TIES THAT BIND
Measurement, Demographics, and Social Connectedness*

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In this article I develop a taxonomy of how demographic variables are used in political science models. The functions of demographics—for description, as controls in statistical models, or as proxies for external societal cleavages or underlying individual attributes—raise questions about validity and responsible usage. To illustrate the more general problem, the construct of social connectedness is examined in regard to its relationship with various demographic variables and its impact on voter turnout. Using data from the 1992 National Election Study, the analyses indicate that marital status, church attendance, owning a home, formal group membership, education, and income are all related to social connectedness, but the impact of education and income on electoral participation does not appear to be mediated by social connectedness. The results illustrate that careful consideration of measurement issues can clarify the relationships in our substantive models and that substantive models can illuminate measurement issues as well.

Political scientists have long recognized the importance of using the appropriate tools to investigate theoretic questions. As Fiorina (1975, p. 148) succinctly stated, “Tailor the model to the research question, not vice versa.” Adhering to this admonition requires researchers to firmly tie their conceptual frameworks to empirical tests of specific hypotheses. Establishment of the appropriate links requires consideration of modeling techniques and the measurement of the concepts under investigation. While both aspects are important for advancing the empirical study of politics, in this article I will focus on the latter issue of measurement.1 In particular, I focus on measurement issues regarding the use of demographics in political research. A substantive example examining the concept of social connectedness is provided

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to illustrate how a closer consideration of the underlying measurement questions helps illuminate substantive understanding.

Several years ago, in this journal, Christopher Achen (1992) called on political scientists to "break the iron triangle" between social psychology, demographic variables, and linear regression. Making a strong case against the use of demographics, Achen (1992, p. 198) argued that, "When researchers are being theoretically serious, demographics should be discarded. They belong neither in party ID nor in vote equations." His criticism of these items serves the useful purpose of forcing empirical researchers to confront theoretical measurement concerns directly. However, Achen's call for the elimination of demographics is somewhat overstated. This paper refines and extends Achen's (1992) concerns and develops a framework for a more responsible use of demographics than is sometimes the case.

DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES IN SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

Demographic variables have been invaluable in the growth of empirical analysis in the social sciences and particularly in political behavior, but should those interested in substantively understanding opinion and behavior abandon them as Achen argued? The answer to this question is not a simple yes or no. In deciding whether or not to use demographics in our models, it is important to be explicit about the underlying purpose for their inclusion, along with the measurement concerns of each approach. Several general uses of demographic variables exist, defined by the functions they serve. These are (1) description and model controls, (2) representing external forces that operate along demographic group lines, and (3) representing underlying individual attributes. The intended purpose for demographics in a particular research project influences the defensibility of their inclusion as well as the necessity for probing measurement questions.

At the first level, demographic variables serve simple descriptive and control functions. Many analyses follow a basic concern for differences among groups in the population that may differ along lines such as race, gender, income, or education. As Duncan (1984, p. 222) notes, many social scientists do not appreciate the utility of demographics for problems where "the units of the population are groups, organizations, social relationships, and the like, and not necessarily human individuals." However, if one is interested in studying why behaviors or attitudes differ, simply knowing that population groups are distinct does not directly address the underlying theoretical issues. While plausible reasons may be provided, they are often simply conjecture without further analysis to support the suppositions.

Although the explanatory power of demographics used in this manner may be problematic, they still play an important role in models of individual be-