

## *Citizen-Initiated Contacting: A Three-City Test of SES and Need Theories*

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Two theories to explain contacting have been advanced: the SES theory which argues that people with higher socioeconomic status have the resources and skills to contact and the need-awareness theory which states that contacting is motivated by need, regardless of SES. Using data from a 1985 survey of citizens in three Florida cities, these two theories were tested. Two very distinct groups of contactors emerged. Social-referent contactors were those people motivated primarily by socioeconomic status. Awareness of government officials, participation in other types of political activity, and to a lesser extent need, as measured by evaluations of city services, were also connected with social-referent contacting. Particularized-referent contactors were those who contacted because of need and awareness, regardless of socioeconomic status. That the effects of city remained significant after controlling for the other variables indicates that environmental context plays a significant yet relatively unexplored role in contacting.

Citizen-initiated contacting has become an active topic of research with good reason. These individual and isolated activities of citizens can have as much cumulative impact on urban policy as the more commonly studied forms of political participation such as voting and campaigning. At the same time, researchers have not been as successful at explaining why individuals contact as they have at explaining other forms of political participation. Indeed, people who contact officials have sometimes been called mavericks by researchers who often find that factors so successful in explaining other forms of participation are not so useful in helping us to understand contacting behavior.

Two theories have emerged to explain contacting. The first theory views contacting as political participation and argues that contacting can be explained by the socioeconomic model. People who have higher socioeconomic status and who thus also possess skills and resources, both attitudinal and material, are more likely to participate. The second theory argues that contacting is very different from other political acts. Need is what pushes people, regardless of socioeconomic status, into this high-initiative activity.

As many researchers have pointed out, contacting is a unique form of political participation. Verba and Nie, in one of the earliest works to research contacting, described it as instrumental, specific, and clear: "the citizen knows what he wants and acts to obtain it" (1972, 105). On the other hand, expectations that people have when they are politically active in other ways generally are more vague in hoped-for outcomes. Second, the contactor, unlike other political participants, takes the initiative in de-

termining the what, who, and the how of the contact. In voting, these objects are determined by government officials prior to the act; in campaigning and interest-group activity, the individual is restricted by the wishes of others. Contacting, therefore, would appear to be an act demanding needs, skills, and resources different from those needed for other types of participation.

In addition to the question of what stimulates contacting generally, some researchers have argued that all contactors are not alike. If this is true, then we cannot expect that all contactors are motivated by the same factors. These researchers have divided contactors into two groups: particularized-referent contactors who contact on behalf of self and family and those who contact not only for self and family but for others as beneficiaries (e.g., Verba and Nie 1972; Zuckerman and West 1985; Sharp 1982, 1984). Social-referent contactors have been found to be more like other political participants in demographic characteristics, skills, and attitudes, while particularized-referent contactors appear to defy standard explanations of political participation. Distinguishing between the two types is tricky and requires that the researcher either make a judgment as to who benefits from contacting, or simply ask the respondent who was the intended beneficiary of contacting. However, making this distinction between types of contactors is important because the diversity of explanations of contacting and the lack of clear findings may be due in part to this failure of researchers to distinguish between the two types.

### **Standard Socioeconomic Model and Contacting**

According to the SES model, higher socioeconomic status (and the benefits it brings to the individual in terms of skills, resources, psychological makeup, and links with the political world) usually leads to higher levels of political participation. Most survey research has found a positive relationship between SES and contacting (e.g., Vedlitz and Veblen 1980; Thomas 1982; Sharp 1982). Although the relationship is not as strong as might be expected, the relationships between SES and other types of participation also prove to be moderate (Sharp 1982). The SES model has been most successful as a predictor of social-referent contacting, while it fails to explain citizen-initiated contacting (Verba and Nie 1972).

Political theorists argue that socioeconomic status helps individuals acquire the psychological attitudes and knowledge necessary to gain access to government. Figuring as a major SES-related variable has been efficacy, or the sense that one can affect the political system and that the

political system will respond to the individual (Campbell et al., 1960; Almond and Verba 1963; Verba and Nie 1972). Because contacting requires high initiative, one would expect efficacy to be a major predictor of contacting behavior. However, the findings are mixed. For example, Sharp (1982) and Thomas (1982) find that efficacy plays an important role in contacting. In contrast, Verba and Nie find that efficacy is important in social-referent contacting but that even people with low levels of efficacy contact on behalf of themselves and their families. Other research indicates that efficacy has zero, or negative, effect on contacting (e.g., Hero 1984; Miewald and Comer 1986). Efficacy, at this point, remains an important SES-related variable theoretically although research has not always come up with findings to support its theoretical importance.

Knowledge of how and whom to access and how the political system operates has been another major SES-related factor in contacting research theory since Jones et al. (1977) used it combined with need. Awareness would appear more important in contacting than in other forms of political participation in which the media and government inform individuals on how to access government (voting), or in which knowledge is shared (group activities, campaigning).

Political activism or participation in one or more activities has been theorized to lead to activism in others. As Verba and Nie (1972) have found, this holds true for most political actors, including social-referent contactors. Particularized-referent contactors, on the other hand, generally do not engage in the standard acts of political participation. Zuckerman and West (1985), however, have tested a theory of "political ties," in which they found that individuals who form links with officials via campaigning activities do participate more, regardless of the referent of contacting. Research indicates that social-referent contactors are those who have benefited most from voting, attending public meetings, campaigning, working with others on community problems, and membership in groups while the findings are mixed at best for particularized-referent contactors.

### **Need and Contacting**

Because SES and SES-related variables have had only moderate success in explaining contacting and essentially none in explaining particularized-referent contacting, researchers have proposed another model. Need, or immediate, specific, and clearly defined demands, in contrast to the vaguer, less immediate expected outcomes motivating other

political activities, has been presented as a major factor in citizen-initiated contacting. Moreover, since need crosses all socioeconomic levels and exists regardless of the levels of skills and resources that accompany SES gradients, it could explain the lack of success that researchers have had in explaining contacting.

The major contribution to this theory was made by Jones et al. (1977), who combined need with awareness. The highest level of contacting, they theorized, would be at the middle ranges of need and awareness. Defining need as socioeconomic well being, they argued that people of high-need levels would lack the awareness necessary to contact while people at high-awareness levels (and higher socioeconomic status) would not have the need to contact. However intuitively satisfying this theory might be, tests of it have found little support (one exception is Bachelor 1983). In fact, Coulter (1988) found the opposite to be true: it is people at the highest and lowest levels that do the contacting. Need, however, remains an important theoretical variable for this unique and instrumental form of political participation.

