**Contextual Influences on Participation
in Local and School Governance**

David E. Campbell – University of Notre Dame

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dcampbe4@nd.edu

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Participation in local politics – including school district politics – is something of a paradox. On the one hand, there is some evidence that Americans *in general* show little interest in, awareness of, and engagement with local politics, as demonstrated by the fact that voter turnout rates in local elections are typically abysmally low. But on the other hand, when we look beyond voter turnout in the general population and instead turn to the specific ways in which participators choose to get involved, engagement in local affairs constitutes a major share of the participatory investment made by Americans. Almost half (44 percent) of Americans report attending at least one meeting on "town or school affairs" in the previous year.[1] And of the issues regularly featured prominently on the local political stage, school politics is often the star of the show. Americans care deeply about their local public schools, enough to put their money where their mouths are. Consider how real estate prices track school quality. Yet the literature on political participation has had little to say about this particular channel for political involvement.

This paper examines one important means of local engagement in politics, attendance at local meetings, including school board meetings. In particular, this paper adds to a growing literature on how the characteristics of the communities in which Americans live affect their civic and political participation. Like previous studies, it asks: does where you live affect your degree of political involvement? Unlike prior studies, however, it specifically looks to the school district as the community of interest. The analysis thus uses a unique dataset to determine whether the contextual features of school districts affect individuals' levels of participation. In a nutshell, this study is motivated by two inter-related claims. First, place matters. Second, school districts are places with political relevance.

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[1] Data from the Social Capital Community Benchmark Study.

Place matters in the sense that the communities in which we live shape our participation in public affairs. While there has long been a literature exploring what have come to be known as "contextual effects" (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1993), in recent years this line of research has become a growth stock. Much of the social capital literature, for example, consists examines the ways that social environments affect our likelihood of engaging in public-spirited behavior (Putnam 2000). There is also a burgeoning body of research into how the social complexion of local communities shapes participation in civic and political activities.

While most of the extant literature focuses on municipalities as political units, I contend that school districts are also politically relevant. Indeed, for policy regarding the local public schools, we should expect that the school district is the most salient political unit. This is not to claim that the school district is the only geographic unit that matters, even for school-level politics, but only to underscore that the district is under-studied as a political jurisdiction. It is also important to note, however, that in many cases the boundaries of school districts coincide with the boundaries of municipalities, which have been the subject of previous research.

To date, the research on the subject has revealed an intriguing inconsistency about the participatory consequences of heterogeneity. Eric Oliver's recent book *Democracy in Suburbia,* (2001) for example, carefully examines how various features of municipalities –including but not limited to heterogeneity– impact local political engagement. One of Oliver's more notable findings is that people who live in communities with greater economic diversity have higher levels of engagement in localized political action, like voting in local elections and contacting local elected officials. In contrast, a number of economists have found that economic, racial, and ethnic heterogeneity all lead to a decrease in participation. In a recent review essay surveying this literature, Dora Costa and Matthew Kahn note that

Over the past five years, at least 15 different empirical economic papers have studied the consequences of community heterogeneity, and all of these studies have the same punch line: heterogeneity reduces civic engagement. (Costa and Kahn 2003, 104)

At first glance, Oliver's conclusions would seem to be in sharp contrast to those of the economists cited by Costa and Kahn, notably the seminal work of Alberto Alesina and Eliana La Ferrara (2000). While Oliver finds that heterogeneity, or at least economic heterogeneity, ignites local political participation, Alesina and La Ferrara find that three types of heterogeneity – ethnic, racial, and economic -- all have a dampening effect on civic activity. A closer look, however, suggests that while their conclusions appear empirically incompatible, they are actually theoretically consistent with one another. It is important to note that these studies examine different forms of participation. Mistakenly, the literature on participation often indiscriminately groups disparate activities together, notwithstanding considerable evidence that various forms of participation are qualitatively different from one another. There are different participatory strokes for different folks. In their classic study of participation, for example, Sidney Verba and Norman Nie draw a distinction between activity that is conflictual and non-conflictual, contrasting electoral activities like political campaigning with intrinsically cooperative activities like membership in (most) voluntary groups (Verba and Nie 1972, 53). More recently, Scott Keeter and his colleagues have conducted a massive study of participation in the United States, and upon analyzing an array of different activities concluded that there are essentially three participatory dimensions (Jenkins et al. 2003). "Civic" activity, by which they mean non-political efforts like volunteering in the community, is a different dimension of participation than expressing political voice or influencing electoral outcomes. These two studies, based on data collected over thirty years apart, bear a striking resemblance to one another.

Oliver has examined political activism – the sorts of things people do to express their political preferences. These are activities largely sparked by conflict and competition. Indeed, he explicitly writes that "conflict is essential for fueling civic participation" and that "economic diversity is a primary determinant of local political competition" (2001, 86). Alesina and La Ferrara model a very different measure, membership in a voluntary association. Their analysis is grounded in a formal model of group membership premised on the assumption that "individuals prefer to interact with others who are similar to themselves in terms of income, race, and ethnicity" (2000, 850). Birds of feather, as it were, flock together.

Once we recognize that there are different types of participation, the empirical results that at first seemed contradictory now appear complementary. Local political engagement is sparked by *conflict*; membership in voluntary associations is facilitated by *commonality*. Therefore, community heterogeneity has a different impact on these different forms of participation. A social context that triggers conflict over differing political preferences will result in higher levels of political activism, while one characterized by people sharing common characteristics – and thus by implication, preferences -- will instead foster collective action that is motivated by feelings of social solidarity.

This theoretical distinction between conflict and commonality as motivations for participation leads us to an interesting question. Is participation in the governance of a school district more likely to be driven by one or the other? In other words, does heterogeneity, whether racial or economic in nature, push people into school district politics or pull them out? The answer speaks to how involvement in school board politics is shaped by the design of the political landscape, specifically the geographic lines defining public school districts. While

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heterogeneity will not be the only contextual factor examined here, given the widespread contemporary concerns about diversity it is perhaps the one of broadest interest.

Data

In order for this analysis to work, attention must be paid to both sides of the equation. On the left hand side, the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey (SCCBS) is a rich source of information about myriad forms of Americans' civic engagement, including participation in local and school politics. Among the sources of data available to researchers studying participation, the SCCBS is unique. Rather than a single nationally-representative sample of a few thousand respondents, the SCCBS consists of representative samples in forty different communities.[2] As a result, the number of cases included in the SCCBS dwarfs what is found in other, similar sources of data like the National Election Studies and the Citizen Participation Study. There is, however, no free lunch. While the SCCBS has a huge sample size, those cases cannot be treated as totally independent of one another, since samples were drawn in each of forty communities which themselves were not selected randomly.[3] Essentially, the challenge presented by the SCCBS is that by design its data violate a standard assumption of regression analysis. Regression models, whether linear or logistic, are based on the assumption that all the observations in the dataset are independent of one another. However, in the SCCBS, this is explicitly not the case. Because samples were drawn within a nonrandom set of communities, we have every reason to suspect that two respondents in, say, Bismarck, North Dakota have more common with one another than

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[2] The SCCBS also includes a nationally representative sample. Since some of the contextual measures can only be applied to respondents in one of the forty community samples, for consistency's sake the analysis excludes the national sample. (When it is included, results do not change).

