Perceived Social Support, Perceived Community Functioning, and Civic Participation Across the Life Span: Evidence From the Former East Germany

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Abstract

Are social contexts as important to civic participation in adulthood as they are in adolescence? And does their significance for civic participation vary across adulthood? Using data from a cross-sectional sample of German adults aged 18–75 who were surveyed in 2013 by mail, we investigated the relationships of perceived family support, perceived support from friends, place attachment, social cohesion, and organizational collective efficacy with three indicators of civic participation. We split the sample into four age groups: 18–29 (N₁ = 442), 30–44 (N₂ = 596), 45–59 (N₃ = 1,095), and 60–75 (N₄ = 931). Perceived support from family was negatively associated with the breadth (i.e., the number of domains) of civic participation in the youngest group and with future intentions for civic participation in three age groups. Perceived support from friends had positive relationships with the intensity (i.e., frequency) of civic participation and with future intentions at ages 30–44. Place attachment and organizational collective efficacy were positively related to all indicators of civic participation, and some of these associations held across age groups. In contrast, social cohesion had no significant effects. We discuss implications for fostering civic participation across adulthood.

Keywords: civic engagement; collective efficacy; perceived social support; sense of community; volunteering.
Civic participation includes unpaid, voluntary activities that are carried out for community benefit in an organizational context (Wilson, 2000). According to Putnam (1993), civic participation is part of the “virtuous circle” of mutual trust, cooperation, and collective well-being, which characterize healthy communities. Civic participation also has numerous benefits at the individual level (Wilson, 2000). Hence, policy makers in many countries look for ways to promote participation. In the present study, we address the importance of social environment for civic participation in contemporary residents of the former East Germany, a region where civic and political initiatives had been suppressed in the communist past (i.e., prior to 1990) and hampered by persistent economic difficulties afterwards (Gensicke, Olk, Reim, Schmithals, & Dienel, 2009). Even today, the rates of participation in East Germany remain lower than those in West Germany, although the difference is no longer dramatic. In 2009, the rates were 31% and 37%, respectively (Gensicke & Geiss, 2010).

Research on positive youth development (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003) considers warm, supportive, and empowering social contexts as a prerequisite to civic participation. Young individuals who feel accepted and supported by their families, peers, and communities develop a need to give back, which may be fulfilled by civic participation (Benson, 1997; Lerner et al., 2003). We apply this developmental contextual approach to the entire life span. Using cross-sectional data collected in 2013 on adults aged 18–75, we address two research questions. First, are perceived social support from family and friends and perceived community functioning positively associated with adult civic participation? Second, do these associations vary across the adult life span? Detecting age similarities and differences is particularly important to inform recruitment efforts and policies to foster civic participation in different age groups. For each of our research questions, we develop several specific hypotheses as shown in Table 1 and elaborated below.

| Table 1 about here |

**Social Support as a Predictor of Civic Participation**
General social support refers to love, caring, help, and respect that a person receives (or perceives as available) from significant others (Thoits, 1995). Its vital importance for health and psychosocial adjustment is well known (Taylor, 2007; Thoits, 1995). Research on US adolescents has also revealed positive relationships of general support from families and peers with adolescents’ concurrent and subsequent civic participation (e.g., Duke, Skay, Pettingell, & Borowsky, 2009; Fletcher, Elder, & Mekos, 2000). These findings corroborated the contention that warm and supportive social environments facilitate youth’s contributions to their families, communities, and the society (Benson, 1997; Lerner et al., 2003).

However, the few studies conducted on adults yielded less consistent evidence. Itzhaky and York (2003) reported that general support from family and friends was positively related to psychological prerequisites of civic participation (i.e., leadership competence and policy control) in a sample of community activists in Israel. In contrast, Omoto and Snyder (1995) found negative effects of perceived social support from multiple sources on the duration of AIDS-related volunteering in a US sample. The authors reasoned that “those who lack social support may be seeking to acquire it through volunteer service, and those with social support may be taking refuge from the stresses of volunteering by seeking the support they possess elsewhere” (Omoto & Snyder, 1995, p. 683). Furthermore, Pavlova and Silbereisen (in press) found positive effects of perceived family support on future intentions for civic participation in a sample of young adults from the former East Germany. However, these effects were limited to several indirect paths, whereas perceived support from friends and acquaintances had no significant effects at all.

More evidence is available on the positive role of content-specific social support (e.g., friends and family who approve of volunteering) in fostering civic participation in adults (Greenslade & White, 2005; Okun & Sloane, 2002). However, general and content-specific social support are distinct constructs and are measured differently (e.g., Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, & Hammer, 2011). The mechanisms through which they may influence civic
participation are also likely to differ: Whereas content-specific social support operates more directly, through social norms and role modeling (Greenslade & White, 2005; Okun & Sloane, 2002; Wilson, 2000), general social support may operate more indirectly, by encouraging a prosocial personality orientation (Benson, 1997; Lerner et al., 2003).

Given the scarcity of prior research conducted on adults, we drew on theory and research on positive youth development (Benson, 1997; Duke et al., 2009; Fletcher et al., 2000; Lerner et al., 2003) to hypothesize that general social support fosters civic participation (see Table 1, Hypothesis 1).

**Community Functioning as a Predictor of Civic Participation**

Civic participation usually occurs within local, community-based organizations and initiatives. Thus, community functioning and civic participation are closely interrelated. In community psychology, several overlapping concepts exist that describe community functioning. First, sense of community refers to feelings of belonging in the community, mutual influence among community members, needs fulfilment by the community, and emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Sense of community is essential for community members to organize and work together towards common causes (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990). In addition, Perkins and Long (2002) suggested considering place attachment as a separate construct, which refers to emotional bonding to a particular socio-physical environment. They argued that people who are attached to their places of living are readier to invest time, money, and energy in them.