### **Data Collection and Methodology**

There are then two models to explain contacting. This study uses data from a 1985 telephone survey of adult citizens in three different Florida cities to examine contacting in the light of both models. Respondents were selected through random digit dialing methods with a response rate for each of the three cities of at least 65 percent (sampling errors are 4-5 percent at the 95 percent confidence level). Selecting three cities rather than just one, as is usually done in contacting research, allows greater exploration of basic theories and a greater potential for generalization. The sample is comparable to 1980 census estimates although, as in most telephone surveys, the respondents are somewhat better educated than census estimates. There were 1449 respondents (541 in Bartow; 440 in Bradenton, and 468 in Orlando).

The three cities, although in the same overall sociopolitical structure of central Florida, are quite different. Bartow is a traditional small southern town of 13,000 with thirty-two percent of the residents Black. It is a low-growth area dependent on agriculture and phosphate-mining. Bradenton is a gulf city of 30,000 with high growth mainly from retirees. Orlando, with a population of 128,000 in 1980, is in a high-growth metropolitan area. Its population is 30 percent Black. Bartow has a city-manager form of government while Bradenton and Orlando have city

commission forms.

In this study, respondents were asked: "In the last three or four years, have you personally contacted a city government official or agency about a problem or issue?" This question is similar to that used by other researchers (e.g., Verba and Nie 1972; Sharp 1982, 1984). Thirty-five percent of the respondents (501 individuals) across the three cities replied "yes." Respondents were further asked whether the contact was about something concerning only them and their families, or "something of concern to the community generally." Thirty-two percent (or 159) of those contacting indicated that they were particularized-referent contactors, and sixty-eight percent (342 respondents) indicated contacting to benefit others in addition to themselves (social-referent contacting).<sup>1</sup> All of these percentages are similar to those found by other researchers.

### Contacting and the Standard Socioeconomic Model

Verba and Nie's standard socioeconomic model has been relatively successful in explaining political participation. That is, in the absence of other political motivators, higher levels of social well-being have been found to lead to the possession of more resources and skills which in turn stimulate individuals to become politically active. Because citizen-initiated contacting is a form of political participation, we would expect a positive relationship between measures of socioeconomic status and the propensity to contact generally.

Two measures of socioeconomic status (SES) are available in this study: a 6-category education question, ranging from eighth grade or less to graduate/professional school, and an 8-category gross family income question ranging from below \$5,000 to \$40,000 and over. Table 1 indicates that the relationship between SES and contacting is similar to that between SES and other modes of participation.

TABLE 1. Relationship Between Political Participation and SES

	Education	Income
<i>Contacting</i>	.29	.24
<i>Voting</i>	.25	.18
<i>Campaign Activities</i>	.37	.31
<i>Community Activities</i>	.24	.20

*Note.* Gammas ( $p = .0001$  in all cases).

However, contactors, in describing the intended beneficiaries of their activity, have categorized themselves as falling into one of two groups,

one group with a social referent, or beneficiaries of their contacting that include people other than themselves and their families, and the other with a particularized referent, or individual/family beneficiaries of contacting. We would expect to find, as other researchers have, that social-referent contactors resemble other political participants and become more likely to contact as their socioeconomic status increases. Particularized-referent contactors, on the other hand, in seeking very direct benefits, are expected to be the "maverick" participants who are unaffected by SES. Our expectations are supported as indicated in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Contactors Compared to Noncontactors

	Contacting		
	Particularized	Social	All
<i>SES and SES-related Variables</i>			
<i>SES</i>			
Education	.07 (.86)	.39 (.0001)	.29 (.0001)
Family Income	.11 (.13)	.29 (.0001)	.24 (.0001)
Race (Nonwhite)	-.19 (.13)	-.23 (.008)	-.22 (.004)
Gender (Female)	-.17 (.06)	-.21 (.0008)	-.20 (.0004)
<i>Efficacy</i>			
Efficacy Index	.07 (.27)	.23 (.0001)	.18 (.0001)
<i>Political Activism</i>			
Campaign Index	.16 (.02)	.54 (.0001)	.44 (.0001)
Voting Index	.01 (.99)	.36 (.0001)	.24 (.0001)
Work With Others	.14 (.14)	.68 (.0001)	.55 (.0001)
Attend Meetings	.22 (.05)	.69 (.0001)	.58 (.0001)
<i>Group Membership</i>			
Memberships	.01 (.98)	.31 (.0001)	.22 (.0001)
<i>Awareness</i>			
Awareness Index	.23 (.0001)	.52 (.0001)	.44 (.0001)
<i>Need</i>			
Financial well-being			
Personal well-being index	-.10 (.39)	-.05 (.58)	-.06 (.37)
Service evaluations			
Poor	.39 (.0001)	.16 (.02)	.24 (.0001)