[3] It is important to note that the scope of the geographic areas covered in each of its forty community samples varies dramatically. In some cases, a whole state was sampled, while in others the area is a single metropolitan area. This means that different types of communities are treated as conceptually equivalent. For this analysis, I have opted not to exclude portions of the sample (like all statewide samples, for example), for the fear of artificially biasing what is already a relatively small sample of communities.

a respondent from Bismarck and another from Boulder, Colorado. This nonindependence means that a standard regression model will bias the parameter estimates and inflate the certainty assigned to them. The models employed in the analysis correct for this nonindependence by accounting for the clustered nature of the data, which has the practical effect of adjusting the standard errors.

The analytical opportunities of the SCCBS's design, however, more than outweigh the econometric challenges presented by the sampling frame. For every survey question asked of an individual, it is possible to construct an aggregate measure for that community – thus permitting the internal construction of contextual measures. While most of the contextual data employed in this analysis are drawn from the U.S. Census, and thus uses the school district as the relevant geographic context, for a few of the measures this is not possible. Because the Census Bureau does not collect any data that touches on religion or political ideology, measures of both religious and ideological context have been constructed from within the SCCBS dataset. This is not possible with surveys that simply draw a single random sample nationwide, as there are generally too few respondents in each geographic location to construct a reliable aggregate measure.

For this analysis, I have appended data describing the public school district in which each respondent resides. These data have been taken from the short and long forms of the U.S. Census, which have then been aggregated by school district.[4] Thus, for each respondent I not only have individual-level information (e.g. whether the respondent is an African American), but also information about that respondent's public school district (e.g. the percentage of African

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[4] The data themselves were compiled using software produced by a commercial vendor (Geolytics 2001).

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Americans in the school district). This is the only dataset of which I am aware that combines individual-level data with information about public school districts.[5]

Unfortunately, the SCCBS's actual measure of attendance at school board meetings is less than ideal. It is worded, "How many times in the past twelve months have you attended any public meeting in which there was discussion of town or school affairs?," which obviously lumps various types of meetings together, making it impossible to isolate attendance at school board meetings specifically. While the imprecision of the question does muddy any conclusions to be drawn using these data, it does not appear to be a fatal flaw. There is evidence from both inside and outside the data to think that much of the participation recorded by this measure is related to the local schools. Outside of the data, any observer American politics should have the intuition that a community's schools occupy much of the issue space on the local landscape. From inside the data, we observe that one of the largest factors predicting whether people attend a "public meeting on town or school affairs" is having school-age children. However, even with evidence suggesting that this questionnaire item largely records attendance at meetings on school-related matters, throughout this discussion the reader should keep in mind that the measure of the dependent variable encompasses meetings of various sorts and is thus "fuzzy."

Analysis

The analysis will proceed in three stages. First, we will examine the individual-level predictors of meeting attendance, in order to establish a baseline with which to compare the contextual factors that are our primary interest. Second, the model will incorporate the contextual measures at both the district and, where necessary, community level. Third, the analysis will turn to examining possible interactions between individuals and their context.

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[5] Data were aggregated over unified school districts – that is, the district covering K-12.

The dependent variable that will be the focus of inquiry is a binary measure of whether the individual reports attending a single meeting in the previous year. The measure has been dichotomized because our primary interest is in the factors that propel people over the threshold of participation, rather than in their frequency of participation once that threshold has been cleared. Because the frequency of attendance is also a relevant target of study, in the course of this project I have also run a series of poisson models predicting the number of meetings a respondent has attended. (Poisson is the appropriate estimator since the dependent variable consists of a count.) Interestingly, these models reveal that there is little substantive difference between the factors that predict whether you attend a single meeting versus those that predict how many meetings you attend. For brevity's sake, they have been omitted, but can be made available upon request.

Individual-level

Using logistic regression, the first model regresses meeting attendance on an array of individual-level variables, each of which has been long recognized as a predictor of participation in general. At the top of the list is a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent has school-aged children (ages six to eighteen), in order to account for the increased attention to school-related issues that follows from having children of this age.[6] The model also includes education level and household income, owing to longstanding evidence that participation in America is skewed toward the upper scale of socioeconomic status (Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Age is in the model, as previous research has found that the greater someone's age the greater the likelihood of engaging in political activity. The model also includes a squared term for age, to account for the fact that at the upper reaches of the lifespan,

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[6] The precise wording of each questionnaire item is included in the appendix.

people often become less able to undertake political activity owing to infirmity (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

Other variables include a dummy variable for homeownership. Since many Americans purchase a home based on the perceived quality of the local public schools, we should expect homeownership to be a factor contributing to engagement in the governance of the local schools and community. Similarly, the model accounts for how long respondents have lived in their communities. The longer one lives in a place, the deeper one's roots, the thicker one's social networks, and the greater investment one feels in the community – all of which contribute to political involvement.

The model also controls for gender, coded as female = 1. While women *generally* show a slightly lower level of political participation than men, one specific area where they exhibit a greater level of engagement is in regards to education, and local schools especially (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). We should thus expect a positive coefficient for gender. Race/ethnicity is included in the equation, coded into five categories: White, African American, Hispanic[7], Asian American, and a catch-all "other" category that includes Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and people who choose not to place themselves in any racial category. Owing to the amalgamation of groups within this category, its coefficient should not be taken as having any theoretically significant meaning. Rather, it is included to keep the interpretation of the other groups' coefficients clear. White is the baseline category, which means that all of the race/ethnicity coefficients are interpreted as that group's level of local political involvement relative to whites.

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[7] White, African-American, and Hispanic are mutually exclusive categories. The categories of "White" and "African American" only include people who indicated that they are not Hispanic as well. Therefore, "Hispanic" includes people who identify as white Hispanics, black Hispanics, and Hispanics with no further racial classification.

In addition to these demographic variables, the model includes three more measures, two that are attitudinal and one that is behavioral. The two attitudinally-oriented measures are political interest and the respondent's level of interpersonal trust. Not surprisingly, political interest strongly predicts political involvement of any sort, and is included here simply as a control for cognitive connection to the political realm. Interpersonal trust has generally been shown to correlate with greater levels of civic activity (Burns, Kinder, and Rahn 2003). Many studies, however, leave a cloud of ambiguity over the substantive interpretation of interpersonal trust's impact, as it is usually measured with a question about whether you can trust "most people." While the assumption in the literature is that this item taps into someone's degree of trust in people generally, it is conceivable that a person might trust some types of people – say, family, friends, neighbors, etc. – but have a deep distrust of others (i.e. strangers). Asking about one's level of trust in "most people" would conflate the two. The SCCBS clarifies this ambiguity by asking about respondents' level of trust in various groups of people, including their neighbors. Since a primary question at hand is how the social complexion of an area affects involvement in school and local politics, the most relevant dimension of trust is in regards to one's neighbors. This is thus the measure of interpersonal trust included in the model, coded so that a higher value means greater trust in one's neighbors.

