

A Dynamic Model of Member Participation in Interest Groups

Thomas T. Holyoke

Department of Political Science
California State University, Fresno
225 East San Ramon, M/S MF19
Fresno, California 93740-8029
1-559-278-7580
tholyoke@csufresno.edu

Forthcoming in
Interest Groups and Advocacy, 2013

I would like to thank the Spencer Foundation, the Agnes and Eugene Meyer Foundation, and the Office of the Provost at California State University, Fresno for funding various parts of this research. Thanks to Colleen Casey, Ben Marquez, and Jim Thurber for helpful comments; all errors are my own. Thanks to Chet Reilly for his research assistance. I would also like to thank the leaders and members of Friends Of Choice in Urban Schools for allowing me to sit in on all of their meetings for so many years, as well as interview them periodically. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, 2008.

Abstract

We know a great deal about how and why interest groups form, why individuals choose to give their time and resources to political organizations, but we know very little about why they stay in these organizations, if, in fact, they tend to. Are participation rates by members constant over time, or do they decline? If the trend is towards decline, why does participation decline and what types of members are more likely to participate less over time? In this paper I use a data set on weekly meetings of members of a charter school advocacy organization to track participation by the entire member population for five years, beginning at the time of the organization's creation. I find that participation does decline over time, but original members participate longer, as do those whose interests are more clearly aligned with the group's positions.

In her 1998 presidential address to the American Political Science Association, Elinor Ostrom argued that collective action remains perhaps the most important field of research in political science (1998). In the years since, scholars have proven themselves up to the challenge of advancing our understanding of the dynamics of group politics. Today, over sixty years after pluralists like David Truman (1951) argued that factions of citizens bound by common interests will mobilize for political action when they perceive their interest to be threatened, we now know that group mobilization is much more complicated and that the default choice of many citizens is *not* to join (Olson 1965). Most subsequent work has thus been on why we often observe exceptions to this default choice, and now we have a fairly solid understanding of when and why individuals, and even organizations and corporations, form or join political interest groups.

We know much less about what happens *after* they join. Do some joiners participate in their group more than others, assuming any participate at all? This is important to discover because evidence of participation would show that interest group advocacy really can serve the representational needs of at least some citizens in the political process. And if members do participate once they join, do they keep on participating as time goes by? In this paper I argue that by and large they do not, that participation normally declines over time but does so at different rates for different members due to variation in member characteristics and contextual circumstances. I test several hypotheses regarding this decline that are drawn from a model of dynamic member participation grounded in prospect theory which assumes people are risk-averse. The data comes from several years of member participation in an interest group lobbying in support of charter school policy in Washington, DC. The results support my claim that member participation declines over time, but some members still participate more than others, and that changes in both political context and group organization make a difference.

Joining and Participating

Collective action research as applied to the mobilization of member-based interest groups (groups with actual members, not just funders) falls into two categories - joining and participating. Why individuals join groups, or form them in the first place (not the same thing), has been studied closely from a couple of perspectives. The older approach regards incentives, the best known work being Olson's (1965). He argued that no rational person would join an interest group if it did not offer valuable but exclusive tangible benefits. If political entrepreneurs and their patron funders could not come up with the resources to provide such material incentives, they would never get a group started (Salisbury 1969; Walker 1983; Cigler and Nownes 1995). Clark and Wilson (1961) argue that people may also join in response to less tangible incentives. Many groups attract members by offering "purposive" incentives, opportunities to express their political passions by participating in coordinated and meaningful political advocacy (see Browne 1976; King and Walker 1992). This is especially true of open-membership, cause-oriented citizen groups (McFarland 1984; Berry 1999), though even many corporate CEOs join closed-membership trade associations with the hope of influencing government policy (Drutman 2012).

The other "joining" literature is grounded in social network theory. If an individual believes that other people in a population defined by a common interest will join an organization promoting that interest, he or she is more likely to join as well (Granovetter 1978). Similarly, the more potential members trust others sharing the same interest, and trust their would-be leaders, the more likely they are to join (Schloz et al. 2008; Siegel 2009). This is why many interest groups depend on their current members to recruit others in their social networks, the "bring-a-friend" approach to group formation and expansion (Schlozman et al. 1995).

The second area of research, member participation in an interest group after they have joined, has received far less attention. Much of what does exist, unsurprisingly, draws on incentive theory. For instance, Hirschman (1970) and Rothenberg (1988) argue that participation is connected to the experiences members have in the group, such as whether they receive the private material benefits group recruiters promised and whether those benefits are really as valuable as members were led to believe. Presumably, though, members attracted primarily by material incentives are relatively passive participants as long as the benefits are provided. They did not join because they felt passionately about the group's political goals and are unlikely to attend chapter meetings or join demonstrations, though this proposition has not been tested.

What about more purposive-driven members, those who join to pursue their political passions? Their experiences, and therefore satisfaction with their organization, would be connected to their participation in its advocacy efforts. Extending Hirschman's and Rothenberg's arguments, members unhappy with how (and if) their group lobbies and what it lobbies for should simply leave, perhaps to join a rival group with a better offer (see Gray and Lowery 1997). Yet when examining the choices of actual members, Cook (1984) found that unhappy members were not leaving. Perhaps, Barakso and Schaffner (2008) argue, because there often is no alternative group to which they can transfer their allegiance (but see Day 1999).

Instead, Franke and Dobson (1985) and Sabatier (1992) found evidence suggesting that something else happens, that purposive-driven members simply participate less. Similarly, in her study of collective action for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, Mansbridge (1984) found that high levels of participation simply could not be sustained over time by even the most passionate activists. Even apart from the frustrations some members had with their more ideologically extreme leaders, and difficulties in achieving the goal of ratification, she describes

a simple loss of enthusiasm. This all suggests that a central focus of research on member participation in interest groups is to learn *why* members become less active in the group over time, assuming that they do. Also, does participation decrease more quickly for some members than others, and what might re-fire their flagging passion for participation?

Member Participation Over Time

Why would members start participating less in organizations championing their political interests? If they were driven purely by rational self-interest, the scholarly assumption for decades (Mansbridge 1990), members would only change their goal-directed behavior if their environment changed, for that would change the incentive to participate. But in politics most people only make boundedly rational decisions (Jones 2001). Their choices are shaped by their *perceptions* of the choice environment around them, and these perceptions change as a result of different *experiences* in that environment. When an opportunity, such as joining an interest group, appears to satisfy their desires, they take it. As they go on to participate in it, their perception regarding the group's value to them, its capacity to satisfy their desires, may change over time from the experience.

Risk-Averse Members

That people really do change their perceptions of their memberships' worth is empirically verified, though not linked to a decline in participation. Moe (1980, p. 217) found evidence in a survey of members that when they first join they tend to over-value their importance to the group's political work. Finkel et al. (1989) then found that individuals engaging in collective action tend to realize after some experience that they are not quite as

essential to the organization's mission as they initially thought. While bounded rationality pioneer Herbert Simon argued that a person's "aspiration level" regarding what they want to achieve changes over time due to experience (1955, p. 111), these findings suggest that what actually changes is a member's *perception of how far he or she is from reaching their aspiration level*. Members want to be important to the group, but experience from participation reveals to them that they are further from satisfying this aspiration than they thought when they joined.

