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Voting Participation and the Very Old: A Cost / Benefit Analysis

Scott Randolph Jendusa

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Abstract

A cost/benefit analysis of the voting behavior of a purposive sample of citizens aged 76 to 94 reveals that disability limits turnout by increasing the effort needed to vote while the reasons to participate decrease due to the loss of social roles and relationships. Personal interviews were conducted with 16 poor, disabled, unmarried women to determine if the decline in voter turnout statistics that occurs in the mid-seventies indicates a lack of interest in voting by the advanced elderly or the inability to participate when so desired. The study expands upon the existing literature which implicitely accepts disability as a legitimate reason not to vote. The increased effort needed to vote due to the onset of disability in advanced old age clearly effects participation. Fifteen of the 16 respondents had voted sometime in their life, but only six did so in the presidential election of 1992. Five of these six needed assistance to cast their ballot. Seven of the nine nonvoters would have voted if they could have done so from their home. The tool designed to accomplish this, the absentee ballot, was ineffectual for this sample. The importance of an active social life upon participation was also established. Family influence was not a factor, but a relationship with a 'best friend' was strongly correlated with a desire to participate. Recognizing the impending growth of the very old population in America these findings suggest further examination of the rights and opportunities available to the advanced elderly is warranted.

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DEDICATION

This paper would not have been completed without the advisement, encouragement, and patience of my committee in charge of candidacy, especially Dr. Arlene Taich, and my wife, Deborrah. Thank you.

It is dedicated to my mother and father.

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Introduction

Cross-sectional analysis of voter turnout by age always reveals the same pattern. Turnout is lowest at the beginning of adult life, rises to a plateau in middle age, and steadily declines as old age increases (Appendix A). This paper will look at the third phase of that cycle. More specifically, it will examine the voting participation of the 'very old', those over 75 years of age, where this decline in turnout occurs. It will attempt to identify the factors and variables which explain why voting participation, which steadily increases with maturity, sharply and steadily decreases upon attaining advanced old age. It will attempt to look beyond generalizations and the obvious to discover not only those factors which contribute to the decline in this most basic and widespread form of political participation, the vote, but also examine this phenomenon in the context of the dynamics of the elderly in today's society. To do this I will review the currently accepted explanations and interpretations of this phenomenon and, more significantly, interview a selected sample of the very old to determine if the existing literature truly addresses the factors involved in their voting participation.

The impetus for this study comes from possibly the most prominent textbook on social gerontology, Robert Atchley's The Social Forces in Later Life. In the first (1972) and sixth (1991) editions Atchley cites a 1968 study by Glenn and Grimes

that states " . . . only widespread disability and lack of transportation keep the voter turnout of the elderly down near that of middle-aged persons with the same amount of education" (1972, p.240; 1991, p. 243). This appears to make sense, as failing health and immobility are generally associated with advanced old age, but it raised a question. Might not "widespread disability and a lack of transportation" as the explanation for lower voting participation by the elderly reflect a negative orientation towards the aged, a bias or stereotype? A review of the literature since 1968 reinforced this concern. Though recognizing that characteristics other than age influence voting participation, a willingness to accept disability as a legitimate explanation for nonparticipation still existed. The distinction between not voting because one doesn't want to and not voting because of obstacles to participation was never addressed. This paper will do so by asking the following question. Do the very old not vote because they don't want to vote, or do they stop voting because of events or circumstances more often encountered in advanced old age? Specifically, this paper will examine if two developments commonly experienced by the very old, disability and social isolation, effect voting turnout by either eliminating the desire to vote or preventing those who do want to participate from casting a ballot.

Examination of the original Glenn and Grimes study reveals its primary objective was to apply the once popular age-negative disengagement theory to the decline in voting participation by

the elderly. Available voter turnout by age data had shown the dropoff in participation by those over 65. Recognizing the weakness of cross-sectional studies, the authors analyzed this data over time controlling for sex, education, and generational cohort. Their findings revealed that there was not a correlation between advanced old age and a decline in political interest and participation. Rather, they hypothesized "that political interest increases as people age and that, short of senility or serious illness, there is never a reversal of the trend" (Glenn & Grimes, 1968, p.564). They found that "turnout does not decline, except to an extent that could be explained by physical disability" (p.564). Fitting this to the disengagement theory, which characterizes the transition from middle age to senescence as a progressive disengagement of the individual from activities and other members of society, the authors suggested that the elderly's increased interest in political affairs was the result of "the removal of distracting influences and the need to compensate for the lack of other activities and interests" (p.574). However, since 1968 the disengagement theory has been recognized as negatively-biased and oversimplified. Subsequently, research concerning the voting behavior of the elderly since 1968 has typically expanded upon and confirmed certain aspects of the Glenn and Grimes study, but new approaches or hypotheses are lacking due to the absence of a theoretical foundation.

The existing literature focuses on information derived from cross-sectional studies, controlling for other sociodemographic

variables. This approach has received such an emphasis that 'disability and lack of transportation' as factors effecting participation seem to be accepted as givens, if they are mentioned at all. In fact, it almost appears as if researchers since 1968 have overreacted to some of the errors of earlier gerontologists and intentionally avoid focusing on possible negative consequences of aging, such as failing health and social isolation. If Glenn and Grimes possibly overemphasized the poor health of the advanced aged (attributing nonparticipation to "senility or serious illness" p.564, "disability" p.570, or becoming "senile, bedridden, or very feeble" p.574) the more recent studies seem to overcompensate by refraining from addressing problems that may be age-specific. But these are realities to many of the advanced aged, and will be the focus of this study. It will examine if events common and peculiar to living an extremely long life influence one's ability or desire to engage in what is generally considered a simple activity, voting. At issue is our willingness to accept disability and loss, as experienced by the very old, as a legitimate reason why a growing segment of our population should not participate in the political process.

Chapter I

Review of Related Literature

Voting Participation and the Elderly

Research since the Glenn and Grimes study commonly reveals a tendency to explain the decline in voting participation that occurs in late life to being not a result of old age, but to the presence of other sociodemographic characteristics typically associated with nonvoting yet common to the very old age-cohort. Education is an example. Since voting participation correlates positively with the higher level of education attained, the fact that many in the recent cohorts of those over 75 do not have a high level of education is presented as a reason why that age group votes less than younger age-groups with more education. Though valid and worthwhile, this research approach has resulted in a highly undisciplined body of knowledge.

One problem is the inability to uniformly define 'the elderly'. Voting turnout and registration studies have used the following age categories: 45-64, 65-74, 75+ (Statistical Handbook on Aging Americans, 1986, p. 81); 55-64, 65-78 (Hooyman & Kiyak, 1992, p.373); 50-59. 60-69, 70-79, 80+ (Glenn & Grimes, 1968, p.569); 45-64, 65+ (Statistical Abstract of the US, 1991, p.268). Since the decline in participation generally appears in the late 70's age-group the variety of applied age-ranges can definitely influence analysis drawn or inferred from these statistics. But even more serious is the use of similarly collected data as explanatory tools. Because of the variety of

data available and the varying analytical abilities applied, studies often differ over how many and which sociodemographic characteristics are relevant. The result is a collection of information that is strong in generalizations, contradictions, and shallow analysis..

The state of analysis and available information involving the elderly and politics can be revealed by examining current social gerontology textbooks. Voting behavior is generally included in a chapter discussing the aged and politics. In these it is recognized that America is 'graying', and the elderly are commonly recognized as a 'political force', but the means by which that 'force' may be most popularly applied, the vote, receives little in-depth analysis. Typical is a recent entry, Social Gerontology: A Multidisciplinary Perspective, by Nancy R. Hooyman and H. Asuman Kiyak, published in 1992. On page 373 they state that "Within a heterogeneous group such as the elderly . . . differences of opinion on any political issue are likely to equal or exceed variations between age groups" yet, a page later, say the "older electorate therefore has the potential to exert political influence substantially beyond what their numbers might suggest." They then devote four and one-half pages to Senior Power and the political organization of the elderly while recognizing that gerontologists disagree about old age being a strong enough unifying characteristic needed for political action. Voting behavior receives just under one page of discussion. In this discussion they point out that, while voting participation declines for those aged 75 and over, this

group still votes more than the age category 35 and under. Their explanation for this decline is that it is not due to age per se, but to factors such as gender, ethnic minority, lower education, and generational influences. Disability and lack of transportation, Glenn and Grimes's influencing factors, are not mentioned as determinants except to say, "Voting does not decline among older individuals who are better educated, actively involved, and in good health" (p.374). They state that the elderly are more likely to vote than younger adults "in part because the elderly disproportionately identify voting as the only way they can have a say about how government runs things" (p.373). Robert Atchley's textbook devotes a bit more space to voting participation by the elderly, about a page and a half, and includes two charts displaying turnout by age correlated with sex and education. But he too devotes over 4 pages to the topic of political power and the elderly. In this discussion he is consistent in his belief that the view that older people comprise a unified interest group that can mobilize political pressure by bloc voting is an illusion, and will remain so, because age itself is not a powerful enough unifying identity to overcome the varied interests, lifestyles, opinions, and experiences of the elderly. His discussion of voting participation focuses on the impact of sex and education on turnout, in addition to the Glenn and Grimes study. Basically he posits that since women vote less than men and that turnout correlates positively with increased education, statistics on elderly voting turnout are influenced by the higher mortality

rate of older men and the educational levels reached by older cohorts. He suggests "that people develop a style of participation as a result of their own unique political socialization and then stick to it" (1972, p.240) so hypothesizes greater voter participation by the elderly as their level of education attained increases. These two sources, prominent textbooks in the field of social gerontology, accurately demonstrate the lack of in-depth analysis and lack of agreement on the factors involved in voting participation by the elderly. They discuss the elderly as a political force at length, with contrasting conclusions, explain any noninvolvement in politics by the elderly as a by-product of other sociodemographic characteristics, and mention or refer to disability without analysis.

