



Introduction

People growing up and living in different places experience life differently. A person living in New York City encounters unique events when compared with another person spending her days in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Even places that are geographically close, such as Washington, D.C., and Harrisonburg, Virginia, offer very different lifestyles for residents. Places within states can also be very dissimilar.

My husband and I both grew up in the state of Georgia, but he spent his formative years in rural middle Georgia, while I grew up in a suburb that was increasingly wrapped in the metropolitan sprawl of Atlanta. As a young person, my husband was very interested in local politics, as he was familiar with the candidates and public servants, even knowing some of them personally. By contrast, I had very little interest in local politics growing up in Lawrenceville, Georgia. This place, my hometown, was much larger (and growing fast). It was difficult to know candidates personally or even keep up with who was running and with what party they were aligned. As a consequence, my earlier political interests developed much differently than my husband's and with more of a national focus. The point is that we experienced politics differently on account of the distinctive characteristics of our hometowns, our places.

Differing contexts produce different socialization processes and thus varying political attitudes and behaviors (Gimpel, Lay, and Schuknecht

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2003). Communities of all shapes and sizes socialize young (and older) citizens into the political attitudes and behaviors that influence local and national politics, influencing who is mobilized, for instance, and who participates, who is elected, and what becomes law. We typically think of political socialization as older residents passing on what they consider to be the proper ways to think about, and behave in, political society to younger generations. While young adulthood is certainly the pivotal period of political socialization, political learning occurs throughout the lifespan (Beck and Jennings 1982; Niemi and Hepburn 1995).

Older adults may learn about politics from their peers as well as from younger people living in their communities. This is particularly evident when older adults live in places with unique age demographics. In communities with extensive numbers of older adults (or younger adults), older residents have the opportunity to experience politics differently than their peers living in places that lack the same community context.

This book explores the growing number of aged communities in the United States and what their lopsided age demographics mean for senior citizens' political behavior into the twenty-first century. Each chapter builds on a body of work that seeks to understand how different social environments—for this book, different representations of age groups within a community—produce different political attitudes and behaviors. The *aged context*,¹ as I refer to it, is an understudied but increasingly important social context. This is a community context in which elderly citizens predominate in the local population. Because communities differ in their age distributions, there are social and political implications for the residents as the mix of younger and older people varies.

The aged context is particularly relevant for American politics and policymaking in the twenty-first century, given the growing senior population and the now ongoing retirement of the Baby Boom generation (Binstock 2010; A. L. Campbell 2003; Cutler 1977; Schulz and Binstock 2008; Weaver 1976).² From 2000 to 2010, the population of people age 45 and over grew at eighteen times the rate for younger people, indicating that the population of people age 65 and older will continue to swell into the 2010s (Frey 2011). Communities with overwhelming numbers of politically active senior citizens are not just located in Florida and Arizona anymore but are increasingly found all over the map as many retirees decide to age in place (Frey 2011; Wolf 2001).

Context Counts

While not everyone agrees that context counts for political behavior (King 1996), research continues to show that it cannot be ignored.³ Individual factors certainly play a large part in predicting political behaviors and attitudes, but this book contributes to the thriving contextual studies research showing that environment also matters. Places with highly skewed age distributions demand our attention because the context of a homogeneous community has been shown over and over to influence the political attitudes and behaviors of residents (Books and Prysby 1991; Brown 1988; Burbank 1995; Huckfeldt 1986; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Key 1949; Miller 1956).

This idea that social context matters for political behavior and attitudes has a long tradition in the social sciences (Baybeck and McClurg 2005; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Books and Prysby 1991; Burbank 1995; Key 1949, 1949; Putnam 2001). While context may be defined in many ways, it broadly refers to a person's local environment, social setting and/or neighborhood—places where individuals live out their daily lives. Neighborhood influences are politically consequential for individual residents as well as for the “political vitality of groups in the political process” (Huckfeldt 1986, 11). Context constrains the extent of social interaction. The social context influences the opportunities for contact and information within a community, which can, in turn, influence attitudes.