Moe's and Finkel et al.'s empirical findings appear more consistent with a version of bounded rationality called prospect theory developed by Khaneman and Tversky 1979. Prospect theory assumes that people are risk-averse and make choices to minimize the probability of loss as they learn more about the circumstances (the choice environment) they are really in (Quattrone and Tversky 1988). Fanis (2004) explains how this might apply to group participation. Prospect theory, she argues, involves a reference point, a condition against which a person evaluates the likelihood of realizing their desires in the group. This essentially is Simon's aspiration level. Interest group members, at least purposive-driven ones, want to believe they are important to the group's efforts to promote their interests. Feeling important is their reference point. When they first join, members are convinced by recruiters that they are important, that the distance between their real importance and their reference point of feeling important is small (Fanis 2004, p. 366). New members participate because they believe contributing their time and resources is essential to the group's advocacy. Presumably the opposite is also true. If experience shows members that they are not as essential to the group's survival as they initially thought, they re-evaluate the worth of their participation. Because they are risk-averse, members start placing greater value on the time and resources they are losing from participation versus alternative investments.

Applying prospect theory like this makes sense when thinking about how members are recruited. Whether they are convinced by networks of friends, or by newsletters and e-mail “alerts,” purposive-driven people join interest groups because recruiters convinced them that their contributions are crucial to the group’s survival. Even members who are not quite so naïve as to believe that they personally make or break the group still join with a strong sense of personal efficacy, that they are making important contributions to the group’s advocacy. As long as they feel important, they believe it is worth spending time and resources on participation. But, as time goes by, they re-evaluate their real worth given their experiences. They keep asking themselves, “Am I needed? Am I valued? Am I really wanted?” And they probably learn that Olson was right, that unless the group is very small, no one person is essential to its success. So, assuming people are risk-averse about committing time and energy to what they begin to realize is the out-of-reach goal of making a difference in the group, the likelihood of observing experienced members participating over time falls, and probably does so quickly. The risk-averse member becomes more concerned with saving time and resources for handling life’s other problems. Call it disillusionment, a reality check, or just burn-out, it leads to a basic hypothesis: *Disillusion Hypothesis: All group members will, all things being equal, participate increasingly less over time.*

There is also a second hypothesis here. Fanis argued that if members are risk-averse, then the one thing that can interrupt this downward spiral is a genuine threat to their group and, consequently, their individual political (and even material) interest. John Mark Hansen (1985) found that external threats, usually from competing interest groups seeking policy goals detrimental to member interests, increase member participation. He explained this in terms of threats to material benefits, but the application of prospect theory shows that it makes sense for

boundedly rational, risk-averse members as well. A threat means members are suddenly very important as the group defends itself, and even risk averse members are again willing to commit time and resources to participation. Of course that only lasts as long as the threat lasts. So:

External Threat Hypothesis: Members will participate more when they believe that their organization, and the interest it represents, is being threatened.

Desires and Incentives

Arguing that a member's sense of political efficacy vis-a-vis the group declines over time assumes the member was interested in political advocacy to begin with, that this is why he or she joined. But incentive theory holds that people may also join for fundamentally different reasons. Presumably these motivations also shape participation. I develop this argument, as well as several others laid out in later sub-sections, with a diagram in Figure 1 of member participation in an interest group over time.

---- Insert Figure 1 about here ----

Start on the left side of Figure 1. Members desire to join an interest group for different reasons, responding to different incentives the organization offers. Those who desire tangible, material benefits, and are therefore attracted by private material incentives, are likely to remain in the group as long as these benefits are provided and valued. Gaining sufficiently valuable benefits is their reference points, not any desire to be useful to the group. The value these members place on material benefits decreases or increases over time as their personal resources grow or diminish, which is reflected in both the "desire for resources" and "availability of resources" points in Figure 1. Indeed, as I suggested above, purposive-driven members also need to have available resources to participate in the group, and, because they are risk-averse,

value them more as their sense of personal importance diminishes. Olson, however, describes members driven by a desire for material benefits as disconnected from the group's advocacy work, so there is no reason to believe they would be overly active in the group. Their aspiration is to get good returns on their investments. They may participate more if they desire the benefits more and can afford to do so, but for them participation is a means, not an end. Thus I predict differences in participation by initial motivations to join:

Purposive-Driven Member Hypothesis: Members motivated by desires to advance their interests through advocacy will participate more than others, given they have the available resources.

Interests and Sub-Interests

The feedback loop in Figure 1 is the influence of current participation on future participation. It is this experience over time that makes the model dynamic. In addition to realizing that they are not essential, the Disillusion Hypothesis, there are other kinds of negative experiences members might have in the group that makes them feel de-valued and further away from their reference point. One is with group staff, which I discuss later. The other is with other group members. Browne (1990) and Gray and Lowery (1997) argue that interest groups try to expand their memberships over time, often by raiding the memberships of other groups advocating for fairly similar, but not exactly similar, interests. Expanding the membership means expanding the range of interests the group is trying to represent. While material benefit-driven members probably do not care who else is in the group or what they believe, purposive-driven members do. If the new members the organization is recruiting do not care about the same issue or share the same values as those already in the group, then purposive-driven members have a problem.

Bringing in new members with new interests makes it harder for group staff to faithfully represent anyone's interests, and the group begins to suffer from internal strife and bickering (Moe 1980). The more intense the passion and commitment of purposive-driven members, the less tolerant they are of any compromise to their political interests. The group's membership fractures into sub-interests that disagree on just exactly what their leaders ought to be doing and whose interests should be prioritized. This experience also makes it clear to individual members that they are not as important to the group's success as they thought, accelerating the decline already predicted in the Disillusion Hypothesis.

This also suggests a link between prospect theory and social network explanations for joining. Group recruitment, Granovetter (1978) argues, flows through social networks, the speed and likelihood of the mobilization depending on the network's density and cohesion. Individuals are drawn to each other by what is called "frame alignment" (Snow et al. 1986). The more individuals find that they share the same beliefs, values, and perceptions as group leaders, meaning their frames of reference are aligned, the more likely they are to feel that the organization represents them and they join. The tighter the frame alignment among members and with group staff, the greater their sense of importance, of efficacy, shared and reinforced by everyone else in the group, and thus the smaller the perceived distance between the importance-reference point and their real contributions. The members happily participate.

On the flip side, when members are not tightly connected, which tends to happen as memberships grow and communication is done largely by e-mail (Moe 1980), the frames linking members together and with staff become weak, and competing sub-groups form. The result, Heaney and Rojas (2008) show, is that group staff end-up alienating those factions of the membership that do not share the beliefs of which ever sub-group staff are serving at that time.

