

**Policy Feedback and Political Participation:  
Effects of the G.I. Bill for World War II Veterans Over the Life Course**

Suzanne Mettler  
Dept. of Political Science  
Maxwell School of Citizenship and  
Public Affairs  
Syracuse University  
Eggers 100  
Syracuse, NY 13244  
(315) 443-9325  
FAX: (315) 443-9082  
[smettler@maxwell.syr.edu](mailto:smettler@maxwell.syr.edu)

Eric Welch  
Dept. of Public Administration  
College of Urban Planning and  
Public Affairs  
University of Illinois at Chicago  
412 South Peoria St., Room 139  
Chicago, IL 60607  
(312) 413-2416  
FAX: (312) 996-8804  
[ewwelch@uic.edu](mailto:ewwelch@uic.edu)

We wish to thank Jeff Stonecash for discussing various aspects of this paper with us, and Andrew Milstein, Lori Beth Way, and McGee Young for research assistance. This research was supported generously by the National Academy of Education Postdoctoral Fellowship program and the Spencer Foundation, as well as the Center for Policy Research and Center for Demography and Economics of Aging, both in the Maxwell School at Syracuse University.

## Abstract

The G.I. Bill of Rights enabled 7.8 million veterans—a substantial portion of the “civic generation”—to attend college or acquire vocational training. How might inclusion in this program have affected the extent of beneficiaries’ subsequent involvement in politics? This paper presents newly collected data that permits examination of both the determinants of G.I. Bill usage and the subsequent effects of the program for recipients’ political participation across three time periods between 1950-1998. A two-stage model is used that allows us to control for endogenous factors that predict G.I. Bill use when we examine effects for participation thereafter. Drawing on policy feedback theory, we find that interpretive effects of the policy produced increased levels of participation among users generally in the immediate post-war era. Subsequently, the resource effects of the policy enhanced participation rates significantly among users at varying rates depending on level of educational attainment. Overall, the policy had a highly democratizing effect, depressing the usual socio-economic determinants of both advanced education and political participation.

Robert Putnam and others have identified a “civic generation,” a cohort of people born in the 1920s who contributed to the “golden age” of civic activity in the 1950s and 1960s, and continued to participate throughout their lives at higher levels than subsequent generations of Americans (Putnam 2000, 254; Strauss and Howe 1991, 261-78). Interestingly, these Americans’ formative years occurred during the Great Depression and World War II: a time when government, through new social programs, had begun to play a greater role in the lives of citizens than ever before. What role did these generous programs bear on citizens’ political activity over time? Current research fails to provide either an answer or a framework for investigating such a question. Scholars of American political development have examined the implications of programs for subsequent policymaking efforts, but refrained from probing the effects for political participation among citizens. Those who focus on the life course and political participation have offered little attention to historical context, neglecting to analyze the relationship between government and citizens during the formative periods of life. A promising approach is suggested by calls for examination of how public policies have feedback effects for political activity of citizens (Pierson 1993), but only a few studies have begun to pursue that agenda (Soss 1999, Campbell 2000).

This paper examines the effects of the educational benefits of the G.I. Bill of Rights, a program that enabled 51% of World War II veterans— 7.8 million members of the “civic generation”—to attend college or to acquire vocational training (U.S. President’s Commission on Veterans’ Pensions 1956a, 287). It presents newly collected data that permits examination of both the determinants of G.I. Bill usage and the subsequent effects of the program for recipients’ political participation across three time periods between 1950-1998. A two-stage model is used that allows us to control for endogenous factors that predict G.I. Bill use when we examine effects for participation thereafter. It is found that interpretive effects of the policy produced increased levels of participation among users generally in the immediate post-war era. Subsequently, the resource effects of the policy enhanced participation rates significantly among users at rates that varied with level of educational attainment. Overall, the policy had a highly democratizing effect, depressing the usual socio-economic determinants of both advanced education and political participation.

## **APPROACHES TO STUDYING PARTICIPATION, THE LIFE COURSE, AND GENERATIONS**

Studies of individuals’ political participation over time generally focus on differences in participation either by age or by stage in the life cycle. Such analyses have grown increasingly sophisticated, recently highlighting how citizens’ participation in institutional settings, networks or relationships can affect their subsequent political involvement. Scholars have demonstrated how education, marriage, or participation in the work place or civic associations foster greater involvement in politics at later stages of life (Langton 1980; Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995, Chap. 13; Stoker and Jennings 1995; Strate, et al. 1989; Erickson and Nosanchuck 1990; Peterson 1992; Baumgartner and Walker 1988; Wald, Kellstedt and Legee 1993). New research focuses on individuals as members of generations, analyzing group levels of social trust and civic engagement, or showing how younger generations are socialized toward political participation by older generations through family lineage (Jennings and Stoker 2001; Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995, chap. 15; Verba, Burns and Scholzman 2001). Despite their rich contributions, these approaches neglect to examine how political and historical circumstances might affect a generation of individuals who experience them at the same stage in the life cycle (Braungart and Braungart 1986, 215; Sapiro 1994).

Earlier research on generations focused more deliberately on the broader social and political milieu experienced by cohort groups, given that they are at the same point in their life cycle at a particular juncture in history (Cutler 1977; Featherman 1981; Elder 1975). Some stressed broad social indicators such as the level of economic growth, changes in occupational structure, the state of technological innovation, and the education of the population (Inglehart 1977; Inglehart 1979). Others emphasized the impact of particular historical events on the life course of a cohort group (Elder 1981). Relevant to this study, Glen Elder and his co-authors looked extensively at the effect of war mobilization and military service for young people on later occupational achievement, marriage, and health (Elder, Gimbel and Ivie 1991; Elder 1986; Elder 1987). Jennings and Niemi suggested the possible political consequences of such experiences by identifying ages 17 to 25 as the critical period during which a “political-cultural consciousness” can be formed, establishing a distinctive, self-conscious generation (1981, 7-8; also Braungart and Braungart 1986, 217). They stressed the formative influence of education (Jennings and Niemi 1981, chap. 8), while others noted that coming of age at the time of war seems to promote higher levels of political participation subsequently (Bennett 1986, 104-5).

