Cohousing as Civic Society: Cohousing Involvement and Political Participation in Massachusetts

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Abstract

This study asks whether cohousing as a form of non-political association has spill-over effects on participation in politics. The civic-society literature has shown that organizational and persuasive activities engaged in by members of voluntary civic associations constitute on-the-job training in political participation skills and can lead to higher levels of participation. Using original survey data on members of nine of the twelve cohousing communities in Massachusetts, I test the hypothesis that the exercise of quasi-political skills among members of cohousing communities leads to higher levels of political participation. I find that involvement in cohousing is positively related to political participation and that involvement in cohousing and political participation are positively related to self-reported change in political participation since joining cohousing. These results, in view of data limitations, suggest limited support for the hypothesis to the extent that members claim that their political participation has changed since moving to cohousing.

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Cohousing is a type of collaborative housing that typically involves varying degrees of shared ownership and spaces, shared responsibility for expenses and work related to everyday living and longer-term community upkeep, and shared governance (Bygott 2006; Cohousing Association of the United States 2013; Fenster 1999; Kahn 2010; Poley 2007; Saegert and Benítez 2005). Most communities have a certain number of shared meals and are multi-generational, creating an extended-family like environment (Forrest and Rich 2005; Kahn 2010; Martin and Yeugn 2006; Mulder, Costanza, and Erickson 2006; Salhus 2006), and many assert larger goals and ideals such as environmental sustainability or egalitarianism. Numerous communities include affordable housing options, a cause which is now an active part of the policy agenda of the Cohousing Association of America. (Cohousing Association of America 2013; Gray, Marcus, and Carey 2005; Helm, Horvitz, and Ben-Egypt 1993; Kahn 2010; Kennedy 2002). Cohousing community members hold joint events and work on joint projects with neighboring organizations and individuals beyond the boundaries of a particular community (Poley 2007). Cohousing communities generally use consensus and other highly democratic forms of collective decision-making to debate and settle community issues (Cohousing Association of the United States 2013; Poley 2007). Members furthermore hold joint events and work on joint projects with neighboring organizations and individuals beyond the boundaries of a particular community (Poley 2007). Taken together, these basic features suggest that cohousing resembles a form of civic association that is worth studying for possible "spill-over" effects on political participation. Does the exercise of quasi-political skills within cohousing communities

carry over to the realm of electoral and interest-group politics, resulting in a more politically active group of individuals?

Cohousing as Civic Society

In asking these questions, I seek to build on the civic-society literature, which argues that involvement in non-political associations and organizations is a crucial training ground for participation in democratic politics (Almond and Verba 1963; Ayala 2000; Bachrach 1967; Barber 1984; Blumberg 1968; Dahl 1970, 1985; Mason 1982; Pateman 1970; Putnam et al. 1993; Putnam 1995a and 1995b; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). Carole Pateman stated the ideal as such:

> The existence of representative institutions at the national level is not sufficient for democracy; for maximum participation by all the people of that level, socialization, or 'social training,' for democracy must take place in other spheres in order that the necessary individual attitudes and psychological qualities can be developed. This development takes place through the process of participation itself. The major function of participation in the theory of democracy is therefore an educative one, educative in the very widest sense, including both the psychological aspect and the gaining of practice in democratic skills and procedures (1970, 42).

Empirical examinations of this general theory have indeed found that involvement in non-political, civic organizations has a positive "spill-over" effect on citizens' participation in politics and on their feelings of political efficacy and competence. This effect thus occurs both through education or on-the-job training and experience in the types of organizational and persuasive activities that one puts to use in politics, as well as the confidence and sense of competence that comes with this experience (Almond and Verba 1963; Ayala 2000; Baumgartner and Walker 1988; Putnam et al. 1993; Putnam 1995a, 1995b; Stolle and Rochon 1996; Strate et al. 1989; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Examples of such activities include giving a speech or

presentation in connection to the group, participating in a decision-making meeting, among others.