This further hurts members' sense of importance. Poorer sub-groups of members, less crucial to its resource base, may be especially subject to this dis-enfranchisement (Strolovitch 2007). So:

Sub-Group Hypothesis: Members with a particular interest will participate less than other members if they do not feel their interest is shared by the group's leaders or other members.

Founding Members

One particular sub-group is worth special attention because it may be composed of especially committed members. These are the founding members, those who initially took it on themselves to invest time and resources in to getting the interest group going when there were no material benefits to be had, even if they were helped by the policy entrepreneurs and funding patrons Salisbury (1969) and Walker (1983) consider essential. Thus they are the group's most politically inclined members, who probably pressured their less passionate peers into joining (Olson 1965). Their early political success encouraged others to join at a pace that, for a time, probably grew exponentially, cascading through networks of potential members (Oliver et al. 1985). Founding members may have been inspired by charismatic political entrepreneurs, if not as colorful as Ralph Nader, John Gardner, David Brower, or John Muir, formed the group with high expectations, determined how it functioned, and were crucial to its initial success. In the early days they were sure that their standing in the group matched their reference point. They *were* essential. As more members joined in later years, founding members formed the "activist layer" that Franke and Dobson (1985) argue most interest group memberships have.

Yet even original members may become disillusioned over time, especially when they see new, less committed members join, co-opting the group with new and different ideas. Their experiences, the feedback loop in Figure 1, become negative. Founding members may also find

that the social benefit is lost as the organization becomes too large for regular face-to-face communication (Cigler and Joslyn 2002).¹ Still, their sense of personal importance to the group arguable remains greater than for other purposive-driven members, so while participation by the founding member sub-group will still decline over time, it does so more slowly. So:

Founding Member Hypothesis: Founding group members will participate more than other members, though their participation still declines over time.

Barriers to Participation from Institutionalization

Other unpleasant experiences members may have in the group come from the demands placed on group staff from managing a growing membership. Larger memberships with more sub-groups mean group leaders and staff need firmer top-down structures to operate efficiently. Moe (1980) explains this by invoking Robert Michel's (1950) iron law of oligarchy, which holds that as political parties grow and mature their structures institutionalize, creating barriers between staff and members. Assuming the iron law also applies to interest groups, then even members whose frames are aligned with group staff will participate less later in time because the organization's "institutionalization" creates a sense of alienation that pushes members further from any feeling of importance. At birth most groups are loosely structured entities striving to serve a small number of members. But for two reasons the institutional barrier in Figure 1 slowly, even unintentionally, forms over time as staff struggle to manage more members.

First, managing more members who increasingly divide into competing sub-groups requires more attention be paid to delivering benefits and finding ways to communicate while at the same time managing the flow of information and keeping a lid on costs. It means bureaucratizing the interest group. The size of the staff must grow, and more well-defined, even

rigid, procedures be put in place to manage relations with members, replacing the free-flowing, ad hoc deliberations members enjoyed at the group's birth. Cigler and Nownes (1995), Bosso (1995), and Berry (1999) show this happening even in grassroots-oriented citizen groups.

Second, an interest group's political success places a competing pressure on its staff. The literature on legislative lobbying shows that access and influence are gained when lobbyists make themselves useful to legislators. Lobbyists help legislators understand and respond to the demands of crucial constituencies (Wright 1996), ultimately becoming extensions of legislators' electoral and policy enterprises (Milbrath 1963; Hall and Deardorff 2006). The need to cultivate and maintain these connections, Ainsworth (1997) points out, means legislators can pressure lobbyists to aid them in their pursuit of policy change or status quo protection, even if that is not what lobbyists' members want. So, to be supportive of their legislative patrons, lobbyists must sometimes sacrifice some of the policy gains some or all of their members desire. Then they must somehow sell those sacrifices to their members to keep them in the group (Holyoke 2011).

To cope with this rock-and-a-hard-place situation, group lobbyists may want more top-down, uni-directional flows of communication to "educate" their members and make it difficult for dissent to foment. Moreover, as lobbyists become more integrated into the culture of the capitol and its society, spending most of their time with lawmakers (Kersh 2002), their beliefs and perceptions, even their interests, may change so that their frames of reference become unaligned with members. As this happens, members may start to experience a gulf opening between themselves and the staff. Their input and participation are valued less, thus their sense of distance from their importance-reference point grows. They could fire the staff, as Costain (1981) reported happened to the National Organization for Women in 1973 when members felt

staff had grown too cozy with lawmakers and made too many compromises. More likely participation will just decline as members become increasingly alienated from their group.

Institutionalization Hypothesis: As organizations grow and mature, their staff will put more distance between themselves and members which will lead to a decline in member participation.

Research Design

Ainsworth (2000) notes that most studies of interest group collective action run into the ecological inference problem by examining organizational structures and incentives, and then attributing these to individual member motivations. I avoid this by studying group members directly, something rarely done in interest group research. The cost of this approach is that I only focus on members of a single group, but I do it for several years starting from the group's birth. This "deep" approach allows me to measure many variables for every single group member, making it possible to observe subtle changes in member behavior over time. So while I sacrifice generalizability, I gain the ability to test hypotheses about the behavior of members by actually studying them in fine detail. I do not have to infer individual behavior from data provided by group staff about their members, which is often the case in collective action studies.

The interest group is Friends of Choice in Urban Schools, or FOCUS, created in late 1998 to lobby on behalf of charter schools in the District of Columbia. In 1996 congressional Republicans, recently come to power, suspended the D.C. government amidst a major financial crisis and imposed direct control. This gave Republicans an opportunity to test innovative new policies advocated by conservatives, such as choice in education. Spirited resistance from Democrats and District public officials made it impossible to enact a wide-spread voucher program, so Republicans instead opted for charter schooling (Henig et al. 2004).

Charter schools are public–private hybrids that receive public funding on a per-pupil basis from local and/or state governments, but are free from most laws regarding management and pedagogy, including curriculum (Hassel 1999). This exemption sparked bitter opposition from public school system officials and teachers unions worried about losing resources and political influence to rivals. Resistance also came from public officials who secured their electoral bases by targeting largess and services towards schools in key constituencies, often the districts where they had begun their careers in parent-teacher associations (Henig et al. 2001).

Such a hostile environment pushed charter schools to mobilize in order to defend themselves in the political arena (Holyoke et al. 2007). The leaders of DC’s first charter schools, many of whom were new to DC, realized that they had neither the time nor the experience to organize this defense. They received help from several policy entrepreneurs who desired to midwife a strong and healthy choice-in-education policy that could be a model for the nation (Lacireno-Paquet and Holyoke 2007). Together they formed FOCUS. In 1999, the year FOCUS began convening (mostly) biweekly meetings, there were 25 charter schools in operation. By the time my field work ended in 2003, this number had grown to 45. In 2012 there were 53 charter schools educating 41% of the District’s K-12 students. All are FOCUS members, though some rarely attended the meetings.