While this approach offers more attention to the timing of historical events within individuals’ lives, still it neglects to examine the relationship between the state and citizens in any given time period. Scholars who stress the role of education, for instance, do not investigate the importance that educational policy may have (Jennings and Niemi 1981, chap. 8). Those who emphasize the role of war explain such effects as the result of enduring shared adversity, but refrain from delving more deeply into the role of government itself, which is necessarily important at the time of war (Putnam 2000, 268-72). Neither approach to studying individuals’ political participation over time, therefore, analyzes the role that government may play in shaping such outcomes.

The policy feedback literature offers a promising theoretical framework for examining a proposition suggested long ago by political scientists: that policies themselves may shape subsequent political activity (Schattschneider 1935; Lowi 1964). Those adopting this approach have shown how policies affect the political activity of organized interests or political elites, with consequences for subsequent policymaking efforts (Skocpol 1992, 57-60; Weir 1992; Orloff 1993, 89-92). Some years ago, Paul Pierson called for more attention to policy feedback effects for “mass publics,” meaning citizens generally. He proposed analysis of two dynamics: (1) resource effects: how resources and incentives provided by policies shape patterns of behavior; and (2) interpretive effects: how policies convey meanings and information to citizens (1993). Recently, scholars have begun to pursue this agenda, probing why government programs vary in their effects for political action (Soss 1999, Campbell 2000). The time is ripe to develop a more specific version of policy feedback analysis that can help us to understand the effects for civic activity over time.

## **POLICY FEEDBACK EFFECTS FOR CIVIC ACTIVITY AND THE G.I. BILL: THEORY AND HYPOTHESES**

In order to make Pierson’s approach more applicable to explaining the effects of policy for participation, we have developed it further by incorporating concepts from public policy and political participation literature. In order to understand the means by which policy shapes civic activity, we integrate a focus on the tools and rules of policy design, highlighted by Schneider and Ingram. This approach is especially useful for elaborating the dynamics inherent in interpretive effects (1997, 93-99). We also draw on Verba, Scholzman and Brady’s Civic Voluntarism Model, with its attention to the impact of resources (free time, money and civic skills) and psychological predisposition (attributes such as political efficacy,

a sense of civic duty, or a group consciousness of having ones' fate linked to others) (1995, pp. 270-2).

[Figure I about here]

The resulting theoretical framework, illustrated in Figure I, extends policy feedback theory for mass publics to specify how policy may affect citizens' civic involvement, broadly understood as both political participation and memberships in civic organizations. First, the resources bestowed on citizens through policy, whether in the form of payments, goods or services, have distinct *resource effects* for individuals' material well-being and life opportunities, and thus directly affect their *capacity* (meaning ability, aptitude or faculty) for participation. Second, features of policy design, including administrative rules and procedures and the form and scope of eligibility and coverage, have *interpretive effects* for citizens. Through such features, a citizen acquires a perception of his role in the community, his status in relation to other citizens and government, and the extent to which a policy has affected his life. As a result, policy design shapes citizens' psychological *predisposition* to participate in public life. In addition, the resources offered through a policy have interpretive effects, inasmuch as citizens perceive those aspects of government programs to affect their life circumstances. Finally, resource effects influence civic predisposition: education, for example, promotes attitudes of civic duty (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, 36).

An recent study tested the proposition that the educational benefits of the G.I. Bill may have had resource and incentive effects that promoted increased participation among beneficiaries in the immediate postwar era. Controlling for other key variables such as level of education, results showed that the G.I. Bill was a significant determinant of increased civic memberships and political participation among veterans in the 1950-64 period. Among several hypotheses tested, the policy feedback approach offered the best explanation of the increased participation, operating through two dynamics: (a) the resource effects of the policy, increased education, had a pronounced effect on individuals' *capacity* to be involved, and (b) to the extent that individuals perceived the G.I. Bill benefits as making a meaningful difference in their well-being and life opportunities, they had interpretive effects that promoted individuals' psychological *predisposition* for civic participation (Author 2001a).

In this paper, we will focus exclusively on political participation and we will refine this theory in two ways, both of which examine the G.I. Bill over time. First, we will control for endogenous characteristics that may have influenced usage of the G.I. Bill for education when we analyze effects of usage for political participation. Hypothetically, those who used the G.I. Bill might have differed in some fundamental way from those who did not, and that difference might explain subsequent differences in participation. This possibility, the pre-existing characteristics hypothesis, has already been examined partially, and the results showed that the significance of G.I. Bill usage for civic activity is not reducible to socio-economic background, parents' civic activity, or veteran status (Author 2001a). It is still possible, though that the G.I. Bill users shared some personality or behavioral trait—being more motivated or out-going, for instance—that made them different from non-users, and that it is the source of the disparity in participation rates. Here we will control for that possibility by using a two-stage model. We hypothesize that G.I. Bill use will remain a significant determinant of political involvement among beneficiaries in the period most proximate to G.I. Bill usage, 1950-64.

Second, we will examine the determinants of political involvement over the next two time periods in individuals' lives, 1964-1979 and 1980-98. It is reasonable to expect that the interpretive effects of the G.I. Bill would diminish over time, once individuals' experience of the program faded in their consciousness. Other analysis has shown that the G.I. Bill was a significant determinant of increased educational levels among World War II veterans (Author

2001b). These resource effects, by contrast to interpretive effects, are likely to become amplified over time. This is because those who have higher rates of education become more richly endowed with those factors that determine political participation—job networks, income, and skills—as their lives progress (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995, 433-37). We expect, therefore, that while the direct effects of G.I. Bill usage may become less important over time in determining participation rates, the increased educational level among beneficiaries-- the primary resource effect of the program- will continue to be a significant determinant of participation in later periods.