Collective efficacy (i.e., shared beliefs in ability of community members to produce desired change through collective action; Bandura, 2000) is also seen as a vital prerequisite to civic participation, which is based on collective action. Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls (1997) famously defined neighborhood collective efficacy as social cohesion and willingness to intervene on behalf of common good (i.e., informal social control). However, this definition strongly overlaps with that of sense of community. Perkins and Long (2002)
adopted a more focused definition: “trust in the effectiveness of organized community action” (p. 295). Following Ohmer (2007), we refer to this construct as organizational collective efficacy, which is directly relevant to civic participation in organizational settings.

Studies from the US and Europe have found positive relationships between sense of community and organizational collective efficacy, on the one hand, and civic participation, on the other hand (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Ohmer, 2007; Pavlova & Silbereisen, submitted; Perkins & Long, 2002). As to place attachment, it may be related to some types of civic participation, such as protesting against locally unwanted land uses, more than to other types (Mihaylov & Perkins, 2014; Perkins & Long, 2002). On the whole, however, we expected various aspects of positive community functioning to foster civic participation (see Table 1, Hypothesis 2).

**Age Differences in the Social Contextual Predictors of Civic Participation**

The links between social contexts and civic participation may vary across the life span. In a recent meta-analysis, which covered the few available studies ($k = 34$), Talò, Mannarini, and Rochira (2014) found that sense of community was significantly related to more civic participation in adult, but not in adolescent, samples. They argued that, because of their peer orientation, adolescents may be influenced by their peer groups more than by larger communities. Apart from this study, we are not aware of empirical research exploring age differences in the effects of perceived general social support and community functioning on civic participation. In the present study, we draw on two life-span psychological theories to make a case for such age differences.

First, convoy theory (Antonucci, 2001; Antonucci, Fiori, Birditt, & Jackey, 2010) contends that the primary sources of social support change across the life span. Friends are relatively more important in adolescence and early adulthood, when individuals gain autonomy from the parental family, whereas a romantic partner and later a spouse are the most desirable sources of support throughout adulthood. We reasoned that the source of social
support considered primary at a given age would be most relevant in fostering civic participation (see Table 1, Hypotheses 3 and 4).

Second, socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999) suggests that approaching the ending of life leads older adults to focus on few meaningful relationships that help them maintain emotional well-being. Hence, whether a relationship is emotionally fulfilling or not is decisive for older adults’ readiness to invest in this relationship. This idea may be applied to community connections as well: Older adults may be motivated to invest in their communities only if they are truly attached to them and have positive feelings about them. In contrast, younger adults are more knowledge- and achievement-oriented (Carstensen et al., 1999) and often have a range of additional motives for civic participation, such as skills acquisition and making new contacts, which are unrelated to community concerns (Gensicke & Geiss, 2010; Omoto, Snyder, and Martino, 2000). On the basis of this theory, we expected that with age, perceived community functioning would gain importance as a factor promoting civic participation (cf. Talò et al., 2014; see Table 1, Hypothesis 5).

**Dimensions of Civic Participation**

In the present study, we used several indicators of civic participation that reflected its different aspects. Borrowing from research on adolescent extracurricular activities (Rose-Krasnor, Busseri, Willoughby, & Chalmers, 2006), we distinguished between intensity and breadth of civic participation in the past 12 months. Intensity referred to the frequency of civic participation, whereas breadth reflected the number of different domains of civic participation, such as environmental protection, social welfare, voluntary fire brigades, and so on. A focused investment in one domain (i.e., high intensity of participation) is associated with high commitment and gives opportunities to develop in-depth knowledge of this particular domain (Rose-Krasnor et al., 2006). In contrast, gaining experiences in multiple different contexts (i.e., high breadth of participation) enables individuals to broaden their
social networks and to acquire a wide range of skills and knowledge (Rose-Krasnor et al., 2006). In addition, we considered future intentions for civic participation among those who were not engaged in the past 12 months. Given the cross-sectional design of our study, this was the only way to look into the factors that might foster the initiation of civic participation in different age groups. Future intentions represent an important cognitive prerequisite of actual behaviors (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010) and were previously found to predict subsequent civic participation reasonably well (Greenslade & White, 2005; Okun & Sloane, 2002).

We expected that age differences specified by Hypotheses 3–5 would hold for intensity of civic participation and for future intentions. However, we expected a distinctive pattern of age differences for breadth of civic participation (see Table 1, Hypothesis 6). On the basis of socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al., 1999), we reasoned that the benefits of participation in multiple domains might be more relevant to younger than to older adults. Hence, factors fostering civic participation might promote its greater breadth only among younger individuals.

Method

Participants and Procedure

A postal survey on civic participation of 18 to 75 years old inhabitants of Saxony-Anhalt, a former East German state with a population of about 2.3 million, was carried out in fall 2013. A master sample was drawn from local registry data. It was stratified by regional units and individuals’ age; otherwise participants’ selection was random. Of 10,000 invited individuals, 3,231 individuals sent back filled questionnaires (89.2%) or used an option to participate online (10.8%). Participation was unpaid and voluntary. To improve the response rate, the survey was advertised in local print media. Nonrespondents received two reminders. The achieved response rate of 34% was satisfactory for a combined postal and online survey (Shih & Fan, 2008). As compared to the German Microcensus 2011 (Forschungsdatenzentrum des Thüringer Landesamtes für Statistik, 2013), this sample represented the population of
Saxony-Anhalt well on major demographic indicators. However, males, lower educated persons, and unmarried persons were underrepresented by up to 11%. The rates of civic participation (29% of respondents were engaged at least monthly in the past 12 months) were comparable to those reported for Sachsen-Anhalt by the German Survey on Volunteering in 2009, when 26% of respondents were currently engaged (Gensicke & Geiss, 2010).