To assess its members’ needs and develop strategy, FOCUS always invited all member charter schools to its meetings.² FOCUS staff allowed me to sit in on these and I attended all 105 meetings from the very first in January of 1999 until June of 2003, although in that final year meetings ceased to occur on a regular basis and I do not include them here. “Everyone is simply too busy now” FOCUS’s executive director remarked to me when I asked about it, which suggests the emergence of the very dynamic pattern of declining participation I hypothesize in

this paper. Regular newsletter, blast faxes, and e-mail listserves replaced face-to-face meetings so that by 2003 members rarely met with FOCUS staff or with each other.

Most of the data used in the analysis below comes from three sources. Information regarding each charter school comes from public records, while other data comes from a survey of the schools (see Brown 2004). The rest is from my observations of who attended these meetings and the notes I took regarding what was discussed. While it is atypical for most interest groups to have biweekly meetings because of distance, this approach provides a unique insider look at the operations of a political advocacy organization over time. Participation comes from the names of schools I wrote down as attending, verified by FOCUS sign-in sheets I was given afterwards. Every school attended at least one meeting, though four attended no more than one.

My notes contain information regarding the issues discussed, as well as who raised an issue and how others reacted to it. These were coded in 2008 by me and my research assistant and reveal something about FOCUS's internal dynamics. For instance, we classified 87% of all meetings as amiable discussions among school leaders and FOCUS staff, while only 12% were argumentative. Politics was discussed at 49% of meetings, as opposed to pedagogy (11%) and internal school administration (39%). More specifically, problems with oversight agencies consumed 30% of all discussion, with public money for schools coming in at 23%. Surprisingly, actual lobbying strategy was only discussed 8% of the time. Policy was discussed among members, but execution (lobbying) was delegated to FOCUS's full-time staff.

Analysis and Discussion

Initial Analysis

The very first thing to look at is whether my basic expectation, that participation by FOCUS members declined over time, the Disillusion Hypothesis, is supported. In Figure 2 I graph the percent of all charter schools that could have attended each meeting that actually did. That is, the horizontal axis shows 101 meetings arranged chronologically while the vertical axis is the percent of charter schools *existing at that time* whose leaders attended. Attendance is erratic, to say the least. Only at 10 meetings did over 50% of school leaders show up, yet over time there is a clear trend downwards as seen in the curved line (a polynomial specification).

---- Insert Figure 2 about here ----

Attendance at meetings is not the only conceivable measure of participation. Researchers might attempt to identify the frequency with which school leaders spoke at each meeting, or other activities such as contacting lawmakers or raising money for the group. Unfortunately, while I originally tried to mark down exactly which school leader spoke at each meeting, this became impossible when discussions became fast and free-flowing. I do not believe any fundraising for FOCUS was done by any school, and while I have survey data on school contacts with government officials (see below), I cannot distinguish between contact at the group's request (which is participation) and contact the school leader did on his or her own (which is not, and was often contrary to the group's goals). In 2000 I did ask the group's executive director and another staff member for their assessments of how active each school was in the group, coded 1 for "not active," 2 for "active," and 3 for "very active." These measures correlate with meeting attendance at $r = 0.40$ and $r = 0.45$, which, given these measurers' very rough nature, I believe is a good indicator that meeting attendance is a valid participation measure.

The Purposive-Driven Member Hypothesis predicts that the more political members, those dedicated to promoting charter schooling, participate more than others and their participation declines less rapidly. To see if this is true I must identify the purposive-driven school leaders. A good indicator is the extent to which a leader was personally lobbying government officials (either independently or at the group's behest). In 2002 every school was surveyed and asked how frequently they contacted Congress, the DC school superintendent, the mayor's office, and the city council (coded 1 for once a year contact if at all, 2 for monthly, and 3 for weekly).³ I average these rates of contact for a rough measure of purposive-driven political activism. In Figure 3 I graph the percentage of meetings activist schools attended (solid curve) versus all of the others (dashed curve), again using the polynomial specification. While I find the same downward trend as in Figure 2, as predicted by the Purposive-Driven Hypothesis it is markedly less steep a decline for the activist schools.

---- Insert Figure 3 about here ----

The Founding Member Hypothesis predicts that original members will also participate more than others, even if they also decline in attendance over time. Interestingly, the purposive-driven schools in Figure 3 are all older, two of the thirteen being 8 years old in 2003, six being 7 years old, and five being 6 years old, though six year schools came into being as FOCUS was being established so they are not considered founding members. Thus it is not surprising that I find a moderate correlation between founding members and the activist members at $r = 0.45$. In Figure 4 I graph the curves of the percentage of possible meetings attended by age cohorts. The first cohort is schools age 7 and 8, then 5 and 6, and then 4 or younger. Interestingly, while founding members do participate more than the other schools, their rate of decline in later years is a little steeper than for the late-comers. There is actually something of a convergence at a low

level of participation at the end of the fourth year. So this hypothesis is supported, but a little qualified. Everyone appears to become equally disillusioned with the group.

---- Insert Figure 4 about here ----

Multivariate Model Set-Up

To test the independent effects of these and the other hypotheses, especially to see if the overall decline in participation in Figure 2 is really independent of school-specific or environmental factors, I estimate a multivariate model. I arrange the data to create a cross-sectional time-series data set with a binary dependent variable coded 1 if a charter school's leader chose to attend each meeting (mode=0). However, while meetings took place every couple of weeks more or less consistently from 1999 to 2002, by 2003 they were sporadic, and because the passage of time is so inconsistent, I drop 2003 meetings from the data set. Also, several schools came into existence between 1999 and 2002. Since it is not clear how to handle their entry into the data set, I drop them as well. So it is schools 5 to 8 years old that are included. Younger schools participated a bit less than older schools, so removing them may introduce some bias towards more participation in the data, but that arguably bolsters my claims when I find declines in participation. Finally, of the remaining 25 schools, two never came to meetings in this time frame and were dropped. Thus I have 23 schools and 101 meetings, so $N = 2,323$.

Beck, Katz, and Tucker (1998) argue that a serious problem with cross-sectional time-series models with binary dependent variables is that most analysts never account for the passage of time. They just estimate their models as if time was irrelevant. Yet rather than add dummy variables to control for each time period, as they do, I include an explicit time variable. The Disillusion Hypothesis predicts that members will gradually participate less because they

become less interested in the group as they feel less important. They will refocus their resources on other activities. In interviews I did with school leaders, several expressed frustration with FOCUS, wondering if the group's staff really listened to them at meetings and felt that the organization would do just fine without their school's participation, even though they had once been enthusiastic about having an advocacy group. Thus the Disillusion Hypothesis is captured by the passage of time. I operationalize this with a count variable of the number of meetings held since FOCUS's first meeting in January of 1999 (mean=51, s.d.=29) so that a longer time since the first meeting should exhibit a negative effect on the likelihood of attending.