A consensus does exist regarding one issue. The decline in voting turnout after the age of 75 is not due to age itself. Since Glenn and Grimes exposed the weaknesses of cross-sectional analysis in 1968 more studies have confirmed that when controls are applied voting turnout actually increases through the seventies (Converse & Niemi, 1971; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980; Dobson, 1983; Lammers, 1983). But William Lammer's book, Public Policy and the Aging, is typical of much of the available literature. In discussing voter turnout of the elderly he cites a Verba and Nie study that found "little evidence of a life cycle tendency to retreat from political activity and stay at home on election day" (p.53) and mentions that "only in the age 75 and over category does voting participation begin to decline"

(p.52). But no explanation or analysis follows. This is common of many of the works addressing the elderly and politics. As found in the textbooks, most discuss the elderly as a political force, with differing conclusions. Voting behavior, however, receives cursory attention. And the very old, if mentioned at all, are usually only recognized for their nonparticipation.

The few sources that do analyze voting behavior generally focus on sociodemographic characteristics, as noted earlier. And even then there is little consensus on which variables to consider, how to apply them, or even the relative merits of each variable. Baum and Baum discussed the apparent disparity between studies showing an increased interest in politics by older people yet a decline in participation after the age of sixty. They attributed this primarily to the disproportionately larger number of females in the oldest age groups, discussing the age cohort involved (using data from a 1972 study) and stating that "women . . . have traditionally lagged behind men in participation" (1980, p.84). While analyzing gender to some degree, other possible factors are only mentioned. They devote one sentence to education, and conclude their discussion by writing, "We suspect that there are other factors that make it quite possible to sustain high political interest and yet not be able to get to the polls. To be ill, to be poor, and especially to be both, may interfere with the opportunity to formally register a political preference" (1980, p.84). Their discussion does mention, if only slightly, the three most-accepted indicators of voting participation; sex, education, and

socioeconomic status. But disagreement exists even in the analysis of these factors and the participation of the very old. An example is gender, which is extremely relevant, since women progressively outnumber men as age increases. Hooyman and Kiyak agree with Baum and Baum, reporting that women "have historically participated less than men in voting, regardless of their educational, income, and age levels" (1992, p.374). Wolfinger and Rosenstone, however, concluded that in 1972 overall voter turnout for women was just 2% less than men based upon multivariete analysis. And age, when combined with gender, was a factor. At the age of 40, women voted at the same rate as men. In their 50's and 60's, women voted about 5% less than men. In their 70's, the difference was about 14%, and over 78 it was 16%. Participation by women decreased as they aged, while it did not decline for men until about the age of 80 (1980, p.37). In another example of the relative merits of particular variables, Glenn and Grimes had hypothesized that the elderlies increased interest in politics was compensation for lessening social roles and activities. This theory has survived, as evidenced by a statement in The Statistical Handbook on Aging Americans, published in 1986, that said, "Older people maintain a strong interest in the election process and have a high voting record, possibly due to having more leisure time than young people" (Schick, p.50). Besides bordering on stereotype, the influence of increased 'free' time was also refuted by Wolfinger and Rosenstone, who discovered that voter turnout is higher for those with less free time; in

fact, the highest voter turnout was by those who belonged to and actively participated in organizations. Correspondingly, the fewer the obligations and social associations the lower the voting participation (1980, p.49). These authors, by applying multivariete analysis to a much larger sample than had ever been used before, could apply and control more variables and so analyze the impact of various demographic categories to a much greater degree. Using data from the 1972 national election, they produced the most in-depth analysis of voting participation to-date.

However, Wolfinger and Rosenstone recognized that there were restrictions inherent in their research approach. They introduced their study by stating that "Our classification is limited to demographic characteristics . . . and to some contextual variables (such as registration laws) which can be determined" (1980, p.1). Their explanation of why this qualification was necessary provided the most accurate summary of the state and nature of research addressing voting behavior at that time, and is still relevant today. They said:

> . . . research on this topic (voting) has not progressed beyond a few very broad (and sometimes false) propositions; for example, men vote more than women, and rich people vote more than poor people. There has been remarkably little conclusive evidence bout the dimensions of such relationships. What is more, there has been virtually no examination of the more fundamental question, what is the true relationship between turnout and any given demographic characteristic? To what extent is the lower turnout of older people caused by the predominance of women among the elderly? If old women vote less, is it because they are living alone or because they are more likely to believe that voting is men's business? To put it more formally, social scientists have been unable to be very precise

> about either the strength of relationships between specific characteristics and turnout or whether these relationships persist, once other variables are held constant (1980, p.2).

They approached this problem by examining a much larger sample than had ever been used before and utilizing a highly sophisticated, analytical model. As mentioned earlier this allowed them to apply better controls to voting statistics. In doing so they were able to avoid and, ultimately, reveal the prevailing tendency to generalize about the voting behavior of the elderly. The depth of their research is revealed in their analysis of the effect of gender and the voting participation of the very old. They had concluded that there was a significant difference in turnout between very old men and women. They hypothisized that this was not due to the women aging, however, but to cohort influence (women in their 70's in 1972 had reached maturity before the 19th Amendment) and another variable, widowhood. Generally ignored by other researchers, Wolfinger and Rosenstone included widowhood in their analysis because their approach recognized the importance of interpersonal influence as a powerful motivating factor in individual behavior. Controlling for education, they found that for people over age 78 with only a grammar school education widowhood decreased the probability of voting by almost 20%, while for those with 1 to 3 years of college the probability of participation decreased practically 14% (1980, p.44). This is extremely relevant when examining the behavior of the very old because widowhood is so prominent. Figures for 1990 show that

for the ages 65-74 9.2% of males and 36.1% of females were widowed, increasing to 23.7% and 65.6%, respectively, for those 75 and over (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992a, Table 6-1). As previously mentioned, however, most researchers did not even include widowhood as a factor influencing voting participation by the elderly. Atchley, for example, had emphasized the importance of gender on voter turnout, but had not mentioned widowhood, even though his data showed that the 6% difference between men and women aged 55-64 increased to 17% for those 75 and over (1972, p.240). His hypotheses regarding an increase in educational level of the elderly cohort and subsequent increase in participation is also affected by Wolfinger and Rosenstone's research. Using multivariate analysis to examine the correlation between education and turnout, while accounting for age, they produced the following data (1980, p.47):

TABLE 1

VOTING PARTICIPATION BY AGE CONTROLLED FOR EDUCATION

EDUCATION	AGE 37-69	AGE 70-78	AGE 78+
0-8	56%	58%	44%
9-12	75	76	63
1-3 coll.	87	85	72
4 coll.	90	85	75
5+ coll.	93	94	80

This reveals that for all age categories voting participation increases with education attained, and actually increased or

stayed relatively consistent through the seventies. This appears to support Atchley's contention about the importance of education and voting participation. However, the figures for those age 78 and over showed a decline of 10 to 14 percentage points, regardless of education. Similar results regarding income were verified, and neither Atchley nor Wolfinger and Rosenstone felt any examination of this phenomenon was needed, accepting disability or poor health as a justifiable explanation. Though Wolfinger and Rosenstone provided a much more comprehensive analysis, their research ultimately was typical of the information collected since 1968. They agreed that the apparent decline in voting participation was not due to aging, per se, reinforcing the data that showed that turnout increased through the seventies. But they also depended upon sociodemographic indicators, and virtually ignored the decline that occurred during advanced old age. However, their greatest contribution was the inclusion of a variable that recognized that experiences and events common to the very old may contribute to that age-group's behavior; specifically, a change in marital status. They discovered this because they organized their study around one question which other researchers apparently did not consider. That question, which Wolfinger and Rosenstone considered essential to understanding who votes, is why people vote?

Cost/Benefit Analysis of Voting Behavior

Most available research on voting behavior ultimately identifies who votes, according to quantifiable demographic

characteristics. Statistics on voting behavior are available according to sex, age, income, race, occupation, religion, geographic location, geographic mobility, education, and marital status. But statistics don't explain why older, richer, better-educated, married Caucasians will vote more often than those without those attributes, as pointed out by Wolfinger and Rosenstone in Who Votes. That particular resource provided the best analysis of voting behavior because the authors recognized from the onset that any investigation of who votes must first examine why people vote. They chose to apply formal theory to the study of voter turnout, to think in terms of benefits and costs of voting to the individual. They cite Anthony Downs, in An Economic Theory of Democracy: "Every rational man decides to vote just as he makes all other decisions; if the returns outweigh the costs, he votes; if not, he abstains" (1957, p.260).