One area of social context research in which findings have been and continue to be quite important for American politics considers the racial composition of communities and how a particular racial social context influences individual residents' affinity for (or antagonism toward) members of other races (Giles and Buckner 1993; Giles and Hertz 1994; Key 1949; Kohfeld and Sprague 1995; Marschall and Stolle 2004). Another path for research on the social context of communities led many researchers to examine neighborhoods with varying gay and lesbian populations. They found that communities with significant numbers of gay and lesbian residents were associated with warmer attitudes toward this group among neighborhood residents (Overby and Barth 2002). The relative educational composition of the neighborhood (Tenn 2005) and the local age distribution (Gimpel, Morris, and Armstrong 2004) have been found to affect voting behaviors of residents. Finally, a community's composition of young people may

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alter the likelihood of political activity (conventional and extreme) among young residents (Hart et al. 2004).

While many other researchers have operationalized local population composition as context, the aged context is a novel and significant social context demanding consideration. The purpose of this book is to explore the aged social context and how political experiences differ on the basis of the presence (or absence) of senior citizens within a community. Whenever discussions of senior political behaviors and attitudes arise, so do speculations about senior power and whether the activism of seniors will serve the larger society or will focus on particularized benefits reserved for their own generation at the expense of younger groups. These conversations are especially relevant for communities with relatively large (and growing) older populations as well as for neighborhoods that lack generally active elders.

Theories of Senior Influence

Two theories of senior power inform much of the research on the topic of aging and influence in the social sciences. These behavioral theories are not necessarily in conflict with each other. But when presented, they often paint different stories of senior citizens and their potential and actual abilities to contribute to and influence their immediate and larger communities.

The senior power model considers the occurrence of and great potential to have large numbers of older adults in society coming together and influencing local and national politics. The media often portray senior power as the older generation dominating the others, creating the conditions for generational conflict. The Merchants of Doom, as J. H. Schulz and R. H. Binstock (2008, 20) dubbed them, who include journalists and some scholars, will mobilize and bring the aging Baby Boomers to action by telling them that they must carry the burden of inevitable cutbacks in pensions, health care, and retirement years. Young adults may worry that the growing older-adult population will hinder spending for education and the welfare of young families (Plutzer and Berkman 2005; Ponza et al. 1988; Rosenbaum and Button 1989).

Senior power (also referred to as *gray power*) remains relevant, considered and studied for the past four decades and up to the present (Binstock 2010; Cutler, Pierce, and Steckenrider 1984; Hudson 1978,

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1987, 1988, 2010; Rosenbaum and Button 1989). Some qualify the model showing that older adults may exercise their collective power only when properly motivated. This motivation often occurs through some sort of threat to their welfare (Andel and Liebig 2002; Anderson and Anderson 1978; Streib, Folts, and LaGreca 1985) often coupled with fear of losing benefits from government programs such as Medicare and/or Social Security (A. L. Campbell 2002, 2003, 2005; Jennings and Markus 1988). Senior citizens often have a power advantage just by being more tuned in to politics in general and being particularly aware of politics involving the various benefit programs they use (Jennings and Markus 1988). However, findings about senior power have been quite limited in number and scope.

Many social scientists describe the senior power model as too simplistic for such a diverse American older-adult population, no matter how large their share of the electorate (Binstock 2010; Ponza et al. 1988; Schulz and Binstock 2008; Street 1997). A criticism of the senior power model is that it fails to account for many unrealized policies that would be beneficial to seniors despite high levels of individual efficacy and participation (Andel and Liebig 2002; Binstock 1997, 2010; Jennings and Markus 1988; Jirovec and Erich 1992; Liebig 1992; Rosenbaum and Button 1989; Strate et al. 1989).

Even modest findings of increased morale among older adults depend on their aging environment. It matters whether older adults choose to live in a community of peers. R. A. Ward, M. LaGory, and S. R. Sherman (1985) interviewed seniors in urban neighborhoods with concentrations of older adults and found decreased morale among these individuals. These urban elderly communities form because older adults require access to age-related services and not because of any particular preference for living among peers. Sherman, Ward, and LaGory (1985) found no relationship between old-age-concentrated communities and political action. These findings warn against a simplistic view of the influence of seniors residing in aging communities.