The literature above highlights a variety of civic arenas where such education occurs, including the workplace, fraternal organizations, church-related groups, parent-teacher associations, sports or hobby organizations, and other kinds of groups. The question here is whether the exercise and development of quasi-political skills in cohousing communities lead to more political participation among members, similar to the relationship as it has been found to exist for members of these well-studied civic settings. Cohousing communities clearly differ from these kinds of settings and organizations in important ways. However, as characterized above, cohousing in practice shares many important features with what we would commonly recognize as civic organizations. Cohousing furthermore involves voluntary, conscious and active efforts to create community. Ayala found that members of voluntary organizations, as opposed to those belonging to more obligatory work-related organizations, experienced significantly stronger political participation effects (2000, 109). Along these lines, Poley's (2007) study of cohousing examined the phenomenon within a civic-engagement approach and found strong aggregate associations between involvement in cohousing and a wide variety of social-capital and political engagement factors. In this study, using a design that allows for somewhat more casual inference, I take a close look at the effects of cohousing on the single dimension of electoral political participation.

Survey of Cohousing Communities in Massachusetts

I examine the proposed linkage between cohousing and political involvement via analysis of data from a survey I conducted in cohousing communities in Massachusetts. According to the Cohousing Association of the United States there are 247 existing and "forming" cohousing

communities spread across 38 states, with the distribution ranging from 51 communities in California to one per state in nine states. California, Washington, Colorado and Massachusetts have the largest number. Massachusetts has twelve communities with a combined membership of approximately 500 (including children).[1] A University of Massachusetts President's Office Creative Economy Grant and an American Political Science Association Small Grant funded my creation of a mail-in, mostly closed-ended survey.[2] Survey questions covered the following areas: reasons for joining cohousing communities; length of residence; demographics; employment and family status; involvement in the community; personal experiences with work-family balance in the community; general perceptions of the relationship between cohousing and work-family; political views, involvements, and affiliations; and perceptions of the relationship between cohousing and political behavior, both in relation to one's own experiences and more generally.[3] Wherever possible, questions closely resembled those used in major national surveys such as the National Election Survey and the General Social Survey.

I administered the survey to individual members of nine of the twelve cohousing communities throughout the state, travelling directly to seven. I arranged to attend one of the regularly scheduled meetings typically held by communities, where I explained the research, addressed questions, and distributed surveys to those members attending the meetings and to the mailboxes of those unable to attend. Many more individuals ultimately returned surveys than attended the meetings I visited. After administering the surveys, I sent detailed follow-up emails

[1] These were the figures at the time of survey implementation during spring and summer of 2011.

[2] I contracted with Survey Sciences Group (www.surveysciences.com) for assistance with survey design and data processing.

[3] The variety of survey subject areas reflects additional research projects.

to my contacts in order to facilitate completion and mailing of survey forms among those who did not attend the meetings. Two cohousing communities agreed to participate in the study, but would not allow meeting time for me to explain and distribute the surveys in person. In these cases, I delivered the forms in bulk to a contact who then distributed them. The combined total adult membership of the nine cohousing communities in Massachusetts at the time of the survey was 433,[4] and I ultimately received 192 completed surveys for a .44 response rate. (Please see the appendix for participating and non-participating communities and for discussion of the demographics of members.)

Hypothesis and Research Design

The proposal here is that in the course of being active in their cohousing communities, members are in effect honing skills that carry over into the realm of electoral and interest-group politics which results in a more politically active group of citizens. The hypothesis can be stated as such:

H: More involvement in cohousing leads to more participation in politics.