Wolfinger and Rosenstone believe a cost/benefit analysis of voting behavior is necessary because most people realize that their one vote will not make a difference between any candidates' victory or defeat. This position is shared by Kim Shienbaum, who rejects the common view that "voting is an instrumental and purposive act . . . through which citizens make significant choices by electing representatives who can later be held accountable" (1984, p.1). Instead, Shienbaum argues that voting may be irrelevant in terms of effect but does serve as a symbolic expression. That the decision to vote or not is in fact a rational choice and decision, and that those "able to benefit (or at least live comfortably within) a political system

in which tangible benefits are obtained for the most part outside the electoral process tend to make a rational choice to give the political system symbolic support by voting--and that those who are miserable and unable to use the system to better their state refrain from such a symbolic act, also rationally" (1984, p.1). Voting can then be seen as a political ritual, similar to going to church, a chosen act expressing support for an institution that maintains an approved social order. It is a habit reinforced through childhood, a gesture to support the status quo, and a means of fulfilling one's sense of social responsibility. According to Wolfinger and Rosenstone's application of formal theory this explanation of why people vote is typical of an expressive benefit, which is the positive sensation one feels when one believes he has done right, thus deserving a reward. With regards to the vote, the benefit is the feeling that one has done one's duty; to society, to a reference group, or to one's self. Voting can be seen as an act of allegiance to or declaration of membership within the political system or a means of fulfilling one's responsibilities. This is similar to Schienbaum's position, and supported by a survey conducted by that author. When asked why an individual voted, 56% said they were motivated by civic duty, 15% said habit, 14% claimed candidate preference, 9% a need for change, 2% party preference, and 5% had no response (1984, p.99). At least 73% could be interpreted to acting out of allegiance to society (civic duty), self (habit), or political membership (party), all examples of voting in response

to expressive benefits.

Wolfinger and Rosenstone recognize another motivational force influencing voting participation which they identify as instrumental benefits. These are rewards individuals receive "from consequences of the act of voting itself on their immediate well-being" (1980, p.7). Government employees may have a vested interest in political outcomes. Patronage situations and political 'machines' are defined by voting participation. Here the rewards are directly the result of voting, and denied to those who don't. But there are also less formalized environments where the failure to vote could be personally disadvantageous, the most relevant for this study being family. Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes state, "An analysis of interviews with people of low motivation who have gone to the polls indicates that the most important force on their behavior is interpersonal influence...personal influence seems particularly important within the family group" (1960, p.109). If interpersonal influence is the most important force to people of low motivation isn't it important to recognize that 31% of people 65 years of age and over live alone (15.7% of males, 42% of females, including 19.3% of males and 53.3% of females, 40.3% total, for those aged 75-84) (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992a, Table 6-3)? Fulfilling familial expectations is a powerful motivating factor. Married couples generally participate in hand: if one spouse votes, so does the other, and vice versa. But Wolfinger and Rosenstone were the only researchers to consider the impact of marital status or family

influence on the voting behavior of the very old, revealing the negative effect of widowhood on participation (see page 10). This occurred because they had based their research on the formal theory of behavior, which required them to examine the reasons behind an individual's decision to participate.

A reason to vote is necessary because there are costs involving both mental and physical effort required for complete participation. Wolfinger and Rosenstone identify the costs of voting as registering to vote, gathering information to make a decision, making that decision, and getting to the polls (1980, p.11). For the very old registration is not a major factor, due to their low geographic mobility as evidenced by statistics showing less than 2% of the 75 and over age group moved out of county in 1987-1988 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991b, p.19). And an interest in politics, and the subsequent development of political opinions, does not wane with age, according to the above authors and others, including Atchley, Glenn and Grimes, Baum and Baum, Hooyman, and Lammers. In regards to getting to the polls, however, we need to return to Glenn and Grimes's 1968 study to focus on a cost to voting participation that is specifically relevant to the very old. Their explanation that voting participation decreases among the elderly due to 'disability and lack of transportation' may be an underdeveloped generalization, but it does tie directly to Wolfinger and Rosenstone's identification of the costs involved in voting.

Measuring disability is difficult, but there is some quantifiable data that confirms the common sense assumption that

the elderly do experience health-related limitations. The 1992 Statistical Abstract of the United States points out that those 65 and over experience 31.5% days per person of 'restricted-activity' days a year compared to 12.9% for those under 65 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992b, Table 188). Sheila Zedlewski, in The Needs Of The Elderly In The 21st Century, utilizes the accepted activities of daily living (ADLs) measure to reveal the progressive limitations encountered by the elderly as they age. In 1984 10.9% of those aged 65-74 had limitations in performing 1-2 of the essential five ADLs (eating, dressing, bathing, toileting, or transferring). This increased to 21.8% for those 75-84, and 49.8% for those 85 and over. In the latter age group approximately 28% had limitations with 3-5 ADLs (Zedlewski, Barnes, Burt, McBride, & Meyer, 1990, Figure 2.3, p.47). In 1992 the U.S. Bureau of the Census noted that there were substantial differences across 11 national surveys in the estimated size of the elderly population with ADL disabilities, but that similar trends were evident. An example was a study by Harpine, McNeil, and Lamas that found 2% of noninstitutionalized persons under 65 and 9% of those aged 65 to 69 needed personal assistance with 'everyday activities'. That increased to 10.9% for the age group 70 to 74, 18.9% for those 75-79, 23.6 for those 80-84, and over 45% of the 85+ age group (1992a, p.3-12). Those health problems that limit one's ability to prepare a meal or bathe might also limit one's mobility, thus making it difficult, if not impossible, to get out of one's home and to the voting booth. Since over a quarter of the 75 and over age

group have limitations affecting at least one ADL the impact and relevance of disabilities on the voting participation of the very old must be recognized. Poor health is a factor that increases the physical cost of voting, and it is a reality of living to a particular age. But what of the mental effort involved in voting? Is there anything about advanced old age that makes the mental effort involved more costly?

Most authors recognize and uniformly point out that the skills and personal confidence needed to deal with an increasingly bureaucratic society is an issue when discussing voting participation. Those people unfamiliar with accessing information, completing paperwork, reading official documents, waiting, or dealing with authority figures may be excluded from registering, finding a poll, or voting. Piven and Cloward, in Why Americans Don't Vote, argue that voting rights in America have historically been interfered with by the purposeful creation of legalized barriers to obstruct the 'poor and unlettered' from participation, in the form of "voter registration laws, literacy tests, poll taxes, extensive, durational residency requirements, and 'grandfather clauses' to limit race, literacy or property" (1988, p.273). While intentional barriers have not been instituted to prevent the elderly from voting, it is possible that the accepted, traditional procedures have not kept pace with the changing nature of the very old, thus unintentionally effecting participation. At issue here is the utilization of absentee ballots. Common knowledge associates absentee voting with

voters who cannot get to their polling place due to geographical circumstances, such as travelers or members of the armed forces. But voting by absentee ballot has been available to some registered voters, for other reasons, in Missouri since 1985. This author was not aware of this until researching this study, and believes it may not be known by many of the elderly. My personal experience in investigating this issue is revealing. Research at the St. Louis County Public Library Headquarters turned up only one resource book addressing absentee voting, The Voting Assistance Guide '92-'93, which was entirely devoted to servicemen, merchant marines, the Foreign Service, and citizens abroad. It stated that "The absentee voting process is designed to permit citizens who will be away from their local polling places on election day to vote through the mail" (U.S. Department of Defense, 1992, p.8). A search of the pamphlet file found information published by The League of Women Voters. However, even their publication Getting Out the Vote, a how-to pamphlet printed to organize registration drives, motivate voters, and increase voting participation, devoted one page of information regarding absentee voting but did not mention that anyone other than servicemen and citizens away from their polling sites could utilize an absentee ballot. Only upon examination of an accompanying poster was relevant information discovered. In Missouri, absentee ballots are available to absent voters, the disabled, and those absent due to religious reasons. They can get their absentee ballot from the county clerk or election commission either one day before an election

in person, or six days by mail, and the ballot must be returned by the close of the polls on election day. After locating the election commission in the White Pages phone directory it was further learned that a request for an absentee ballot due to disability must be made in writing with an accompanying letter from one's doctor justifying the disability. One lacking a doctor's letter but unable to get to their poll due to immobility, such as the aged, can still use an absentee ballot but then a personal visit by an election commissioner to notarize the ballot is required. Even if one has the personal efficacy, time, and patience to find this information it does not guarantee successful use of the absentee ballot. A recent episode in the 1992 national election demonstrated the precarious efficiency and complexity of voting rules and regulations. Local election commissioners rejected 119 absentee ballots from disabled people in the 68th state representative district of Missouri because they were not notarized nor accompanied by a medical certificate of disability. An attorney appealed this decision, however, arguing that federal law, which prohibits such requirements, overrules state law in a national election. Upon review the Election Board reconsidered, and accepted 24 ballots, which directly influenced the race for state representative. The other ballots remained uncounted because they would not affect the outcome of any race or ballot proposal (Sutin & Bryant, 1992, p.4B). But what about those voters confused or discouraged from voting because of the complex instructions regarding the use of absentee ballots?

Intentional or not, the difficulties in dealing with bureaucracies, accessing information, and using that information to vote may seem very costly to people facing hardships and low motivation, such as the very old. This recent incident supports a point expressed by Wolfinger and Rosenstone and Kim Ezra Schienbaum. More and more, the basic act of participating in the political process by voting requires a well-developed sense of personal efficacy, and the ability and reasons to utilize those skills. In other words, there is a mental cost involved in voting. And to use one voting tool, the absentee ballot, a tool more likely to be utilized by the very old, a great deal of effort is involved.