Incorporating trust of one's neighbors into the model will give us the first hint of whether attendance at local public meetings is better characterized as driven by conflict or commonality. If it is conflictual, and that conflict is sparked by disagreements among people who live in the same community, we might then expect that participants will be less trusting of their neighbors. Conversely, if it is generally based on commonality, trust and participation would share a positive relationship. However, this interpretation of the measure is tentative at best, as the same

ambiguity that clouds the words "most people" hangs over "neighbors." It could be that a political conflict at the local and/or school level is the product of distrust *between* residents of different neighborhoods, which would not necessarily mean distrust *within* a neighborhood. It all depends on who respondents consider their neighbors to be, which is unknowable with these data.

Finally, the model includes a measure of religious involvement, which is a composite index of membership in a church,[8] attendance at religious services, participation in church activities, financial contributions to a religious organization, volunteering for a religious cause, and participation in a religiously-affiliated organization.[9] Religious involvement is a strong predictor of community participation, so we should expect it to have a positive coefficient (Putnam 2000; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

[Insert Table 1]

With these introductions out of the way, we can turn to the results of the model. As mentioned above, the estimation accounts for the clustered nature of the sample and so robust standard errors are reported. Also, each variable has been coded on a 0-1 scale, facilitating the comparison of coefficients' relative magnitudes. The first column of Table 1 presents the results. We see that, with only a few exceptions, our expectations are met. Having school-age children, more education, and a higher income are all positive predictors of meeting attendance, each reaching a conventional level of statistical significance. The same is true for owning a home and having lived in a community longer. The coefficient for age is positive, but misses the standard cut-off for statistical significance. Interestingly, however, the squared term for age is negative and statistically significant, suggesting that as with other forms of participation like voter

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[8] "Church" here is used in a general sense, and includes synagogues, mosques, temples, etc.
[9] Using factor analysis, these have been combined into a single variable. Details available upon request.

turnout, attendance at meetings drops off at the later stages of the lifespan. Women are more likely to attend meetings than men, although the coefficient's magnitude is small and its statistical significance is just inside the .10 threshold. Regarding race, African Americans are more likely than whites to attend meetings on local and school politics, while Asian Americans are slightly less likely (although in the latter case, the statistical significance is marginal). Both attitudinal measures, political interest and trust in neighbors, are positive and highly significant. As suggested above, the fact that a higher degree of trust has a positive impact on meeting attendance suggests, even if only slightly, that this is not a form of participation motivated by localized political conflict (although, without any confirming evidence, such a conclusion remains highly speculative). Finally, we see that religious involvement has a substantial, positive impact on whether someone attends a local meeting.

Because of the way the dependent variable has been measured, questions undoubtedly remain about the extent to which the model is predicting attendance at school board meetings per se. One way to assuage such concerns is to limit the model to the respondents with the greatest stake and therefore the most immediate interest in the local public schools: parents of children who are of age to attend school (six to eighteen).

Column 2 of the table thus repeats the same model, but restricts the analysis to parents of children who are of school age. Even though this model drops 70 percent of the cases used in column 1, it tells the same story. In no case does a coefficient's sign switch signs or shift substantially in magnitude, although in a few there are different levels of statistical significance. Notably, age reaches statistical significance in the second model, while gender increases in both magnitude and significance. It would appear that, among families with school-age children, mothers are more likely to attend local meetings than fathers, and older parents are more likely

than younger parents (to a point, at which age becomes a drag on participation). Because the

number of cases is smaller in model 2 than model 1, we can be confident that these specific

changes in statistical significance are not merely due to varying sample sizes. If they were, we

would expect to see coefficients move from significance to nonsignificance, which is probably

what explains the diminished significance level for African Americans in column 2 versus

column 1.

[Insert Figure 1]

Because the coefficients in Table 1 are from logistic regression, they are difficult to

interpret in substantive terms. Their common coding allows for comparisons of relative

magnitude, but this still does not tell us how the probability of attending a local meeting

increases or decreases as a particular independent variable changes. For that sort of comparison,

the coefficients must be translated into a more meaningful metric. This has been done in Figure

1, where we see the relative impact of each statistically significant variable[10] on the probability

of attending a meeting, holding everything else constant at its mean.[11] The binary variables, like

gender and homeownership, obviously vary between their two states. In order to maintain

consistency, the ordinal and categorical variables vary between one standard deviation above and

below the mean, or the nominal categories that most closely approximate this range.[12] While

these probabilities have been calculated from the model in column 1, the results are almost

identical when the results from column 2 are used (these results are available upon request). We

see that having school-age children has the single largest impact on attending public meetings

(roughly 25.5 percentage points), followed by political interest (18.4) and religious involvement

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[10] Age-squared has not been included in the figure, because age did not achieve statistical significance.
[11] Note that the probabilities are actually reported as percentages, as this is a more intuitive way to think about the results.
[12] For example, education changes from high school graduate to a college degree, the two nominal categories that are closest to one standard deviation below and one standard deviation above the mean.

(16.9). Gender has the smallest impact (1.8) within this population, although it is worth noting

that this rises to 4.5 points when the model is limited to families with school-age children only.

Contextual

The model with individual-level factors only is only a warm-up for the headliner, the

contextual variables. The individual level variables, however, do provide a benchmark against

which to compare the relative impact of contextual factors. This way, we can be informed as to

the substantive as well as statistical significance of the factors included in the model.

While the central focus of our inquiry is the impact of heterogeneity on local and school

politics, other contextual factors are of theoretical interest as well. The contextual variables can

thus be divided into three categories: geography, sociodemography, and heterogeneity.

Geography includes the physical size of a school district (the land area it occupies as measured in

square miles), as well as the size of its population. The ideal size of a polity, both in terms of

area and population, has long been a matter of concern to political philosophers, but has only

been of sporadic interest to empirically-oriented political scientists. Oliver's (2000) work is a

notable exception, as he provides evidence that communities with a relatively small geographic

size facilitate civic engagement. Apparently, size matters. We can thus test whether the size of a

school district matters in a comparable way. Similarly, we can see whether the population of a

school district impacts the decision to get involved in local and school politics. Perhaps a larger

population fosters anonymity, and a sense of alienation from the workings of local government,

thus pulling localized participation down. Or it could be that what Madison describes for the

nation as a whole in Federalist 10 applies to school districts as well – a larger population

produces more political factionalization, sparking more conflict, and stimulating participation

(Madison 1961). The third geography variable is a measure of population density, which is

simply calculated as population divided by area. As with the size of population, the expectation

for the impact of population density is not clear. Greater density means a more urban

environment, which again might foster anonymity and thus detachment from local politics.

However, greater density might also spark conflict, and also facilitate the work of political

mobilizers –retail politics is much easier when large numbers of people are clustered together.

The sociodemographic makeup of a respondent's context is measured with four variables.