We divided our participants into four age groups: ages 18–29, 30–44, 45–59, and 60–75. Those under 30 are often not settled in their work and family roles (Arnett, 2000; Gensicke & Geiss, 2010). In our sample, this was the only group that grew up after the German reunification of 1990. The two next groups represented ages in which work and family life are of prime importance. Those aged 30–44 typically have families with young children, whereas those aged 45–59 usually have older children and transition to the “empty nest” phase. According to the German Survey on Volunteering, rates of civic participation are highest in these two age groups (Gensicke & Geiss, 2010). Finally, those aged 60–75 are in the transition to retirement or already retired (Deutsche Rentenversicherung, 2014).

The survey was conducted half a year after a severe flooding that affected Saxony-Anhalt along with other German states. The flooding threatened the majority of communities in Saxony-Anhalt, lasted more than a month, and caused damage of over two billion Euros (Bundesministerium des Innern, 2013). During this time, local authorities called upon citizens to assist in damage prevention and remediation. Questions on flooding experience and volunteer work during the flooding were therefore included in the survey.

The questionnaire was administered in German. Wherever possible, we used previously validated German translations of established international scales.

**Measures**

**Social context.** For general social support, we used two scales from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). Support from family and support from friends were each measured with four items, which
were very similar for both scales (e.g., “My family/friends really tries/try to help me”; 1 = does not apply at all; 5 = fully applies; across age groups, $\alpha = .86–.93$ and $.91–.94$ for family and friends, respectively). For perceived community functioning, we used three indicators, whose items were each measured on a 5-point rating scale (1 = does not apply at all; 5 = fully applies). Social cohesion was measured with the respective subscale of Sampson et al.’s (1997) collective efficacy scale (five items; e.g., “People here can be trusted”; $\alpha = .82–.88$). Following Perkins and Long (2002), we regarded social cohesion as an aspect of sense of community. Place attachment was assessed with one item (“How strongly do you feel connected to this town/community?”). Organizational collective efficacy was assessed with four items adapted from Perkins and Long (2002). Participants were asked to think of local voluntary organizations and to assess their capability to achieve various ends (e.g., “to improve life conditions in this place”; $\alpha = .89–.93$). This formulation enabled the participants who did not belong to any voluntary organization also to respond to this scale.

**Civic participation.** Activities in the past 12 months were assessed with items adapted from the German Survey on Volunteering (Gensicke & Geiss, 2010). The questionnaire gave a definition of civic participation (i.e., unpaid, voluntary activities undertaken for social or community benefit) and its examples for the sports domain (i.e., volunteering as a coach or a team assistant or serving on the committee of an amateur sports club). This was followed by a list of domains reflecting typical areas of civic participation in Germany (Gensicke & Geiss, 2010): sports and physical activity; school and kindergarten; church and religion; social welfare; culture and music; education and science; leisure and social life; rescue services and fire brigades; environmental and animal protection; other.

For each domain, participants reported on the frequency of their participation. In the present study, we used the following coding: 0 = never or not in the past 12 months; 1 = infrequently or irregularly in the past 12 months; 2 = at least monthly in the past 12 months; 3 = at least weekly in the past 12 months. The maximum frequency across all domains
represented the intensity of civic participation in the past 12 months (ordinal variable; range 0–3). The number of domains rated at least 1 (infrequent or irregular participation) represented the breadth of civic participation in the past 12 months (count variable; range 1–10). To eliminate the dependency between the two indicators, we considered breadth of participation for only those who were engaged in at least one domain. Future intentions for civic participation were measured with two items (“I would like to be [further] civically engaged” and “I intend to be [further] civically engaged;” 1 = does not apply at all; 5 = fully applies; $r = .76–.83$ across the age groups; mean score was used). These items were based on the theory of planned behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010) and referred to civic participation in general, without domain specification. In this study, we considered future intentions among only those who were not engaged in the past 12 months.

**Control variables.** We controlled our analyses for well-known correlates of civic participation (Wilson, 2000). Sociodemographic indicators included length of residence in years, sex (0 = male; 1 = female), school attainment (8, 10, and 12–13 years of schooling; dummy coded with 10 years as the reference category), net household income per person in Euros (logged scores were used in regression analyses), employment status (0 = not working; 1 = employed), partnership status (0 = no steady partner; 1 = steady partner, irrespective of marital status), and presence of children in the household (0 = no; 1 = yes). General health was assessed with one item from the German version of the SF-36 Health Survey (Bullinger & Kirchberger, 1998; “In general, would you say your health is…” 1 = poor; 5 = excellent). To account for the transient influence of the flooding emergency on civic participation in our participants, we also controlled for volunteer work during the flooding. This variable referred to various activities to help relatives, neighbors, acquaintances, and strangers in preventing or remediating damage from the flooding (0 = no; 1 = yes).