## **THE DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

Most studies of participation are based on large data sets that include numerous variables regarding demographic characteristics and attitudes but little about government programs. Such data are useless for studying the G.I. Bill's effects since they lack indicators about program participation. Conversely, though a few surveys of veterans conducted shortly after World War II permit analysis of the characteristics of G.I. Bill beneficiaries and the socio-economic effects of the program, they failed to ask about participation in civic and political life (eg. U.S. General Accounting Office 1951; Frederiksen and Schraeder 1951). In order to conduct systematic analysis for this study, therefore, it was necessary to collect original data.

The use of a survey and in-depth, open-ended interviews permitted the collection of both quantitative data and qualitative data. Because no ready means of access to a national, random sample of all World War II veterans was available, it was necessary to find an alternative means of reaching veterans. Many survivors from World War II military units have formed their own veterans' organizations, groups that typically have mailing lists, generate newsletters, and hold reunions. Several such organizations were contacted in an attempt to locate a few that were sufficiently different from each other and large enough to include veterans with a wide range of personal backgrounds, military ranks, and wartime experiences. Lists from four military units were used, including two from the U.S. Army (87<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, 89<sup>th</sup> Division) and two from the U.S. Army Air Force (379<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group; 783<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Squadron, 465<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group). These units included only men; also, because the World War II military was still segregated, African Americans served in separate units, none of which were included in this version of the survey.

A mail survey of 1,000 veterans investigated such topics as family background, political activities, military service, education and training, the G.I. Bill, occupational history, and demographics. Most of the questions had been used in prior surveys, but never combined in a single survey in a manner that would permit systematic analysis.<sup>1</sup> The data permits investigation of the G.I. Bill's consequences for participation in political activities, while controlling for level of education and various socio-economic background factors. The survey subjects were randomly selected from 4,000 names on the World War II military unit organizations' lists. Surveys mailings were sent as many as three times to each subject in order to limit bias from early respondents. The survey yielded 716 completed surveys, a 73.5% response rate.

The possible sources of bias in a sample based on military unit associations were considered. Regional biases were not a concern because World War II units were drawn from the nation as a whole, and veterans who served in such units and belong to their

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<sup>1</sup> Questions were drawn from surveys such as the U.S. Census, World Values Survey, General Social Survey, the 1990 Citizen Participation Study conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, and various conducted by the U.S. Veterans' Administration.

associations live throughout the nation. Concerns that group membership might be highly correlated to participation were alleviated through the interviews, which revealed that not all members had even initiated their own membership status, and that the percentage who actually attend reunions and participate actively is small. Survey questions confirmed the wide disparity in degrees of involvement in the organizations.

The fact that several decades have elapsed since the G.I. Bill was administered necessitated careful attention to constraints upon subjects' memory and recall. Before designing the survey, several open-ended interviews were conducted with veterans. This process, as well as the pre-test of the survey and focus group meeting that followed, helped guide the survey design process, limiting questions to those that veterans answer readily and with confidence. Participation in the war and the pursuit of education thereafter constitute landmark events in the autobiographical knowledge of most veterans, and as such, are memorable (Touranguau, Rips and Rasinski 2000, 67-83). Techniques were used that are known to improve accuracy of responses: a survey instrument that gave respondents ample time to answer questions, and questions organized in a framework that facilitated both forward (chronological) and backward recall (Touranguau, Rips and Rasinski 2000, 94-95, 146). These measures are discussed further in Appendix A.

The timing of the survey made it imperative to pay close attention to the representativeness of the sample. Conceivably, differential death rates among subgroups in the population mean that a sample drawn in 1998 is likely to differ systematically from one drawn in the immediate postwar era. Among survey respondents, veterans who used the G.I. Bill for education constituted 60.8% of the total, 10% higher than among the original population. Considerable variation exists within the groups of G.I. Bill users and non-users in terms of level of education completed prior to military service. Given that the sample included some individuals who had pursued advanced education prior to military service, each group had respondents from each of nine different educational levels. While such variation assures us that we can control for important background variables, we do need to recognize that the majority of G.I. Bill users who responded to the survey pursued higher education whereas the majority in the original population enrolled in vocational training. The underrepresentation of vocational training participants in the data means that it will be necessary to consider the distinct consequences of each type of program usage. The representativeness of the sample is analyzed further in Appendix B.

The qualitative component of the research consisted of 28 semi-structured, open-ended interviews with veterans in all regions of the United States. Their names were drawn from the same lists as those used for the survey.<sup>2</sup> The interview covered the same basic topics as the survey, but while the survey data allows for systematic comparisons between groups, the interviews offer the opportunity to probe responses in greater depth and to understand their meaning in the context of individual lives (Hochschild 1981). They allow exploration of G.I. Bill beneficiaries' perceptions regarding: the significance of the policy for their lives, the character of the military unit in which they served or the college or university they attended on the G.I. Bill, the differential effects of military and wartime experience, the role of education, and beneficiaries' civic and political participation in the 1950-1964 period as distinguished from the present. Each interview lasted between one-and-a-half and three hours. Analysis of the survey data and interview data is an interactive process: I alternately

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<sup>2</sup> These interviews were conducted in all regions of the United States. Before each trip, letters requesting interviews were sent to about 30 individuals living within a two hour radius of a base location. Among those who agreed to be interviewed, 5-7 individuals were selected who lived in a variety of different neighborhoods and areas.

investigate the survey data regarding questions or patterns suggested by the interviews, and return to interviews in search of a contextual understanding of how aggregate trends in the survey data are manifested in the lives of individuals.

## **RESEARCH STRATEGY AND VARIABLES**

In the first stage of the analysis, we predict usage of the G.I. Bill educational benefits. Some scholars have suggested that the G.I. Bill only privileged already privileged individuals, paying the tuition of those who could have continued their education at their own expense (Campbell 1998; Story 1998). Analysis of the data used here has shown that in fact G.I. Bill usage was not biased strongly or primarily by socio-economic background. As a universal program, the educational benefits were utilized by some who could have enjoyed the same opportunities without them, but also made access to education a reality for the majority of users who could not have pursued it otherwise (Author 2001b).