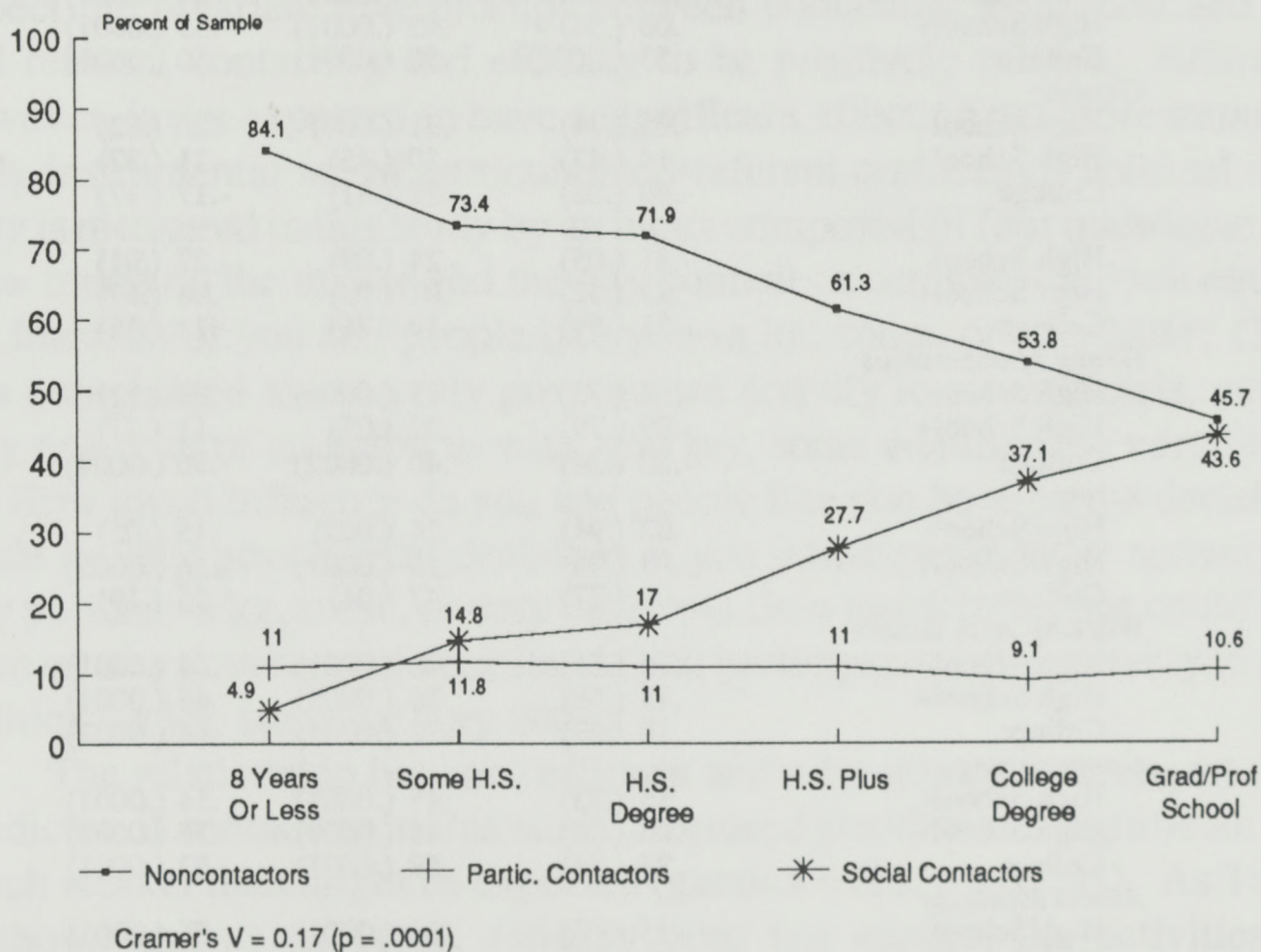
Note. Gammas (*p*-values in parentheses).

As Table 2 indicates, both education and income have a positive, although moderate, effect on contacting generally (education gamma = .29; income gamma = .24). This effect appears to be largely the result of social-referent contactors who make up two-thirds of the contacting group (education gamma = .39; income gamma = .29). The relationship between SES and particularized-referent contacting is not significant, as expected. The relationship between education and contacting is stronger than that for income and contacting. This is not surprising because, as Wolfinger and

Rosenstone (1980) and others have argued, education and income are not necessarily highly correlated, and it is education, not income, that provides the skills and psychological resources needed for participation. Because education is the variable with the stronger relationship to contacting, it, and not income, will be used as our measure of SES throughout the rest of the paper.

The differences among noncontactors, social-referent contactors, and particularized-referent contactors becomes clearer in Figure 1, which shows the effects of education on contacting. Varying levels of education have essentially no effect on particularized-referent contactors while they clearly have a positive effect on social-referent contacting. Because contacting is so specific in purpose, because SES and contacting are only moderately related, and because SES adds almost nothing to our understanding of particularized-referent contactors, we must explore other explanations of contacting behavior.

Figure 1. Relationships Between Education And Noncontacting, Particularized-Referent Contacting, & Social-Referent Contacting



### Race and Gender

Women and some minority groups (in this paper, Blacks and Hispanics) have traditionally been less likely to participate politically, although

research has shown that as these two groups achieve educational and economic parity, their participation rates resemble those of men and whites. In this survey, men and whites are significantly more likely to contact (for both particularized or social beneficiaries) as Table 2 shows.<sup>2</sup> When we control for education (collapsed into three categories: high school and below, beyond high school, and college graduate and above) the relationships between contacting and gender and contacting and race, respectively, remain at the lower levels of education (at  $p = .10$ ). Results are shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3. Effect of Individual Variables, Controlling for Education

	Contacting		
	Particularized	Social	All
<i>Efficacy</i>			
High School	.05 (.11)	.11 (.02)	.08 (.006)
High School+	-.16 (.48)	.24 (.008)	.13 (.06)
College	.44 (.05)	.46 (.0001)	.46 (.0001)
<i>Awareness</i>			
High School-	.22 (.07)	.51 (.0001)	.40 (.0001)
High School+	.06 (.54)	.45 (.0001)	.35 (.0001)
College	.53 (.0002)	.50 (.0001)	.50 (.0001)
<i>Gender</i>			
High School-	-.05 (.74)	-.31 (.004)	-.20 (.02)
High School+	-.14 (.47)	-.10 (.45)	-.11 (.32)
College	-.40 (.08)	-.12 (.41)	-.17 (.17)
<i>Race</i>			
High School-	-.31 (.05)	-.24 (.09)	-.27 (.01)
High School+	.25 (.32)	.01 (.99)	.08 (.67)
College	-.31 (.59)	-.10 (.76)	-.14 (.58)
<i>Group Memberships</i>			
High School-	-.02 (.72)	.15 (.0006)	.08 (.11)
High School+	-.09 (.79)	.22 (.05)	.13 (.27)
College	-.22 (.24)	.40 (.0002)	.36 (.0004)
<i>Voting</i>			
High School-	.02 (.94)	.24 (.002)	.15 (.05)
High School+	-.03 (.95)	.35 (.0001)	.16 (.0005)
College	-.09 (.77)	.47 (.04)	.35 (.19)
<i>Working With Others</i>			
High School-	.16 (.31)	.70 (.0001)	.53 (.0001)
High School+	.13 (.58)	.56 (.0001)	.46 (.0001)
College	.18 (.57)	.72 (.0001)	.64 (.0001)
<i>Campaigning</i>			
High School-	.15 (.33)	.45 (.0001)	.34 (.0001)
High School+	.08 (.34)	.45 (.0001)	.36 (.0001)
College	.27 (.34)	.57 (.0001)	.52 (.0001)
<i>Attend Meetings</i>			
High School-	.35 (.03)	.66 (.0001)	.56 (.0001)
High School+	.03 (.99)	.61 (.0001)	.49 (.0001)
College	.19 (.56)	.67 (.0001)	.60 (.0001)
<i>Need (Service Evaluations)</i>			
High School-	.41 (.0005)	.29 (.009)	.34 (.0001)
High School+	.41 (.003)	.20 (.07)	.26 (.007)
College	.03 (.99)	-.21 (.64)	-.17 (.70)

Note. Gammas ( $p$ -values in parentheses)



In testing whether education affects contacting after controlling for gender and race, we find that education does influence social-referent contacting, but again not particularized-referent contacting, which does not appear to be an act driven by traditional predictors of political participation (See Table 4). Because race and gender have significant effects even after controlling for education, these two variables deserve attention in further contacting research.

