

Paul H. Showalter. Assessing the Level and Nature of Political Participation among Academic Librarians in North Carolina. A Master's paper for the M.S. in L.S. degree. April, 2001. 55 pages. Advisor: Barbara B. Moran.

This study describes the political participation of a random sample of academic librarians in North Carolina as determined from analysis of mailed surveys that they completed. The questionnaire asked the study participants to answer questions testing their political knowledge, to rate the political participation of themselves and others, to respond to various statements about political participation, to describe their activities, and to give some demographic information about themselves. Major sections of the questionnaire were repeated from similar studies done in 1976 by Edward James Sheary and in 1966 by Frances Goins Wilhoit in order to assess the changes that have occurred in academic librarians' political participation over time. Throughout this study and the two prior studies, political participation is measured on a 5-level scale with values ranging from (1) No political participation to (5) Belonging to political groups or holding office.

Headings:

Librarians – Political participation

Librarians – Political attitudes

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ASSESSING THE LEVEL AND NATURE OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION
AMONG ACADEMIC LIBRARIANS IN NORTH CAROLINA

by
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Introduction

Political participation, or political activism, is one of the fundamental ideas of a democratic society. To say that it is anything less than a right of citizens is to diminish its importance in our system of values. That is, one of the freedoms we cherish is our right to decide how and by whom we are governed. Political participation can take many forms, most of them familiar to us—voting, for example. Other forms of political participation are not as common, but are significant due to their “activist” qualities. For example, one might write letters to politicians encouraging them to introduce some specific legislation or to vote in a certain way on a particular bill. Such activities are normally considered “above and beyond” the more common forms of political participation. But we can imagine a spectrum of political activity ranging from apathy to zeal, encompassing the examples given above and many other actions.

This is fundamentally a study of a particular type of communication by librarians. Plainly, activities like discussing upcoming legislation with associates and writing letters to legislators are forms of communication. Voting, also, is often described as a way to “send a message”. Other, more advanced levels of political participation imply a willingness to engage in even more types of

communication. Holding political office, for example, would seem to indicate a desire to communicate with groups over political issues.

While we *have the right* to be politically active, no one is forced into participation. Certainly not everyone votes or has an interest in voicing their opinion in the local legislature. Many people even avoid “talking politics” in mixed company for fear of starting an argument with someone holding a different opinion. But someone has to be writing all those letters to legislators and filling the rolls of politically active interest groups. Who? The purpose of this research was to try to assess whether it is academic librarians who are, in part, participating in activities like writing letters and joining activist groups for political purposes. Specifically, the paper will attempt to answer the question: What is the level and nature of political participation among academic librarians in North Carolina?

In answering the above question, this research will essentially be updating the work of two former students of library science at the University of North Carolina. Frances Wilhoit and Edward Sheary both asked the same basic question in their Master’s papers—Wilhoit in 1966 and Sheary ten years later.

This study is not, however, an exact replication of either Wilhoit’s or Sheary’s work. Wilhoit used a non-random group of librarians attending a North Carolina Libraries Association Conference as her sample. The current research, like Sheary’s in 1976, involved mailing questionnaires to a randomly selected group of librarians. Also, both Wilhoit and Sheary included public and

academic librarians in their samples. Indeed, one could fairly claim that the purpose of both their studies was to not only assessing the level of political participation of librarians in general, but also to compare the participation levels of two different types of librarians. The 2001 survey focused exclusively on academic librarians. Fortunately, because Wilhoit and Sheary made distinctions between the two types of librarianship and listed the statistics for each type separately, it is not difficult to compare the current results with the earlier numbers for academic librarians.

With regard to the actual measurement of political participation, this work relies heavily on the work of Wilhoit and Sheary, if only for the sake of continuity. The same scalar measurement that the two previous studies used is used again here. That is, political participation will be assessed on five levels: (1) No political participation, (2) Talking about politics, (3) Voting, (4) Campaigning, and (5) Belonging to political groups or holding office. This scale was devised by University of North Carolina political scientists Donald Matthews and James Prothro and used in their research on the political participation of African-Americans in the southern United States.

It is hoped the current research will not only give a picture of the current state of political participation academic librarians, but will also indicate how the thoughts and actions of academic librarians in North Carolina have changed, if at all, in the last twenty-five years.