Here we will conduct a simple version of this analysis in order to control for endogenous factors predicting G.I. Bill usage in the second stage of the analysis. We will run a logistic regression in which a dummy variable for G.I. Bill program usage is the dependent variable (coded 1 for use, 0 for non-use).<sup>3</sup> The independent variables include socio-economic and socialization factors that are widely considered to be important determinants of educational attainment (Bachman, O'Malley and Johnston 1978; Rehberg and Rosenthal 1978; Sewell and Shah 1967). The socio-economic background variables include parent's level of education, measured on a scale ranging from no formal schooling to graduate or professional degree (1-7),<sup>4</sup> and standard of living in childhood during the 1920s, indicated on a five-category response (from low to high).<sup>5</sup> While standard of living is based on subjective judgment, scholars have found that most people perceive their socio-economic status accurately (Milbrath and Goel 1977, 91). As a socialization factor, we used a five-category response that measures the extent to which individuals were encouraged, while growing up, to pursue an education by family members or others (from strongly discouraged to strongly encouraged). Also included was level of education attained before joining the military, also measured on a nine point scale from elementary school to advanced graduate work.

For the second stage of the analysis, we will test a model of the determinants of political activity in each of three different time periods, 1950-64, 1965-79, and 1980-98, as well as a lifetime average. We have operationalized the dependent variable, political participation, as the sum of participation in a wide range of activities in any given time period or, in the case of lifetime average, as the average of political activity levels across the three

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<sup>3</sup> G.I. Bill usage is the dependent variable rather than level of educational attainment because the majority of veterans used the benefits to attain vocational training rather than to attend a college or university, and such programs did not increase veterans' formal education as it is typically measured.

<sup>4</sup> This variable consists of fathers' level of education except in 37 cases in which it was not available and mothers' level of education could be substituted. Given the large number of cases still missing data for this variable, which sharply reduced the number of cases in the regressions, the unconditional mean was imputed for data that was still missing. The main results of each regression analysis are the same regardless of whether data is imputed for this variable or not.

<sup>5</sup> We chose to use the 1920s rather than the 1930s because it was a more "normal" time and would be likely to indicate more about the persistent socio-economic status of families than the Depression Era, when so many fell into worse living conditions than they experienced generally.

time periods. The survey includes several sets of questions about types of political activities and asks respondents to specify if they ever engaged in such activities, and if so, on how many occasions and during which periods of time. The types of involvement include: ever contacted a political official to communicate concerns about some problem or issue; worked on a campaign for a candidate running for national, state, or local office; served on any official local government board or council that deals with community problems or issues; contributed money to an individual candidate, party or other organization that supported candidates; ever participated in a protest, march, or demonstration. We added together responses to these questions (each individual variable was coded as 0 or 1) separately for 1950-64, 1965-79, and 1980-98.

The rates of veterans' participation by period in each of the five types of political activities combined in the dependent variable are shown in Table I. Veterans' participation in two of these activities, contacting political officials about some problem or issue and contributing money to a campaign, has increased dramatically over time. These specific findings are consistent with Verba, Schlozman and Brady's findings for the general population. They explain such shifts as responses to changes in political institutions, such as the rise of citizen groups and political action committees and the decline of political parties, which have "redefined the role of the citizen activist as, increasingly, a writer of checks and letters (1995, 73)." On other measures of participation, veterans activity peaked in the mid-life period, 1965-79, but declined only slightly in the latter period, 1980-98.

[Table I about here]

The survey contains data on several explanatory variables that are widely considered to be important determinants of political participation. Individuals' level of educational attainment is regarded as a highly significant determinant (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, 35-36; Jennings and Niemi 1981, Chap. 8), one which must be distinguished from use of the G.I. Bill itself. This variable is measured on a scale from elementary school to advanced graduate work (1-9). Standard of living during the 1960s will be used as a measure of socio-economic well-being during the first two time periods under investigation and for the lifetime average, and current standard of living will be used for the latter time period. Each of these variables is measured on a scale from low to high (1-5). Scholars know that individuals' participation in early adulthood is highly influenced by parents' level of participation (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995, chap. 15), so parents' political activity, ranked on a scale from not active to very active (1-5) will be part of the model for the first time period only. Because all in the sample are veterans and members of the same generation, it was unnecessary to control for those variables. Finally, the predicted values of G.I. Bill use, saved from the dependent variable of the stage one regression, will be used as an independent variable.<sup>6</sup> Ordinary least-squares regression will be used to test the model.

Finally, we will test an interactive version of the political activity model in order to isolate the effects of G.I. Bill use in combination with particular levels of education. This will be necessary in order to examine whether the level of education attained by G.I. Bill users was significant in determining subsequent participation. We will create five interactive dummy variables, as follows: G.I. Bill use combined with educational level of four year college degree or more; G.I. Bill use combined with some college or two-year college degree; G.I. Bill use combined with high school completion or less education; no G.I. Bill use

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<sup>6</sup> We have chosen not to use lagged variables of predicted values of political activity in prior periods as independent variables in latter periods. The theoretical reasons for doing so are not strong, and the procedure would overshadow the variation in determinants from period to period.

combined with some college or more education; no G.I. Bill use combined with high school completion or less education. The last variable listed will not appear in the regression.

## RESULTS

### *Stage One: Determinants of G.I. Bill Use*

We begin by examining the determinants of G.I. Bill usage. The results of the logistic regression appear in Table II, with the results for vocational education beneficiaries and higher education presented separately.<sup>7</sup> Veterans were significantly more likely to use the vocational training benefits if they had less education prior to military service than others; in the case of the higher education provisions, those who had advanced further in school before participating in the war effort were significantly more likely to be users. Having been encouraged to pursue an education while growing up also proved to be a highly significant determinant in the case of higher education benefits. Parents' level of education was a significant positive determinant of use of the higher education benefits, though it was overshadowed by the socialization and preparedness factors. Conversely, those whose parents were less well educated were significantly more likely to use the vocational training benefits of the G.I. Bill. The other socio-economic factor, standard of living in the 1920s, proved to be insignificant in determining use of either educational benefit.