There is another type of mental cost involved in voting that might be applicable to the very old. Schienbaum theorized that the decision to vote, or not to vote, is a rational one based upon an individual's self-perception of membership within and support of the social and political system. Those who see themselves as beneficiaries of the system symbolically chose to show their support by voting. Those who feel excluded or alienated opt not to vote, again as a symbolic gesture of nonsupport. This theory is actually compatible with other authors, typified by the textbooks of Atchley and Hooyman, who simply present the relation between voting participation and selected sociodemographic characteristics: specifically education, income, race, ethnic identity, and sex. They show that lower turnout does correlate with being less educated, lower paid, nonwhite, and to a lesser degree female;

characteristics generally not associated with success and inclusion in American society. Their lack of participation may be an act of nonsupport, due to a sense of exclusion or alienation from society. But what of an attained characteristic, advanced old age? Opportunities for socialization can lessen after the age of 75. Wolfinger and Rosenstone revealed how a change in marital status, from married to widowed, could affect voting behavior. The death of a spouse, and concurrent loss of a social role, led to a higher probability of voting nonparticipation. But widowhood is only one of many losses the very old will eventually encounter. Friends, siblings, and even children may pass away, or become insignificant in one's life. Careers, and relationships with coworkers, end. These losses, combined with health problems limiting one's mobility and independence, may result in social and physical isolation. Might not the very old at some point feel excluded, or alienated, from society? This is not suggested to reintroduce the disengagement theory. Rather, it is proposed in the context of the formal theory as applied to voting participation. The possible perception by the very old that they are no longer viable members of society might eliminate the rewards derived from participating because they no longer feel a positive association with their social and political system. If this is the case it is important to realize that voting participation is the result of a rational decision, and may change as the factors involved in that decision change. The very old may chose not to vote, as their

reasons to vote lessen while the effort needed to participate (i.e. costs) increase.

Summary of the Existing Literature

The general topic of this paper is the voting behavior of the advanced aged (those over 75 years of age). The particular issue under investigation is the decrease in voting participation of that age group in light of the statistically-established correlation between increased turnout and maturity. The general question asked is why does this occur? The available literature offers two separate, but noncontradictory, explanations. The first, and earliest, explains the decrease as the result of the increasing incidence of 'disability and lack of transportation' experienced by that age group. The second explanation built upon an approach of the earlier studies by applying other sociodemographic variables to voting-turnout-by-age statistics and justifying decreased participation to characteristics other than age, but common to that age group, which are recognized as positively correlated with low participation. These studies did not discount the earlier explanation, however, because a decrease in participation still occurred in the mid-seventies throughout the entire range of any controlling variable, such as education. The newer studies expanded upon but did not contradict the earlier explanation, by either explicitly including or implicitly accepting it. This acceptance of the first explanation disturbed this author. That the advanced aged do not vote because they never have or are not interested, as

presented in the later studies, is acceptable because participation is a matter of individual choice. But if they do not vote because of events or circumstances that limit their ability to participate when they want to then the acceptance of those events or circumstances should be questioned. It became increasingly clear that to truly examine the voting participation of the very old it is necessary to utilize Wolfinger and Rosenstone's application of formal theory: that all behavior, including voting, is the result of an individual's assessment of the costs and benefits to that individual that are involved regarding that particular behavior. Applying that theory to the issue at hand, this author postulates that it is not advanced old age that leads to a decrease in voting by the very old, but an imbalance in the costs involved in voting weighed against the benefits received due to circumstances peculiar to simply living that long. More specifically, a review of the available literature suggests that two occurrences that typically correspond with living into one's late 70's and beyond, the onset of physical disability and the loss of social roles and interpersonal relationships, may make the act of voting more difficult while simultaneously decreasing the benefits of voting by eliminating one's motivation and sense of societal membership and responsibility. If this is so, and at some point the very old chose not to participate because the costs outweigh the benefits, the possibility of easing the costs or reestablishing a sense of social responsibility should be addressed. This study will examine these issues by interviewing

a select number of the very old, who commonly share some of the difficulties inherent to old age, to discover if their individual voting behavior has been affected by disability or an age-specific sense of personal and social isolation.

Chapter II

Method

A Field Study

Fred N. Kerlinger, in Foundations of Behavioral Research, defines field studies as "ex post facto inquiries aimed at discovering the relations and interactions among ...variables in real social structures" (1973, p.405). The issues addressed by this paper require a field study. Before identifying the variables and relations in question it is necessary to examine this form of social research, in order to both justify and understand the limitations involved in this type of study. An ex post facto study starts with the observation of the dependent variable and retrospectively studies independent variables for their possible effects on the dependent variable (Kerlinger, 1973, p.315). The primary criteria distinguishing this type of research is the lack of control, or inability to manipulate, the variables under study. This separates the field study, carried out in a real social setting, from purer, scientific experiments. The variables are different, in that they are categorical attributes, and the subjects studied are in a sense self-selected, according to their possession of those attributes. Since randomization and manipulation of variables are not involved, establishing reliability and 'proving' hypotheses is difficult, if not impossible. But field studies are similar to experiments in that they both systematically pursue relationships and test hypothesis. And in doing so, they share structural and design features. This is done by

specifying hypotheses, or developing a good scientific problem. According to Kerlinger, there are three criteria of a good problem (1973, p.24):

1. It should express a relation between two or more variables.
2. It should be stated clearly in question form.
3. It should imply possibilities of empirical testing.

If these criteria are met, a field study can qualify as a scientific approach to inquiry (p.17). And as long as this approach is the basis, the additional elements of the research design depend upon the issue, "Does the design answer the research questions" (Kerlinger, 1973, p.315)?

Research Design

Research design is the set of theory and procedures for carrying out a study. Regarding design, Charles Backstrom and Gerald Hursh-Cesar make a distinction between research approaches and research methods in their 1981 book, Survey Research. They explain that a research approach determines what kind of information is produced, while a research method is the manner in which that information is collected. The difference is important. They state that, "Any method can be used with any approach, but . . . the purpose for which we do research defines which approach must be used. Each approach places certain known limitations on the information obtained (p.8). One of the most important determinants in selecting a research approach when dealing with human problems is if the information is to be used to describe or explain behavior. Describing behavior tells how

without telling why. To explain behavior means to show the relationships between certain 'causes' and certain 'effects'. The purpose of this study is clearly an attempt to explain human behavior: specifically, do events or circumstances of advanced old age (causes) prevent or prohibit voting participation (effects). But Backstrom and Hursh-Cesar include another factor that must be considered regarding information objectives. This consideration is whether to generalize or not generalize from the persons studied to a larger population. Certain approaches allow this, while others will not. Regarding explanatory research, this is again a matter of control. These authors recognize that explaining what happens in the real world is difficult and requires massive resources, so limit explanatory research approaches with powers to generalize to controlled field experiments, simulation, and physical laboratory experiments. This study's resources are not vast, and the subject matter is impossible to control, so it cannot assume findings that may be generalized to a larger population. But by combining two other explanatory approaches, case studies and focused interviews, worthwhile results may still be achieved. Backstrom and Hursh-Cesar say a case study is a special type of small-group study, one that focuses on the process of change (before, during, and after) that occurs within a group. A focused interview focuses on the sequence of events surrounding a critical incident, exploring the connection between events, attitudes, and actions to explain behavior (1981, p.13). These two strategies can be used to initiate early research and

generate hypotheses, perfectly satisfactory goals for a study this limited in resources.

Choosing a research method depends on what we want to know, the available resources, and how the information desired can best be obtained (Backstrom & Hursh-Cesar, 1981, p.24). For this study, the best and most appropriate method is personal interviews. This becomes evident when carrying out the first step in research design, that being defining exactly the problem to be studied (Backstrom & Hursh-Cesar, 1981, p.24, Kerlinger, 1973, p.17). The basic issue under investigation is the voting participation of the advanced aged, defined here as those 75 years of age and older. More specifically, we want to know if the statistically verified decline in participation of that age group is due to events or circumstances related to attaining that particular age, applying a cost/benefit analysis of human behavior. The dependent variable is thus voting participation, whether an individual in the targeted age group actually voted or did not vote in a recent election. But for this study, that definition is not totally adequate. Using a cost/benefit approach, it must be determined not only if an individual participated, but also if a person wanted to participate but could not because of obstacles making participation too costly in relation to the benefits received. This variable is an unobservable abstract, a thought or feeling, and can only be ascertained through direct questioning. This can be done by phone, mail, or in person. Due to the personal nature of some of the information needed, and recognizing the constraint of

resources available, mail and phone interviews were not considered. Personal interviews were the research method of choice, not only because it was the best way to get the information sought, but because it was the only way. However, that was the easiest decision regarding the research design. A good research problem requires identifying a relationship between variables, and the greatest concern regarding the issue at hand was how to identify and define the independent variables, and then implement them into a useable schedule.