Review of Relevant Literature

Political participation is not at all uncommon in the United States. Many of us act individually to support causes we believe in. As discussed in the previous section, many of us vote. We vote along ideological lines, although there are a myriad ideologies to be swept up in—political ideology, religious ideology, corporate ideology, and cultural ideology to name a few. But voting is only a facet of political activism. And it is an aspect of activism that, even though others may share your beliefs, is a very individual act. As noted in the preceding section, political participation can take many forms, including ones in which groups act to influence politics in their favor. First among these group activities is lobbying, an oft-reviled form of communication. For years lobbying the government was the purview of large businesses and industries. And by no means is the lobbying of business and industry becoming less vigorous in its old age. David Yoffie writes in the *Harvard Business Review* (May/June 1988) that ignoring Washington “is a prescription for failure.” He stresses the importance of high-level executives bringing to politics “the same long-term perspectives they apply to marketing and investment decisions,” especially when they are representing a company or an industry “whose size and reach don’t provide a natural base of influence” (82). It is difficult to find a better analogy of an

academic library. Picture an institution revered in the community it serves. It has always had to compete for funds with other entities within the university and now it might even be threatened by the rise of new technologies that capture the attention of financial decision-makers. Library directors are not unlike corporate executives in that they represent their institution's interests to those who can make laws or funding decisions that will directly impact the future health of the institution.

Librarians can look to small business executives for exemplary behavior, as well. In the June 3, 1996 edition of *Business Week*, Susan Garland writes about a small business owner in Texas who was advocating the re-election of Senator Phil Gramm. The businessman knew Gramm's record on issues that were important to small businesses, and he actively shared that information with others. Garland notes "politically active small-business execs in every congressional district will seek support for candidates in meetings with customers, talks with employees, and speeches before groups" (36). This kind of grassroots political participation is certainly not the exclusive right of businesspeople. Although state employees are prohibited from using their position to advocate one particular candidate, they can act at the grassroots level outside of work. Academic librarians concerned about legislation that will affect them would be wise to be as well-informed as the businessman from Texas. Debra Gersh Hernandez echoes the necessity of lobbying and staying abreast on important issues in the May 4, 1996 edition of *Editor & Publisher*. She offers

advice on communicating with legislators that librarians could use to make their activism more effective, including how to “stay on message” when explaining what is at issue and why it is important (18).

Other professions have taken a look at the level of political participation of their members. Rochelle Ganz discusses “Social Studies Teachers as Political Participants” in *Social Education* (October 1981). Ganz’s research is based on a survey of the background and characteristics of 1,200 social studies classrooms in six states. At the time of her survey, according to her research, there was an extremely high percentage (98%) of social studies teachers who “voted frequently or occasionally.” Ganz’s article examines many of the aspects of political participation, including political contributions, attendance at public hearings, and participation in political groups (408-11).

In the November 1982 edition of *Free Inquiry in Creative Sociology*, Roger Handberg discusses his research in “Isolating Political Activists among Practicing Physicians.” Handberg surveyed 290 M.D.s in a central Florida metropolitan area (207-8). His sample size, in number and geographic dispersion, is much smaller than the sample size in Ganz’s study and could be considered a model for other small-scale research.

How can we characterize the political communication of academic librarians? For example, with whom are the librarians most likely to communicate regarding political issues? Schramm describes communication as “selective”, noting the “tendency for people to expose themselves to information

with which they agree rather than information with which they do not” (31).

Rogers elaborates on the selectivity of communication when he discusses homophily, the state in which two or more people share meanings of concepts and a mutual subcultural language (18-19). Will librarians adhere to these models and communicate exclusively with those people who share and support their ideologies?

Or do librarians, perhaps, see political communication and participation as a social good, as described by Constant *et al* in “*What’s Mine is Ours, or Is It? A Study of Attitudes about Information Sharing*”? Librarians who consider political communication to be a social good, may actively seek to inform others about political issues even though such communication may be personally costly (402). Ronald Doctor, in his article “*Social Equity and Information Technologies*” declares, “Democracy requires an informed and empowered people” (49). Libraries, he claims, are important sources of information—including political information—by those with political knowledge and those without. Do librarians, then, feel a responsibility to act individually—even privately—to inform others about political issues?