### *Psychological Resources and Contacting*

Attitudinal resources and knowledge are important in determining whether individuals participate politically. Citizen-initiated contacting, which requires high individual initiative and clear articulations of needs and wants, would appear to demand greater levels of self-confidence, or efficacy, and awareness than would most other types of participation.

*Political Efficacy.* Since the literature indicates that higher levels of SES would lead to greater levels of efficacy, we would expect the two measures to be strongly and positively related. Moreover, we would expect the bivariate relationships between contacting in general and social-referent contacting and efficacy to be positively related. Efficacy, however, is not expected to have a significant effect on the more immediately instrumental act of particularized-referent contacting. Political efficacy is measured in this study by an index composed of four questions: (1) How much do the mayor and the city council or commission look out for the interests of you and people like you--a lot, some, or very little? (2) If you complained about a city government activity to city officials, would they pay a lot of attention to what you say, some attention, or very little? (3) How much influence do you and people like you have on the decisions made by city government decisions if you participated more actively in city politics--a lot, some, or very little? (4) How much influence could you have on city government decisions if you participated more actively in city politics—a lot, some, or very little?

The relationship between efficacy and education, the strongest SES predictor of contacting in this study, is indeed positive and significant but much weaker than might be expected ( $\gamma = .21, p = .0001$ ). As Table 2 shows and as expected, efficacy does not explain the activities of particularized-referent contactors. There is a positive relationship between efficacy and contacting in general ( $\gamma = .18$ ) and between efficacy and social-referent contacting ( $\gamma = .23$ ). This relationship is not as strong as those for the SES variables, education and income, and contacting. However, it is similar to the relationships between efficacy

and other political activities such as voting ( $\gamma = .22$ ), campaigning ( $\gamma = .26$ ), and working with others to solve community problems ( $\gamma = .15$ ).

TABLE 4. Effect of Education, Controlling for Individual Variables

	Contacting		
	Particularized	Social	All
<i>Race</i>			
White	.02 (.77)	.38 (.0001)	.28 (.0001)
Nonwhite	.32 (.06)	.52 (.0002)	.46 (.0003)
<i>Gender</i>			
Men	.17 (.28)	.35 (.0001)	.30 (.0001)
Women	.02 (.75)	.47 (.0001)	.33 (.0001)
<i>Efficacy</i>			
low	-.04 (.46)	.28 (.02)	.16 (.18)
medium	.15 (.26)	.39 (.0001)	.31 (.0001)
high	.13 (.17)	.49 (.0001)	.42 (.0001)
<i>Awareness</i>			
low	.04 (.38)	.43 (.0001)	.29 (.0008)
medium	-.04 (.93)	.26 (.01)	.16 (.12)
high	.26 (.10)	.41 (.0009)	.38 (.001)
<i>Attend Meetings</i>			
no	.10 (.44)	.34 (.0001)	.25 (.0001)
yes	-.08 (.65)	.33 (.002)	.26 (.01)
<i>Group Memberships</i>			
0 memberships	.04 (.54)	.26 (.01)	.18 (.05)
1 memberships	.01 (.92)	.49 (.0001)	.34 (.0002)
2 memberships	.30 (.09)	.45 (.001)	.42 (.001)
3+ memberships	.29 (.51)	.34 (.01)	.33 (.02)
<i>Need (Service Evaluations)</i>			
No Need	.15 (.18)	.50 (.0001)	.41 (.0001)
Need	.07 (.74)	.36 (.003)	.26 (.02)
<i>Voting Frequency</i>			
Never	.16 (.48)	.30 (.15)	.23 (.14)
Sometimes	.06 (.79)	.18 (.49)	.14 (.53)
Most of the time	.15 (.44)	.36 (.009)	.31 (.02)
Always	.05 (.81)	.49 (.0001)	.39 (.0001)
<i>Campaigning</i>			
0 (inactives)	.05 (.75)	.28 (.007)	.18 (.04)
1	.06 (.92)	.32 (.009)	.24 (.03)
2	.03 (.60)	.32 (.03)	.27 (.06)
3 (activists)	.01 (.88)	.24 (.23)	.20 (.30)
<i>Worked With Others</i>			
No	.07 (.71)	.39 (.0001)	.26 (.0001)
Yes	.07 (.89)	.37 (.0001)	.32 (.0001)

Note. Gammas (*p*-values in parentheses)

We then wanted to separate the effects of SES from those of efficacy by first examining the relationship of efficacy to contacting, controlling for education. As Table 3 shows, efficacy remains significant at the .05 level (except for one category) for the social-referent contactors and contactors in general. Also interesting is that efficacy's influence is highest at the highest level of education. At the same time, Table 4 shows

that education generally remains significant for general and social-referent contacting when we control for efficacy. These findings support the theoretical importance of both variables in explaining contacting other than particularized-referent contacting although efficacy is a much less important variable than expected.

*Awareness.* Awareness, or basic knowledge of how to access the political system, is essential in political participation. Consequently, awareness has become a key variable in contacting because contacting in many instances demands so much more from the citizen in terms of initiative and effort. We would expect that awareness, particularly in terms of whom to contact, would be a significant predictor of contacting, regardless of referent.

Awareness in this study is measured by an index composed of responses to two questions: (1) Do you happen to remember the name of the city manager of Bartow (mayor of Bradenton or Orlando)? and (2) Do you happen to remember the names of the members of the city council or commission? This index is demanding; however, it is similar to one used by Brown (1982). It also appears an appropriate awareness measure since the major dependent variable of the study asks whether people have contacted either city officials or agencies. Forty-nine percent of the entire sample knew the name of the city manager (or mayor) but only 20 percent knew the names of two or more city council (commission) members.

