) engaged in all four non-electoral activities.

The strongest associations, of course, occur between participatory acts taking place in the same political arena. Acts directed toward the national government are more associated with each other than with local activities; acts designed to influence local political decisions are also more likely to occur in tandem. Contacting one's congressman and signing a petition concerned with a national issue is a more common pair, for example, than contacting a congressman and attending a school board meeting. Citizens who joined with others to do something about a community problem are an exception. They were not only more likely to attend school meetings but also were more likely to have signed petitions or to have written their representatives.

The weak relationship among the responses suggests that it would be inappropriate to consider these items as alternative measures of the same underlying dimension. They are different political acts; different people engage in them; and as we will see in a moment, they have different causes.

The distinctiveness of these forms of participation is even more evident when we look at the relationship between the new items and campaign related activities engaged in during the 1982 election season (table 5). There is very little relationship between non-electoral political action and participation in election campaigns. The campaign activists are different people than the non-electoral political activists. Few respondents appear in the northwest cell of each table compared to either the northeast or southwest cells.

It is also important to note that with the exception of voting and trying to influence others' votes, campaign related acts are actually more exotic forms of political participation than the nonelectoral modes of participation included in the Pilot Survey. Putting the two exceptions aside, more people politically active outside of the electoral arena than within it. (Compare the sum of the yes column to the sum of the yes row in any of the crosstabs.) Furthermore, with few exceptions, more people engaged exclusively in nonelectoral activities (the southwest cell) than took part exclusively in electoral modes (the northeast cell). Indeed, with only a few more exceptions, more people participated exclusively in the Pilot Study activities (the southwest cell) than participated in electoral activities at all, either exclusively or in combination with Pilot Study activities (northeast plus northwest cells).

There are two interesting patterns worth mentioning. Electoral participation is most strongly related to writing one's congressman. People who were active in a midterm election campaign did not go into hibernation when their candidate or her opponent went to Washington. Since many of the respondents had a hand in her election, they were not hesitant about dropping her a line. A second interesting pattern is that those who took part in collective activities during the election--attended meetings or worked for parties or candidates--were slightly more likely to take part in collective activities even on the local level--attending school meetings and working with others in local problem solving.

Since the four non-electoral forms of participation are so weakly associated with each other, one would expect them to have different causes. Probit equations estimated for each of the new items are reported in tables 6a-d.

Table 5
Associations Between Non-Electoral and Electoral Participation
(Total Percentages)

Electoral Participation In 1982		V2204 Contacted Congressman		V2205 Signed Petition		V2206 Worked with Others		V2207 Attended School Meeting	
		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
V501 Voted	Yes	13.1	51.6	10.2	54.3	17.8	46.8	13.1	51.6
	No	2.2	33.1	4.2	31.3	5.7	29.6	4.5	30.9
		r= .18		r= .06		r= .13		r= .10	
V473 Influenced Others' Vote	Yes	4.1	15.9	3.2	16.9	6.1	14.0	4.8	15.3
	No	11.1	68.8	11.2	68.7	17.5	62.4	12.7	67.2
		r= .07		r= .02		r= .08		r= .08	
V474 Attended Rally	Yes	3.2	4.1	1.3	6.1	3.5	3.8	2.9	4.5
	No	12.1	80.6	13.1	79.6	20.1	72.6	14.6	78.0
		r= .22		r= .02		r= .16		r= .16	
V475 Worked for Party or Candidate	Yes	1.6	3.5	1.0	4.2	2.2	2.9	2.2	2.9
	No	13.7	81.2	13.4	81.5	21.3	73.6	15.3	79.6
		r= .10		r= .03		r= .11		r= .16	
V476 Displayed Button or Sticker	Yes	1.6	4.5	1.0	5.1	.6	5.4	1.6	4.5
	No	13.7	80.3	13.4	80.5	22.9	71.0	15.9	78.0
		r= .08		r= .01		r= -.08		r= .06	
V477 Member of Political Organization	Yes	1.6	2.2	.6	3.2	1.0	2.9	.6	3.2
	No	13.7	82.5	13.7	82.4	22.6	73.6	16.9	79.3
		r= .15		r= .01		r= .01		r= .00	
V481 Gave money to Candidate	Yes	3.2	5.4	1.9	6.8	2.6	6.1	3.5	5.1
	No	11.9	79.5	12.5	78.8	21.2	70.2	14.1	77.2
		r= .19		r= .07		r= .04		r= .19	
V490 Gave Money to Party	Yes	1.9	2.6	1.0	3.5	1.6	2.9	1.3	3.2
	No	12.8	82.7	13.5	82.0	21.8	73.7	16.3	79.2
		r= .17		r= .04		r= .06		r= .06	
V497A Gave money to PAC	Yes	4.2	7.7	2.6	9.4	3.5	8.4	2.9	9.0
	No	10.9	77.2	11.6	76.5	19.9	68.2	14.5	73.6
		r= .21		r= .08		r= .05		r= .07	

Except for variables with a natural metric (age and number of school-aged children), all of the explanatory variables are coded on the zero-one interval.

The kinds of variables that showed up in the equations were appropriate given the activities they were explaining. Optimistic assessments of the national economy and dissatisfaction with the job Congress is doing increased the probability of contacting one's representative. Union members and strong ideologues were more likely to write, but strong ideologues were neither more nor less likely to sign a national petition. At first this might seem odd, since most petitions are explicitly policy-centered. But signing a petition is very nearly an automatic response, like giving the time to a stranger. Thus, the probability that one will sign a petition is related more to whether one comes into contact with a petition carrier than whether one agrees with the petition's content (Hansen and Rosenstone 1983). Cultural norms in the South make Southerners less likely to circulate petitions, so that other Southerners have less opportunity to sign them. People with school-aged children are more likely to be drawn to places where petitioners lurk and are more likely to be at home when petitioners call. The demands of parenthood lessen the probability, however, of performing a more onerous task, writing one's congressman.