**Analytical Approach**
We regressed each indicator of civic participation on the two indicators of perceived social support, on the three indicators of perceived community functioning, and on the control variables. The type of regression analysis depended on the outcome variable (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). For the intensity of civic participation in the past 12 months, we used ordinal logistic regression. For the breadth of participation among those engaged in at least one domain, we used zero-truncated negative binomial regression. In these regressions, robust estimation of standard errors was used. For future intentions, we used linear regression and bootstrap estimation of standard errors. To test for age differences in the effects of interest, we employed a multiple group design in MPlus v.6.1 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010), whereby regression coefficients were compared across age groups. We considered Hypotheses 1 and 2 about the overall effects of social contextual variables on civic participation (see Table 1) as supported if significant positive effects emerged in at least one age group. We considered Hypotheses 3–6 about age differences in predictors (see Table 1) as fully supported if age differences were significant and in the expected direction and as partially supported if these differences were in the expected direction but not significant. Missing values on dependent variables and continuous covariates were estimated with the full information maximum likelihood algorithm. We excluded cases with missing values on age and on other major sociodemographic variables (n = 167). For employment status and volunteer work during the flooding, we created dummy variables representing missing values (n = 123 and n = 307, respectively). In all analyses, we used a conventional alpha level of .05.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 reports descriptive statistics on the study variables. The four age groups differed significantly along all control variables excepting gender. These differences were expected. For instance, the highest length of residence, the largest percentage of low-educated individuals, and the lowest percentage of employed individuals were found in the oldest
group. Volunteer work during the flooding was reported more often by younger than by older
groups. This finding could be attributed to the physically strenuous nature of this work.

[Table 2 about here]

Concerning the predictor variables, it appeared that our participants scored higher on perceived support from family and friends than on the indicators of perceived community functioning (see Table 2). Significant but small age differences emerged for some variables. A steady decline with age was found for perceived support from friends. This finding supported the idea that friends are a more important source of social support for younger than for older individuals (Antonucci, 2001; Antonucci et al., 2010). In contrast, place attachment and social cohesion were lowest in the youngest group. This result could indicate a lower community embeddedness of younger individuals (Talò et al., 2014).

Finally, there were significant age differences along the three indicators of civic participation (see Table 2). Individuals aged 30–44 were more likely than the other age groups to be engaged in the past 12 months, especially at moderate rates of involvement, and reported the highest breadth of participation. This result coincided with prior findings on the high rates of involvement among young and middle-aged adults, who often have small children at home (Gensicke & Geiss, 2010). Furthermore, the oldest group was least likely to be infrequently or irregularly engaged. This result was also expected, because older adults who are civically engaged often give even more hours than their younger counterparts (Wilson, 2000). At the same time, future intentions for civic participation in those who were currently not engaged exhibited an almost linear decline with age.

**Findings From Regression Analyses**

For convenience, we organize the presentation of results by outcome variables. Table 3 shows results of regression analyses for the intensity of civic participation expressed in $\text{Exp}(B)$, odds ratios. Perceived family support had no significant effects across the age groups. In contrast, perceived support from friends predicted a higher intensity of civic participation,
but only at ages 30–44. In terms of the effect size, a one-unit increase in perceived support from friends increased the odds of reporting a higher intensity of participation by the factor of 1.3. Although this effect was found only in one age group, it did not significantly differ from those in the other age groups. As to perceived community functioning, social cohesion had no significant effects at all, whereas place attachment and organizational collective efficacy were significantly associated with a higher intensity of civic participation in all age groups. Effect sizes ranged from 1.3 to 1.5 times greater odds to report a higher intensity of civic participation with a one-unit increase in the predictor. There were no significant age differences in these effects.

Table 4 shows regression results for the breadth of civic participation expressed in $\text{Exp}(B)$, which in this case represented ratios of expected counts (Cohen et al., 2003). The five predictors made a significant contribution to the model fit only in the youngest group. In this group, two significant effects emerged. First, perceived support from family was significantly related to the breadth of participation. The direction of this effect was opposite to what we expected: A one-unit increase in perceived family support decreased the expected number of domains of participation by the factor of $1 / 0.6 = 1.7$. In contrast, the effect of place attachment was in the expected direction: A one-unit increase in place attachment increased the expected number of domains of participation by the factor of 1.3. Other predictors did not have significant effects here.

Table 5 presents results of regression analyses that predicted future intentions for civic participation in those who were not engaged in the past 12 months. Again, an unexpected negative effect of perceived support from family emerged. This time, it was significant or marginally significant in three age groups out of four (i.e., except for ages 45–59). In addition, this negative effect was significantly stronger at ages 18–29 than at ages 45–59. With regard
to perceived support from friends, it had a positive and significant effect on future intentions at ages 30–44, whereas the same effect in the youngest group was also positive, but only marginally significant. At ages 45–59 and 60–75, the effect of perceived support from friends was nearly zero. The difference between ages 30–44 and 60–75 was significant. As to perceived community functioning, across the age groups, organizational collective efficacy proved to be the most consistent predictor of future intentions for civic participation. Only in the youngest group, its effect did not reach significance. Social cohesion did not have any significant effects. Finally, although there were no significant age differences in this effect, place attachment had a significantly positive effect on future intentions only at ages 60–75.

Across the predictors, effects sizes were small, with betas ranging from .1 to .3.