While the specific variables will be discussed below, elaboration of this hypothesis requires some discussion of relevant survey items. There are questions relating to extent of involvement in cohousing and in politics and there is an item prompting respondents to self-report on the extent to which their participation in politics has changed since joining a cohousing community. If there is a positive relationship between cohousing-community activity and participation in politics and if there are positive relationships between these two items and extent of self-reported change in political participation since joining cohousing, this would *suggest* a causal relationship between involvement in cohousing and involvement in politics insofar as

[4] There were approximately 100 children living in the nine cohousing communities at the time of the survey.

members themselves report such a relationship. This approach clearly falls short of solving the problem of causal direction. It is likely in many cases that already highly political people join and become active in cohousing communities while sustaining their previous high levels of political involvement, thus confounding the proposed relationship. However, the expected positive results as discussed above could indicate some degree of a cohousing-effect even among those who start out from a more politically-active point than others. Another serious limitation in this regard is the absence of non-cohousers in the present data set with whom to compare cohousers.[5]

Variables

Table 1 and the associated footnotes below describe the variables. I include multiple measures of involvement and participation in one's cohousing community and in politics. "Political activities index," is based on items in the *American National Election Studies* series. It is comprised of standard forms of political participation. "Political behavior change" consists of self-reported extent of change on the items comprising "political activities index" since moving to cohousing. Independent variables include "cohousing activism index," "attendance at cohousing meals," and "attendance at cohousing meetings." "Cohousing activism index" is intended to access more formalized types of quasi-political activities that are expected to serve as practice for involvement in the larger sphere of electoral and governmental politics. "Attendance at cohousing meals" relates to the more informal, day-to-day aspects of life in a cohousing community that may also play a social-capital-building role in political participation. "Attendance at cohousing meetings" has features in common with both of the other cohousing-involvement variables. On the one hand, cohousing meetings, which generally occur at least once

[5] Efforts are currently underway to create such a data set.

a month, are convened to address community matters in a somewhat formal group-decision-making setting. On the other hand, meetings also present an opportunity to socialize and catch up with other members.[6]

Table 1. Descriptives

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Political activities index[7]	185	.00	3.00	1.9730	.9523
Political behavior change[8]	183	.00	3.00	1.0601	.7926
Cohousing activism index[9]	192	.00	3.00	1.6146	.9475
Attendance at cohousing meetings[10]	184	.00	3.00	1.8207	.7132
Attendance at cohousing meals	185	.00	3.00	1.6162	.7793
Valid N (listwise)	182				

[6] I observed as much in the course of administering the survey. In most cases, I was invited to sit in on meetings until community business was completed.

[7] This variable is an additive scale computed from the following three dummy variables: "Have you ever written to members of Congress/made a financial contribution to a campaign/campaigned door-to-door?" The variable was coded: 0=none of these types of activities; 1=one type of activity; 2=two types of activities; 3=three types of activities.

[8] This variable was created from the following item: "How much has your participation in activities such as talking about politics, writing to Congress members, making financial contributions, campaigning door-to-door, or voting changed since you moved to your cohousing community? For the sake of consistency, this variable was coded in the following way: 0=not at all; 1=a small amount; 2=a moderate amount; and 3=a large amount.

[9] This variable was computed from the following survey item: "As part of this study, we want to learn more about the nature and extent of your involvement in community decision-making on particularly contentious issues that may face your cohousing community from time to time. From among the following, what have you done in relation to such issues? *(Check all that apply).*" Items in the list included: "Research or information-gathering, one-on-one or small-group discussions with other members (face to face or electronic), creation of pamphlets or signs, composed position papers, given presentations during meetings, arranged to have input from individuals or groups from outside the community." An additive scale was then created such that no activism=0; 1 or 2 types of activism=1; 3 or 4 types=2; and 5 or 6 types=3.

[10] This variable and the next (attendance at cohousing meals) are based on the survey questions: "How often do you attend your community's meetings/common meals?" For coding consistency among all variables, these variables were coded in the following way: 0=never; 1=a little or some of the time; 2=most of the time; and 3=all of the time.