After controlling for the SES measure of education (recoded into three categories), awareness generally remains an important predictor of all three categories of contacting, except for particularized-referent contactors at lower levels of education (see Table 3). In Table 4, looking at the relationship between education and contacting while controlling for awareness, we find that education (except in one category) remains significant for social-referent contactors and insignificant, as we expected, for particularized referent contactors. Generally, then, SES is an important predictor of social-referent contacting and contacting in general, but not of particularized-referent contacting. Awareness, on the other hand, appears to be an important variable in its own right for all types of contacting, including particularized-referent contacting. A minimal level of knowledge seems to be necessary for an individual to make the effort to get government to respond to a specific request.

### *Group Membership*

The effect of group membership, whether the group is an interest group or not, theoretically increases the propensity to participate. Belong-

ing to a group generally informs individuals about issues of broader relevance, provides information on how to participate, and might even stimulate dissatisfaction with one's own well-being and with that of the community. While all groups are not equally stimulating in the political sense, we expect that the number of group memberships and consequent exposure to more than one source of social influence and pressure will have a significant and positive effect on all three categories of contacting.

As expected, Table 2 indicates that the number of group memberships individuals have affects the likelihood of their contacting in general ( $\gamma = .22$ ) and of contacting for social-referent reasons ( $\gamma = .32$ ). However, contrary to expectations, the political advantages of group membership have no influence on contacting for particularized-referent purposes ( $\gamma = .01$ ). Both education and group membership remain significant predictors of social-referent contacting when each variable is controlled for the other (see Tables 3 and 4).

### *Political Activism*

Participating in other activities which influence political outcomes can provide the skills, self-confidence, and connections necessary for citizen-initiated contacting.

*Voting.* Voting is a relatively undemanding form of participation that rarely, if ever, leads to the specific and immediate outcomes produced by contacting. Nevertheless, voting connects the individual with public issues and with ways to access government. We would expect that voting would make a significant but minor contribution to contacting. Respondents were asked: "In city elections, do you vote always, most of the time, only some of the time, or never?"

As Table 2 indicates, those who voted were more likely to be social-referent contactors (contactor  $\gamma = .36$ ). When we tested for a spurious relationship controlling for education (i.e., that education affects both contacting and voting), we found that voting remains significant (Table 3). After controlling the effects of voting frequency, we find that education is significant for those who vote more frequently (Table 4). Contrary to expectations, voting frequency has no effect on particularized-referent contacting.

*Working with others.* Verba and Nie (1972) recognized that working with others on a community problem is a political activity even though government may or may not be directly involved. We would expect to find that respondents who reported working with others on a community problem are also more likely to contact generally and for social-referent

reasons. There should be no relationship between communal activity and particularized-referent contacting.

As Table 2 indicates, these expectations are supported. As expected, the propensity to work with others on community problems is unrelated to contacting for oneself or one's family. The gammas for this variable and social-referent contacting and general contacting are quite large in comparison to those for other relationships (social-referent contacting gamma = .68; general contacting = .55). After controlling for education, the effect of community work remains very strong for social-referent contacting and contacting in general (see Table 3). The strong relationship between working with others and contacting generally as well as contacting for social reasons could be the result of "social desirability" responses or, more optimistically, an indication of the existence of people with "other-directed" interests. Still, this relationship distinguishes a group of similarly motivated people, comparable to those Verba and Nie (1972) labeled communal activists.

*Campaigning.* Zuckerman and West (1985) found that political party activity and campaigning activities provided strong explanations for both particularized-referent and social-referent contacting. They theorized that people who had campaigned had formed political ties with officials and that these ties would stimulate subsequent contacting of those officials. We would expect to find relationships between campaigning and all types of contacting similar to those of Zuckerman and West (1985). A campaigning index was created from three questions in this survey: (1) In the last three or four years, have you attended any political meetings or rallies? (2) . . . have you contributed money to a political party, candidate, or some other political cause? (3) . . . have you done any other work for a party, candidate, or some other political cause?

The data generally support these expectations. As Table 2 indicates, those who have formed links with public officials through campaigning are more likely to contact public officials. However, when the effect of campaigning is controlled by education, its relatively weak relationship with particularized-referent contacting disappears while campaigning remains a strong predictor of contacting in general and social-referent contacting (Table 3). When the effects of education on contacting are tested, controlling for campaign activism, education remains significant at the lower levels of activism; however, education is no longer a driving force for campaign activists.

*Attending meetings.* Citizens who maintain ties with government and who inform themselves through attending public meetings are ex-

pected to be more likely to contact regardless of referent. Those surveyed were asked, "In the last three or four years, have you attended a meeting or a hearing of the city council or commission?"

As Table 2 indicates, individuals who attended public meetings were also more likely to contact officials. This relationship was strongest for social-referent contactors. When the effects of education are controlled, attending meetings is still an important factor in predicting whether individuals will contact generally or for social-referent reasons. Interestingly, attending meetings remains significant ( $\gamma = .35$ ) only at the lowest level of education for particularized-referent contactors. Education, when attendance at public meetings is controlled, still remains a significant predictor of social-referent contacting (see Table 4).

### *Summary of SES Model Variables and Contacting*

The standard socioeconomic model has been hypothesized to provide material and psychological resources necessary for political participation. This model appears to be relatively successful in explaining social-referent contacting. Because education as our SES measure generally remains significant after controlling for other SES-related variables, we assume that there may be other SES-related variables, such as a sense of civic duty, which we have not measured.

On the other hand, the SES model and standard explanations of political participation do not explain particularized-referent contacting. Only awareness, campaigning, and attending public meetings are significant predictors of particularized-referent contactors. When the effects of education are controlled, these relationships become attenuated, and only awareness remains significant across two of the three levels of education ( $p = .10$ ).