[Table 5 about here]

Discussion

Using a large cross-sectional sample of adults aged 18–75 who were surveyed in 2013 in the former East Germany, we addressed the roles of social contexts for civic participation across the life span. We used three indicators of civic participation: its intensity and breadth and future intentions in those who were currently not engaged. Our main expectation based on research on positive youth development (Benson, 1997; Lerner et al., 2003) was that positive perceptions of important developmental contexts (family, friends, and community) would be associated with higher civic participation across adulthood (Research Question 1). In fact, we found a considerable variation in the links between different positive aspects of perceived social environment and civic participation, ranging from positive to nonsignificant to negative effects. Furthermore, drawing on convoy theory (Antonucci, 2001; Antonucci et al., 2010) and socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al., 1999), we hypothesized certain age differences in these effects (Research Question 2). Although some support for both theories was found, there was also evidence that some social contextual variables, such as organizational collective efficacy, were relevant to civic participation across adulthood,
irrespective of age. We summarize our major findings in relation to our research questions and hypotheses in Table 1.

**Perceived Social Support and Civic Participation Across the Life Span**

We expected to find a positive relationship between general support from family and civic participation and to see this relationship grow stronger with the participants’ age (see Table 1, Hypotheses 1 and 3). However, family support had significantly negative effects on the breadth of civic participation at ages 18–29 and on future intentions in several age groups. The latter effect was also most pronounced at ages 18–29. One explanation for these unexpected negative relationships may be that some individuals who experience low general social support try to seek new sources of support through civic participation (Omoto & Snyder, 1995). This may be especially true for younger individuals, who are more motivated to expand their social networks than are older people (Carstensen et al., 1999). Another explanation may involve the sociohistorical context. Alesina and Giuliano (2011) argued that in societies with strong family ties, civic and political participation is hampered, because family is the only social connection that matters. In a multinational study, they found inverse associations of strong family ties with political participation and generalized trust. Alesina and Giuliano noted that strong family ties are not “bad” but may lead to a different type of social organization. Indeed, under the communist regime in the former East Germany, private networks substituted for the structures of civil society (Gensicke et al., 2009) and served as a retreat from the public life permeated by ideology (Howard, 2003). In this context, strong family support may not be conducive to civic participation.

At the same time, perceived family support had no significant associations with the intensity of civic participation in any age group or, indeed, with the very fact of civic participation, as we established in additional analyses. Even if, for the reasons suggested above, individuals with high family support feel little inclination for civic participation
initially, they may probably become engaged through other pathways, such as being recruited or pursuing career enhancement goals (Gensicke & Geiss, 2010; Wilson, 2000).

Findings for another source of social support were more in line with expectations. Specifically, we hypothesized that general support from friends would have positive associations with civic participation and that these associations would be more pronounced in younger individuals (see Table 1, Hypotheses 1 and 4). Indeed, perceived support from friends had significantly positive associations with the intensity of and future intentions for civic participation at ages 30–44. These effects did not significantly differ from those found at ages 18–29, but one significant difference from the oldest group emerged. Concurring with convoy theory (Antonucci, 2001; Antonucci et al., 2010), these results suggested that friends may be a more salient source of social support to younger individuals as compared to middle-aged and older ones.

Our finding that perceived general support from friends had a positive association with the intensity but not with the breadth of civic participation at ages 30–44 was related to that it predicted the fact of civic participation (i.e., yes or no) but not its amount, as we established in additional analyses. Probably, being embedded in a strong friendship network increases the likelihood of recruitment by voluntary organizations (Wilson, 2000). Moreover, as opposed to family members (Alesina & Giuliano, 2011), supportive friends may encourage prosocial behaviors that reach beyond one’s family circle. However, other factors, such as perceived community functioning, may be responsible for increasing the amount of civic participation.

Perceived Community Functioning and Civic Participation Across the Life Span

We expected positive community functioning to have positive associations with civic participation in adulthood and to grow more important to civic participation with the participants’ age (see Table 1, Hypotheses 2 and 5). In partial support of these expectations, we found consistently positive effects of place attachment (Perkins & Long, 2002) and organizational collective efficacy (Bandura, 2000; Perkins & Long, 2002), with some
variation across age groups and outcomes. However, the differences between the age groups were not significant. We may conclude that civic participation, which usually occurs at the community level, is intimately related to positive perceptions of community functioning across adulthood (cf. Pavlova & Silbereisen, in press; Talò et al., 2014). A lack of age differences may be due to that civic participation also reinforces place attachment and organizational collective efficacy (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Ohmer, 2007). Even if, as we initially supposed, perceived community functioning becomes more important for civic participation with age, reverse effects (i.e., civic participation enhances perceived community functioning) may exist at all ages.

Having said that, we should note that place attachment had a positive and significant effect on future intentions for civic participation only in the oldest group. This finding provided some support for our contention derived from socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al., 1999) that older adults may be willing to invest in their communities only if they have a meaningful relationship to those communities. Place attachment reflects emotional bonding to one’s place of living (Perkins & Long, 2002) and may therefore be better suited to test predictions of socioemotional selectivity theory than are more cognitive constructs, such as perceived social cohesion and organizational collective efficacy.

Contrary to our hypotheses, social cohesion (Sampson et al., 1997), which stood for sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), had no significant effects at all in our study. In fact, the few studies that addressed the relationships of this specific indicator with civic participation found no significant effects either (Ohmer, 2007; Perkins & Long, 2002). As Perkins and Long (2002) argued, social cohesion may matter more for unorganized and unplanned community participation, such as residents’ willingness to intervene in threatening situations (Sampson et al., 1997). To test for this possibility, we conducted additional analyses with volunteer work during the flooding as the outcome. However, our predictors, including social cohesion, had virtually no effects on this indicator. This null finding may be attributed
to the urgency of the situation, when inhabitants of the flooded regions felt compelled to help one another.