The first is simply a measure of the percentage of people over age twenty-five with college

degrees within the school district. The expectation for this measure is straightforward. Just as an

individual's level of education is a potent predictor of participation, so should we expect a higher

average level of educational environment within a community to facilitate engagement in local

and school politics. The second measure is the district's median income, for which the expected

relationship is not so straightforward.[13] Oliver has found that the relationship between the

affluence of an area and its residents' participation in local politics is curvilinear -- falling in

areas with both the lowest and the highest median incomes, rising in between. As with the

curvilinear effect of age, this pattern can be captured with a squared term for median income

(which would be negative should this same relationship hold up in these data). Finally, as a

complement to the individual-level measure of religious commitment, the equation also

incorporates the mean level of religious commitment within the community, which must be

calculated from within the SCCBS and thus aggregated at the community rather than school

district level.   Unlike the other contextual variables, there has not been a flourishing research

literature on this subject producing divergent results. Rather, the literature on social context has

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[13] Owing to the aggregate nature of the data, median income is categorical (five categories), and more precisely
described as a mean of medians. That is, it has been calculated using the census tract as the basic unit of analysis.
Data from the tracts have been aggregated up the public school district boundaries, which means that the district-
level measure consists of averaging the tract-level medians.

paid no attention to religious environments.[14] In the absence of any theoretical or empirical

guidance, the essential research question remains – will a high level of religious commitment at

the community level facilitate or inhibit individuals' rate of participation in local and school

affairs? An important caveat about the contextual measure of religious involvement is in order.

While the aforementioned contextual measures are external to the study and thus calculated

using the school district as the geographic unit, this is not possible for religiosity. It is measured

internally, and so its dispersion is calculated across each of the *communities* comprising the

study, which do not necessarily coincide with school district boundaries. The results for

community-level religious involvement, therefore, should not be interpreted as applying to

school districts per se, but instead to the wider community.

The model includes a series of variables that measure heterogeneity along four

dimensions: economic, race/ethnicity, ideology, and religion. Economic heterogeneity is

calculated using the index of qualitative variation (IQV)[15]. The ethnoracial composition of each

district is measured using a Herfindahl Index.[16] Both variables produce a score between 0 and 1,

where 0 means perfect homogeneity (the entire district is of a single income or ethnoracial

group) and 1 is complete heterogeneity (the district is evenly divided among all of the groups).

Both economic and racial heterogeneity are measures that have been used in past

research, featuring prominently in the work of Oliver as well as Alesina and La Ferrara. In

addition to these types of heterogeneity, the SCCBS allows for a measure of the ideological

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[14] For example, none of the fifteen studies of community heterogeneity cited by Costa and Kahn consider the possible impact of religious heterogeneity.

[15] This is calculated with the formula: IQV = k(N2 – Sum (f2)) / N2 (k-1), where k = number of income groups (5), N= total number of cases, and Sum(f2) = the sum of the squared frequencies. See Oliver (2001, chapter 3) for more details.

[16] This is calculated using the following computational formula: $1 - \sum_r h^2_{rc}$, where r represents each racial group, and c each community.

dispersion within a community (Rahn and Rudolph 2001). If, as Oliver suggests, political

conflict sparks local political action, then it would follow that communities with greater

ideological variance will experience higher levels of engagement. Ideological diversity is

measured as simply the standard deviation of political ideology within a community. The greater

the standard deviation, the more ideologically heterogeneous the community. Because this

measure has been constructed from within the SCCBS data, the same caveat that applies to the

community-based measure of religious involvement is relevant here: ideological heterogeneity is

not calculated across school districts, but communities.

As already discussed, the literature on community heterogeneity leads to divergent

expectations about the relationship between an area's social composition and the participation

levels of its residents, depending on the type of participation in question. Heterogeneous

communities spark disagreement over policy preferences, and thus increase participation

motivated by political conflict. Places that are homogeneous, however, facilitate participation

that is rooted in the participants finding things in common rather than in conflict – birds of a

feather flocking together. The task at hand is to see whether any of these measures of

heterogeneity impact attendance at meetings about local and school affairs, and if so whether the

impact is positive or negative. If positive, this would suggest that attendance at such meetings is

spurred by political conflict. If negative, this would suggest that social solidarity leads people to

engage in local and/or school affairs.

[Insert Table 2]

Table 2 presents the results of models that parallel those in Table 1, the only difference

being the addition of the contextual variables. As before, two models are presented, the first for

the general population the other for people with school-age kids only.

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We turn first to the geographic variables: area, population, and density. Within the general population, geographic size is not a significant predictor of attending local meetings, although when the model is restricted to parents of school-age children it has a marginally significant and positive impact on meeting attendance. Population density follows the same pattern. Population size, in contrast, has a consistent impact across both columns. Whether we are looking at the general population or parents of school-age children only, districts with larger populations have lower levels of attendance at public meetings.

Next, we move to the measures of a district's sociodemographic profile. In both models, the percentage of college graduates within a district has a positive effect on attendance at meetings. However, there is no impact for either median income or median income squared in either model. This is in sharp contrast to Oliver's conclusion that the affluence of a community is an important factor explaining the participation of the people who live there. The strength of religious commitment within a community also has a negative impact on meeting attendance, reaching significance in the general population but not in the restricted sample.

The findings for the heterogeneity variables also diverge from Oliver's work. Whereas he found that economic diversity leads to greater local political involvement, here it fails to achieve statistical significance. Tellingly, however, its sign is negative, not positive. Racial heterogeneity is also negative and significant in the general population, although it fails to reach significance among people with children of school age (and is positive, although the standard error so swamps the point estimate that the sign is essentially meaningless). Ideological heterogeneity (in the community) is also negative, although in neither case is it statistically significant.

[Insert Figure 2]

Figure 2 again presents the substantive magnitude of the contextual variables, calculated as changes in the predicted probability of attending a local meeting as the independent variables shift from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above (ceteris paribus). The four variables that achieved statistical significance in the general population are displayed. Of these four, the educational environment has the largest substantive impact, 7.3 points, while the population of the district has the smallest, only -1.1 points. Most notable perhaps is simply the general observation that these variables have a much more muted impact than the individual-level factors.

In seriatim, these results are a lot to absorb. When taken as a whole, however, some patterns emerge. First, we see that districts with populations that are small in population but high in education facilitate attendance at meetings. Neither relationship is surprising. School districts with a small population likely foster a sense of local attachment, and facilitate the spread of a social norm encouraging engagement. Similarly, a higher average level of education would also cultivate a norm encouraging attention to local affairs, especially the schools. A more religious environment, however, pulls such participation down, suggesting that at the community level perhaps there is a tradeoff between a heavy investment in church versus the community.

While the interpretation of the findings regarding geography and demography are slightly ambiguous, the consistent results across the heterogeneity variables imply that a single story ties them all together. Economic, racial, and ideological heterogeneity all have a negative impact on public participation in local and school governance – suggesting that it is not conflict but commonality that brings people out to meetings regarding town and/or school affairs.