The nature of the study required two dependent variables: (1) the desire to vote and (2) the actual act of voting or not voting. The presence of these variables could be determined through a direct dichotomous question. The independent variables, however, presented a serious, two-fold problem. One of the weaknesses found in previous research and discussions about this subject is the existence of multiple factors considered relevant and the subsequent inability to control or even agree as to their relative importance. Commonly, variables that could be quantitatively measured were utilized, such as education, income, and sex. This study, however, wanted to address factors that were either hard or, possibly, impossible to define and measure. Adhering to a cost/benefit approach, the relevant factors to be examined were age-specific developments that either increased the effort involved in participation or lessened the rewards received by voting. Specifically, three factors were involved: (a) A higher cost to participate - Glenn and Grimes's 'disability and lack of transportation', (b) the

loss of an expressive benefit - social disengagement, or a sense of exclusion from society, based upon Shienbaum's theory of voting as a symbolic act of support, and (c) the loss of an instrumental benefit - Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stoke's analysis of the influence of interpersonal relationships, primarily family, as a motivation to vote. Thus, the major difficulties regarding research design for this study were how to define and investigate such concepts as disability, alienation, and absence of 'interpersonal influence', while controlling such variables as gender, education, income, and marital status.

The primary means of controlling the independent variables was addressed by utilizing a nonprobability, purposive sample. This type of sample selects its respondents by their availability and possession of certain attributes (Backstrom & Hursh-Cesar, 1981, p.36). Although this eliminates the possibility of generalization, that issue had already been decided by the chosen research approach (see p.26). The use of a nonprobability, purposive sample does not interfere with the goals of this study, initiating early research and possibly generating hypotheses. And it is the only workable option, considering the resources available and the number of variables and population involved. The general population discussed up to now has been identified by only one criteria, age, specifically those 75 years and up. But this study is not really interested in all people in that age group. Rather, it concerns a subset of that population that is independent but subject to

limitations corresponding to certain age-specific events or circumstances. Of specific interest were situations in which conditions exist that might increase the effort needed to actively participate in the vote, primarily some degree of disability or restrictions on mobility. Controlling for the other independent variable intrinsic to this study, a sense of alienation due to the loss of influential interpersonal relationships, was not an issue because it was the effect of the existence of this variable on voting behavior that was under investigation. But to examine the essential independent variables, other attributes recognized as factors influencing voting behavior had to be controlled. The primary relevant characteristics identified in earlier studies were gender and socioeconomic status. Recognizing the impact of marital status (as demonstrated by Wolfinger and Rosenstone) it was decided to limit the sample to women without male partners, although not necessarily widows. The question of socioeconomic status was satisfied by the sample population accessible to the author. The author is a caseworker for the Missouri Division of Aging, an agency that provides protective and alternative community and in-home based services to the independent elderly and disabled. Although the agencies services are available to any eligible adult (elderly defined as age 60 or above) the nature of many government-funded services are directed at and utilized by very low-income persons. This is startlingly true regarding the author's load of over 100 cases. Nearly all of my clients could be considered very poor, at or near the means-tested

requirements to qualify for Medicaid. This currently translates to an income under $435 a month, with individual assets of less than $1000, not including a personal residence. Those clients who do not qualify for Medicaid invariably had incomes under $1000 a month, and little assets other than their home. When homes are owned, they are unfortunately old, in disrepair, and of little market value. Using my caseload as a sample base thus satisfied the need to control for socioeconomic status. Other determinants of status, such as occupation and education, were not controlled because of the age and current circumstances of the available sample. Another variable, unrecognized but possibly relevant, that fell under control was geographic location. Ninety percent of my caseload lives within the boundries of the city of St. Louis, and it was decided to limit my sample to city residents to control for possible differences in distance, operations, or accessibility of information and services in different social or political environments.

The use of the author's Division of Aging caseload also provided a means of addressing the problem of defining and operationalizing one of the relevant independent variables, disability. As discussed earlier, the most commonly used tool to measure disability is the existence of assistance needed to perform activities of daily life (ADL's). An assessment of need, based upon the ADL's, is required to receive services from the Division of Aging, so this information regarding prospective respondents was available to the author before the study was initiated. A score of 18 level of care (LOC) points is

considered the minimum assessed rating of assistance needed to warrant nursing home care. Since the impact of disability on the advanced aged's voting behavior is one of the major issues of this study, a rating of 18 LOC points or more was used to validate the presence of disability among the respondents. The other independent variables, however, did not conform to as convenient a means of measurement and definition.

This stage of the research design was very difficult because the key independent variables regarding the rewards of voting are highly abstract. Based upon the formal theory of behavior as explained on p.11, its primary hypothesis is that events and circumstances of advanced old age can influence voting behavior by either increasing the costs involved to actively participate or decreasing the benefits received from that participation. But how does one measure the rewards derived from a 'symbolic' act of support for a political system, a fulfillment of one's civic duty, as presented by Shienbaum? Or the presence of 'interpersonal influence', the need and ultimate reward of living up to a significant others' expectations? These two abstractions are the primary benefits motivating voting participation that may be jeopardized by circumstances encountered by the advanced elderly, In scientific terms both civic duty and interpersonal influence are concepts, abstractions formed by generalizations from particulars (Kerlinger, 1973, p.28). In order to give them an operational definition some phenomenon had to be identified which would represent these concepts, one whose measurable

absence could account for the lost motivation to vote, an intervening variable. This required a broad assumption; that an individuals' self-perceived membership and sense of inclusion in a social and political system is dependent upon the social roles and relationships significant to that person. Subsequently the loss of those significant roles and relationships, an unfortunate but realistic development in advanced old age, could lessen the need or desire to symbolically support said systems by voting. Those same losses would also eliminate the instrumental benefits that may be the motivation to participate. Considering the population involved, family members were chosen as the most likely representatives of the existence of significant social roles and relationships, but the importance of a 'best friend' will also be recognized. The basic premise to be examined recognizes Wolfinger and Rosenstone's research that demonstrated the impact of widowhood on voting behavior, i.e., that the death of a spouse could lessen the likelihood of voting, but this study will expand that idea to examine if the loss or absence of meaningful interaction with all significant others might also influence voting participation. Though this does not directly address the issue of expressive benefits as motivation to participate, it does fit into the intentions of this study if the influence of social roles and relationships on social integration and alienation is acceptable. Considering the scope and resources of this study, this assumption does satisfy the intent of this research.

The Scientific Problem

Having defined the variables, it is now possible to state the scientific problem under investigation. Do two possible circumstances commonly experienced in advanced old age, disability and the loss of social interaction with significant others, effect the voting participation of the advanced elderly by either eliminating the desire to vote or preventing active participation? This problem identifies two independent and two dependent variables, expresses a relation between them, and is in question form. This satisfies two of the criteria of a good scientific problem as defined by Kerlinger (see p.25). The third is that the problem should imply possibilities of empirical testing. The presence of disability can be verified through use of the established assessment of needs for the ADL's. The other variables, however, can only be determined through personal interviews with the respondents. The dependent variables, participation in a recent election or the desire to participate but inability to do so, are dichotomous issues easily obtained through direct questioning. The validity of the answers is dependent upon the respondents, but is reproducible. The fourth variable, meaningful interaction with significant others, is more abstract and much harder to identify. A person may rightfully feel a meaningful and significant relationship exists through a wide range of actual interaction, from direct physical contact to daily phone calls to simply believing another knows of and cares about them. Operationalization of this variable required a more precise definition. Considering

the intent and target population of this study, a means to measure the physical and social isolation experienced by the respondents was needed. Since the absence of a mate is controlled by the sampling procedure the impact of social loss through death of other significant family members, siblings and children, is a primary concern. This can be discovered through direct questioning. If these relations endure, or have been supplanted by extended family or a 'best friend', the degree of isolation can still be measured by investigating the frequency of direct face-to-face interaction. This information could represent social isolation considering the experiential possibilities available to the very old. Physical isolation could be ascertained by a continuous measure of opportunities to leave one's home. These three criteria were thus selected as a means to measure the extent of meaningful social interaction for this study. Their existence could be verified through questioning, and the relation between their absence or presence and voting behavior could be analyzed.

Having stated the problem, recognized the approach, and chosen the method one aspect of the research design warrants discussion. This is the matter of reliability. Since most of the information will be obtained through personal interviews it must be recognized that the responses are subject to contamination due to memory, motivation, and possible misrepresentation through an attempt to satisfy the interviewer or present a 'correct' answer. This eventuality is compounded by the fact that all the interviews are to be administered by

the researcher, who is also subject to subconscious or accidental manipulation of responses. In addition, the researcher is previously known to the respondents, through a social worker/client relationship that may influence a truly objective interview. However, it is that same relationship that makes this study possible. Previous research concerning voting and the elderly has typically accepted disability as a reason not to participate and generalized that characteristics other than advanced age explained nonvoting. But no research could be found that asked the elderly themselves if these assumptions were accurate. This study could do so because an existing caseload solved two design obstacles. Identifying, locating, and especially accessing a targeted sample of the very old can be very difficult. Independent, unmarried, low-income, disabled women over 75 are not typical subjects of social research. Even if located, gaining access to their homes, where the interviews must be conducted, may be hard to attain. This may be decided by a very intangible aspect of research design, trust. This same matter of trust distinguishes this study from previous research regarding the elderly and voting and relates directly to the issue of reliability. Though the familiarity of the interviewer and respondents may introduce the possibility of contaminated results, it also creates a certain comfort level that makes possible an open discussion about sensitive, personal issues. The chance of responses tailored to meet expectations or satisfy a particular image exist in any interview, and the likelihood increases the more sensitive the subject or wary the

respondent. Voting behavior is a value-laden activity. One's family and personal abilities may be sensitive subjects, especially when the death of family members and personal disability are the issues. And this particular targeted sample is academically unsophisticated, so might be uncomfortable in an interview no matter what the subject. Because of these matters the effect of the established relationship between the researcher and respondents might be a benefit rather than a problem with the research design. Though its effect on reliability is unknown, the preexisting relationship is an essential component of the overall research design. It not only solves the problem of access, it is the reason behind this study. Because I work with and know the targeted sample, I felt uncomfortable with the existing literature that analyzed their voting participation through statistics and generalizations. This study grew from the idea that if we want to understand and explain the behavior of people over 75, we should ask people over 75 about that behavior.