**Dimensions of Civic Participation and Their Predictors Across the Life Span**

Similarities and differences in our findings for different outcome variables, which represented distinct dimensions of civic participation, may be summarized in two key points. First, in line with socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al., 1999) and our expectations (see Table 1, Hypothesis 6), the breadth of participation seemed to be a more relevant indicator in younger than in older adults. Although the average breadth of civic participation was highest in the group aged 30–44, our predictors had significant associations with this indicator only in the youngest group aged 18–29. Younger individuals are more motivated to broaden their social networks than middle-aged and older adults are (Carstensen et al., 1999). Hence, in response to contextual influences relevant to civic participation, whether in a positive or in a negative way, younger adults may be more likely to adjust the number of domains of engagement rather than its intensity.

Second, some differences emerged between the findings for intensity of actual civic participation and future intentions for participation in participants who were not civically engaged in the past 12 months. Most importantly, the analyses of future intentions yielded more evidence for age differences in the predictors (e.g., in support from friends and in place attachment; see Table 5). These results suggested that the *initiation* of civic participation may be driven by somewhat different social contextual factors in younger and older adults.

**Implications and Future Directions**

We found few age differences in the rates of actual civic participation. Both intensity and breadth of actual participation were comparable across age groups, with those aged 30–44 tending to be slightly more engaged than were others (cf. Gensicke & Geiss, 2010). This finding suggests that different socialization experiences (i.e., before and after the German reunification in 1990) have not led to drastically different patterns of civic participation in
younger and older cohorts of East Germans. At the same time, future intentions showed a steady decline with the participants’ age. Rather than being a cohort effect, this finding indicates that, with age, individuals become less likely to get involved in civic participation if they are not already engaged (cf. Wilson, 2000). However, as Kruse and Schmitt (this issue) showed, even the old-old may sometimes initiate civic engagement. Hence, it is all the more important to understand the factors that might foster civic participation in older adults.

The consistently positive effects of organizational collective efficacy (i.e., beliefs in the effectiveness of local voluntary organizations; Perkins & Long, 2002) suggest that there is at least one important factor that can be addressed at the community level and may be used as a leverage to promote civic participation across adulthood. Policy makers may attempt to boost organizational collective efficacy in communities by publicizing successful projects that were accomplished by voluntary organizations. Approaches to community organizing that are based on building trusting interpersonal relationships between community leaders and other community members (Christens, 2010) may serve the same purpose.

The fact that some of our results, such as those concerning general family support, disagreed with prior findings obtained on adolescent samples (e.g., Duke et al., 2009; Fletcher et al., 2000) could be due to that we studied adults and/or to that our sample came from a particular sociohistorical context of the former East Germany. Consequently, future research should address the less investigated social contextual factors of civic participation in adult samples from different countries (for cross-country studies conducted on adolescent and young adult samples, see Eckstein, Jugert, Noack, Born, & Sener, this issue, and Kim, Flanagan, & Pykett, this issue). Furthermore, as the distinction between the intensity and breadth of civic participation proved meaningful, it should be taken further. Future research may focus on the differing developmental experiences associated with the intensity and breadth of civic participation in different ages (cf. Rose-Krasnor et al., 2006). Finally, it is
worthwhile to investigate why some aspects of perceived social environment appear to exhibit age differences in their relation to civic participation, whereas others do not.

**Limitations and Conclusions**

A cross-sectional design made it difficult to ascertain the direction of effects in our study. Some effects were probably reciprocal (e.g., between perceived community functioning and civic participation). However, a possibility of the opposite direction of effects was largely ruled out in our analyses of future intentions in those who were currently not engaged. Moreover, we could not disentangle age, cohort, and period effects. Our sample was large and fairly representative, but a usual self-selection of females, better educated individuals, and married persons into the survey did occur. Our findings should therefore be generalized with caution. Furthermore, we relied on self-report data, and shared variance could have inflated the associations of interest. However, the fact that we obtained similar results with more objective (i.e., self-reported involvement in various domains) and more subjective (i.e., future intentions) measures of civic participation speaks against such a bias. Our measures also had their strengths, including a differentiated assessment of civic participation and the use of established, highly reliable scales. Finally, we should note that effect sizes were mostly small in our study. Hence, the predictors that we identified made only a modest contribution to explaining civic participation in the former East Germany.

Despite some limitations, our study brought new insights on the links between social contexts and civic participation in adulthood and presented evidence from a less studied region, the former East Germany. Our main conclusion of relevance to developmental research is that some social contextual factors may hamper or promote civic participation across adulthood, whereas others appear to be more age specific.
References