Interactions

Having examined the individual and contextual factors that contribute to local political engagement in isolation, the final step is to put them together. Does the impact of individual-level characteristics vary according to social context? For example, even though we found that the general impact of racial heterogeneity is to dampen involvement in local affairs – which suggests that this form of participation is not stimulated by racially motivated discord – it could be that *whites* become more participatory in a racially heterogeneous environment, which would suggest the presence of conflict after all.

I have tested for possible interactions in five areas: education, race, religion, income, and ideology. In the realm of education, Norman Nie, Jane Junn, and Kenneth Stehlik-Barry (1996) have argued that education has such a potent impact on participation because it is essentially a mechanism by which to sort people by socioeconomic status. What matters, then, is not your absolute level of education, but your level of education *relative to others*. A college degree confers greater social status in a place where it is unusual than in a place where it is the norm. To test this hypothesis, the model includes an interaction between holding a college degree and the percentage of the population over age twenty-five who hold college degrees within one's local school district. If the Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry argument holds up, we should expect this interaction to be negative – holding a college degree provides less impact on participation as the average level of education in a school district rises.[17] A similar interaction is tested for income – an individual's own household income has been multiplied against the median in a

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[17] In order to keep the interpretation of the coefficients straightforward, the individual-level measure of education is now a dichotomous measure of whether the respondent has graduated from college.

community. As with education, a negative coefficient would mean that as the median income in a school district increases, the impact of an individual's own income decreases.[18]

For race, the interaction displayed in the model is between being white and the level of racial heterogeneity within a district. A positive coefficient would mean that as the racial diversity in a district climbs, so does the likelihood that whites get involved in local politics. Other racial interactions have also been tested but for the sake of space are not presented. As discussed below, this decision seems warranted by the fact that the story is similar across all such interactions.[19]

As with race, we might expect that religiosity's impact is relative to the religious character of a community. Given that many anecdotal reports of involvement in school politics center on moral issues – sex education, treatment of homosexuality in the classroom, teaching evolution, etc. –we might expect that religious commitment sparks political conflict, if people with strong religious convictions feel that their values are not represented in their public schools (Sharp 1999). When it comes to religion, therefore, the relevant measure might not be an individual's level of religious involvement, or even that of the community as a whole. Rather, what would matter is an individual's level of religious commitment *relative* to the religiosity of the community at large. Being highly religious in a secularly oriented environment – or vice-versa – could lead to conflict over the presentation of morally-tinged issues in the public schools. On the other hand, if engagement in local affairs is triggered more by social solidarity than political conflict, then we would expect that highly religious people would be more likely to attend meetings when surrounded by other people who share the same type of commitment (and,

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[18] Admittedly, it could also mean the opposite, but that seems far less plausible.
[19] As with education, here again there has been a slight change in the individual-level race variables included in the model in order to facilitate interpretation of the model. Rather than using white as the baseline category, in this case white is the only category included in the model. The substantive effect is, of course, the same either way.

potentially, the same might apply to secularly-minded people in a secular context).[20] These

hypotheses are evaluated with another interaction term between individual and community-level

religiosity, calculated by multiplying an individual's own level of religious commitment and the

mean level in the community.

The final interaction is between personal ideology and ideological context. If attendance

at local meetings is driven by political conflict, then we should expect that people who are out of

step ideologically with their community will be more likely to get involved. Conversely, if

ideological comity has a positive impact on local engagement, that would be evidence in favor of

local participation as the product of consensus. The measure of ideological consonance is simply

the absolute value of the distance between an individual's own ideology and the mean ideology

of the community. The higher the value, the more extreme is one's relative ideology. Note that

this measure is not dependent on an individual's absolute degree of ideological extremism, nor

its direction. Thus, being a moderate in San Francisco might make you a radical in South

Dakota, and a conservative in Boston could be a liberal in Boise. A positive value for the

coefficient would mean that ideological extremists are more likely to attend local public

meetings, while a negative value means that ideological comity brings people out.

[Insert Table 3]

Table 3 displays the results of models that again parallel those in Tables 1 and 2, only

now the interactions have been added to the individual-level and contextual variables. For the

education interaction, we see evidence in favor of Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry's argument, at

least in the general population. One's relative education level drives local participation, as the

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[20] The reader may wonder why I focus on religious involvement rather than affiliation as the measure of interest.
While denominational affiliation is undoubtedly an important element of understanding religion's imprint on
American politics, there is increasing evidence that the most politically salient divide is more likely to be between
religiously and secularly oriented people, and thus less likely across denominational lines per se. (Layman 2001)

coefficient for the interaction term is negative and statistically significant (at only the 0.10 level, though, suggesting that we should not place too much confidence in this result). Note that this same effect is not observed among parents of school-age children. And while the income interaction is also negative, it comes nowhere near statistical significance in either model.

For race, there is no interaction effect, as the multiplicative term between whites and racial heterogeneity does not achieve significance in either model (although it is interesting that the sign is negative in both). It is important to note that I have experimented with multiple permutations of racial interactions – different racial groups multiplied against racial heterogeneity. Neither African Americans nor Hispanics are more, or for that matter less, likely to participate in an ethnoracially heterogeneous school district.[21]

Regarding religious involvement, we see that the interaction term has a positive coefficient, although it is only statistically significant among the general population. In other words, religiously-involved people are more, not less, likely to participate in local politics as the mean level of religious involvement in their community rises. Although it has the opposite sign, the coefficient for relative ideology leads to a similar inference. Recall that relative ideology measures one's distance from the ideological mean of the community. A negative coefficient means that the closer you are to your community's ideological mainstream, the more likely you are to attend a local meeting on town or school affairs. The impact of ideological congruence between an individual and the community is underscored by the fact that it is the only individual-contextual variable to retain statistical significance within the population of parents with school-age children. Indeed, it is estimated with greater certainty in the restricted sample, notwithstanding the smaller N.

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[21] Nor does the story change when each ethnoracial group is interacted with the share of the population of the same group (e.g. African American X Percentage African American).

The substantive impact of the interaction terms can again be determined by calculating predicted probabilities, as displayed in Figure 3. For education and religious involvement, the way to gauge the effect of the interaction terms is to compare the impact of varying the two "main effects" in the interaction term, with and without accounting for their interaction (and, as always, holding everything else constant at their means). Without the interaction, having a college degree and varying the percentage of college graduates two standard deviations (as has been the practice, from one below the mean to one above) increases the probability of attending a local meeting by 25.8 points. With the interaction, it is 18.6 points. Similarly, without the interaction the simultaneous impact of an increase in an individual's religious involvement and a community's level of religiosity is 20.3 points. The interaction boosts that slightly to 22.8 points. For relative ideology, we will shift the range of variation. Since the measure is in relation to the mean, the meaningful comparison is to vary the value from two standard deviations above the mean to the mean itself, which increases the probability by 1.5 points. (And, obviously, there is no contextual variable to vary).