Results and Analysis

I assess the hypothesis that more involvement in cohousing leads to more participation in politics through analysis of means tests,[11] which can potentially show that mean values of "political activities index" and of "political behavior change" differ to a statistically significant degree for different values of the cohousing-involvement independent variables.[12] As such, this approach, while not causal at the individual level, points the way toward causal inference. That said, it is important to establish at the outset the existence of an individual-level correlation between cohousing and political involvement. "Cohousing activism index" shows a fairly strong bivariate correlation with "political activities index" at .259 (sig. 2-tailed .000, Spearman's rho, N=185). Looking ahead, Table 2 on "political activities index" and table 3 on "political behavior change" below show the overall results for each of the means tests. Figures 1-5 present visual displays of the change in mean values for each value of the independent variables. First, I analyze the results for "political activities index" and will refer to table 2 and figures 1 and 2. Second, I will turn to the results for "political behavior change" and will refer to table 3 and figures 3-5.

Table 2 below shows significant results for "political activities index" with two of the three cohousing involvement variables. The "F" statistics for "cohousing activism index" and "attendance at meals" are significant, but are insignificant for "attendance at meetings." It may be that meetings are too infrequent to bear on political participation. In any case, because of the insignificant results, "attendance at meetings" will be dropped from further analyses. The "eta

[11] The "n" is relatively small at 192, mitigating against full-scale causal analysis at the individual level of analysis.

[12] In the means test of "political behavior change," in addition to the cohousing involvement variables, "political activities index" is also included as an independent variable.

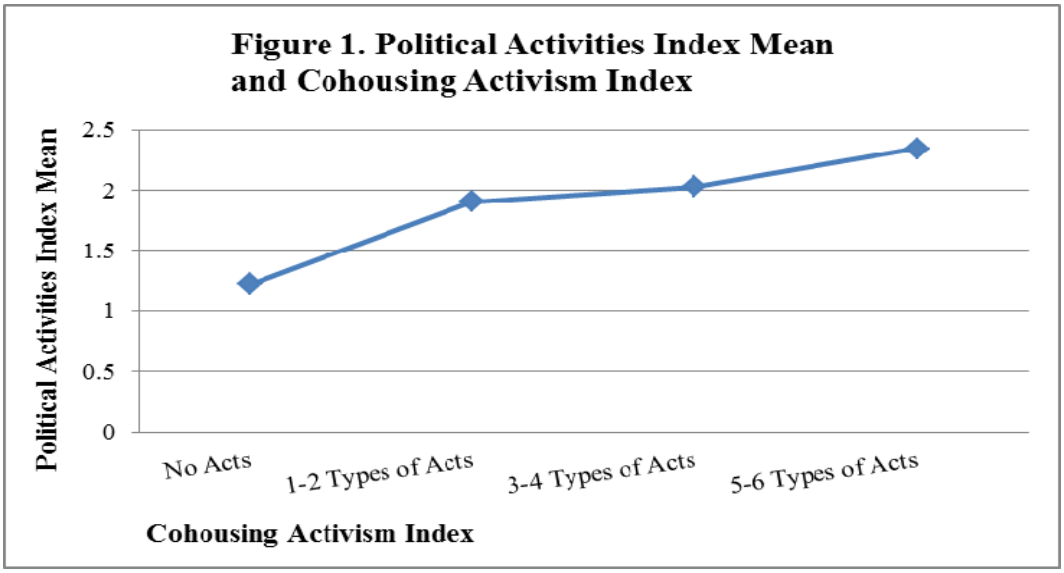
squared" values indicate an effect of particularly small magnitude for "attendance at meals" with a larger but still minor effect for "cohousing activism index."