[Table II about here]

Some might expect that variables such as encouragement during childhood to pursue an education and pre-military education were highly correlated to socio-economic factors, but this is not the case.<sup>8</sup> In the interviews, veterans from a wide variety of different backgrounds, including some who grew up very poor or in lower-middle class homes, stressed that their family members had always emphasized the value of education. Neither is it unreasonable that level of education prior to military service proves not to have been biased by socio-economic level, given that Claudia Goldin has shown that secondary-school enrollment and graduation rates increased dramatically in the United States during the early twentieth century, especially in nonsouthern states with greater wealth and greater homogeneity of wealth. Ironically, the Great Depression had boosted high school graduation rates by eliminating many of the jobs teenage males would fill, such that they attended school instead (Goldin 1998:371).

The regression results demonstrate that usage of the G.I. Bill was not biased primarily by the socio-economic factors that had typically determined educational attainment in the United States, especially in the mid-twentieth century and before. To the contrary, the G.I. Bill's educational provisions were quite broadly accessible to returning veterans and made educational institutions far more open to those from less privileged backgrounds than they would have been otherwise. The program extended new opportunities to many who had

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<sup>7</sup> The number of cases included in each regression throughout this paper is less than the total number of respondents and the number varies from one table to the next because of missing data. Respondents were asked to complete a 12-page mail survey that included over 200 individual questions. Although the proportion that answered each question was high, the subsamples in the analyses are lower in some cases because if a respondent skipped a single question used in variable construction, his case was excluded entirely.

<sup>8</sup> The bivariate correlation between standard of living in the 1920s and education encouraged while growing up, while significant at the .001 level, is low: .23. The same is true of standard of living and level of pre-military education, at .26. Similarly, the correlation between parents' level of education and both socialization variables is highly significant but low: .13 ( $p < .01$ ) for level of pre-military education, and .18 ( $p < .001$ ) for being encouraged to pursue an education.

been socialized to pursue more education but who would not otherwise have had the opportunity.

*Stage Two: Determinants of Political Participation Across Three Time Periods*

Next we examine the determinants of veterans' political participation within each of three time periods, starting with 1950-64. As summarized in Table III, the most striking result of the OLS regression is that the predicted values for use of the G.I. Bill's educational provisions were highly significant in determining the degree to which veterans participated in political activities in 1950-1964. This shows that even when controlling for the implicit or endogenous factors that led individuals to use the G.I. Bill, beneficiaries became significantly more active in political activities during the post-war era than those who did not benefit from the program. Not surprisingly, given the well-known connection between socialization in childhood and subsequent participation, veterans whose parents were active in political activity were also significantly more likely to become politically active themselves in early adulthood (Jennings and Niemi 1981, chap. 4; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995, 418-20, 437-38). Interestingly, neither level of education completed nor standard of living in 1960 bears a significant relationship to involvement in political activities in the immediate postwar era.<sup>9</sup>

[Table III about here]

These results show that the G.I. Bill had a direct and positive policy feedback effect during the postwar era, promoting participation in a wide range of political activities. They demonstrate, moreover, that G.I. Bill use, together with parents' influence, overwhelmed the usual socio-economic and educational determinants of political participation. In other words, veterans who came from lower socio-economic backgrounds and had less education were as likely to become involved in politics during the post-war era as veterans who were more privileged and educated. These results suggest that those who used the G.I. Bill for vocational education or for only some college education were as likely to become involved in politics as those who used it to complete college or attain a post-graduate degree.

The results for political activity over the next two time periods differ from those of the earlier time period. The predicted values of G.I. Bill use became less significant in determining political involvement during the 1965-79 period, and insignificant by the later period, 1980-98. Level of education, by contrast, emerged as most highly significant in determining outcomes in each period, and standard of living as significant.

The results for the latter time periods are more consistent with what scholars already know about political participation, given that level of education and socio-economic factors are important determinants. Meanwhile, the direct feedback effects of the G.I. Bill that were evident immediately after program implementation gradually faded as determinants of political activity. Still, given the relationship of the G.I. Bill benefits to educational attainment, it is possible that program effects are implicit within the level of education variable in latter periods. Several scholars have suggested that the G.I. Bill produced at least a modest increase in levels of education among World War II veterans (Eggertson 1972; Nam 1964; Bound and Turner 1999; Brown 1979). More recent analysis controlled for socio-economic and socialization variables missing in the aforementioned studies and revealed a more powerful role of the benefits in boosting educational attainment (Author 2001b). We

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<sup>9</sup> Scholars recognize that the determinants of participation are numerous, and thus it is not surprising to have a relatively low  $R^2$ . It should be noted, however, that the purpose here is not to include all the possible explanatory variables but rather to test those deemed most significant.

will turn shortly, therefore, to an examination of the interactive effects of G.I. Bill use and various levels of educational attainment.

The determinants of veterans' lifetime average political activity rates are shown in the far right-hand column in Table III. Level of education proves the most significant determinant over a lifetime. Predicted values of G.I. Bill use is also significant, though at a lower level. The fact that the G.I. Bill retains a significant, positive relationship to political activity over a lifetime is impressive, as is the fact that it overwhelmed the socio-economic factor. Not only did the program have direct effects for veterans' political involvements in the period immediately after they benefited from it, but it also had a significant effect on their average level of involvement over the long-term. Certainly, level of education is a much more powerful determinant of political activity over a lifetime, however, so we turn to an interactive model to better understand the relationship between it and G.I. Bill use.

[Table IV about here]

#### *Interactions between G.I. Bill Use and Level of Education*

In Table IV, we have presented the results of the interactive model across three time periods and for lifetime average political activity. All variables that were significant in the non-interactive model remain so in the interactive version.<sup>10</sup> The critical findings in the new table involve the interactive dummy variables, which permit us to understand the extent to which G.I. Bill users of particular levels of education became involved in politics. The results are intriguing. Across time, as the direct effects of the G.I. Bill independent of educational level waned, G.I. Bill users became significantly involved in politics to varying extents depending on their level of education. The greater the level of education attained, the more likely the G.I. Bill user was to become involved politically. The significance and strength of those relationships varied directly and predictably with level of education. We will now return to the theory of policy feedback for civic activity in order to make sense of these findings.