The Interview Schedule

The final stage in the research design before conducting the actual interviews was to create a schedule that would provide the information needed to answer the research problem. This schedule had to address the following issues:

1. The dependent variables, defined as actual voting participation or the desire to vote. A primary concern of this study is the implicit acceptance in the existing literature of nonparticipation due to disability and other factors occurring

in advanced old age. This author takes the position that there is a difference between not wanting to vote and not being able to vote.

2. The independent variables. Since disability is controlled through the use of the nonprobability, purposive sample the schedule needed to address the other variable under examination, the loss of motivation to vote because of the absence of expressive and instrumental benefits influencing participation. This is to be measured by examining the correlation between the amount of social interaction with significant others and voting behavior.

3. A third issue that is not actually a variable or a component of the research problem but is a relevant matter concerning the subject matter. This is the absentee ballot, the instrument currently in existence in our political system that is meant to address the situation being studied. This paper wants to examine how effective the absentee ballot is in satisfying its purpose with regards to this population. If the elderly want to vote, but are unable to get to a polling place, does the absentee ballot provide a solution? The author's personal experience suggests it does not.

With these issues in mind the resulting schedule (Appendix B) took form as a combination of open and closed questions. Some of the information could be provided by a closed, dichotomous response. Other information required a continuous measurement, or an open-ended question because the range of responses could not be predetermined. An attempt was made to

account for all possible responses and implement closed questions whenever possible. Questions 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, and 18 were designed to both qualify respondents for the study and identify any unidentified variables that might effect their responses. Number 6 was included to account for and address the existence and subsequent loss of social roles outside of interpersonal relationships, while number 5 covered recent changes in one's current environment. Number 4 directly questioned social and physical isolation, an issue also addressed by questions 9 through 13. These questions also provided information regarding degree of disability, mobility, and sociability. Restrictions on independence were identified in numbers 9 and 10, as well as the existence and identity of a primary caregiver. This identification was necessary to cover the possibility that this position was filled by someone other than the family members and subjectively-defined 'best friend' examined on page 2. Examination of these relationships was limited to existence and actual face-to-face interaction. It would have been valuable to know the strength of these relationships but it was determined there was no way to ascertain consistent and reliable responses regarding such an intangible matter. The remainder of the schedule focused on the respondents voting behavior. Page 3 established the individual's voting history and participation in the most recent national election. Depending upon that information pages 4, 5, and 6 examined details relevant to either voting or not voting and the respondent's knowledge or experience concerning the

absentee ballot. An open-ended question asking why they voted was included to gauge their self-perceived motivation to vote within the cost/benefit model. The author believes the final product was a workable, concise tool that would provide reliable information about the issues under investigation.

Chapter III

Results

My Division of Aging caseload consisted of 27 individuals who qualified for inclusion in this study. They were all noninstitutionalized St. Louis city residents 75 years of age or older, female, with low income, and either widowed, divorced, or separated. They could all be considered disabled by qualifying through need for Medicaid-funded assistance in their homes. Eleven of these people could not be interviewed. Four of these suffered from dementia, two were too confused to give permission, two only spoke Spanish, one was too ill to speak, one had moved to St. Louis in 1992 and had not registered, and one refused. The sixteen who were interviewed ranged in age from 76 to 94 years. The level-of-care points indicating extent of disability extended from the minimum needed to qualify for in-home assistance, 18, to 33. All interviews were conducted in the subject's home during the months of March, April, and May, 1993. A written release of information was obtained after the researcher explained he was completing graduate studies at Lindenwood College and was not conducting the interview in the capacity of an employee of the State of Missouri.

Though 16 interviews is not a large number a surprisingly diverse range of voting experiences emerged considering the controlled similarities of the purposive sample. Before discussing the findings, however, certain aspects of the interviews themselves should be mentioned. The interview schedule did fulfill its intended purpose of collecting relevant

data. However, it was not a perfect tool in either design or operation. Information was collected regarding family members under the assumption that they represented significant relationships to an individual. The schedule did not take into consideration the possibility that these relationships were not positive ones. Situations where the respondent considered the death or loss of contact with a spouse or sibling to be a blessing, or when an adult child was dysfunctional and a detriment to their aged parent's mental and physical health, were discovered. The schedule's layout didn't address or provide space to include these developments, nor the retrospectively obvious matter of where the family members lived. For example, one completed schedule reports the respondent has 4 living siblings, but none visit her. That they all live out of the state of Missouri, and that she has good relationships with them all and they speak regularly on the phone, had to be scribbled between the official questions. Others had siblings residing in a nursing home, an important fact if one is examining social interaction. Even a seemingly simple question such as number 2 required a better design layout than provided. One respondent had been married, widowed, remarried, and then separated with her estranged husband's current status unknown. The primary drawback of the interviews, however, could not have been corrected no matter how the schedule had been designed. Not once did an interview proceed according to a question and answer format. They could all best be described as steered conversations, with the interviewer

trying to get the respondents to discuss the topics under investigation. It often occurred that during the request to interview as soon as the subject of voting was mentioned the respondents launched into a monologue about their voting habits, experiences, and preferences. Many were not reticent to discuss their families, either, and gave detailed accounts of their siblings and childrens lives and deaths. Though the intended information was always eventually covered, I feel it is only fair to report that the means of data collection is not accurately represented by reading the completed interviews.

Of the 16 respondents nine had voted in previous national elections but not in 1992 (Mmes. A, B, D, H, J, M, N, O, and P), one had never voted (Mrs. L), and six had participated this past November (Mmes. C, E, F, G, I, and K). Of those who did vote Mmes. E, G, and I went to a polling site while Mmes. C, F, and K used an absentee ballot. The first two pages of the schedule were designed to investigate the independent variables, and so an examination of this data will reveal if those factors do or do not influence participation.

The existence of primary family members appeared to be a nonfactor regarding voting participation. Question 14 revealed that all of the siblings of Mmes. C, F, I and K were deceased, and Mmes. E and G each had one surviving brother but that brother lived out of town. Though Mmes. C, E, and G had children who were actively involved in their lives, Mrs F never had children, and Mmes K and I's children were deceased. Similar results were obtained from the nonvoters, though a

higher number of them had living relatives. The impact of a change in marital status was interesting because four of the six voters were separated while all of the nonvoters were widows. A possible effect of widowhood upon participation appears only three times among the nine women who once voted but stopped. Mrs. D was widowed in 1964 and reported she last voted in 1968. Mrs. J's husband died in 1970, and she last voted in 1976. The past election was the first time Mrs. O didn't vote, and her husband passed away a year before. A gap of over 10 years between widowhood and last time voted existed in all the other cases. Eight of the nonvoters said their husbands had voted, and the other didn't know. Only Mrs. D mentioned the death of her husband as a factor in her nonparticipation, and this was in regards to a subsequent loss of transportation. As there was no difference between voters and nonvoters regarding familial relations, an individual's abilities and mobility were also not factors. Every respondent required some help with handling either financial affairs or shopping. Mobility as measured by how often one left one's home ranged from never to almost every day in both groups. However, poor health was identified by six of the nine nonvoters as the primary reason why they no longer participated. Mmes. A, J, and M included lack of transportation with health problems, and as mentioned earlier the inability to get to the poll was the reason Mrs. D gave for not voting. That the six who continued to participate did so because they were less disabled than the others, though, is improbable because the voters included Mrs. C, who was at the top of the LOC scale with

33 points, and Mrs K, who was one of two respondents who never left their home, even to see a doctor. What does distinguish the voters as a group from the nonvoters is the amount of social interaction and ability and willingness to socialize as evidenced by a strong nonfamilial relationship with a recognized best friend, as revealed in questions 17 and 18. All six voters said they were visited by or visited others more than once a week. All six could claim a best friend, although Mrs. G named three, and Mrs. F said there were too many to pick one. Only Mmes. A and B of the nine nonvoters had that same combination reflecting socialization. Mmes. J, O, and P identified a best friend, but had little personal interaction with friends or family. The others either could not name a best friend, had infrequent visits, or both. What makes this even more interesting is that all five of the nonvoters who could identify a best friend said they would have voted if they could have done so from home (question 38). At this point it is necessary to discuss an unforeseen aspect regarding voting participation and the very old that was revealed in question 24 in the interviews with the three absentee voters and by question 38 with the nonvoters. This concerns irregular social interaction and relationships available to the very old only during elections, due to the contact and assistence provided by political workers motivated by their own vested interest in voting participation.