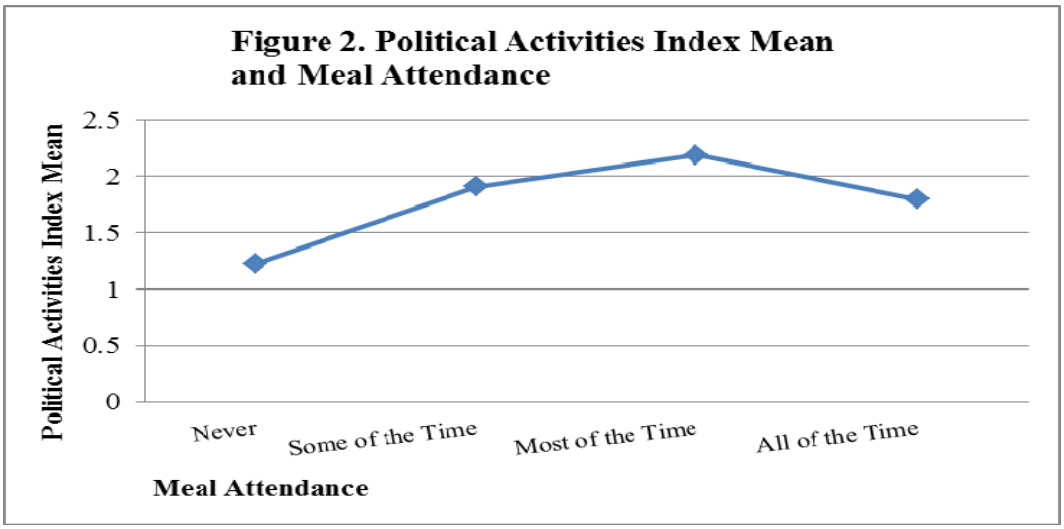
Table 2. Differences in Political Activities Index Means Test

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Eta	Eta Squared
Political Activities Index * Cohousing Activism Index	Between Groups	15.841	3	5.280	6.329	.000	.308	.095
	Within Groups	151.023	181	.834				
	Total	166.865	184					
Political Activities Index * Attendance at Meetings	Between Groups	6.869	3	2.290	2.576	.055	.203	.041
	Within Groups	159.995	180	.889				
	Total	166.864	183					
Political Activities Index * Attendance at Meals	Between Groups	9.622	3	3.207	3.692	.013	.240	.058
	Within Groups	157.242	181	.869				
	Total	166.865	184					

The specific implication of these summary statistics, while showing small effects, is that for progressive values of the cohousing activism and meal attendance independent variables, the mean of "political activities index" generally rises. Figures 1 and 2 below demonstrate these relationships visually. Figure 1 shows that the mean for "political activities index" rises consistently, if by small increments with each value of "cohousing activism index." The increase

in mean values for categories of "meal attendance" as shown in figure 2 is evident, yet inconsistent. There is a decrease from the "most of the time" to the "all of the time" category.





The results thus far—keeping in mind that individual-level causation ultimately cannot be determined due to the statistical techniques used here and due to the lack of comparison with non-cohousers—constitute a crucial first step in supporting the hypothesis that more involvement in cohousing leads to more participation in politics. The data have shown a relationship between

two of the three cohousing involvement variables and "political activities index." Figure 1 suggests the possibility that in the course of composing position papers, engaging in small-group discussion, giving talks, and participating in similar activities, members develop skills that are especially relevant to political participation and thus are moved to participate more. Figure 2 also suggests a role for the more informal kinds of interactions at meals that build social capital, although it is not clear why the mean of "political activities index" should decline from the "most of the time" to the "all of the time" category. The next phase of analysis moves tentatively along this line of causal inference through the use of self-reports on how political participation has changed since moving to cohousing. In essence, the positive relationships found in the first phase of analysis above can be viewed as evidence in support of a possible causal relationship to the extent that members themselves claim that their political participation has changed since moving to cohousing. The variable "political behavior change" is used to represent this self-assessment on the part of members. If the cohousing involvement variables as well as "political activities index" are found to be positively related to "political behavior change," this may suggest that actual behavior matches up with self-perception and thus that cohousing involvement indeed leads to political involvement.

As a starting point, "political behavior change" is positively and significantly correlated at the individual level with "political activities index" at .208 (sig. 2-tailed .005, Spearman's rho, N=183). Table 3 below presents the results for a means test of "political behavior change" for categories of "political activities index," "cohousing activism index," and "attendance at meals." The results of the means test are positive and significant as expected. In addition, the "eta squared" values indicate small effects for each of the independent variables. Figures 3, 4, and 5 reveal that for progressive values of the independent variables, the mean of "political behavior

change" rises, if not in an entirely consistent manner. To focus on figure 3, the overall increase in mean values, while small, is however consistent as the number of political acts rises from zero to three types of acts. This figure as well as figures 4 and 5 suggest that the higher the level of participation in politics and in cohousing, the greater the perception of change in political participation since moving to cohousing.

