

A Comparative Study on Political Participation of the Elderly in China and the United States

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Abstract. With the intensification of population aging, "age" is gradually becoming politically relevant. Through the analysis of literature related to the political participation of the elderly in China and the United States, this paper finds that compared to the elderly in China, the elderly in the United States have higher political enthusiasm, higher levels of political participation, and more diversified ways of political involvement. Through political participation, the elderly in the United States not only influence government decisions, securing political, economic, and social rights for themselves, but also play a significant role in upholding the American democratic system, constructing a proactive aging society, and promoting the welfare state. In contrast, although nearly half of the elderly in China have participated in grassroots voting and election activities, there is still considerable room for growth in their political participation. The government should effectively expand orderly political participation channels for the elderly and enhance their enthusiasm for political involvement.

Keywords: Elderly; Political Participation; China-US Comparison.

1. Introduction

With the intensification of population aging, "age" is gradually becoming politically relevant[1]. On one hand, issues related to aging have become hot topics in the field of public welfare, prompting the introduction of policies related to the construction of elderly care service industries and systems. This reflects policymakers' response to the interests and social concerns of the elderly population. On the other hand, the elderly also participate in political activities in certain ways[2]. The political participation of the elderly, as an important aspect of their involvement, is also at the core of the proactive aging concept. It directly affects an individual's quality of life, health, and self-esteem[3] and is a necessary requirement to counter age discrimination[4].

Political participation is a commonly used concept in modern political science, often used to describe the activities and processes in which citizens participate and influence political life during the state's political life and the opening of political power[5]. The political participation of the elderly is not only an important way for them to realize their citizen rights but also a manifestation of their practice of proactive aging. On a micro level, the political participation of the elderly can realize their own interests, enhance rights awareness, strengthen political responsibility, and feel their own dignity and value in the participation process. On a macro level, the political participation of the elderly can promote the democratization and scientification of public decision-making and play a significant role in the benign operation of the entire political and social system[6].

In the research field of elderly political participation, comparative studies on the political participation of the elderly in different countries, such as the similarities and differences between China and the United States, are worth exploring. Due to differences in the political systems, overall development levels, and the subjective initiative of the elderly population towards political participation in the two countries, there are differences in the political participation of the elderly in China and the United States. Research has found that the political participation of the elderly in China is mainly institutionalized, such as political voting, political elections, participation in social groups, letters and visits, dialogues with government departments, etc. In political participation channels other than voting, the elderly appear more conservative than the young[7]. Some studies have pointed out that the political participation of the elderly in China is dominated by the elite group, lacking mass political participation[13]. In the United States, participating in elections at all levels is the primary

form of political participation for contemporary American elderly, including voting, campaign donations, lobbying for candidates, or other activities that influence election results. Of course, the elite elderly also have a significant impact on American politics[9].

In general, current research has touched on the political participation of the elderly in China and the United States and studied their characteristics. However, most of the research results are empirical summaries and discussions on the political participation of the elderly in individual countries, and there is still a lack of comparative research on the issue of elderly political participation. This study uses a comparative research method to explore the similarities and differences in the political participation of the elderly in China and the United States, filling the current research gap.

2. Comparison of Modes of Political Participation

2.1. Forms of Political Participation

The primary forms of political participation for the elderly in the United States include participating in elections at all levels, elderly organizations, and elderly conferences. Tocqueville mentioned in "Democracy in America": "Americans, regardless of age, status, or interests, are always organizing associations"[9]. Nancy Hooyman's research found that at the beginning of the 21st century, there were over 1,000 local, state, and national organizations in the US, with at least 100 major national organizations representing the elderly in political activities[8]. For instance, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), established in 1958, is the largest interest group for the elderly. The federal government regularly convenes the White House Conference on Aging, inviting elderly representatives to participate, greatly expanding their voice. The conference facilitated the passage of the "1962 Elderly Housing Act" and the "1965 Older Americans Act". Additionally, under the "E-Government Act", the elderly express their demands online.

In China, the political participation of the elderly is mainly institutionalized, such as political voting, political elections, participation in social groups, letters and visits, and dialogues with government departments[7]. Regarding political voting, data from the 2010 China Comprehensive Social Survey showed that 57.2% of the population aged 60 and above participated in village/community committee election voting in the past three years, and the proportion of the entire population participating in village/community committee election voting in the past three years reached 48.93%. However, compared to countries like Finland and the US where the voting participation rate of the elderly exceeds 60%, the voting participation rate of the elderly in China is relatively low. Apart from participating in voting, the elderly also pay attention to current affairs, participate in discussions, make suggestions to village/community committees, and participate in the work of village/community committees. However, the proportions of those reflecting issues to relevant departments, the media, participating in petitions, writing joint letters, protesting or petitioning, and reflecting issues online are very low. Overall, the current political participation behavior of the elderly in China is mainly voting, supplemented by political communication and work. Therefore, compared to the diversity of contemporary American political participation methods, the political participation methods of the elderly in China are fewer, more singular, and have weaker influence.

2.2. Degree of Political Participation

The political participation of the elderly in the United States is relatively high. In a 2007 Pew survey on "I feel that voting regularly as a citizen is my duty," as many as 79% of the elderly fully agreed with this statement, the highest proportion among all age groups[9]. The activities that the elderly participate in are not limited to voting but also include campaign donations, lobbying for candidates, and other activities that influence election results. In the 2000 presidential election, 13.7% of voters aged 65 and above donated, while only 10.5% of voters aged 35-64 donated, and less than 3% of voters aged 18-34 did. In addition to donations, 12% of elderly volunteers campaigned for election activities[10].