This other work suggests a model of *senior peril or powerlessness*. Some researchers actually show that older group identification relates to decreased feelings of political power and political participation. Older survey respondents who identify with older adults are actually less politically involved than are people who do not identify themselves as elderly (A. H. Miller, Gurin, and Gurin 1980). These seniors may simply misperceive their potential influence or lack the socioeconomic

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resources to be more actively engaged (Miller, Gurin, and Gurin 1980). Additionally, people have been found to retain less political knowledge and show lower levels of political cognition as they reach their mid-60s (Lau and Redlawsk 2008). Seniors living among others their age may become more aware of this effect, the result being a general sense or context of political withdrawal and inefficacy in the community.

Residents of retirement communities also devote much of their time to leisure and become involved in politics only when they feel directly threatened (Rosenbaum and Button 1989; Streib and Metsch 2002). In response to the supposed but unobserved senior power, C. F. Longino, K. A. McClelland, and W. A. Peterson (1980) described the “aged sub-culture” of retirement communities as retreatist in nature rather than activist. It may be that many older adults do not feel particularly threatened or may have little faith that the political system will offer solutions.

These two very different theories of senior influence present seemingly opposing expectations for political attitudes and behaviors of older adults. One theory promotes the idea of a potent and even unstoppable tide of political action by older adults determined to get their pet policies enacted against all opposition. Another paints a picture of a withdrawn and despondent senior citizenry with no faith that political action will make a bit of difference.

While journalists are quicker to take the more exciting and newsworthy side of senior power, most scholars agree that older adults probably fall somewhere between the two extremes, behaving as a powerful group in one situation and powerless in another. In addition, the two theories of senior power may not be completely incompatible inasmuch as they speak to different attitudes and behaviors of older adults. The senior power model mostly involves activity, while the senior peril research refers to attitudes and perceptions of power.

What about places with relatively large older-adult populations? Surely these locations represent the model for senior power, or perhaps the retreatist or inefficacious attitudes expressed in some aged communities prevent seniors from exerting their collective influence. Each chapter of this book makes progress in assessing whether large populations of older adults express political attitudes and exhibit behaviors that conform more toward the senior power notion or toward the powerlessness notion and determining the circumstances in which each theory’s predictions might hold.

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The argument being made here is that the actual and perceived power of older adults is mediated by the local age context. Locations with high proportions of older adults encourage unique political attitudes and behaviors that may equip older adults for senior power but, for other reasons, may deflect that power from being exercised. Evidence is presented showing that seniors with very similar individual characteristics may think and act differently depending on the age distribution of the places where they live.

Does the Aged Context Count?

Coming together with like-minded people to establish a political voice and make a political impact is a familiar occurrence in American democracy. In the social sciences, when people identify with and think and act on behalf of a well-defined group, we say that they possess group consciousness. Group consciousness may not always result in political power, but it is a precursor to group politics when people identify with others who have similar interests and coalesce to become a political community (Conover 1984).

Group consciousness can be especially important as an antecedent to advancing the interests of vulnerable or underrepresented groups that might otherwise be overlooked by society and underrepresented in public office, such as ethnic and racial minorities, the poor, and, yes, many of the elderly (A. L. Campbell 2002; Masuoka 2006; Miller, Gurin, and Gurin 1980; Shingles 1981; Stokes 2003). On the other hand, threats to power may also activate group consciousness for powerful groups in society with the goal of maintaining the position of influence (Miller et al. 1981). Whether coming from a position of power or powerlessness, group identities and consciousness play a crucial role in shaping the way in which people view politics.

With the rapidly growing older-adult population in the United States, many scholars have questioned whether American seniors are becoming more group conscious, wondering about their potential political power as a group. A common finding for earlier work was the apparent absence of any special political consciousness among older adults for any issue area other than health policy (Weaver 1976). With little evidence of an aged group consciousness, these same scholars also discussed the potential for an emerging consciousness with projections

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of a booming older-adult population into the twenty-first century (Ragan and Dowd 1974; Rose and Peterson 1965; Weaver 1976).⁴

One documented change in recent decades is the emergence of retirement communities encouraging “interactions that foster an awareness of common political interests” (Rhodebeck 1993, 343). The rising percentage of older adults across the country may not be enough, by itself, to generate age politicization. However, rising numbers of aged communities, in which older adults are concentrated, may fulfill these predictions with an influential aged context. Examining the varying age compositions of locations provides an effective way to test for the contextual effects of old age.⁵ However, a political community based on age may not emerge simply because a lot of older people happen to live in a particular place. Old-age-concentrated areas naturally increase opportunities for social interaction among older adults and may attract special attention from interest groups and candidates wishing to mobilize older adults in particular. While social context research is abundant, research examining the aged context is sparse and needs to be improved in many ways.