Table 3. Differences in Political Behavior Change Means Test

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Eta	Eta Squared
Political Behavior Change * Political Activities Index	Between Groups	6.483	3	2.161	3.586	.015	.238	.057
	Within Groups	107.856	179	.603				
	Total	114.339	182					
Political Behavior Change * Cohousing Activism Index	Between Groups	5.489	3	1.830	3.009	.032	.219	.048
	Within Groups	108.849	179	.608				
	Total	114.339	182					
Political Behavior Change * Attendance at Meals	Between Groups	4.898	3	1.633	2.670	.049	.207	.043
	Within Groups	109.441	179	.611				
	Total	114.339	182					

Figure 3. Political Behavior Change Mean and Political Activities Index

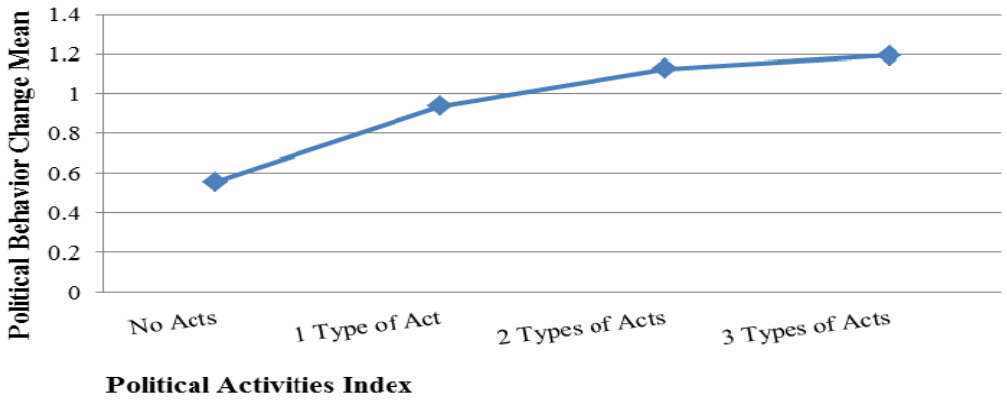


Figure 4. Political Behavior Change Mean and Cohousing Activism Index

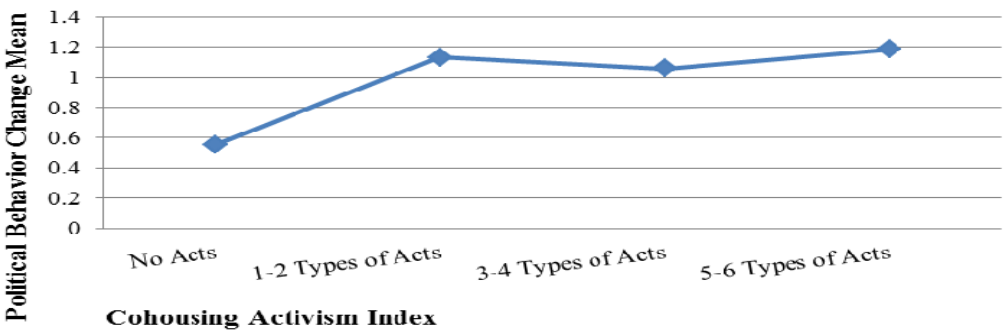
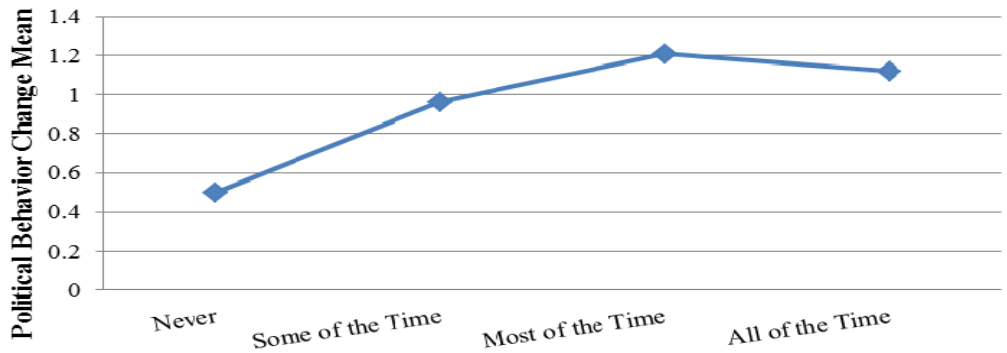