The External Threat Hypothesis, that threats encourage school leaders to be more active in the organization, was measured with a binary variable coded 1 if a threat from an increase in oversight from government regulatory agencies, or an attempt by district politicians and their interest group allies to shut charters down, was discussed at the previous meeting (mode=0). Especially in 2000 and 2001 this was a big concern as district education officials were still not reconciled to having charter schools in DC and, the charters believed, were actively trying to starve the movement of money and building space. Since discussions of threats at previous meetings should lead to more subsequent participation, this indicator is lagged by one meeting.

For the Founding Member Hypothesis I use the dummy variable created for Figure 4, schools 7 and 8 years old being original members (mode=1). Since the founding member variable correlates highly with the purposive-driven school dummy, I did not include the latter in the multivariate model. I did, however, re-run the multivariate model without founding members and with the purposive-driven measure (mean=1.43, s.d.=0.40). The latter was interacted with a binary indicator of whether the school was in debt (see below) because the Purposive-Driven Member Hypothesis conditioned participation on available resources (as in Figure 1). I found

that the independent purposive member variable was positive and significant ($p < 0.05$) while the interactive term was negative and significant ($p < 0.01$) as this hypothesis predicts.

Membership sub-groups, or groups whose interests are distinctly different from other members, can manifest along several different dimensions. One dimension regards local pride, in this case District resident resentment of Congress's micro-managing of DC. Since 1973 the District had been allowed to govern itself as an autonomous territory, but in 1996 congressional Republicans suspended the in-debt and allegedly corrupt DC government, which included severe limits on the authority of the anti-school choice Board of Education. While many DC educators were eager to open charter schools, they nonetheless deeply resented this take over. The feeling, however, was not really understood by the other education entrepreneurs who moved to Washington to open charter schools. FOCUS staff in particular saw the Board as an enemy. When staff and other members ridiculed the Board at meetings, many long time DC school leaders reacted angrily. Thus one sub-group is schools whose leaders lived in DC prior to opening a charter, as determined in the surveys.⁴ They were coded 1 (mode=0). I coded another binary variable 1 if the Board of Education was "bashed" by staff or other schools at the previous meeting (mode=0). These are multiplied together to create an interactive term which should be negative, indicating that local schools felt insulted at the last meeting and thus less interested in participating in the currently observed meeting.

A second sub-group was defined along the lines of operational need rather than pride. While some schools were fortunate to secure buildings in which they could operate early on, others were not so lucky and were teaching in converted warehouses, storefronts, and office space designed for other purposes. Thus availability of facilities, ideally an old school building, was a frequently discussed topic, but it only concerned those schools needing one. From the

surveys I learned which schools needed proper facilities, coding a dummy 1 if they did (mode=1). I coded another dummy 1 if available school buildings (that the DC mayor controlled and sometimes made available) were discussed at the previous meeting, expecting that the school's leader would be motivated to attend the next meeting if he or she needed a building (mode=0). This is also an interactive variable, but this time I expect a positive effect.⁵

Finally, as FOCUS grew over time, the Institutionalization Hypothesis predicts that group staff will develop more rigid, rule-bound procedures to manage the membership which, as a byproduct, makes members less inclined to come to meetings. I found in the meeting notes that school leaders only raised issues to discuss 17% of the time, while staff did so 68% of the time.⁶ More importantly, agenda control by leaders increased over time, for they raised issues only 57% of the time in the first ten meetings, but did so 94% of the time in the last 10. Furthermore, while group leaders proposed solutions to issue problems in 79% of meetings, they did so 100% of the time in the last twenty. While schools generally agreed with their leaders on solutions 80% of the time after some discussion, the evidence here suggests that leaders were exerting greater control over FOCUS's agenda. I cannot use organization size in terms of the number of members as it correlates with other variables, and FOCUS budget data is incomplete. Instead I use FOCUS staff, which grew inconsistently from 1999 to 2002 (mean=1.83, s.d.=0.42). It started at 1.5 staff members in 1999, grew to 2 in 2000, fell back to 1.5 in 2001, and then grew again to 2 and then 2.5 in 2002. This variable should negatively influence member participation.

I also included four control variables. Figure 1 indicates that a school's available resources should matter to all members. Since all charter schools are charitable nonprofits, I obtained data on their financial conditions from the GuideStar data base for 2002. I coded a dummy variable 1 if a charter school had available resources and 0 if it was in debt (mode=0).

Unsurprisingly, it is positive and significant in the model. Barakso and Schaffner (2008) argue that members might participate more if they have no alternative group to join, thus finding it necessary to do the best they can with the group they have. There was another charter school organization in DC, the Charter School Cooperative, but it was not an advocate so much as a technical support group. Still, some school leaders might have seen it as an alternative so I control for membership in it. I asked in the surveys if each school was a member and coded a dummy 1 if it was (mode=0). It does not turn out to be significant. Finally, schools serving predominantly African-American or overly poor neighborhoods might be systematically different than other schools, so I included a dummy coded 1 if the 2000 census tract for that school was two-thirds African-American (from Census Bureau data) (mode=1). I also included the percent of families under the poverty line in 2000 from census data (mean=20.77, s.d.=15.40). These are not statistically significant in the model.

Multivariate Model Analysis

The model is estimated using the random-effects probit technique that accounts for observations on the same charter school, all twenty-three of them, over 101 different points in time.⁷ The results are in Table 1. For the most part my hypotheses are confirmed, but not all. The Disillusion Hypothesis is confirmed, the passage of time variable being statistically significant and negative. All things being equal, as time went by charter school leaders became less interested in participating in FOCUS, with Figure 2 showing the rate of decline increasing over time. This does not appear to be due to discontent with group staff, or discomfort with other members, because those factors were controlled for. Members simply participate less in their interest group as time goes by. Yet if there are threats from outside the group, such as

threats from the District government, member participation increased to help defend their common interests through the group, as shown in the positive and significant result for the External Threat Hypothesis. The Original Member Hypothesis was also confirmed, suggesting that charter school leaders who helped create FOCUS in the first place were more likely to keep on participating from meeting to meeting, though Figure 3 showed their rate of decline to be steeper than for younger members who were already participating less. The Institutionalization Hypothesis, operationalized here by staff increases, was also confirmed with a significant but negative estimate of the effect of staff increases on the participation variable.

---- Insert Table 1 about here ----

The result for sub-groups was not what I predicted. Whether a charter school needed a new building, and whether that topic was discussed in group meetings, had no discernible effect on participation. Nor did the components of the interactive term (which are indented in Table 1 under the multiplicative term) prove statistically significant. There was, however, a sub-group effect for school leaders with local roots who heard FOCUS staff and other schools bash their government, but they became more active in the group rather than less. This *is* a sub-group participation effect, but one where unhappy members perhaps used “voice,” as Hirschman (1970) calls it, to change the tenor of their interest group by attending more meetings rather than disassociating themselves from it. This is one of the more interesting findings for it suggests that when they are insulted, group members might actually stand-up for themselves rather than simply leave. A group’s ability to represent its members is probably better served by such assertiveness.