There are two conclusions to distill from this array of results. First, we have seen confirmation of an underappreciated perspective on why education has such explanatory power in models of political participation. Education is, at least in part, a social sorting mechanism, and so the participatory boost that results from having a college degree diminishes as college degrees become more common within a district.[22] Second, we have seen further evidence that engagement in local, including school, politics simply does not increase in environments where political conflict is expected to result because individuals differ from others in their surroundings. On the contrary, the individual-contextual interaction terms for religious

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[22] Note that this particular application of education's impact as relative, rather than absolute, is an extension of the model developed in Nie, Junn, Stehlik-Barry's *Education and Democratic Citizenship*. They do not incorporate geographic differences into their model, as I do here.

involvement and political ideology suggest that people are more likely to make a participatory investment in their communities and schools where they are surrounded by people who share their degree of religious involvement and political ideology. The comparable interaction for race does not clear the bar for statistical significance, but nonetheless points in the same direction.

Conclusion

Imagine that you wanted to design school districts so as to increase their residents' participation in school affairs.[23] What could you learn from this analysis? In answering that question, there are obviously some factors that impact participation which are more amenable to policy manipulation than others. For example, increasing the average education in a district would undoubtedly increase the level of participation, but this would be an extremely tall task for local policymakers.[24] Similarly, it is difficult to see what policymakers could do to affect the level of religious involvement within a community, putting aside both its political impracticality and constitutional infeasibility.

Even the one school district characteristic that seems most policy-pliable turns out to be fraught with complexity. As we have seen, size matters. Or at least, size of population matters. Smaller districts have higher levels of participation (although not by much), especially among people who have children of school age. Therefore, one reform to enhance participation in school affairs would be to create districts with smaller populations. Even this seemingly straightforward reform, however, is not as simple as it seems, at least if we look at the results among parents of school-age children. Based on these data, if we wanted to facilitate

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[23] It is important to keep in mind that while this portion of the discussion will focus on participation in meetings that deal with school affairs, as noted the dependent variable in the foregoing analysis covers a broader range of meetings.

[24] Although, as we have seen, there is a diminishing returns process at work. As the average education level increases, the impact of education at the individual level drops off.

participation among parents, school districts should simultaneously increase in area, decrease in population, and increase in population density!

The findings for heterogeneity are potentially far more explosive, but no less complex. A naïve reading of this analysis might lead to the suggestion that policymakers craft racially homogeneous school districts in order to enhance participation. Given that sheer demography ensures that America's communities are only going to become increasingly diverse as time marches on, this is hardly a practical suggestion. Beyond mere practicality, this sort of policy engineering would undoubtedly strike many Americans as morally suspect. (Although, it should be noted that it is analogous to drawing congressional districts along racial lines, which is widely done with the endorsement and even encouragement of the courts).

At the very least, the lesson to be learned is that America's increasing diversity, racially and along other dimensions too, presents a civic challenge. And the best hope for grappling with that challenge is understanding the nature of local participation. The fact that homogeneous communities, including school districts, have higher levels of localized participation suggests that something other than a Madisonian "clash of interests" motivates this type of engagement. To borrow Mansbridge's (1980) felicitous terms , attendance at meetings on local and school affairs appears to be better characterized as a form of *unitary* rather than *adversary* democracy. With that insight, the real challenge is to design our public institutions, including school boards, to foster a sense of solidarity within local communities.

At this point, I am not prepared to offer specific, empirically-grounded policy proposals to foster such solidarity, and thus enhance participation. However, it is fair to say that far from being a pie-in-the-sky objective, experience has shown that such institutions can be designed at the local level. In a compelling study, Berry, Portney, and Thomson (1993) highlight the

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positive participatory impact when cities create small-scale neighborhood associations with real

decision-making power. Interestingly, when applied to school districts this would seem to be

consistent with the observation that smaller is better. Nevertheless, with the data at hand it

would be premature to propose that school boards adopt any specific institutional features to

enhance participation in the governance of the local schools. Before we know what works, two

things have to happen. First, school boards must take up the challenge to serve as laboratories of

democratic engagement, experimenting with different ways to thicken the connections between

school officials and their constituents. Second, these efforts – many of which are undoubtedly

already underway – must be evaluated rigorously, with an eye toward determining the best

practices for enhancing participation in the governance of local public schools.

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Appendix

Question wordings in the SCCBS

School-age children

How many children, aged seventeen or younger live, in your household?
And how many of these children are six years of age or older.

Coded as 1 if respondent has at least one child between ages six and eighteen living at home

Education

What is the highest grade of school or year of education you have completed?
1. Less then high school
2. High school diploma (including GED)
3. Some college
4. Assoc. degree (2 year) or specialized training
5. Bachelor's degree
6. Some graduate training
7. Graduate or professional degree

Household income

If you added together the yearly incomes, before taxes, of all the members of your household for last year, 1999, would the total be:

1. Less than $30,000 or
2. $30,000 or more

If (1)
Would that be
1. $20,000 or less
2. Over $20,000 but less than $30,000

If (2)
Would that be
1. $30,000 but less than $50,000
2. $50,000 but less than $75,000
3. $75,000 but less than $100,000
4. $100,000 or more

Age

In what year were you born?
(Subtracted from 1999 to determine age)

Homeowner

Do you or your family own the place where you are living now, or do you rent?
Coded as 1 if homeowner

Years in community
How many years have you lived in your community?

1. Less than one year
2. One to five years
3. Six to ten years
4. Eleven to twenty years
5. More than twenty years
6. All my life

Female
(Interviewers coded respondent's gender. If necessary, they were instructed to say "I am recording that you are a male/female").

Race
Do you consider yourself Hispanic or Latino?
If yes: Do you consider yourself to be White or Black?

If no: Do you consider yourself to be White, Black or African American, Asian or Pacific Islander, Native American, or some other race?

Interest in Politics
How interested are you in politics and national affairs?

1. Very interested
2. Somewhat interested
3. Only slightly interested
4. Not at all interested

Trust in neighbors
Think about people in your neighborhood. Generally speaking, would you say   that you can trust them

1. A lot
2. Some
3. Only a little
4. Not at all

Religious involvement (Described in the SCCBS codebook as "faith-based social capital" and identified as variable "faithba2")

Factor score of the following variables:

Not including weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services?

1. Every week (or more often)
2. Almost every week
3. Once or twice a month
4. A few times per year
5. Less often than that

Are you a member of a local church, synagogue, or other religious or spiritual community?

In the past 12 months, have you taken part in any sort of activity with people at your church or place of worship other than attending services? This might include teaching Sunday School, serving on a committee, attending choir rehearsal, retreat, or other things.

People and families contribute money, property, or other assets for a wide variety of charitable purposes. During the past twelve months, approximately how much money did you and the other family members in your household contribute to all religious causes, including your local religious congregation?

1. None
2. Less than $100
3. $100 to less than $500
4. $500 to less than $1000
5. $1000 to less than $5000
6. More than $5000

I am going to list some of the types of organizations where people do volunteer work. Just tell me whether you have done any volunteer work for each in the past twelve months.

. . .For your place of worship

Now I'd like to ask you about other kinds of groups and organizations. I'm going to read a list; just answer yes if you have been involved in the past twelve months with this kind of group.

. . . Besides your local place of worship, any organization affiliated with religion, such as the Knights of Columbus or B'nai B'rith, or a bible study group.