### **DISCUSSION: INTERPRETIVE AND RESOURCE EFFECTS OVER TIME**

These results suggest that the G.I. Bill had feedback effects for recipients' political participation over the life course, and that the dynamics through which such effects operated and the degree to which they affected different groups varied over time. In the first time period, immediately after the war, the program appears to have had interpretive effects that boosted participation among beneficiaries generally. Later, after the experience of benefiting from the program faded, still the policy appeared to boost participation but in relation to the degree of resources—or level of education—obtained through it. Here we will probe each of these dynamics in turn.

From 1950-64, the experience of having used the G.I. Bill had a direct effect on the political participation of beneficiaries generally, regardless of their educational level. The educational benefits shaped veterans' consciousness in ways that made them more inclined to participate in politics. In keeping with the theoretical framework in Figure 1, the policy design of the G.I. Bill is likely to have had interpretive effects that boosted participation. The interview data illustrate how such dynamics worked.

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<sup>10</sup> While we have retained the “predicted values, use of the G.I. Bill” variable here, “level of education completed” has been dropped as a lone variable and has been divided into three categories and combined with G.I. Bill use or non-use in the dummy variables. The reason is that we are testing whether G.I. Bill use as a resource mattered most at certain levels of education, while still controlling for endogenous characteristics that may have predicted G.I. Bill use.

First, the interpretive effects of the G.I. Bill were transmitted through the administrative rules and procedures of the program. The universal eligibility criteria, stratified only by length of military service, treated all veterans uniformly, without means-testing or other invasive procedures. The routinized process through which the provisions were administered bestowed dignity on recipients, regardless of socio-economic background, treating them as first-class citizens.<sup>11</sup> Those who used the benefits to go to college described smooth and efficient administrative procedures. As George Josten, a University of Illinois at Champaign Urbana graduate said, “We had to apply. I think it was processed through some regional offices, and then we simply got a (monthly stipend) check. I got a check for \$75.00 and the school was paid (tuition) directly. It was an extremely convenient arrangement.” Louis Bluestein recalled that he and his fellow veterans at DePaul University were treated “efficiently and courteously” by university administrators, professors, other students. “I never heard of any problems,” he added. “The student admissions office... took care of the paperwork. They were eager to have us.” Veterans who used the benefits for vocational training often remarked that considerable “paperwork” was involved in program administration, but emphasized that standardized procedures were applied uniformly to all. James Johnson, who received training to advance in his job at the Atlanta Gas Light Company, explained, “You had to take these tests. First I went as an apprentice then I was moved up to a 2<sup>nd</sup> class journeyman and then moved up from there to a 1<sup>st</sup> class journeyman [by passing] all the tests.” Beneficiaries generally expressed sentiments that concurred with Richard Colosimo, a laborer before the war who earned a BA at the University of Pittsburgh and part of an MA at the University of Southern California on the G.I. Bill: “We were treated with respect.” Such treatment gave veterans the sense of being incorporated as first-class citizens of the nation.

Second, the resources bestowed through the G.I. Bill—the tuition payments and stipends—were recognized as highly valuable by many veterans *and* they were administered in such a way that made veterans consciously aware that government had sponsored their education. Scholars have suggested that the visibility and traceability of government programs have an important bearing on their civic consequences among mass publics (Pierson 1993; Arnold 1990, 47-51). The fact that veterans readily identified the G.I. Bill as a government program and a generous one was evidenced by responses to the interview question, “What does the American government owe veterans? How well has government done in this regard?” Most all veterans responded that government had treated World War II veterans well, especially through the G.I. Bill. Said James Murray, a Pennsylvania State University graduate who felt he might not have had the “initiative” to attend college were it not for the G.I. Bill, “They’ve treated me okay...In terms of the G.I. Bill, I was very happy.” Richard Colosimo agreed, “As far as World War II veterans, they did well. I must admit if it wasn’t for government and subsidizing our education I never would have gotten my degree, both degrees.” Sam Marchesi, who became a custom builder through the vocational training benefits of the G.I. Bill, replied, “The government made many opportunities for us...for a man such as myself with a lack of education to better myself. I’m very grateful that we had those opportunities and the government was always ready to be behind us.” Like the administrative rules and procedures, G.I. Bill program resources conveyed to veterans that an elevated status was bestowed upon them through government largesse.

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<sup>11</sup> Although administration did not discriminate by socio-economic background, racial discrimination was commonplace. African Americans experienced unequal treatment to white veterans, especially in the South where both institutions of higher education and the new vocational training programs were segregated. See U.S. Congress, Senate 1950, 1970-83; Herbold 1994-95; Jenkins 1947; Caudill 1945.

Conversely, while those who did not use the G.I. Bill also tended to mention it as a very positive program, their comments suggested that they did not experience the same sense of incorporation that beneficiaries experienced. Harry Serulneck, who went back to work after the war, said, "I think the veterans of World War II that wanted to go back to school got to do that with the G.I. Bill of Rights. They got a lot of entitlements...As far as I'm concerned, I never got nothing from the government; the only thing I got was the \$300 (a lump-sum veterans' bonus payment) when I came home."

Over time, as the experience of the G.I. Bill became more remote, these direct cognitive or interpretive policy feedback effects faded. In middle-age and older adulthood, however, the resource effects of the educational benefits became highly significant in promoting high levels of political activity. Those who had been able to attain the highest levels of education through the program became most involved politically. How can we explain these outcomes? Students of participation know that education begets, over time, an increase in other factors that promote civic capacity and thus boost participation: skills, networks, and income (Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995, 433-37). This explains why, among G.I. Bill users, those with the highest levels of education participated at the highest and most significant levels in politics, and those relationships became more apparent over time. Still to be explained, however, is why such effects were stronger among G.I. Bill users than non-users. If resources alone mattered, we would expect that by late in life, G.I. Bill users would be as likely to participate in politics as non-users with the same educational level. The more significant participation by highly educated G.I. Bill users suggests the presence of a lingering interpretive effect of the G.I. Bill, one that varied in relationship to the value of the resources—or extent of education—veterans had gained through the program.