Thus far, this review has covered the literature about the importance of political participation and the literature about peoples’ communication characteristics that might be manifest in political participation. The main purpose of this paper and of the research performed by Sheary and Wilhoit, though, is discovering which librarians are involved in politics and to what

degree. There are models of behavior—each with its an accompanying body of literature -- that serves to guide researchers in making such attempts at discovery and in making hypotheses about how certain types of people will perform with regard to political participation.

The model used most often to determine who will be politically active is probably the socio-economic status (SES) model. According to M. Margaret Conway, socio-economic status includes traits like education, occupation, salary, marital status, gender, race, and ethnicity. In her book, *Political Participation in the United States*, Conway offers three explanations for the effects of SES on political participation:

- The social roles that people play, which includes their expectations for others and for themselves, are determined to some degree by their SES.
- People with different SES levels receive different amounts of political communication, which leads to different levels of interest in politics.
- SES affects citizens' "stakes" in legislation and elections and the citizens' perceptions of those "stakes" (17).

Conway also suggests that a person's age is not, by itself, a good predictor of political participation. People of different ages, she states, "are influenced by other social characteristics" (24). Among the social characteristics that Conway believes are strong predictors of political participation are:

- **Education:** Higher education levels are equated to higher participation. Reported voter turnout by level of educational attainment in the 1996 Presidential election showed nearly 90% for people with a college degree and just over 70% for high school graduates with no college education (26).
- **Income:** Those people with higher incomes tend to participate more in politics. This is true across all levels of educational attainment (29).
- **Gender:** With regard to voting, women participate as much as men. Beyond voting, however, women's participation rates fall below the participation rates of men. Women are less likely, that is, to contribute money to a campaign or contact a public official (36).

Occupation, according to Conway, like age, has little effect on political participation. She states that educational attainment is usually enough to predict participation levels and that income and gender complete the explanation (30). Her claim is interesting to this researcher since this paper studies political participation within a particular occupation. Will most librarians with similar educational backgrounds and income levels behave the same way or will there be enough disparity among the responding librarians to divide them realistically into different SES groups?

In a chapter on the psychology of political participation, Conway states that an individual's identification with a political party is a good indicator of

whether a person will participate in politics or not (59). Abramson and Aldrich reported the same relationship in 1982 (502-521). This paper will attempt to examine librarians' identification with political parties and its relationship to their participation, if any.

Some researchers have attempted to explain political participation using models that are different from—or enhancements of—the SES model. Perhaps the most seminal such work is *Beyond SES: A Resource Model of Political Participation* by Brady, Verba, and Schlozman. The resources they consider in their research are time, money, and civic skills. In their opinion, the traditional SES model is sufficient for explaining who will participate in politics and who will not, but it is insufficient for explaining why different people participate in different ways and in different amounts, even among single SES levels (271). The *Beyond* model looks at the specific resources derived from one's SES—time and money—and explains why having different levels of these resources will lead to different levels of participation. By examining civic skills, the researchers claim to move outside the scope of SES and into “understanding the disparities in activity among politically relevant groups distinguished by characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, or gender) in addition to SES” (285). Note that the characteristics they mention as outside the scope of SES fall within the scope of SES as established by Conway (16).

The researchers' findings in *Beyond* indicate that people with more money, more time, and better civic skills will participate more in politics. Specifically,

people who have more money will give more of it to a political campaign or party; people who have more time can engage in time-based activities like working on a campaign; and greater civic skills facilitate participation in certain types of political activities like protesting or sitting on a local governing board (283).

It is noteworthy that, like Conway, the authors of *Beyond* stress the value of a formal education. They state that having a formal education is statistically linked to political interest (which inspires voting) and being motivated to participate in civic and time-based activities (284-5).

As discussed briefly in the introduction, two other researchers have studied the political participation of librarians in North Carolina. Both researchers reported their findings in their Master's papers for the School of Library Science at UNC-Chapel Hill.