First, most of the aged context–relevant work cited in the book thus far is more than twenty or thirty years old and desperately needs to be updated, especially because of the increasing aging population. Two of the more recent studies examining the role of old-age-concentrated communities look at the impact they have on the health of older adults. One study finds that older adults living among their peers are more likely to report poor health (Subramanian et al. 2006). Another discusses the health implications of different neighborhood age structures (Cagney 2006). Older adults living in these areas may be more aware of their aging needs because of their increased social interaction with peers, which has implications for the health industry. Using up-to-date survey data may uncover some unique political attitudes and behaviors of older adults residing in aged communities that have become evident only as the Baby Boomers have begun to reach retirement age.

Second, a greater range of political attitudes and behaviors should be examined. The public opinion and political behavior work cited here focuses mostly on the impact of aged communities for a few dated issues and some political action. Social scientists have long since established age as a powerful predictor of political attitudes and behavior, through both generation effects and life cycle effects (Abramson 1979;

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Alwin 1998; Alwin and Krosnick 1991; Braungart and Braungart 1986; Cutler and Bengtson 1974; Highton and Wolfinger 2001; Jennings 1979; Jennings and Niemi 1975, 1978, 1981; Nie, Verba, and Kim 1974; Stoker and Jennings 1995). The aged context may also influence a wider range of political attitudes and behaviors than has been examined previously.

For instance, a very recent study shows that older adults who are surrounded by peers maintain higher cognitive function owing to their higher rates of social interaction with peers (Clarke et al. 2012). Political cognition generally declines somewhat in adults after they reach their mid to late 60s (Lau and Redlawsk 2006, 2008), but the social and political environments in the aging neighborhoods may minimize this decline. Research into the influence of the aged context and political knowledge is needed to fill this void in the literature. Looking at additional political attitudes and behaviors with recent data may provide findings that are more enlightening overall and highlight associations between the aged community and the residents' unique political knowledge, attitudes, efficacy, and participation.

Third, past work has looked at only the impact of the older age context for socializing older adults. As with other contextual studies, the age composition of the local population should influence people of all ages in the community, not just the older adults. The educative role of community is powerful and necessary for political socialization, a concept that includes political learning and the acquisition of political attitudes (Greenstein 1970). However, given the great influence of individual age on political attitudes and behaviors, I expect that the aged context will not influence older and younger residents to the same degree or even in the same way.

The focus of the present research is concerned mostly with the impact of aged communities on older adults and on the most impressionable residents: young adults. While older adults may adjust their political attitudes and activities with certain motivation, young adulthood is the critical period for learning about politics (Niemi and Hepburn 1995). Younger people who live in places with an aged context will certainly be socialized uniquely. They may absorb the homogeneous attitudes of the concentrated older population and adopt them as their own (Huckfeldt 1986). As a minority population, younger adults in these communities may not choose or prefer much contact with the older adults, but they may have little control over

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their contacts and be overwhelmed with information that is most relevant for the aged members of the community (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). Finally, they are generally less engaged with politics and therefore may be more easily influenced by community (here, age-relevant) cues (Orbell 1970).

Another important age distinction to consider is that between the young-old and the old-old (Neugarten 1974, 1982), examining the effects for individuals age 65 to 74 separately from the effects for the most aged citizens, those age 75 and older. To avoid the sometimes confusing *young-old* and *old-old* language of past research, I describe the younger group (age 65 to 74) as *emergent older adults* and the older group (ages 75 and above) as the *oldest adults* throughout the book.

People began to live much longer in the second half of the twentieth century, and many older adults enjoy good health and peak political engagement well into their 60s and often into later years. Although the process may be delayed somewhat, many elderly individuals eventually face mounting physical and cognitive challenges in their latest years, which influence their political cognition and participation (Clarke et al. 2012; Hamerman 1999; Hebert 1997; Jennings and Markus 1988; Jirovec and Erich 1992; Lau and Redlawsk 2006, 2008). The lessened opportunities for community interaction may shelter the oldest adults from the aged contextual effects that are evident for the more able and active emergent older adults.