Veterans' conceptions of the generosity and value of the G.I. Bill made many, especially the most educated users, express a sense of gratitude for the program, as was evident in the interviews. Paul Parisi, who earned a B.A. at Syracuse University under the G.I. Bill, described himself as someone who lacked not only the resources to attend college otherwise but also the confidence in his own abilities that would have led him to consider college a possibility. He said, "I'm one of the beneficiaries. I feel that American government really, really went the limit to deal with the people who were in the service (in World War II). They really went the limit. Sometimes I wonder if I really earned all that I've gotten, to be frank with you." Anthony Miller, who attended both Xavier University and Fordham University on the G.I. Bill, said of the educational benefits, "I was very grateful. I would never of gone to college otherwise." Such feelings of gratitude may have been, for many veterans, translated into a sense of owing something back to society. Such results could be the product of the civic education gained by veterans who had the highest levels of education (Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Barry 1996), or they could reflect the same beneficiaries' understanding of having gained an especially valuable resource from government. In any case it is likely that the more highly educated the G.I. Bill beneficiaries, the more aware they were of how the program had affected them and the more fully ensconced they became within the political community as a result.

Thus, the G.I. Bill had important democratizing effects among white men of the civic generation that came of age during World War II. Attention has been given elsewhere to the manner in which the program's educational benefits made social citizenship more inclusive, expanding advanced education and its subsequent socio-economic effects to many veterans who would not otherwise have had the opportunity to pursue it. The novel finding here is that the G.I. Bill also helped to expand participation in the democratic process. By being treated well in a government program and believing themselves to benefit considerably from its generous resources, program beneficiaries became more fully incorporated within the political

community. Consequently, they were prompted to participate in politics themselves, becoming active in the processes of self-governance. It is especially striking that these effects were felt in the initial period by beneficiaries generally, regardless of their socio-economic background or level of education. This offers evidence that the program not only stimulated participation but also had a leveling effect on a phenomenon that is typically stratified by privilege. The two-stage analysis here shows that even as the effects for participation became more associated, over time, with educational level, still the G.I. Bill displaced the usual determinants of participation from their places. The G.I. Bill acted as yeast among the civic generation, prompting a sizable portion of that cohort group to become far more involved in politics than they would have otherwise, and to remain so, throughout their lives.

## **CONCLUSION**

Further research on the G.I. Bill's mobilizing effects might investigate for whom it had such consequences: children of immigrants or native-born citizens? particular religious or ethnic groups? members of groups who had been excluded from political participation previously? Once active, toward what ends was the new political activity directed? Did it help to promote, for example, the dominance of the Democratic party through much of the mid-century, and the expansion of various social programs during the 1960s? Did G.I. Bill beneficiaries become more active in civic organizations as well as political activities? Finally, a more in-depth treatment of the effects of the vocational training programs is warranted, given that users of those programs were underrepresented in the data but appeared to be strongly influenced toward greater political involvement.

By combining attention to public policy and the life course, this analysis has demonstrated how a government program can shape the propensity for civic engagement among members of a generation. Theoretically, this suggests that the investigation of why some generations are more civic-minded than others should incorporate analysis of the role that government played in individuals lives, especially in the formative years of early adulthood. The "civic generation" benefited from numerous other social programs, and similar analyses might be conducted to understand how they have affected participation. Conversely, changing policy designs might offer a key to understanding what Stoker and Jennings (2001) have identified as a decline of civic engagement among the so-called Generation X. We might investigate whether recent programs—such as educational grant and loan programs, or tax expenditures such as the home mortgage interest deduction—have lacked the visibility and traceability necessary to produce civic responses among beneficiaries. Possibly policy design—among other factors—has made younger generations more cognizant of government failures and less aware of government successes, rendering them more passive as political actors. To the extent that government is a significant force within the lives of citizens, it is reasonable to expect that it has consequences for their political activity. How those consequences vary across policies, across time, and across generations suggests a broad agenda for future research.

## **APPENDIX A: DEALING WITH MEMORY AND RECALL CONSTRAINTS**

Some of the primary potential sources of error in a study of the World War II generation pertain to subjects' memory and ability to recall events that happened several decades ago. These concerns are alleviated to some degree by scholars' understanding that salience matters: that is, people will recall events or activities that were important to them, otherwise known as "landmark events" (Mangione 1995, 34-36; Tourangeau, Rips and Rasinski 2000, pp. 67-91). It is not important for this study to ascertain specific details from the past, such as the number of Lion's Club or Parent-Teacher Organization meetings a person attended in a given year, or the particular elections in which they voted. Rather, we wanted to know whether the subjects were, generally, active participants in such activities or not.

The mail survey format does help to limit such concerns, given that a second chance to answer questions is known to stimulate memory (Tourangeau, Rips and Rasinski 2000, 94; Fowler 1984: 92-3). Respondents could question at their leisure, and take time to remember past activities. Several additional precautions were taken in order to reduce errors of recall as much as possible. First, I decided against asking respondents much about past attitudes in which case responses would be affected by intervening circumstances. Secondly, survey researchers have found that greater accuracy is obtained by framing questions for a specific time period; for this purpose, specific responses were requested for each of three periods: 1950-1964, 1965-1979, and 1980 to the present. This pairing of questions is intended to prompt respondents to consider how their activities might have changed, if at all, and thus to respond to the questions about the earlier period as clearly and thoughtfully as possible. Asking a number of questions about a given time period has proven to facilitate memory; the questions about the immediate postwar years in the survey should have a cumulative effect.

## **APPENDIX B: REPRESENTATIVENESS OF THE SAMPLE**

Among returning veterans of World War II, 51% used the G.I. Bill for education; in the sample used in this study, 60.8% used the G.I. Bill for education. Among the general population of World War II veterans, 28.6% of those who used the educational provisions pursued higher education, whereas the survey sample included 63.5% such users.