Conclusion

There are limits to what can be learned from a single case study. Still, if any interest group should be able to resist a decline in member participation, it is FOCUS. It was unusually easy for its members to participate because they all lived and worked fairly close together in the District, and yet participation *still* declined. Even the most politically passionate members burned-out. So too did the founding members, those who once felt it critically important to start the interest group. In most other interest groups, participation probably starts at a lower level and declines faster. Most national interest groups, after all, cannot ever have their members meet on a regular basis. Usually it is only at a single national convention, and even that most likely only attracts a fraction of the membership, even when it is held in Las Vegas. A fruitful area of future research would be on participation in other local level interest groups where participation is probably as easy as it was with FOCUS. As Alexis de Tocqueville found in his studies of the Antebellum-era United States, Americans are often most comfortable participating in groups serving their immediately communities. They just appear to become frustrated with, or at least lose interest in, their local political organizations after a while.

There is admittedly something not entirely satisfying about the Disillusion Hypothesis, even with it grounded in prospect theory. Why would some members join with an inflated sense of their own importance? Is it because group recruiters and their propaganda told them so, or do new members just want to believe it? I have not answered that question, but it needs to be answered. And is a member's loss of belief in their personal worth to the group, the growing distance from their reference point, real, or do group staff still consider them as important as the day they joined? Is their decline in importance real or just in their heads? I have not answered that question either, though that research might be more in the realm of psychology. It may also

be useful to explore collective action and participation from a Bayesian perspective, members joining with poorly-informed expectations because they are boundedly rational (their “priors”), but re-evaluating and updating their expectations of what they may gain from their interest group based on what they learn from their experiences (see Western and Jackman 1994; Gill 2002).

What this work suggests about interest groups is that nothing lasts forever. Organizations change as they grow and age, sliding away from the heady early days when members and leaders are closer together and share political passions. Leaders start to find that success makes it necessary to integrate their organization into the political system and accommodate the needs of principles other than their members. Members feel this growing division between themselves and their leaders and lose heart. External threats temporarily boost member passions, partly because threats really mean that members are more important, but it is only a temporary boost in feeling importance and participation. Fracturing into sub-interests hurts the group even more as even the best intentioned group staff must hurt some portion of their membership to please others. Where it becomes an issue of serious concern is when we consider the role interest groups play in representative politics, especially since they are increasingly being seen as a more effective means of participation than voting and parties. But how good can this representation be when members begin to participate less and group leaders find (or create) a gulf between them?