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Table 1

*Research Questions and Hypotheses*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Supported by findings?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Are supportive and empowering social contexts positively associated with adult civic participation?</td>
<td>1. Perceived general support from family and friends is positively associated with civic participation in adults&lt;br&gt;2. Sense of community, place attachment, and organizational collective efficacy are positively associated with civic participation in adults</td>
<td>No for support from family&lt;br&gt;Yes for support from friends&lt;br&gt;No for sense of community&lt;br&gt;Yes for place attachment and organizational collective efficacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Do these associations vary by age?</td>
<td>3. The positive associations between perceived general support from family and civic participation increase with the participants’ age&lt;br&gt;4. The positive associations between perceived general support from friends and civic participation decrease with the participants’ age&lt;br&gt;5. The positive associations between perceived community functioning and civic participation increase with the participants’ age&lt;br&gt;6. The strength of associations between the examined predictors and the breadth of civic participation decreases with the participants’ age</td>
<td>N/A as the relationships were negative&lt;br&gt;Partial support&lt;br&gt;Partial support for place attachment&lt;br&gt;No for organizational collective efficacy&lt;br&gt;Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Ages 18–29</th>
<th>Ages 30–44</th>
<th>Ages 45–59</th>
<th>Ages 60–75</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N1 = 442</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N2 = 596</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N3 = 1,095</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N4 = 931</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of residence in years, $M (SD)$</td>
<td>17.5$_a$ (9.8)</td>
<td>22.9$_b$ (14.3)</td>
<td>34.5$_c$ (17.3)</td>
<td>46.6$_d$ (20.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female, %</td>
<td>56.6</td>
<td>57.4</td>
<td>53.9</td>
<td>54.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 years of schooling, %</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>8.9$_a$</td>
<td>8.0$_a$</td>
<td>29.0$_b$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12–13 years of schooling, %</td>
<td>45.2$_a$</td>
<td>40.3</td>
<td>32.3$_b$</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income in Euros, $M (SD)$</td>
<td>1,076.7$_a$ (685.4)</td>
<td>1,325.3$_{bc}$ (595.7)</td>
<td>1,432.6$_b$ (710.3)</td>
<td>1,226.5$_c$ (576.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed, %</td>
<td>59.4</td>
<td>86.1$_a$</td>
<td>82.3$_a$</td>
<td>15.8$_b$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steady partner, %</td>
<td>65.6$_a$</td>
<td>86.4$_b$</td>
<td>83.5</td>
<td>81.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children in the household, %</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>67.6$_a$</td>
<td>16.9$_b$</td>
<td>2.4$_b$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General health, $M (SD)$</td>
<td>3.5$_a$ (0.9)</td>
<td>3.3$_b$ (0.8)</td>
<td>2.9$_c$ (0.8)</td>
<td>2.6$_d$ (0.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer work during the flooding, %</td>
<td>44.6$_a$</td>
<td>36.9$_a$</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>18.0$_b$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predictor variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from family, $M (SD)$</td>
<td>4.4$_a$ (0.7)</td>
<td>4.3 (0.8)</td>
<td>4.2$_b$ (0.9)</td>
<td>4.4$_a$ (0.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from friends, $M \ (SD)$</td>
<td>$4.3_a \ (0.8)$</td>
<td>$4.2_a \ (0.8)$</td>
<td>$4.0_b \ (0.9)$</td>
<td>$3.9_b \ (1.0)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social cohesion, $M \ (SD)$</td>
<td>$3.3_a \ (0.7)$</td>
<td>$3.4 \ (0.7)$</td>
<td>$3.4_a \ (0.7)$</td>
<td>$3.5_b \ (0.7)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place attachment, $M \ (SD)$</td>
<td>$3.4_a \ (1.0)$</td>
<td>$3.6_b \ (0.9)$</td>
<td>$3.5_b \ (0.9)$</td>
<td>$3.6_b \ (0.8)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational collective efficacy, $M \ (SD)$</td>
<td>$3.3_a \ (0.9)$</td>
<td>$3.5_b \ (0.9)$</td>
<td>$3.4 \ (0.9)$</td>
<td>$3.3_a \ (1.0)$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Outcome variables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intensity of civic participation, %</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never/not in the past 12 months</td>
<td>$58.0$</td>
<td>$49.2_a$</td>
<td>$60.5$</td>
<td>$60.0$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrequently or irregularly</td>
<td>$11.5$</td>
<td>$19.3_a$</td>
<td>$11.4$</td>
<td>$9.2_b$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least monthly</td>
<td>$8.3$</td>
<td>$13.9_a$</td>
<td>$9.3$</td>
<td>$11.3$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least weekly</td>
<td>$22.2$</td>
<td>$17.6$</td>
<td>$18.8$</td>
<td>$19.4$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Breadth of civic participation, $^a \ M \ (SD)$

| $1.8_a \ (1.2)$ | $2.2_b \ (1.7)$ | $1.9 \ (1.3)$ | $1.8_a \ (1.3)$ |

Future intentions for civic participation, $^b \ M \ (SD)$

| $2.5_a \ (1.1)$ | $2.2_b \ (1.0)$ | $2.1_b \ (1.0)$ | $1.9_c \ (0.9)$ |

*Note.* Means with different subscripts differ significantly ($p < .05$) between the age groups. Percentages with subscripts deviate significantly ($p < .05$) from those expected on assumption of an equal distribution across the age groups. Different subscripts denote different directions of deviation.

$^a$ Among the participants who were engaged in at least one domain in the past 12 months. $N_1 = 183, N_2 = 300, N_3 = 416, N_4 = 342$.

$^b$ Among the participants who were not engaged in the past 12 months. $N_1 = 253, N_2 = 290, N_3 = 636, N_4 = 513$. 