### **Contacting and the Need-Awareness Model**

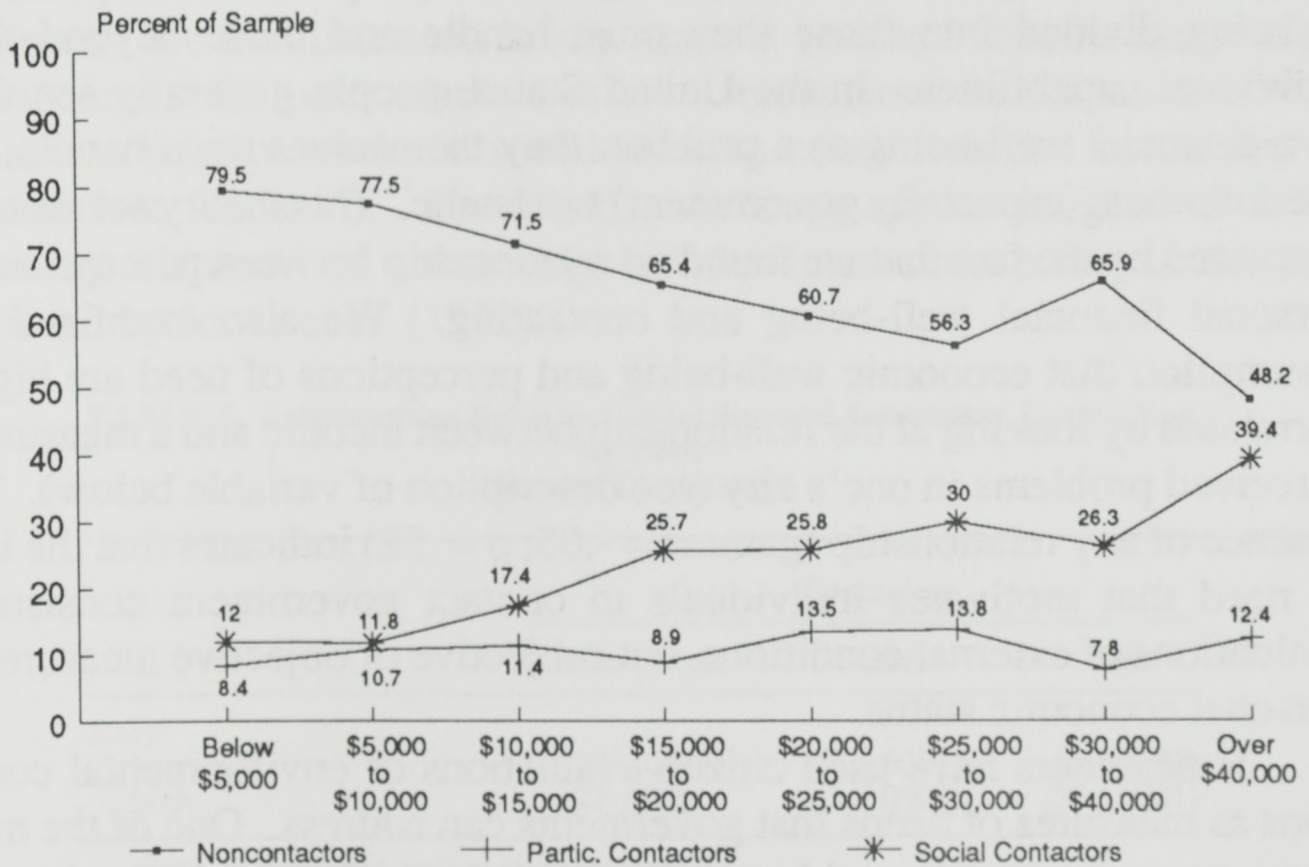
Explanations of why SES has such limited success in explaining contacting, especially that done for self and family, center around the fact that contacting differs from other types of political participation. Contactors have greater control over the timing and the content of their activity. Moreover, contacting demands are so much more specific and narrow in focus than demands usually possible through other political activities. It follows, therefore, that individuals are less moved to contact by SES and SES-related factors than by perceptions of immediate need.

Need, however, is a complex concept that has been measured in various ways. Two conceptual problems come to mind. Is need indicated

by personal and family well-being or should it be measured by evaluations of environmental conditions, which may or may not be correlated with personal well being? Second, is need best measured by objective indicators or should it be measured by the citizen's own perceptions of need? We looked at the relationship between need and contacting, addressing both of these questions.

*Need as Personal Well-being.* We start by using measures of personal well-being as indicators of need. Using gross family income as an objective measure of personal well-being, we find that income is a significant predictor of contacting generally (gamma = .24) and contacting for social reasons (gamma = .20) but not for particularized-referent contacting. As Figure 2 shows, if we use income as both a measure of need and as an SES measure (arguing that awareness increases as SES level increases), we find no support for the curvilinear relationship of Jones et al. (1977). Income essentially has no effect on particularized contacting while its relationship with social-referent contacting is positive. Perceptions exceed "objective" classifications of people as measures of needs that motivate political activity.

Figure 2. Relationships Between Income And Noncontacting, Particularized-Referent Contacting, & Social-Referent Contacting



Cramer's V = 0.15 (p = .0001)

Sharp (1984) argued that the Kinder and Kiewiet (1979) finding that political participation (voting) was unaffected by perceptions of personal well-being (i.e., personal need) does not apply at the local level. However, in making this argument, she used a measure based upon perceptions of problems in one's neighborhood, not a measure of personal well-being. We created a subjective measure of need defined as personal well-being with an index created from two questions: (1) "Would you say that you (and your family) are better off or worse off financially than you were a year ago?" (2) "Do you think that a year from now you (and your family) will be better off financially, worse off, or just about the same?" We find that perceptions of well-being have no effect on contacting (see Table 2). On the basis of these findings, we find that the Kinder and Kiewiet (1979) theory *does* apply at the local level. When a subjective measure of personal well-being is used, we find that individual evaluations of their own financial conditions do not generally figure in their decisions to contact. The needs that motivate contacting are, we feel, externally based and viewed by the individual as beyond the individual's capacity to control or, as Brody and Sniderman (1977) described them, "socially located."

*Need as Measured by Service Evaluations.* Much of the contacting research has assumed implicitly or explicitly that personal well-being and need requiring government intervention are equivalent or at least highly correlated. Other researchers have argued that people perceive problems as being divided into those they must handle and those beyond their individual capabilities. In the United States, people generally see their own financial well-being as a problem they themselves must handle, not one for others (especially government) to assume. This theory seems to be supported by the fact that we found no relationship between perceptions of personal financial well-being and contacting. We also examined the assumption that economic well-being and perceptions of need are highly correlated by looking at the relationship between income and a measure of perceived problems in one's city (see description of variable below). The absence of any relationship ( $\gamma = -.05$ ;  $p = .52$ ) indicates that the kind of need that motivates individuals to contact government consists of evaluations of external conditions, not subjective or objective measures of personal economic status.