Figure 1: Diagram of Interest Group Member Participation and Experience

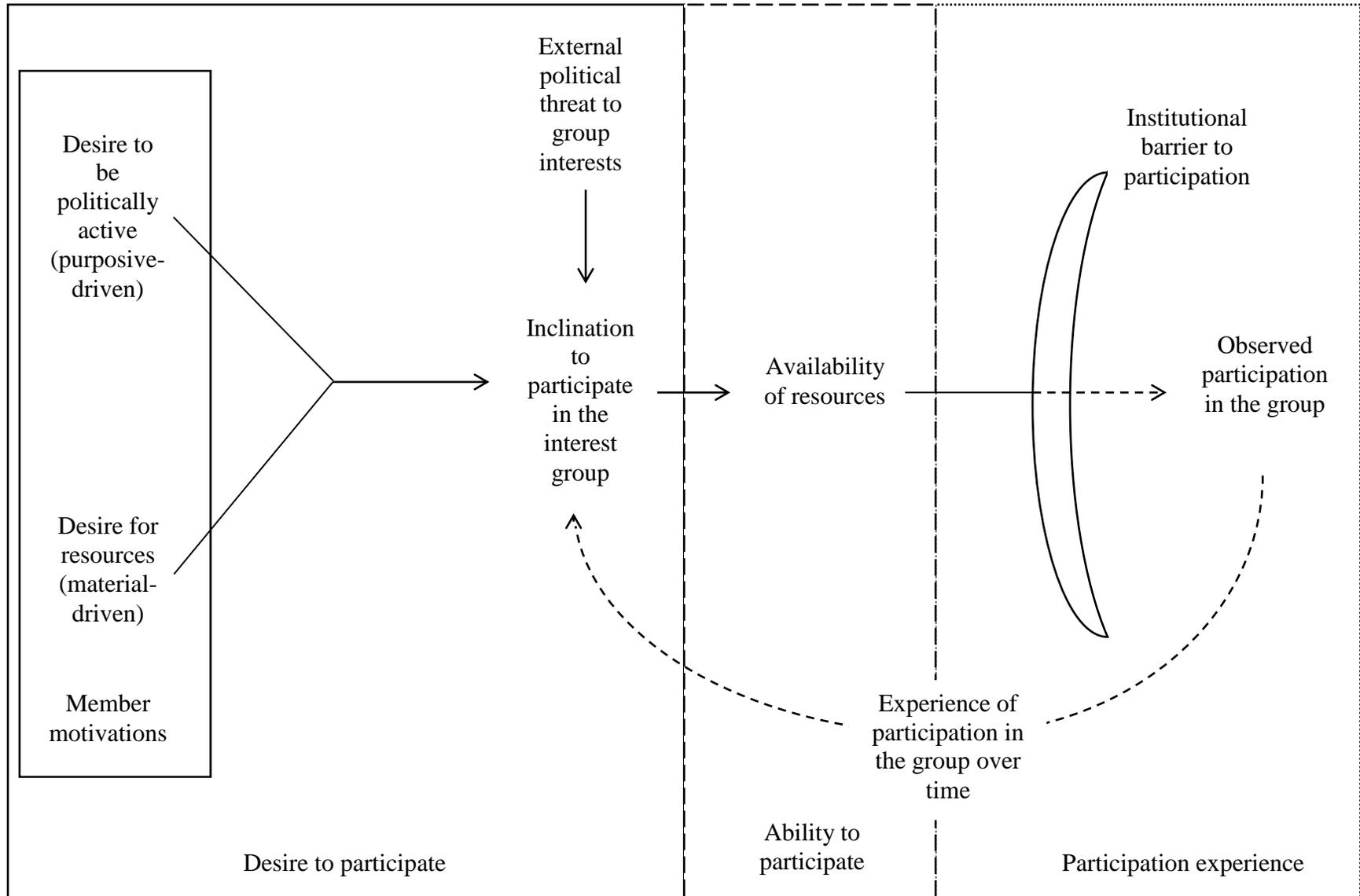


Figure 2: Percentage of Charter Schools Attending FOCUS Meetings

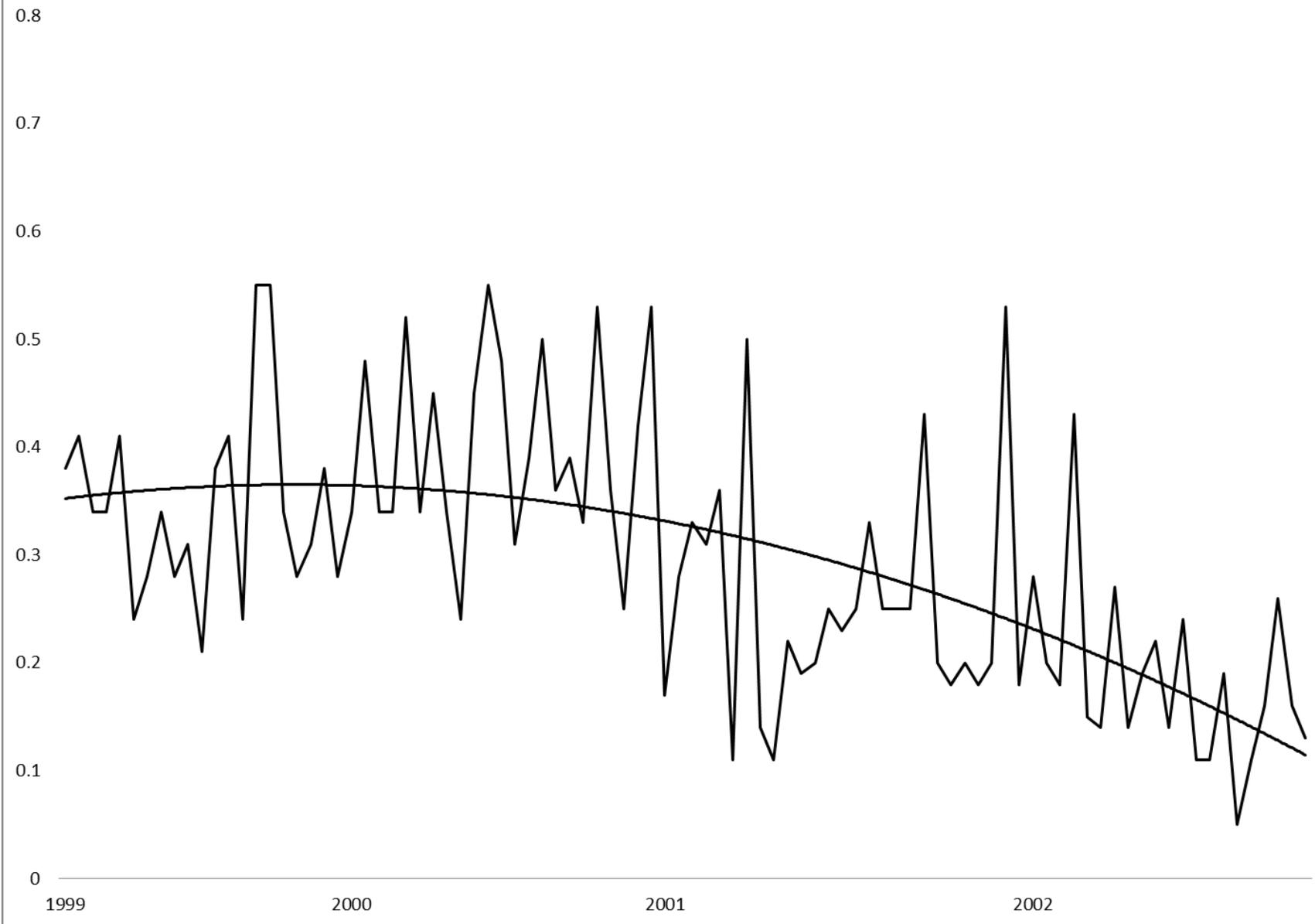


Figure 3: Meeting Attendance by Purposive and Non-Purposive Charter School Leaders