Table 1. Attendance At Town And School Meetings
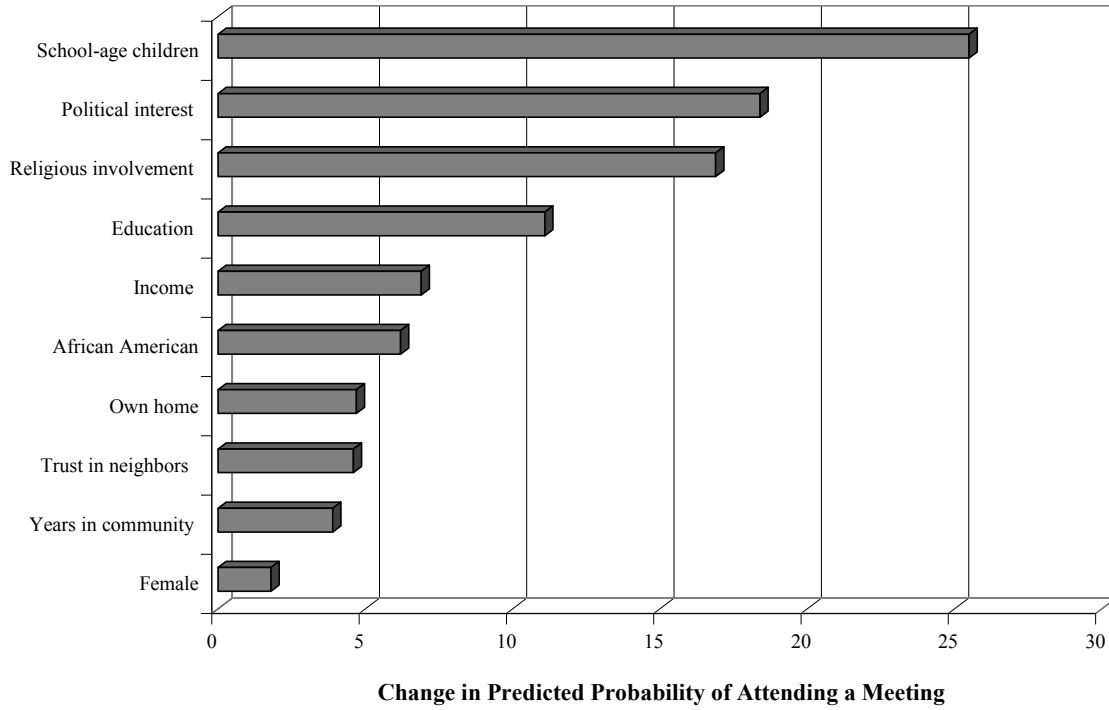Individual-level factors
Results from logistic regression

	(1)	(2) People with school-age kids only
School-age children	1.043*** (0.048)	
Education	0.913*** (0.068)	1.015*** (0.148)
Household income	0.466*** (0.080)	0.510*** (0.128)
Age	0.855 (0.780)	4.275** (1.915)
Age squared	-2.737** (1.085)	-7.865** (3.342)
Homeowner	0.196*** (0.056)	0.087 (0.079)
Years in community	0.265*** (0.063)	0.135 (0.125)
Female	0.075* (0.039)	0.194*** (0.065)
African American	0.250*** (0.062)	0.177* (0.092)
Hispanic	-0.158 (0.104)	-0.118 (0.172)
Asian American	-0.231* (0.133)	-0.349 (0.229)
Other races	0.102 (0.091)	0.133 (0.174)
Interest in politics	1.129*** (0.062)	1.171*** (0.087)
Trust in neighbors	0.279*** (0.080)	0.475*** (0.120)
Religious involvement	1.195*** (0.088)	1.200*** (0.108)
Constant	-2.794*** (0.095)	-2.099*** (0.156)
Observations	21056	6360
Pseudo-R^2	0.13	0.12

Robust standard errors in parentheses (with clustering by community). All variables coded 0-1.
* significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%

Source: Social Capital Community Benchmark Study

Figure 1. Impact of Individual-level Factors on Attendance at Meetings

Change in Predicted Probability of Attending a Meeting

First differences generated from logistic regression; all control variables set at their means.

Table 2. Attendance At Town And School Meetings
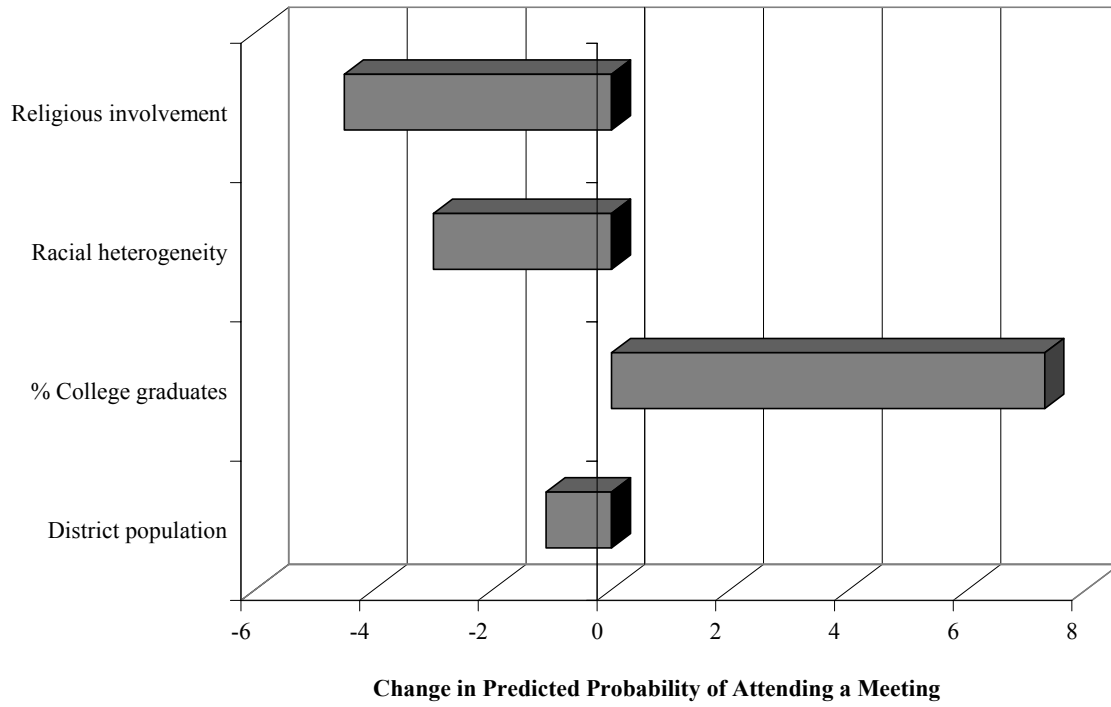### Contextual factors
Results from logistic regression