In contrast, the political participation of the elderly in China is relatively low, and their level of involvement in decision-making is also low. Even urban elderly in China with higher political status and cultural levels have low political participation, let alone the elderly in rural China. Most rural elderly are in a socially disadvantaged position and rarely participate in village political affairs, including village elections. When their interests are harmed, they resort to legal petitions and complaints, as well as non-institutionalized forms of participation such as illegal petitions, public disturbances, and suicide threats[7].

3. Comparison of Characteristics of Political Participation

3.1. Demographic Variables

Among the elderly in the United States, men, whites, those with higher education levels, better economic conditions, and better physical and mental health have higher levels of political participation. In contrast, women, ethnic minorities, those with lower education levels, poor economic conditions, and poor physical and mental health show less enthusiasm for political involvement. For instance, in the 2008 presidential election, the voting rate for elderly individuals with less than a high school education was only 51.9%, 68.5% for those with a high school education, 79.1% for those with a college degree, and as high as 82.0% for those with a master's degree or higher.

In China, among the elderly, men have a higher rate of institutionalized political participation than women. This is due to the traditional patriarchal society where men dominate, and the traditional mindset of "men handle external affairs, women handle internal affairs" still has a significant influence. Most elderly women have a weak sense of political participation, considering it a "man's business" or "irrelevant to them." As age increases, the rate of institutionalized political participation among the elderly decreases. For instance, over half of those aged 60-69 participate in politics, but for those over 80, the rate drops below 40%. This is partly due to their declining health, making it more challenging to vote. In terms of education, elderly individuals with lower education levels have a weaker political awareness and lower political participation. Those with primary and junior high school education have an institutionalized political participation rate of over 50%, but those with high school education or higher have a slightly lower rate. Illiterate elderly individuals have the lowest rate, below 40%. In terms of marital status, elderly individuals with partners have a higher rate of institutionalized political participation than those who are widowed. Compared to widowed elderly individuals, those with partners are often younger, healthier, and more educated. They not only have a higher awareness of participation but also a higher ability to participate.

3.2. Internal Differences

Among the elderly in the United States, attitudes and support rates for various parties differ based on gender, ethnicity, region, marital status, and economic conditions. Elderly women tend to vote for the Democratic Party; wealthier elderly voters are more inclined to support the economic plans of the Republican Party over the Democratic Party; ethnic minority elderly individuals tend to support the Democratic Party, while white elderly individuals are keen to support the Republican Party. Additionally, there are significant differences in the political inclinations and practical activities of different generations of the elderly. Differences in education background, family structure, and career choices among generations form their intergenerational perspectives on fundamental issues. For example, starting from the era of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the "Greatest Generation" has shown strong support for the Democratic Party. Even as they entered old age, their support remained unwavering. This generation has firsthand experience of the Great Depression of the 1930s and Roosevelt's New Deal. The inefficiency of the Republican Party and the efficiency of the Democratic Party during the crisis left a profound impression on the "Greatest Generation," influencing their political beliefs and participation throughout their lives.

In China, among the elderly, political affiliation significantly influences their participation in political decision-making. Whether one is a party member significantly affects the elderly's participation in

political decision-making. Elderly individuals with party membership have a higher degree of action participation in making suggestions to government departments than those without party membership[13].

3.3. Political Participation Attitude

Elderly Americans approach the concept and practice of political participation with rationality. They ardently defend the social security system and are deeply concerned about the scope of medical insurance and prescription drugs. Although they desire welfare measures beneficial to them, they don't necessarily prioritize policies related to the elderly, such as supporting tax cuts. Their political involvement is more based on experience than emotion, displaying more trust and steadiness than younger individuals. Especially in recent years, when looking at the attitudes of elderly Americans towards some social hot topics, they are not necessarily conservative on all issues. Their conservative views are evolving. On the issue of abortion, while the elderly are slightly more conservative than the younger generation, their attitudes are becoming more tolerant, narrowing the gap with the youth. Their political and social cognitive orientation tends to be stable and rational.

In China, urban elderly individuals with higher political status and cultural levels have a positive and rational attitude towards political participation. They participate in diverse ways, and their political involvement often garners attention from relevant departments. In contrast, most rural elderly individuals in socially disadvantaged positions can only participate in politics through "one-time participation" like elections or other informal methods, such as petitions or even violence, to express their political demands. Compared to the proactive nature of elderly Americans, the political participation of Chinese elderly individuals tends to be passive and marginalized. Most elderly individuals only actively participate when they realize that the event they are involved in is related to their personal or family interests.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

Through a comparative analysis of the methods and characteristics of political participation among the elderly in China and the United States, this study found that, overall, the degree of political participation among elderly Americans is higher than that of elderly Chinese. Moreover, the methods of political participation among elderly Americans are more diverse, offering more opportunities for political involvement. At the same time, the enthusiasm for political participation among elderly Americans is generally higher. Through their political involvement, elderly Americans not only influence government decisions, securing political, economic, and social rights for themselves, but also play a crucial role in upholding the U.S. democratic system, constructing a proactive aging society, and building a welfare state. In contrast, although nearly half of the elderly in China have participated in grassroots voting and election activities, playing a role as an essential political force, there is still significant room for growth in the political participation of elderly Chinese.

To further promote the political participation of the elderly, the demands and practices of elderly political participation should continue to be emphasized. Given the significant differences in institutionalized political participation among the elderly in terms of gender, age, education level, urban/rural location, marital status, and health, the government and society should provide scientific and orderly guidance. Combining the current status of elderly political participation, the right to political participation should be concretely defined, with clear procedural arrangements and explicit institutional guarantees for the behavior and channels of elderly political participation. This will uphold the elderly voters' right to information and supervision, effectively expand the orderly political participation channels for the elderly, and enhance their enthusiasm for political participation. At the same time, efforts should be made to improve the health of the elderly, enhancing their capability for political participation.

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