Finally, this work needs to account for characteristics that are highly predictive of political attitudes and behaviors of older (and younger) adults, including individual economic circumstances and partisan identification as well as to account for community characteristics such as the size and wealth of the population. Past work has not considered differences in the type of aged community. The different types of older-adult communities span the economic distribution from the very wealthy to the very poor who are entirely dependent on government income security programs. The aged communities are also quite different in their population size, many communities receiving an influx of new residents and other communities losing residents every year as young people move away and older residents pass away. Accounting for particular community characteristics (1) provides additional confidence that context effects may be attributed to the aged context and not to these other community influences and (2) tests for varying effects for the different types of aged communities.

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Plan of the Book

Through the careful examination of political behaviors and attitudes of older and younger residents across various aged contexts, the remaining chapters add to the significant social context research with a new twist. The book also contributes to the ongoing discussions of elderly political consciousness and senior power and serves as a much-needed update to the past literature. Chapter 2 is a descriptive chapter defining and locating aged communities. It explores the processes leading to the development of these communities across the United States. Places with skewed age distributions do not just turn up out of thin air. Rather, they result from a culmination of developments occurring over decades. This chapter provides additional justification for the project by delineating the old-age-concentrated communities and introduces data and methods used throughout the book.

Chapter 2 answers the following questions: What is an aged community? And where are the aged communities? Chapter 3 extends the conversation in Chapter 2 by setting the stage for the remaining chapters. Chapter 3 asks the following question: What makes an aged community? This book argues that a lot of older people living in one place will create special meaning for the local social context and, therefore, the political context. However, it is not enough to say that residents within the aged communities are behaving differently. Although it is a difficult question to answer, it is important to know why the residents of aged communities exhibit unique political attitudes and behaviors. Chapter 3 provides evidence of contextual mechanisms by using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, including some original data collection. A better understanding of aged community dynamics informs and frames the analyses in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 4 examines the unique political knowledge for older adults living in areas with high concentrations of seniors. Past work has emphasized the decline of cognition into older age. More recent work suggests that living in an aged community provides ample opportunity for social interaction with peers and that these older residents perform better cognitively than more isolated seniors. Chapter 4 asks whether this relationship is evident for the political cognition of older residents. The increased social integration and resources that are available for the older people in aged communities suggest that older residents surrounded by their peers will exhibit higher levels of political knowledge.

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Chapter 5 examines the relationship between the age context of a community and attitudes for social welfare policies among both older and younger residents. Paying attention to the attitudes of younger residents is critical for addressing predictions of intergenerational conflict over the funding of such policies into the future. The prevalent commentary largely speculates that the extreme costs associated with providing for a large Baby Boom generation into older adulthood will negatively affect the younger generations, leading to intergenerational conflict. Specifically, this chapter addresses the following question: Do aged locations create environments supportive of aging policy or more broadly, social welfare policies?

Chapters 6 and 7 speak to the implications of the distinct preferences among aged community residents by looking at their political efficacy attitudes and activity levels. Popular wisdom considers senior citizens a highly organized group that seeks specialized political benefits for older adults. Other scholars find little evidence supporting the “greedy geezers” outlook. In particular, Chapter 6 delves into the relationship between the age context of a community and the efficacy attitudes of older and younger residents. Chapter 7 considers the political participation of older and younger residents across the spectrum of aged communities. Most of the past work predicts increased participation in aged locales yet finds no evidence to support such predictions. Other researchers show that older adults in the aging communities must be properly motivated into political participation by threats to the community lifestyle. The young adult residents living in aged communities may be socialized into distinct political efficacy attitudes held and activity levels practiced by the surrounding senior presence. Consequences may be significant for the political action and efficacy of seniors in these unique communities but may be greater for the less-interested and still-to-be-socialized younger populations.

Chapter 8 concludes the book, summarizing the findings and considering the implications for local and national politics and policy currently and in the decades to come. Reflecting on the observations in the previous chapters, I consider the state of the older-adult population, concentrated and scattered, with regard to perceived and actual power. I also discuss the consequences for American politics as the Baby Boomers move into retirement and socialize the younger generations well into the twenty-first century.