All three absentee voters had had their ballot brought directly to their home, which they then completed and handed

back to the person who had delivered it. Mmes. F and C knew this person, probably because they had each served as an election judge or official earlier in their lives, and were familiar with local political organizations. Mrs. K, however, never was politically active, and could only identify the people who had contacted her and delivered her ballot as 'they'. Since home delivery is not a part of the normal operating procedures regarding absentee ballots, it is safe to assume that Mrs. K had been contacted and assisted by someone working for a particular candidate organization. In addition to the absentee voters, Mrs. E was contacted by and ultimately transported to her polling site by a neighbor who is an active member of the Democratic Party. In all, four of the six voter's participation was made possible or in the least made much easier through the efforts of people who were not an integral part of their regular lives. While this is very significant, and was not considered in the research design, it does not interfer with the focus of this study. Though the presence of this unexpected variable surely influenced the participation of four of the voters, this study wanted to examine the desire to vote and the difficulties encountered to do so. This variable actually reinforces the hypotheses and results. Three of the nine nonvoters also reported that they were contacted by the same, or similar, organizations. Two of these, Mmes. A and P, reported that they had had absentee ballots brought to their homes in the past and had expected them again this past year. Mrs. O said she was contacted and told a ballot would be delivered to her but must

have missed connections. As reported on page 39, these were three of the five nonvoting respondents who claimed to have a meaningful relationship with a best friend. One of the others, Mrs. J, was not contacted but knew absentee ballots were available. Because of her poor eyesight, however, she couldn't look up the needed numbers and didn't want to bother anyone else about it. She also explained that her best friend just passed away over the winter, and since she is one of the respondents who has very little contact with friends or family, this may have had a great impact on her recent nonparticipation. The other nonvoter who had a best friend, Mrs. B, said she was never really interested in politics but would vote if she could do so from home (question 38). In fact, only two respondents answered number 38 in the negative. Mmes. H and N stopped voting in the 1970's because they lost trust in politicians or interest in politics in general. Neither have regained interest and, significantly, they were two of the four respondents who did not claim to have a best friend. The relevancy of this type of relationship to voting behavior is further indicated by examining the strength of the relationships, as revealed by questions nine and 10. Earlier it was reported that all the respondents required some assistance with financial affairs, shopping, or both activities. Only three received this help from their identified best friend. All three voted in the last national election. Two by absentee ballots, and one where the best friend provided the needed transportation. This is not meant to imply that an older person needs a best friend to

vote. What it does suggest is that of the factors examined by this research the strongest indicator of a continued interest in voting participation by the very elderly is the ability and opportunity to remain involved in at least one meaningful, personnally-significant social relationship.

The interview data can now be applied to the stated scientific problem under investigation and subjected to cost/benefit analysis. That problem asked if two possible circumstances commonly experienced in advanced old age, disability and the loss of social interaction with significant others, effects the voting participation of the advanced elderly by either eliminating the desire to vote or preventing active participation. Though based on only 15 responses (Mrs. L's is not applicable since she never voted) the research indicates that events and circumstances specific to advanced old age does influence active participation. All 15 had voted sometime in their life, so each must have received some sort of benefit or reward that made that behavior worthwhile. But 9 of the 15 did not vote in 1992. For them the rewards motivating their participation lessened or ceased to exist, or the costs involved in participation increased. An increased cost to participate existed for the entire sample because of age-related disability, which meant extra physical effort was needed to compensate for poor health and transportation difficulties. This clearly effected participation. Five of the six voters needed assistance to cast their ballot. Two needed transportation and three had their ballots brought to their home. Of the

nonvoters, six of the nine directly identified poor health as the reason they did not vote. Two of these had had absentee ballots delivered to their homes in the past, and with similar help probably would have voted again. Disability obviously had a major effect on the voting behavior of 11 of the 15 respondents. It may have been a factor with the other four, but this is unknown, as one drove herself to the poll and the other three did not credit poor health or disabilty with effecting their behavior. One of these three said she no longer voted because of transportation problems due to the death of her husband. The other two reported they had lost interest in politics. But even they did not stop voting until they were over 60, after having participated for over twenty years. For them the rewards of voting must have disappeared, because whatever motivated them earlier obviously had lost its impact. The lack of motivation might be explained by other developments commonly experienced in late life. The loss of meaningful social interaction with significant others was examined to see if this might result in a sense of alienation or exclusion from society. This could eliminate the benefits received from voting, both expressive and instrumental. It was discovered that there is a correlation between voting interest and the quality and amount of socialization. This significant socialization did not involve family members, however, but was reflected by the individual's ability and willingness to maintain meaningful relations with a best friend. The three respondents who gave reasons other than poor health for not

voting did not have such a relationship. Two of them had no interest in voting, even if they could do so from home. Their participation may have reflected a sense of social alienation due to the absence of meaningful social interaction. But benefits still existed for the majority of the respondents, evidenced by their participation or expressed desire to vote even though the costs had increased. A question about why they voted now or in the past drew the typical responses. Duty and the need to elect the best person to do the best for the country were the most common replies. This suggests that the advanced elderly still appreciate the expressive benefits derived from voting. Even for a sample chosen purposely to possess as many characteristics conducive to feeling excluded or alienated from society the rewards of doing one's civic duty or improving the country continue to have appeal. Each respondent was poor, female, very old, and disabled. Yet 13 of the 15 said they would vote if they could, which according to Kim Shienbaum indicates they would still consider a symbolic act of support for their country to be rewarding. However, the comparatively high socialization of those that did vote suggests that the instrumental benefits received by voting are even more important regarding actual participation. Greater rewards for participation were potentially available to the six who voted because they were socially active and involved in meaningful relationships with a significant other. This gave them the extra motivation needed to overcome the costs or reasons not to vote. Even considering that assistance was needed, the added

self-esteem or sense of living up to another's expectations appears to have been the deciding factor between actually voting and simply being willing to vote. This demonstrates the special attention needed to examine or attempt to explain the behavior of the very old. Events and circumstances specific to old age does limit their behavior, and those same events and circumstances may alter the factors that determine how that behavior is manifested. This is true of voting. Special circumstances exist, and it is a mistake to assume that just because a very old person did not vote, he or she did not want to vote.

Chapter IV

Discussion

Previous research addressing the elderly and voting turnout attributes the statistical decline in participation to disability and certain demographic characteristics of the older population. This is accurate and worthwhile information if we are interested in statistics. If we are interested in the elderly as human beings, however, the existing literature is open to criticism for failing to recognize that there may be a difference between voting participation and the desire to vote. Disability can effect their physical ability to participate while social losses eliminate the supports and motivation needed to overcome the increased costs of participation. This study focused on a select sample of the very old population for which this was true. The majority could not leave their homes, yet expressed the desire to vote. Three were able to by using an absentee ballot, but not even one of these three understood the official rules and operations of using this tool. They were contacted by interested parties, who brought the ballot and a notary to their home. Removing this extraordinary assistance, only 3 of 13 interested voters would have participated in the national election of 1992. This was a small sample, and purposively selected to investigate an admittedly small segment of the very old in America today. But in fairness to them, and in recognition of demographic projections for the future, it is hoped that this study fulfilled its intent of initiating early research and generating hypotheses regarding voting

participation and the very old.

Why is the voting participation of the very old worth studying? As mentioned earlier, America is 'graying.' Projections commonly state that 20% of the population will be over the age 65 by 2030, if not earlier. And the voting behavior of this age group is extremely important, as pointed out by the 1990 Current Population Statistics (CPS) compiled by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. They found that persons 65 and over made up the only major age group that had a higher turnout rate in the 1990 Congressional election (60%) than it had a quarter century earlier in the Congressional election of 1966 (56%), and in the same time period had increased as a proportion of all voters with 16% in 1966 compared to 22% in 1990 (p.6). And, for the first time, this same CPS tabulated registration and voting results according to three 'elderly' age-categories: 65 to 74 years old, 75 to 84 years, and 85 years and over. This reflects the recent awareness that the categorical age group 65 and over has been recognized as too broad, and that it is important to distinguish between the 'young' old and the 'old' old. This is particularly true regarding voting, since the decline in participation begins in the mid-seventies. The 'old' old age group, which I refer to as the advanced aged or very old (age 75 years and over) comprised 3.7% of the American population in 1970. In 1980 it was 4.4%. Current projections estimate 6.2% of the population will be 75 or over in the year 2000, and 6.5% by 2010 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991b, Table 18).