Death rates may account, in part, for these different response rates. Nearly two-thirds of World War II veterans were deceased when the survey was conducted in 1998 (*New York Times*, June 4, 2000.) Studies show that in the United States, old age is positively correlated with being better educated. Demographers report a recent increase in longevity among American males that some consider attributable to the effects of the G.I. Bill. Accordingly, G.I. Bill users are likely to have experienced more favorable socio-economic circumstances than non-users and may thus have greater longevity; a similar disparity may exist between those who used the G.I. Bill for higher education and those who used it for programs below the college level. Differential death rates may also be explained by age disparity of G.I. Bill users and non-users. Use of the G.I. Bill was inversely related to age of returning veterans, and those younger veterans are more likely to still be alive and to have responded to the survey (President's Commission on Veterans' Pensions 1956b, Part A, 315).

Nonetheless, for the purposes of this study, it is unnecessary for either the ratio of G.I. Bill users to non-users or the ratio of higher education users to vocational training users to reflect the original population of World War II veterans. Meaningful results are still attainable as long as each of these groups reflects characteristics of the same group in the original population, and then consider effects for both higher education users and vocational training users separately. Such determinations cannot be ascertained from U.S. Census data because the Census does not include questions about the G.I. Bill. It is possible, however, to

make comparisons between the sample used here and data obtained in surveys conducted earlier, at a point closer to use of the G.I. Bill, and drawn from a nationwide random sample of veterans or the population more broadly.

We compared the veterans who used the G.I. Bill for programs below the college level in this survey with those in a survey presented to Congress in 1956. The results, shown in Table 8, suggest that the sample discussed here mirrors the original population, as measured by the President’s Commission, quite closely.

**Table 8. Pre-military Educational Attainment of World War II Veterans Using G.I. Bill for Vocational Education and Related Programs**

	President’s Commission Report*	Survey Used For this Study
Elementary School	28.3%	28.1%
High School	60.2	57.0
1 to 3 years college	7.9	11.0
4 years or more of college	3.6	3.9

\*Source: President’s Commission on Veterans’ Pensions, *Readjustment Benefits: Education and Training, and Employment and Unemployment* Staff Report IX, Part B (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1956b), p. 32. Data used on veterans entering training in 1950.

Using the same study, we compare World War II veterans who used the G.I. Bill’s higher education benefits with their cohort group in the original population. This reveals that subjects in this study had more education prior to military service. These results are summarized in Table 9:

**Table 9. Pre-military Educational Attainment of World War II Veterans Using G.I. Bill for Higher Education**

	President’s Commission Report*	Survey Used For this Study
Elementary School	4.0%	1.4%
High School	67.7	47.0
1 to 3 years college	21.0	45.2
4 years or more of college	7.3	6.4

\*Source: President’s Commission on Veterans’ Pensions, *Readjustment Benefits: Education and Training, and Employment and Unemployment* Staff Report IX, Part B (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1956b), p. 26. Data used on veterans entering training in 1950.

The higher levels of pre-military education among subjects in this study suggests that they may have been, on average, from more advantaged backgrounds than the original universe of veterans who used the G.I. Bill benefits for higher education. This would imply that the findings of this study air on the conservative side: the G.I. Bill may have provided greater access to more veterans than the findings here suggest.

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**Table I. Veterans' Participation Rates in Political Activities by Time Periods, 1950-1998**

Type of Activity	1950-64	1965-1979	1980-98	N
Contacted political official about community issue	14.2%	31.1%	38.4%	652
Worked on a campaign for a candidate running for public office	9.9%	12.6%	12.0%	666
Served on an official local government board or council	9.2%	12.8%	11.6%	667
Contributed money to an individual candidate, party, etc.	14.1%	35.2%	42.6%	674
Participated in a protest, march or demonstration	1.5%	3.6%	2.7%	675

**Table II. Predicting Use of the G.I. Bill: Results of Logistic Regression**

Variable	Coefficient/Significance		
	Vocational Training Users	Higher Education Users	All Users In Sample
Education Encouraged	-.19	.56***	.32**
Parent's Level of Education	-.20*	.21**	.07
Standard of Living in Childhood, 1920s	-.03	.21	.24*
Level of Education before Military Service	-.35**	.40***	.13
N	511	511	530
-2 Log likelihood	515.28	597.66	672.14

\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

**Table III. Determinants of Political Involvement by World War II Veterans, 1950-1998: Standardized Coefficients Resulting from Ordinary Least Squares Regression**

Variable	1950-64	1965-1979	1980-1998	Lifetime Average
Predicted Values, Use of G.I. Bill	.18**	.14*	.07	.17**
Level of Education Completed	.10	.24***	.33***	.30***
Standard of Living <sup>12</sup>	.02	.11*	.12*	.07
Parents' Political Activity	.11*	NA	NA	NA
R <sup>2</sup>	.08	.14	.18	.20
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.07	.13	.18	.19
Sample Size	403	426	429	426

\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

<sup>12</sup> Standard of living in 1960 was used for the 1950-64 and 1965-1979 periods and for the lifetime average; standard of living in 1998 was used for 1980-1998.

**Table IV. Determinants of Political Involvement by World War II Veterans, 1950-1998: Results of Interactive Equation, Ordinary Least Squares Regression (Standardized Coefficients)**

Variable	1950-64	1965-1979	1980-1998	Lifetime Average
Predicted Values, Use of G.I. Bill	.18*	.12*	.07	.16**
G.I. Bill Use * 4 Yr. College Grad Or More Education	.12	.28***	.39***	.37***
G.I. Bill Use * 2 Yr. College Grad or Some College	.04	.11*	.20***	.17**
G.I. Bill Use *High School Grad or Less Education	.07	.06	.10	.09
No G.I. Bill Use * Some College Or More Education	-.08	.09	.13*	.09
Standard of Living <sup>13</sup>	.04	.12*	.12*	.09
Parents' Political Activity	.10*	NA	NA	NA
R <sup>2</sup>	.09	.13	.19	.20
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.07	.12	.18	.19
Sample Size	374	395	397	395

\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

<sup>13</sup> Standard of living in 1960 was used for the 1950-64 and 1965-1979 periods and for the lifetime average; standard of living in 1998 was used for 1980-1998.

**Figure 1. Policy Feedback for Mass Publics: How Policy Affects Civic Involvement**