Figure 5. Political Behavior Change Mean and Meal Attendance



Given the study design, the best way to interpret these results is to do so in light of the results in the first phase of analysis. The following is not backed up by evidence at the individual level, but is rather a suggestive line of analysis based on the results at hand. The demonstrated increases in “political behavior change” means with progressive categories of “political activities index,” “cohousing activism index,” and “mean attendance” in essence constitute self-reports on the validity of the relationships examined in the first phase. The positive relationships between “political activities index” and each of the two cohousing variables therefore suggest support for a causal relationship between cohousing involvement and political participation to the extent that members claim that their political participation has changed since moving to cohousing. As such, the hypothesis assessed in this study—granting the limitations of a design centered on means analysis and of a data set containing no non-cohousers—has been supported.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings here suggest that members of cohousing communities hone skills that facilitate participation in politics. This study therefore makes a contribution to the civic-society literature, which argues that involvement in non-political associations and organizations is a crucial training ground for political participation (Almond and Verba 1963; Ayala 2000; Bachrach 1967; Barber 1984; Blumberg 1968; Dahl 1970, 1985; Mason 1982; Pateman 1970; Putnam et al. 1993; Putnam 1995a and 1995b; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). Composing position papers, engaging in small-group discussion, giving talks, and engaging in other similar activities—including informal give-and-take at cohousing meals—have a positive "spill-over" effect on members’ participation in politics. This research, by enhancing to some extent the ability to make causal inferences about the relationship between involvement in cohousing and political participation, successfully builds on Poley’s findings of strong aggregate associations

between involvement in cohousing and a wide variety of social-capital and political engagement factors (2007).

The ability to compare members of cohousing communities with non-members would clearly help to make a strong case that cohousing leads to more political participation. Plans are underway for such research on a national scale, which would also allow for systematic examination of the possibility that cohousing is more conducive to political participation than other kinds of civic associations. Ayala found that members of voluntary organizations, as opposed to those belonging to more obligatory work-related organizations, experienced significantly stronger political participation effects (2000, 109). Cohousing similarly involves voluntary, conscious and active efforts to create community. I plan to compare the effects of the various types of associations that people belong to, including cohousing, on political participation.

This study has additional implications for future research. In her 2006 book, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative Versus Participatory Democracy,* Diana Mutz advances the theory that there is a fundamental conflict in American society between these two important democratic values. Using national level survey data, she finds that citizens who participate tend to be of "like mind" and rather closed-minded politically in their devotion to particular causes; while those with larger numbers of "non-likeminded" political discussants are generally more politically deliberative and tolerant yet shy away from participation because of perceived social costs. Cohousing encourages active participation in internal community affairs and relies in most cases on consensus rather than majority-rule decision-making. It is then possible that cohousing may alleviate to some extent the tension between deliberation and participation within communities. Does participation in cohousing affairs, occurring in the context of consensus decision-making

where there is an active attempt to incorporate diversity of viewpoints, carry over into the wider political sphere such that political "non-likemindedness" is not a barrier to political participation? The concept of skills development within cohousing could be extended to include practice in activities that ameliorate conflict between deliberation and participation.