Researchers have used citizen evaluations of environmental conditions as measures of needs that governments can address. One of the more common measures of need has been evaluations of governmental provision of services (e.g., Sharp 1982; Thomas 1982). The measure we use in



this study is an index of six evaluations of the following services provided by the city: police protection, fire protection, collecting garbage and trash, maintaining city streets and roads, parks and recreational facilities, and providing fresh water. If respondents gave no "poor" evaluations of services, they were coded 0; one or more poor answers were coded 1. We would expect people who evaluated one or more services as "poor" to be more likely to contact government for either particularized- or social-referent reasons.

As Table 2 indicates, need as measured by service evaluations is a significant predictor of propensity to contact. Need is quite important for those who contact on behalf of self and family ( $\gamma = .39$ ). For particularized-referent contactors, whose behavior proved unrelated to most SES-related variables, need is the single most important variable (see Table 2). The need-contacting relationship is significant yet weak for social-referent contactors whose behavior appears to be as much the result of SES, psychological attitudes that stimulate participation, and other activities which link the individual with the political system.

Need has been linked with awareness in research based upon arguments that contacting is the result of both need and awareness, or familiarity with public officials and mechanisms of access. Looking at the relationship of awareness controlling for need (our measure of service evaluations) we find that awareness remains significant for all three groups of contactors at both levels of need (see Table 5). Controlling for awareness, we find that need is important at both low and medium levels of awareness for particularized-referent contactors and at all levels of awareness (except one) for social-referent contactors and contactors in general (see Table 6). Need and awareness appear in general to be important elements of contacting, but the interaction effect is not that proposed by Jones et al. (1977).

TABLE 5. Relationships Between Contacting and Awareness, Controlling for Need (Service Evaluations)

	Contacting		
	Particularized	Social	All
<i>Need</i>			
low	.29 (.0001)	.51 (.0001)	.45 (.0001)
high	.27 (.08)	.63 (.0001)	.50 (.0001)

Note. Gammas (*p*-values in parentheses).

Table 6. Relationships Between Contacting and Need  
(Service Evaluations),  
Controlling For Awareness

	Contacting		
	Particularized	Social	All
<i>Awareness</i>			
<i>low</i>	.40 (.0001)	.09 (.50)	.23 (.01)
<i>medium</i>	.53 (.0001)	.28 (.03)	.37 (.0003)
<i>high</i>	.27 (.40)	.37 (.03)	.35 (.04)

Note. Gammas (*p*-values in parentheses).

### Contacting Across Cities

Throughout this paper, contacting behavior has been examined as if the patterns are the same across all three cities. We noted earlier that the three cities differed socially, economically, and politically. Bartow is a small southern town with a stable population while Bradenton and Orlando are high-growth cities experiencing major socioeconomic changes. The contacting rates across cities are different. In Bartow, 45 percent reported having contacted a city official or agency, while 28 percent in Bradenton and 29 percent in Orlando so reported.

To examine why the contacting rates are different, we first tested whether all respondents differed across cities in terms of the independent variables we have used in this study (see Table 2) or in measures of satisfaction with the community and length of residence. We found significant differences in education, race, efficacy, voting, attending public meetings, number of group memberships, and working with others. We then looked at the relationships between contacting and city, controlling for these variables. We found that the city variable still has significant effects indicating that there are contextual differences affecting contacting. Further research is needed to explore how contacting is affected by environmental factors as well as the characteristics of individuals.

The fact that the contacting rate is higher in Bartow even after controlling for the effects of the independent variables brings into question whether the relationships we find in the overall sample still obtain in all three cities. When we look at the effect of our independent variables controlled for city, we find that generally the relationships hold across all three cities (see Table 7). Particularized-referent contactors are motivated by need and awareness, rather than by SES and SES-related measures of civic attitudes and participation in other forms of political activity. There are a few city differences among particularized-referent contactors. That race and gender are significant in Bartow is likely due to the fact that

TABLE 7. Contacting by Individual Variables by City

	Contacting			Contacting		
	Particularized	Social	All	Particularized	Social	All
<i>EDUCATION</i>						
<i>City</i>						
Bartow	.20 (.31)	.52 (.0001)	.42 (.0001)			
Bradenton	.13 (.52)	.43 (.0001)	.34 (.0001)			
Orlando	-.03 (.84)	.30 (.009)	.19 (.05)			
<i>INCOME</i>						
<i>City</i>						
Bartow	.33 (.0001)	.18 (.05)	.42 (.0001)			
Bradenton	.19 (.08)	.01 (.99)	.26 (.004)			
Orlando	.14 (.55)	.16 (.58)	.15 (.32)			
<i>RACE (Nonwhite)</i>						
<i>City</i>						
Bartow	-.33 (.05)	-.43 (.0006)	-.39 (.002)			
Bradenton	-.70 (.10)	-.26 (.29)	-.37 (.07)			
Orlando	.08 (.82)	-.04 (.89)	-.01 (.99)			
<i>GENDER (Female)</i>						
<i>City</i>						
Bartow	-.33 (.02)	-.24 (.01)	-.27 (.002)			
Bradenton	-.10 (.56)	-.29 (.02)	-.22 (.04)			
Orlando	-.01 (.99)	-.17 (.17)	-.12 (.27)			
<i>EFFICACY</i>						
<i>City</i>						
Bartow	.11 (.21)	.36 (.0001)	.28 (.0002)			
Bradenton	-.01 (.60)	.08 (.17)	.05 (.20)			
Orlando	.01 (.75)	.08 (.14)	.06 (.32)			
<i>AWARENESS</i>						
<i>City</i>						
Bartow	.28 (.03)	.56 (.0001)	.48 (.0001)			
Bradenton	.29 (.06)	.59 (.0001)	.51 (.0001)			
Orlando	.12 (.71)	.47 (.0001)	.38 (.0001)			
<i>VOTING</i>						
<i>City</i>						
Bartow	.02 (.76)	.38 (.0001)	.26 (.0003)			
Bradenton	-.01 (.68)	.45 (.0001)	.30 (.0002)			
Orlando	.01 (.78)	.24 (.10)	.17 (.19)			
<i>CAMPAIGNING</i>						
<i>City</i>						
Bartow	.05 (.21)	.58 (.0001)	.44 (.001)			
Bradenton	.29 (.22)	.55 (.0001)	.48 (.0001)			
Orlando	.27 (.05)	.51 (.0001)	.44 (.0001)			
<i>WORKED WITH OTHERS</i>						
<i>City</i>						
Bartow	.27 (.07)	.68 (.0001)	.58 (.0001)			
Bradenton	.22 (.36)	.73 (.0001)	.62 (.0001)			
Orlando	-.07 (.85)	.69 (.0001)	.51 (.0001)			
<i>ATTEND CITY MEETINGS</i>						
<i>City</i>						
Bartow	.35 (.03)	.66 (.0001)	.56 (.0001)			
Bradenton	.03 (.99)	.61 (.0001)	.49 (.0001)			
Orlando	.19 (.56)	.67 (.0001)	.60 (.0001)			
<i>GROUP MEMBERSHIPS</i>						
<i>City</i>						
Bartow	-.01 (.74)	.29 (.0002)	.20 (.02)			
Bradenton	.04 (.99)	.32 (.0001)	.24 (.003)			
Orlando	-.15 (.42)	.31 (.0003)	.18 (.006)			
<i>PERSONAL WELL-BEING</i>						
<i>City</i>						
Bartow	-.06 (.83)	.13 (.09)	.03 (.89)			
Bradenton	-.05 (.13)	-.13 (.02)	-.12 (.001)			
Orlando	-.05 (.80)	.05 (.95)	.06 (.82)			
<i>SERVICE EVALUATIONS</i>						
<i>City</i>						
Bartow	.33 (.02)	.06 (.67)	.16 (.13)			
Bradenton	.43 (.01)	.15 (.33)	.24 (.04)			
Orlando	.47 (.003)	.33 (.007)	.37 (.0003)			