	(1)	(2) *People with school-age kids only*
Individual-level		
School-age children	1.066*** (0.044)	
Education	0.882*** (0.078)	0.928*** (0.166)
Household income	0.535*** (0.079)	0.603*** (0.124)
Age	1.300 (0.805)	6.480*** (2.084)
Age squared	-3.337*** (1.116)	-11.379*** (3.637)
Homeowner	0.171*** (0.059)	0.047 (0.092)
Years in community	0.243*** (0.075)	0.115 (0.126)
Female	0.091** (0.040)	0.224*** (0.073)
African American	0.291*** (0.060)	0.150* (0.087)
Hispanic	-0.079 (0.153)	0.030 (0.201)
Asian American	-0.159 (0.172)	-0.281 (0.285)
Other races	0.050 (0.102)	-0.071 (0.185)
Interest in politics	1.093*** (0.070)	1.157*** (0.107)
Trust in neighbors	0.252*** (0.086)	0.449*** (0.114)
Religious involvement	1.339*** (0.086)	1.257*** (0.121)
Contextual		
School district size (area)	9.032 (6.495)	24.284* (14.717)
School district population	-0.780*** (0.280)	-2.553*** (0.741)
School district population density	0.824 (0.514)	1.940* (1.038)
% college graduates in school district	1.038*** (0.346)	1.023** (0.456)
Median income in school district	1.324 (3.866)	3.756 (5.981)
Median income squared	-2.557 (4.149)	-4.793 (6.254)
Economic heterogeneity in school district	-0.823 (1.050)	-0.870 (1.315)
Racial heterogeneity in school district	-0.249** (0.123)	0.024 (0.286)

Ideological heterogeneity in community	-0.742 (1.008)	-0.095 (1.094)
Religious involvement in community	-0.372** (0.177)	-0.052 (0.216)
Constant	-1.277 (1.139)	-1.741 (1.096)
Observations	18832	5652
Pseudo-R^2	0.14	0.12

Robust standard errors in parentheses (with clustering by community). All variables coded 0-1.
* significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%

Source: Social Capital Community Benchmark Study

Figure 2. Impact of Contextual Factors on Attendance at Meetings

Change in Predicted Probability of Attending a Meeting

First differences generated from logistic regression; all control variables set at their means.

Table 3. Attendance At Town And School Meetings
Individual-Contextual Interactions
Results from logistic regression

|	(1)	(2) *People with school-age kids only*
Individual-level		
School-aged children	1.043*** (0.049)	
College degree	0.649*** (0.131)	0.107 (0.200)
Household income	0.797*** (0.236)	0.985** (0.413)
Age	2.095** (0.818)	8.023*** (2.172)
Age squared	-4.398*** (1.163)	-13.490*** (3.772)
Homeowner	0.164*** (0.060)	0.030 (0.095)
Female	0.101** (0.041)	0.232*** (0.076)
Years in community	0.197*** (0.075)	0.087 (0.125)
Religious involvement	1.463*** (0.087)	1.410*** (0.112)
White	-0.029 (0.114)	0.113 (0.220)
Interest in politics	1.142*** (0.067)	1.228*** (0.110)
Trust in neighbors	0.245*** (0.085)	0.429*** (0.115)
Contextual		
School district size (area)	5.555 (6.102)	24.615* (13.472)
School district population	-0.893*** (0.244)	-2.712*** (0.704)
School district population density	0.782 (0.558)	1.894* (1.025)
% college graduates in school district	1.427*** (0.333)	1.102** (0.484)
Median income in school district	-1.136*** (0.432)	-0.806 (0.616)
Economic heterogeneity in school district	-0.497 (0.471)	0.071 (0.513)
Racial heterogeneity in school district	-0.206 (0.217)	0.171 (0.360)
Ideological heterogeneity in community	-0.519 (1.033)	0.051 (1.225)
Religious involvement in community	-0.290* (0.167)	-0.024 (0.232)

Individual-Contextual Interactions		
College degree X % College graduates	-0.752* (0.399)	0.638 (0.647)
White X Racial heterogeneity in school district	-0.106 (0.230)	-0.187 (0.385)
Religious involvement X Community religious involvement	0.556* (0.311)	0.273 (0.360)
Household Income X Median Income in school district	-0.410 (0.506)	-0.682 (0.972)
Relative ideology	-0.131* (0.079)	-0.393*** (0.152)
Constant	-1.783** (0.857)	-2.404** (1.086)
Observations	18459	5529
Pseudo-R^2	0.13	0.12

Robust standard errors in parentheses (with clustering by community). All variables coded 0-1.

* significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%

Source: Social Capital Community Benchmark Study

Figure 3. Impact of Individual-Contextual Interactions on Attendance at Meetings
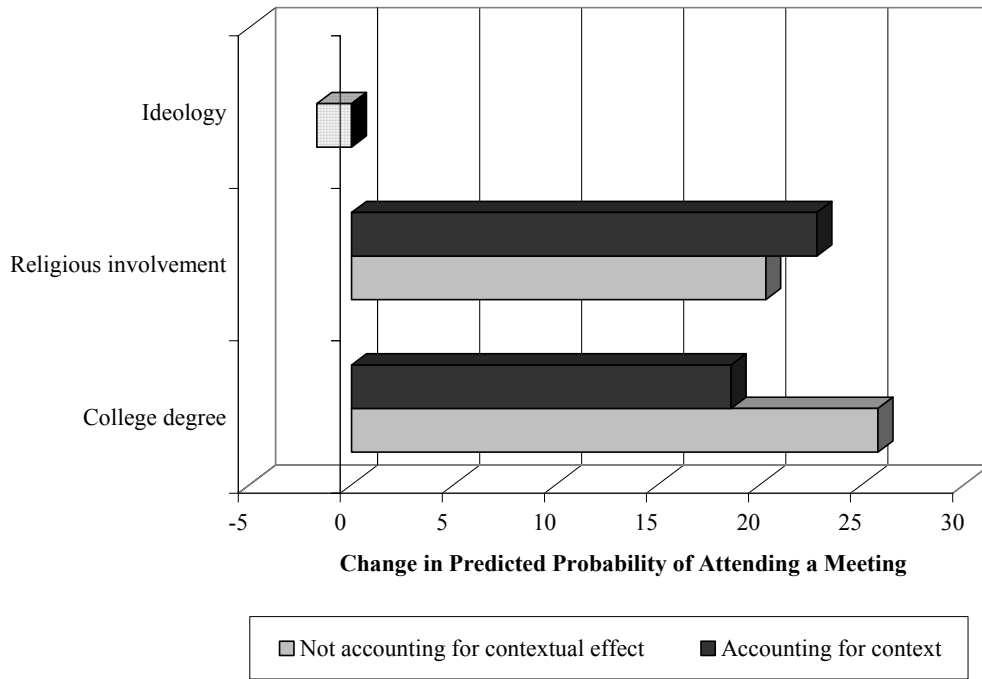
First differences generated from logistic regression; all control variables set at their means. When accounting for context, the individual-level, contextual, and interaction terms have all been varied from one standard deviation below to one above the mean. When not accounting for context, the interaction term has been held at its mean, while the other two terms vary across the same range. Relative ideology varies from two standard deviations above its mean to its mean.