Finally, future research could examine how phenomena similar to cohousing relate to political engagement. Housing cooperatives and intentional communities, like cohousing, typically involve varying degrees of shared ownership and spaces, usually require some community-related work, and most commonly use small-group democratic procedures to make decisions affecting the community. However, unlike cohousing, housing cooperatives and intentional communities do not generally involve unit ownership, so are therefore theoretically more accessible to larger swaths of the population. In order to understand the political effects of more intensive forms of community living as these occur throughout the country, it is important to examine all three phenomena.

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Appendix

The seven communities I visited to implement the surveys in person include the following: New View Cohousing, Camelot Cohousing, Mosaic Commons, Jamaica Plain Cohousing, , Cornerstone Village Cohousing, Pathways Cohousing, and Rocky Hill Cohousing. I delivered survey forms in bulk to Island Cohousing and Pioneer Valley. Cambridge Cohousing, Pine Street, and Alchemy Farm refused to participate.

A fairly distinct Massachusetts "cohouser" profile emerges from the data.[13] Tables A1-A8 below show a decidedly educated and middle-high income group. It is perhaps not surprising that members of cohousing communities cluster on the middle to higher end of the income scale. While the communal context looms large in cohousing, one of its basic features remains homeownership.[14] Members largely range from middle-aged to elderly. The large majority of households does not include children, but some do—as indicated, there are approximately 100 children living in cohousing communities throughout the state. There are notably more women than men residing in cohousing. Most cohousers are married or partnered, yet there is some variation in marital status. The large majority are employed either part- or full-time. Finally, while these data are not displayed, cohousers in Massachusetts are racially and ethnically very homogenous: close to 94 percent are white.

[13] Some of those involved in the cohousing movement are working to create more diverse memberships.

[14] However, a rising number of communities include affordable housing rental options, a cause which is now an active part of the policy agenda of the Cohousing Association of America. (Cohousing Association of America; Gray, Marcus, and Carey 2005; Helm, Horvitz, and Ben-Egypt 1993; Kahn 2010; Kennedy 2002).

Table A1. Gender	**N**	**Valid Pct.**
Female	117	64.6
Male	64	35.4
Missing	11	

Table A2. Age	**N**	**Valid Pct.**
20s (incl. a 19 yr.-old)	4	2.4
30s	20	9.4
40s	44	21.5
50s	48	23.7
60s	44	21
70s	17	8.8
80s	4	2.4
Missing	11	

Table A3. Education	**N**	**Valid Pct.**
Some college, vocational or trade school	5	2.7
Undergraduate degree	56	30.8
Master's degree	77	42.3
Professional degree	12	6.6
Doctorate degree	25	13.7
Selected multiple	7	3.8
Missing	10	

Table A4. Employment status	**N**	**Valid Pct.**
Working full-time	97	52.7
Working part-time	45	24.5
Temporarily laid-off	6	3.3
Retired	18	9.8
Homemaker	4	2.2
Student	2	1.1
Other*	10	5.4
Selected multiple	2	1.1
Missing	8	

Table A5. Marital status	**N**	**Valid Pct.**
Married	102	55.4
Divorced	23	12.5
Separated	3	1.6
Widowed	6	3.3
Never married	27	14.7
Partnered, not married	16	8.7
Selected multiple*	6	3.3
Missing	9	

Table A6. Number of children 10 years old and younger in household	**N**	**Valid Pct.**
Zero	126	75
One	27	16.1
Two	14	8.3
Three	1	.6
Missing	24	

Table A7. Number of children 11-17 years old in household	**N**	**Valid Pct.**
Zero	118	70.2
One	34	20.2
Two	15	8.9
Three	1	.6
Missing	24	

Table A8. Household income in 2010 (before taxes)	**N**	**Valid Pct.**
Less than $15,000	4	2.3
$15,000-$24,999	9	5.1
$25,000-$34,999	15	8.5
$35,000-$49,999	16	9
$50,000-$74,999	36	20.3
$75,000-$99,999	32	18.1
$100,000 or more	65	36.7
Missing	15	