Besides increasing in number, the nature of the very old is expected to change. Here there are divergent views, but both indicate the need to know more about this age group. People will live longer, thus spending more time as 'very' old. Recent census figures show the fastest growing age group in Missouri from 1980 to 1990 was that of 85 years of age and over, which increased 33% in that decade (Tighe & Brown, 1991, p.20A). William Lammers points out that life expectancy after attaining age 65 has steadily been increasing. In 1959 remaining life expectancy after age 65 was 14.4 years. In 1970 that figure was 15.2 additional years, and in 1977 it was 16.3. He expects this figure to increase, due to medical advances (such as organ transplants and the elimination of diseases), the increasing research into the aging process, and improved personal healthcare and physical fitness (1983, p.8). A recent forum of social scientists hypothesized that, examining the potential expansion of life spans and relevant limiting factors, life expectancy could actually reach the age 100 by the year 2080 ("Experts Debate," 1992, p.7B). The Institute of Medicine agrees the elderly will be healthier in the future, and better educated, but projects a downside to the increased life expectancy. They expect the percentage of older women to increase, especially very old women, and the accessibility of family supports to weaken. Following trends in household patterns, which find elderly women living alone, they project an increase in demand for services and assistance: "If present trends continue, the US's new older population will contain two

subpopulations: the younger old, most of them healthy, and the older old, many of whom will remain relatively healthy until very advanced old age but more of whom will be chronically ill or disabled" (1986, p.15). If a significant percentage of that population suffer from disabilities or face social limitations, as is likely, factors affecting their abilities and social integration will take on greater significance. Voting participation is one of those activities. If aspects of surviving to advanced age might limit one's ability to vote, both society and the individual are cheated. Society could lose the input of its most experienced, and possibly interested, citizens. The very old themselves may be deprived of what has been called the most basic American right. The Supreme Court has said, about the vote, that "though not regarded as a natural right, but as a privilege conceded by society, according to its will, under certain conditions, nevertheless it is regarded as a fundamental right, because preservative of all rights" (Piven & Cloward, 1988, p.272). And for those very old who do experience age-related difficulties, the loss of the ability to vote can take on added significance. The struggle for basic needs, along with loneliness, idleness, and depression, can absorb and exhaust considerable energy. The reliance on the government for financial security (and for some much more), the fear of total dependency (nursing homes), the intimidation of others (powerlessness=fear), the lost physical vitality, and the indifference or open hostility expressed by others can create a situation where the elderly, according to noted gerontologist

Robert Butler, "must overcome apathy, self-hatred, and fatalism" (1975, p.322). But, according to Butler, "All politics contain therapeutic elements: the opportunity for catharsis, the struggle for control over one's destiny, the advantages of self-confidence and respect, the hope and actuality of gaining one's goals" (1975, p.322). The ability to participate in the political process through voting may be a minor, but meaningful, means for the very old to retain a sense of identity, efficacy, and place in society.

Appendix A

Cross-sectional Studies of Age to Voter Turnout

This research study evolved from the ideas and topics discussed by Norval D. Glenn and Michael Grimes in the article "Aging, Voting, and Political Interest" printed in the August, 1968 issue of American Sociological Review. The first sentence of that article read, "The several cross-sectional studies of age to voter turnout in the United States have reported similar findings: the youngest persons eligible to vote are least likely to do so, middle-aged persons are most likely to vote, and elderly people are more likely to vote than the youngest adults (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960: 493-496; Arneson and Ells, 1950; Campbell and Kahn, 1952; Korchin, 1946; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1968)." (p.563). These same findings still appear in similar studies conducted since 1968. The following are more recent examples which reinforced this author's belief that the issues introduced by Glenn and Grimes warrant further investigation.

TABLE 2

VOTING PARTICIPATION BY AGE, 1980 AND 1982

Statistical Handbook on Aging Americans, edited by F.Schick, 1986 (p.79).

Age	Percent voted 1980	Percent voted 1982
18-20	36	20
21-24	43	28
25-34	55	40
35-44	64	52
45-54	68	60
55-64	71	64
65-74	69	65
75+	58	52

TABLE 3

VOTING PARTICIPATION BY AGE, 1990

Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 453, U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990 (Table 1, P.13).

Age	Percent Reported Voted 1990
18-19	17
20-24	22
25-29	29
30-34	38
35-44	48
45-54	53
55-64	59
65-74	64
75-84	58

TABLE 4

VOTING PARTICIPATION BY AGE, 1976 THROUGH 1988

Statistical Abstract of the U.S., Bureau of the Census, 1991 (No. 450, p.68).

Age	Percent 1976	Percent 1980	Percent 1984	Percent 1988
18-20	38	35	37	33
21-24	46	43	44	38
25-34	55	55	54	48
35-44	63	64	63	61
45-64	69	69	70	68
65+	62	65	68	69

Appendix B

The Interview Schedule

1. When is your birthday, including the year born_____

2. How long have you lived in St. Louis_____

3. How long have you lived in this home_____

4. Do you live alone yes_____ no_____

   (IF NO) Who lives with you (name and relation)_____

5. Did anyone else ever share this home with you yes___ no___

   (IF YES) Who was that_____

   Why did that arrangement end_____

   When did this occur_____

6. Have you ever worked for a wage or salary yes___ no___

   What was your occupation_____

   When did you retire_____

7. What is your source of income_____

8. How much do you receive monthly_____

   (IF NEEDED)under $500_____$501-$700_____over$700_____

9. Does anyone help you with paying bills yes___ no___

   (IF YES) Who: by name, relation, or both_____

10. Does anyone help you with your shopping yes____ no____

    (IF YES) who: by name, relation, or both_____

11. Using the choices offered, how often do you leave your home

    More than once a week_____ Less than once a week_____

    About once a week _____ Do not leave the house_____

12. For what reasons do you leave your home

    Doctor___ shopping___ church___ visiting___ recreation___

13. When you do go out, how do you travel

    Own car___ pub. trans.___ friends___ family___ other___

Interviewer notes_____

I am now going to ask you about your friends and family. I would like to remind you that, although all information is important for this study, you are free to not respond to any question you do not want to answer.

14. How many brothers and sisters do you have, living or deceased

    # bros. living___ deceased___ # sis. living___ deceased___

    (IF ALL DECEASED) When did your last bro. or sis. pass away___

15. Did you have any children, living or deceased, of your own, adopted, or taken in

    # sons living___ deceased___ # dau. living___ deceased___

    (IF ALL DECEASED) When did your last child pass away_____

16. Do you have other family that visits your home yes___ no___

    (IF YES)who visits the most_____

17. Do you have one person you consider your closest friend

    yes___ no___ (IF YES) who is this person_____

18. How often do you see your closest friend

    1 x a week___ more than 1 x a week___ less than 1 x a week___

    Do any of your relatives visit

    more than once a week_____Who_____

    1 x a week_____Who_____

    less than once a week_____Who_____

    Does anyone else visit your home yes___ no___

    Who is this_____

19. Are you: widowed_____ separated_____ never married_____

    (IF WIDOWED)when did your husband pass away_____

    (IF SEPARATED)when did you separate_____

3

We are now going to talk about voting.

Have you ever voted in a presidential election yes___ no___

(IF NO, GO TO PAGE 5, QUESTION 27. IF YES, CONTINUE)

20. When did you first vote in a presidential election _____

(IF HELP NEEDED)

1920 Harding-Cox

1924 Coolidge-Davis

1928 Hoover-Smith

1932 Roosevelt-Hoover

1936 Roosevelt-Landon

1940 Roosevelt-Wilkie

1944 Roosevelt-Dewey

1948 Truman-Dewey

1952 Eisenhower-Stevenson

1956 " - "

1960 Kennedy-Nixon

1964 Johnson-Goldwater

1968 Nixon-Humphrey

1972 Nixon-McGovern

1976 Carter-Ford

1980 Reagan-Carter

1984 Reagan-Mondale

1988 Bush-Dukakis

21. Did you vote in the presidential election of 1992 yes___ no___

(IF NO, GO TO PAGE 6, QUESTION 33. IF YES, CONTINUE)

22. In your own words, why do you vote_____

---

23. How did you cast your ballot go to the poll___ absentee___

24. (IF ABSENTEE) When did you first use an absentee ballot_____

How did you learn about using an absentee ballot_____

---

25. (IF WENT TO POLL) When you voted, did you go to the poll

alone_____ or with someone_____

(IF WITH SOMEONE) Who did you go with_____

how did you get to the poll

own car___ pub. trans.___ friends___ family___ other___

26. (IF WIDOWED OR SEPARATED)did your husband vote yes___ no___

Additional comments by respondent_____

This is the end of the interview. Thank you for your cooperation.

27. Did you ever want to vote, but didn't or couldn't

yes___ (GO TO QUESTION 28) no___ (GO TO QUESTION 29)

28. (IF YES) Were you ever registered yes___ no___

Did you not vote because you

didn't know where to vote_____

didn't know how to vote_____

were in poor health_____

another reason (WHAT)_____

29. (IF NO) Would you say you never voted because

you didn't care_____

you didn't know how_____

you felt your vote didn't matter_____

another reason (WHAT)_____

30. If you could have registered and voted from home, do you think

you would have voted yes___ no___

31. In your own words, why do you think other people vote_____

_____

_____

_____

32. (IF WIDOWED OR SEPARATED) Did your husband vote yes___ no___

Additional comments by respondent_____

_____

This is the end of the interview. Thank you for your cooperation.

33. When did you last vote_____

34. In your own words, why did you vote before (DATE ABOVE)_____

_____

_____

35. Did you not vote since (DATE ABOVE) because you

had lost interest_____

were in poor health_____

had no transportation_____

didn't care for the candidates_____

you felt your vote didn't matter_____

another reason (WHAT)_____

36. Did any specific event or occurence influence your decision not to vote

yes_____ no_____

37. (IF YES)what was it_____

38. If you could have voted from home, would you have voted

yes_____ no_____

39. Are you aware that you can use an absentee ballot

yes_____ no_____

(IF YES) why didn't you use it in the last election_____

_____

40. (IF WIDOWED OR SEPARATED) Did your husband vote yes___ no___

Additional comments by respondent_____

_____

This is the end of the interview. Thank you for your cooperation.

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