Note. Gammas (p-values in parentheses).

Bartow is a more traditional southern community and one less affected by socioeconomic changes created by influx of new residents. The dependence of particularized-contactors in Bartow on attending meetings is possibly due to the lack of media resources that would otherwise inform citizens of governmental activity.

Likewise, the patterns found across all three cities for social-referent contacting generally conform to our expectations. Socioeconomic status (education) and SES-related measures, including awareness, are generally significant across cities. Social-referent contactors also act in a wide range of political activities which further contribute to their knowledge and abilities to make more specific demands. We do note that race is significant only in Bartow for reasons noted above. Further, efficacy, which generally appears to be a weak explanatory variable in this study, is significant only in Bartow.

### Conclusion

In this study, two models of citizen-initiated contacting were explored. The first model, taken from research on other forms of political participation, states that SES and the resources and skills that usually result from higher SES levels, on the whole, increase individuals' propensity to act politically. The second model states that contacting is so unique in allowing citizens to specify the content and timing of their activity that they are motivated by need rather than by more traditional factors such as civic duty, group membership, and the like. The advantage of this study is that citizens from three cities, very different in political and socioeconomic structure as well as in size, were interviewed. In general, we found that the two models performed as expected across these very different cities. At the same time, the findings indicate that contacting is in part due to conditions outside the individual. Although some studies have speculated about context, the data from these three samples show that the effect of contextual factors on contacting needs to be examined in further research.

What this study demonstrates is the importance of separating those who report contacting into two separate groups. Any research that does not do this is likely to find weak, ambiguous, and perhaps conflicting relationships. Sharp (1982) justified her question on who the intended beneficiary of the contact was with the old argument used by survey researchers to the effect that the best way to find something out about someone is simply to ask. Our study provides substantial evidence that, in the case of contacting, this argument is valid.

A question asking whom one intends to benefit is one that arguably could lead to "social desirability" responses. However, fully one-third of the respondents openly admitted that their contacting was only for themselves and their family. The two groups are very different from each other. Social-referent contactors are more likely to be better educated, aware or informed about whom to contact (evidently in part due to more frequent attendance at meetings). Social-referent contactors have more links with others through election-oriented activities such as campaigning and voting and through working with others on community problems, and we can assume that these links familiarize individuals with issues that involve many in their community. Need (service evaluations) has some impact on contacting but social-referent contactors act out of a variety of motives, some of which we tapped here (e.g., links with others which inform the individual) and some of which we did not tap (e.g., civic duty).

Particularized-referent contactors, on the other hand, are not motivated by psychological attitudes which generally stimulate political behavior (except at lower levels of education in some cases). Nor do they have the strong political and community links that social-referent contactors do. Even awareness, which has been theorized as a necessary element in contacting, is significant only in two cities and at the highest level of education. Need (service evaluations) appears to be a driving force for contacting.

We also explored two concepts of need. One measure of need in contacting research has been personal economic well-being. Using both income and a subjective measure allowing individuals to evaluate their financial status, we found that individuals generally do not demand that local government improve their personal economic conditions.

Using service evaluations as a second measure of need does not allow us to test Sharp's (1982) thesis that citizens have taken an entitlement approach to local government because the nature of the questions in this survey naturally presupposes governmental involvement. On the other hand, this measure allows us to examine the effects of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the environment as it affects one personally or affects both oneself and others. Need, we find, does play a role in both types of contacting although it is more important to particularized-referent contactors who apparently perceive that problems in their environment have a direct impact on their lives.

Research on contacting would benefit at this point from more comprehensive studies allowing consideration of both individual factors and environmental or contextual (i.e., social, political, and economic) effects.

A more comprehensive approach would also be able to focus on both the input and the output--the nature of the contacts as well as what responses are made to them. This research has been performed on the premise that individual-initiated acts have as much impact on the political system as do traditional mass political activities. We now need to explore systematically the links between the individual act, the governmental reaction, and the larger consequences for the system.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The actual responses included no contacting, contacting for self and family, contacting for community, or contacting for both self and community. Because the latter combined category is consistent with theory and because reduction of the response categories simplifies analysis, people in the latter category were compared to particularized- and social-referent contactors on a variety of characteristics. "Both self and community" contactors resembled social-referent contactors in age, income, education, and other acts of political participation. "Both" contactors, on the other hand, were significantly different from particularized referent contactors. Consequently, individuals who said they contacted for both self and others (48 respondents) and individuals who claimed to have contacted for the community (294 respondents) have been combined together as social-referent contactors.

<sup>2</sup>Two hundred thirty-four respondents out of 1449 labeled themselves as Blacks. Only 32 people gave their race as other than Black or White. Consequently, the race variable has been recoded into 2 categories, White and Nonwhite.

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