Parenthood increases the incentives for getting involved in one's community. Those with school-aged children have good reason to show up at school meetings and to work with others to solve community problems. By and large, it is women who go to school meetings and older women (who have social ties of longer standing) who work with others in problem-solving. Finally, the communitarian tradition in the South explains the proclivity of Southerners to take part in communal activities.

In summary, national conditions, like economic well-being and evaluations of Congress, explain participation in national level activities. Cultural milieux structure the opportunities and predispositions toward certain types of participation and away from others. And life circumstances, parenthood, for instance, provide incentives to take part in some activities but raise the costs of participating in others.

More striking than the discriminant validity of the items, however, is how poorly the equations explain each of the four dependent variables. In only one instance is as much as 20 percent of the variance explained; in the other three equations only about 10 percent of the variance is accounted for. The standard errors of the equation estimates are huge. In every instance save one, the null model (the fit if one simply predicted that every respondent did not participate) fits the data at least as well as the estimated equations. Lots of other⁶ variables were tried,⁵ but most had coefficients that were equivalent to zero.

⁵ These included several measures of personal economic well-being, strength of party identification, actual and anticipated reductions in government benefits, race, income, religion, evaluations of Reagan, and urban or rural residence.

⁶ The t-statistics on the deleted variables that had appropriate signs were each less than 1.0. Multicollinearity was not a problem.

Table 6
 Probit Models of Non-Electoral Participation

a. Contacted Representative

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Err.
Education (t-1)	1.12	.41
National economic well-being	1.02	.47
Number of school-aged children (t-1)	-.29	.13
Congressional job rating (t-1)	-.55	.22
Age X Women (t-1)	.01	.004
Strength of ideology (t-1)	.07	.03
Union household (t-1)	.36	.24
(Constant)	-2.38	.45

$R^2 = .10$

Chi-square (7 d.f.) = 28.2 (pr. < .001)

Standard error of the estimate = .35

83.8 percent of cases predicted correctly (null model = 84.6)

N = 253

b. Signed National Petition

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Err.
Education (t-1)	.94	.34
Southerner (t-1)	-.63	.24
Age X Women (t-1)	.008	.004
Number of school-aged children (t-1)	.13	.10
(Constant)	-1.76	.28

$R^2 = .08$

Chi-square (4 d.f.) = 21.4 (pr. < .001)

Standard error of the estimate = .34

85.6 percent of cases predicted correctly (null model = 85.6)

N = 312

Table 6 (Continued)

c. Joined With Others To Solve Community Problem

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Err.
Education (t-1)	.87	.29
Southerner (t-1)	.52	.18
Age X Women (t-1)	.008	.003
Number of school-aged children (t-1)	.31	.08
(Constant)	-1.81	.25

$R^2 = .11$

Chi-square (4 d.f.) = 31.0 (pr. < .001)

Standard error of the estimate = .40

78.3 percent of cases predicted correctly (null model = 76.4)

N = 313

d. Attended School Meeting

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Err.
Education (t-1)	.47	.40
Women (t-1)	.62	.22
Log (mean of income categories) (t-1)	.59	.19
Southerner (t-1)	.39	.24
Group identifier	.49	.23
Union household (t-1)	.40	.23
Number of school-aged children (t-1)	.30	.10
(Constant)	-4.12	.67

$R^2 = .21$

Chi-square (7 d.f.) = 48.9 (pr. < .001)

Standard error of the estimate = .34

84.3 percent of cases predicted correctly (null model = 82.3)

N = 254

Conclusions

We have established five things:

1. A sizable number of people participate in nonelectoral activities. These are not exotic forms of behavior, but common channels of political expression, more common forms of political participation, in fact, than most campaign centered activities traditionally measured on the NES.
2. People who engage in one form of nonelectoral activity are only slightly more likely to engage in another mode. The least overlap occurs between national and local forms of action.
3. The people who participate in electoral politics are not the same set of people who participate in non-electoral activities--these two groups of people overlap hardly at all. One gets a very distorted picture both of whether a respondent is politically active and of political participation in America if one relies solely on electoral measures of political participation.
4. Who participates in politics changes over time, probably in response to shifts in life circumstances and in the political environment. We found little overlap between those who reported contacting their representatives up to 1982 and those who did so in 1983.
5. Variables currently available on the NES do not do a very good job of accounting for why people engage in nonelectoral forms of political participation. Neither the costs of participation, nor the benefits, nor the forces that mobilize citizens are currently measured by the NES. Suggestions for instrumentation appear on our February 1983 and April 1983 memoranda to the 1984 NES Planning Committee.

References

- Cannell, Charles F., Marquis, Kent H., and Laurent, André. n.d. "A Summary of Studies of Interviewing Methodology."
- Hansen, John Mark and Rosenstone, Steven J. 1983. "The Dynamics of Political Participation," ms., Yale University.
- Neter, John and Waksberg, Joseph. 1964. "A Study of Response Errors in Expenditures Data from Household Interviews." Journal of the American Statistical Association. 59 (March 1964), pp. 18-55.
- Penick, Bettye K. Eidson. 1976. Surveying Crime. Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences.
- Pierce, John C. and Lovrich, Nicholas P. 1982. "Survey Measurement of Political Participation: Selective Effects of Recall in Petition Signing," Social Science Quarterly 63 (March 1982), pp. 164-71.