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Table 3

*Correlates of the Intensity of Civic Participation in the Past 12 Months: Findings From Ordinal Logistic Regression*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Ages 18–29</th>
<th>Ages 30–44</th>
<th>Ages 45–59</th>
<th>Ages 60–75</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$N_1 = 442$</td>
<td>$N_2 = 596$</td>
<td>$N_3 = 1,095$</td>
<td>$N_4 = 931$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from family</td>
<td>1.02 [0.76, 1.37]</td>
<td>0.87 [0.70, 1.07]</td>
<td>0.91 [0.76, 1.09]</td>
<td>0.99 [0.81, 1.22]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from friends</td>
<td>0.94 [0.70, 1.27]</td>
<td>1.33* [1.07, 1.66]</td>
<td>1.04 [0.86, 1.26]</td>
<td>1.12 [0.94, 1.34]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social cohesion</td>
<td>1.34 [0.99, 1.82]</td>
<td>1.12 [0.85, 1.46]</td>
<td>0.90 [0.72, 1.11]</td>
<td>1.06 [0.85, 1.31]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place attachment</td>
<td>1.31* [1.03, 1.67]</td>
<td>1.49** [1.18, 1.88]</td>
<td>1.45*** [1.21, 1.74]</td>
<td>1.48*** [1.20, 1.81]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational collective efficacy</td>
<td>1.31* [1.01, 1.69]</td>
<td>1.39** [1.13, 1.72]</td>
<td>1.48*** [1.26, 1.75]</td>
<td>1.42*** [1.19, 1.70]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta \chi^2$ (df = 5)</td>
<td>21.45***</td>
<td>48.44***</td>
<td>49.43***</td>
<td>51.58***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Cells represent $\text{Exp}(B)$ with 95% CIs in brackets. Where significant effects emerged, they did not significantly differ across the age groups.

Analyses were controlled for length of residence, gender, school attainment, income, employment status, partnership status, children in the household, general health, and volunteer work during the flooding. $\Delta \chi^2$ refers to the difference from the model with control variables only.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. 
Table 4

**Correlates of the Breadth of Civic Participation in the Past 12 Months: Findings From Negative Binomial Regression**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Ages 18–29</th>
<th>Ages 30–44</th>
<th>Ages 45–59</th>
<th>Ages 60–75</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$N_1 = 183$</td>
<td>$N_2 = 300$</td>
<td>$N_3 = 416$</td>
<td>$N_4 = 342$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from family</td>
<td>0.60&lt;sup&gt;a, **&lt;/sup&gt; [0.43, 0.85]</td>
<td>1.02&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt; [0.85, 1.23]</td>
<td>1.07&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt; [0.88, 1.31]</td>
<td>0.96&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt; [0.78, 1.18]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from friends</td>
<td>1.04 [0.80, 1.34]</td>
<td>0.86 [0.70, 1.06]</td>
<td>1.12 [0.93, 1.36]</td>
<td>1.00 [0.83, 1.21]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social cohesion</td>
<td>1.16 [0.89, 1.52]</td>
<td>1.07 [0.84, 1.35]</td>
<td>0.93 [0.77, 1.13]</td>
<td>1.05 [0.81, 1.34]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place attachment</td>
<td>1.32&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt; [1.07, 1.64]</td>
<td>1.12 [0.90, 1.39]</td>
<td>1.18 [1.00, 1.39]</td>
<td>1.07 [0.85, 1.35]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational collective efficacy</td>
<td>1.23 [0.92, 1.65]</td>
<td>1.26 [1.00, 1.58]</td>
<td>1.00 [0.85, 1.17]</td>
<td>1.02 [0.85, 1.23]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta \chi^2$ (df = 5)</td>
<td>34.43***</td>
<td>7.49</td>
<td>8.36</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Analyses were conducted among those who engaged in at least one domain in the past 12 months. Cells represent Exp($B$) with 95% CIs in brackets. Coefficients with different subscripts differ between the age groups at $p < .05$. Differences were tested for unstandardized coefficients. Analyses were controlled for length of residence, gender, school attainment, income, employment status, partnership status, children in the household, general health, and volunteer work during the flooding. $\Delta \chi^2$ refers to the difference from the model with control variables only.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. 
Table 5

*Correlates of Future Intentions for Civic Participation: Findings From Linear Regression*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Ages 18–29</th>
<th>Ages 30–44</th>
<th>Ages 45–59</th>
<th>Ages 60–75</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$N_1 = 253$</td>
<td>$N_2 = 290$</td>
<td>$N_3 = 636$</td>
<td>$N_4 = 513$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from family</td>
<td>-.22$_a$,** [-.35, -.11]</td>
<td>-.13 [-.25, .00]</td>
<td>-.07$_b$ [-.17, .03]</td>
<td>-.12* [-.23, -.02]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from friends</td>
<td>.11 [.00, .24]</td>
<td>.20$_a$,** [.06, .33]</td>
<td>.05 [-.04, .14]</td>
<td>.03$_b$ [-.09, .16]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social cohesion</td>
<td>.09 [-.05, .22]</td>
<td>.03 [-.09, .15]</td>
<td>-.01 [-.10, .07]</td>
<td>-.06 [-.18, .07]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place attachment</td>
<td>.03 [-.12, .17]</td>
<td>-.01 [-.15, .14]</td>
<td>.04 [-.05, .14]</td>
<td>.12* [.02, .22]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational collective efficacy</td>
<td>.12 [-.01, .25]</td>
<td>.26*** [.13, .37]</td>
<td>.17*** [.09, .25]</td>
<td>.18*** [.08, .27]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>.058**</td>
<td>.114***</td>
<td>.026**</td>
<td>.045***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Analyses were conducted among those who were not engaged in the past 12 months. Cells represent standardized regression coefficients with 95% CIs in brackets. Coefficients with different subscripts differ between the age groups at $p < .05$. Differences were tested for unstandardized coefficients. Analyses were controlled for length of residence, gender, school attainment, income, employment status, partnership status, children in the household, general health, volunteer work during the flooding, and past experience of civic participation. $\Delta R^2$ refers to the difference from the model with control variables only.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. 