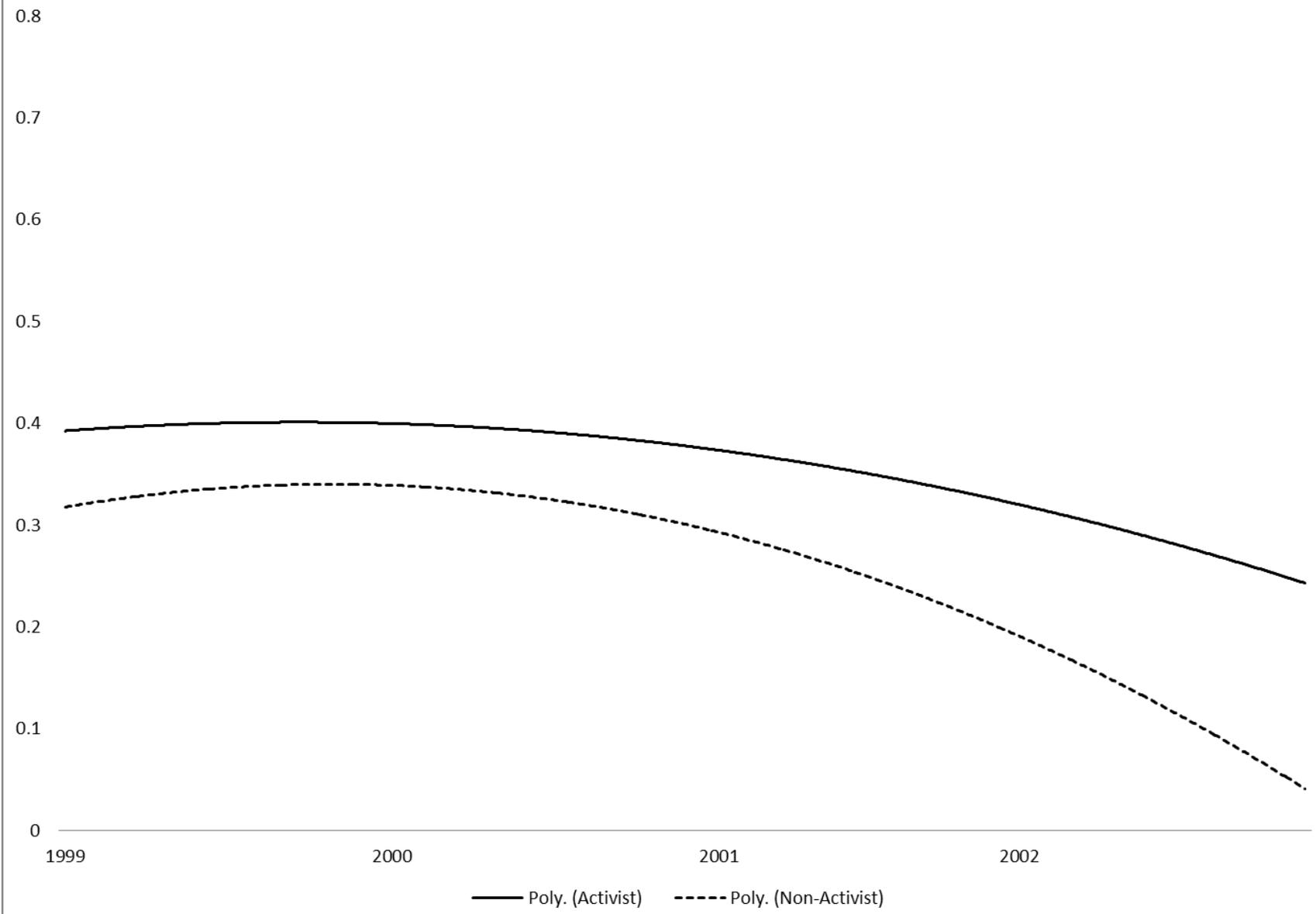


Figure 4: Percentage of Meetings Attended by Age Cohorts of Charter Schools

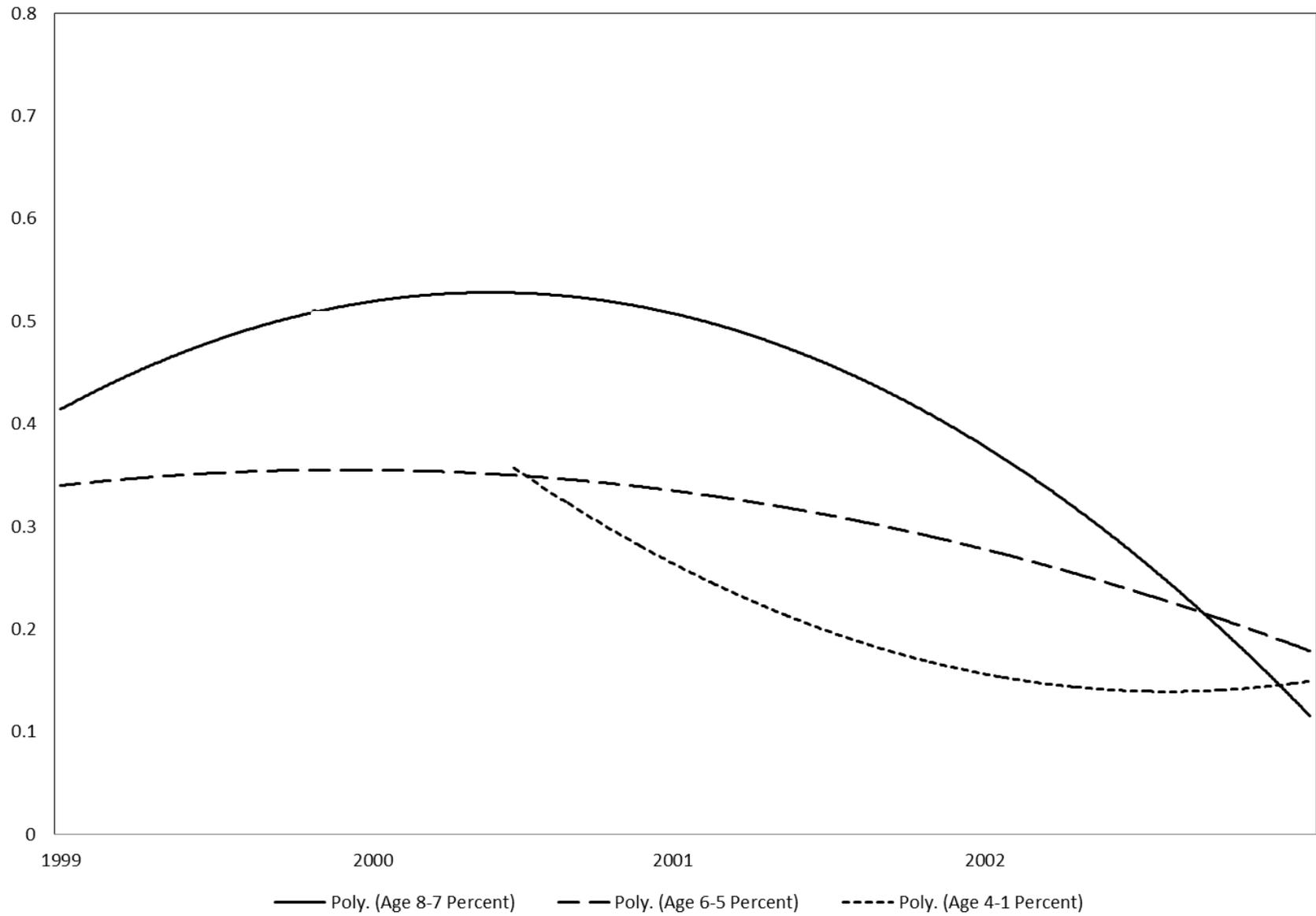


Table 1: Estimates of Charter School Participation in FOCUS (ML estimate and standard error)

Explanatory Variable	ML Estimate
Passage of time (Disillusion Hypothesis)	-0.01*** (0.01)
A threat to charter schools was discussed (lagged term) (External Threat Hypothesis)	0.20* (0.09)
Number of FOCUS staff (Institutionalization Hypothesis)	-0.27** (0.10)
Charter school is an original member of FOCUS (Original Member Hypothesis)	0.50** (0.18)
A local charter school hears insults about the Board of Education at prior meeting (Sub-Group Hypothesis)	0.29* (0.14)
Charter school is local	-0.51** (.18)
Board of Education was insulted at the prior meeting (lagged term)	-0.20 (0.12)
Charter school needs a building and that was discussed at the prior meeting (Sub-Group Hypothesis)	-0.07 (0.08)
The charter school needs a building	0.01 (0.09)
Available buildings were discussed at the prior meeting (lagged term)	-0.12 (0.06)
Charter school is in debt	0.21** (0.08)
Charter school is located in an African-American Neighborhood	0.63*** (0.20)
Charter school is a member of Charter School Cooperative	0.28 (0.18)
Charter school's neighborhood is below the poverty line	0.02* (0.01)

Constant	-0.72*
	(0.37)
Probability that $\rho \neq 0$ (significant panel-level variance)	< 0.005
Wald χ^2	98.91***
<i>N</i>	2,323

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.005$

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¹ This is also similar to the solidary incentive that Clark and Wilson argue also attracts some people to interest groups, opportunities to meet and socialize with people like themselves. However, this is not really an incentive offered by most political groups, and even when it arguably exists it is very hard to distinguish from the purposive-incentive.

² Although the meetings were normally biweekly for the first few years, sometimes meetings would be cancelled if they fell too close to Christmas or school exam schedules. So while the meetings were typically biweekly, they did happen absolutely every two weeks.

³ The survey question read "Please indicate how frequently someone from your school actively initiates contact with the following people or institutions in order to inform them of interests and concerns regarding government policies or their implementation."

⁴ The survey question read "Were [the school's] founders primarily longstanding members of the local community, or were they relative newcomers?"

⁵ Other sub-group variables were tried, such as schools serving primarily African-American neighborhoods (schools in African-American neighborhoods multiplied by a survey variable indicating whether student recruitment was local or District-wide), but it produced too much collinearity with existing variables and was not used.

⁶ In the remaining 14% of cases issues were raised by guests.

⁷ Specifically, I used STATA's "xtprobit" command.