In 1966, Frances Goins Wilhoit, surveyed librarians attending the Biennial Conference of the North Carolina Library Association. Wilhoit's questionnaire focused on four areas: political knowledge, actual political participation, political attitudes, and demographic information. To measure political participation, she used the 5-level scale devised by Matthews and Prothro. Much of Wilhoit's study focused on the differences between the public and academic librarians who responded to her survey. She also compared her results to a prior study of the political participation levels of southern whites. In her reporting, Wilhoit primarily discussed the results gleaned from analyzing the

responses of her entire sample and of the public librarians' responses in particular. There was little said regarding academic librarians, although she did find that, in general, academic librarians participate more at the higher levels of the Matthews and Prothro scale than either public librarians or southern whites (29).

In 1976, Edward James Sheary largely replicated Wilhoit's study in order to see what changes, if any, that had occurred in librarians' political participation levels over the course of the decade since Wilhoit had done her study. Sheary used the Matthews and Prothro scale to measure political participation and focused on the same four areas as Wilhoit in his questionnaire. Like Wilhoit, Sheary included public and academic librarians in his survey. Unlike Wilhoit, however, Sheary mailed his questionnaire to randomly selected librarians. Generally, Sheary found that attitudes about politics were more favorable in 1976 than they had been in 1966 and that the librarians in his study had a greater political knowledge than the librarians in the 1966 survey. Sheary contrasted the more favorable attitudes he found with the lower overall participation he found among librarians at the higher levels of the Matthews and Prothro scale. He also found that academic librarians were still participating more than public librarians (48).

An extensive search of the databases *Library Literature*, *ERIC*, and *Dissertation Abstracts Online* indicated that no other assessments of the political participation of librarians have been published since 1976. Such a glaring lack of

contemporary data on this important issue could potentially be detrimental to the library profession if one of its goals is to be politically viable. Political activism among librarians would seem to be more effective if, as a profession, librarians knew their strengths and weaknesses and on whom they could rely for leadership when dealing with political issues.

Methodology

The Sample

The primary method of gathering data for this paper was through a mailed survey. One hundred North Carolina academic librarians from the sixteen public universities in North Carolina were randomly selected to participate in the survey using the following method: From the staff lists on the libraries web pages, a list was compiled of all staff members with titles indicating a professional library position. These titles included any title of Librarian, as well as managerial or supervisory titles, and academic titles such as Instructor or Assistant Professor. Using this method, a population of 619 people was established. From that population, 100 names were randomly chosen for participation in the survey using a javascript that arranged the entire list of 619 names in random order. The first 100 names produced by the program comprised the sample.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was divided into four sections, each designed to examine political participation in a different way. This researcher hoped that by

asking different types of questions about multiple facets of participation, a more complete picture of the phenomenon could be obtained.

In the first section, participants were asked about their attitudes toward librarians in general being politically active. They were also asked to rate their own political participation and the participation of co-workers and colleagues across North Carolina on a Likert scale with responses ranging from “Very high” to “Very low”.

The second section of the survey was designed to elicit information about the respondents’ actual practiced level of personal political activism. Their responses were measured on the scale created by Matthews and Prothro and used by both Wilhoit and Sheary. There were several questions directed at each activity-based level of the scale: (1) No political participation, (2) Talking politics (verbal or written with non-political entities), (3) Voting, (4) Campaigning (includes letter and email writing and calling on behalf of political issues and/or entities), and (5) Belonging to political groups (including any group with a lobbying effort) or holding office.

Participants were asked in the third section to submit basic demographic information about themselves. This largely socio-economic data might be used to show relationships between personal characteristics of North Carolina academic librarians and the level and nature of their political participation.

Section four, the last in the survey, was designed to test the respondent's political knowledge. Research has shown that a high level of political knowledge usually accompanies a high level of participation.

In all sections, as many of the questions as were relevant from Sheary's 1976 study and Wilhoit's 1966 study were included in the current study. However, some questions were added and others dropped in an effort, essentially, to modernize the study. For example, pretesting indicated the need for the inclusion of computerized methods (i.e. email, chat rooms, etc.) in the responses for questions about communication.

A cover letter was included in the mailed survey packet that explained the purpose of the survey, advised the sample members of their rights as research participants, and requested that the surveys be returned at the respondents' earliest convenience. The survey was mailed to the chosen one hundred on March 2, 2001. On March 19, a postcard was sent to all members of the sample reminding them to return the survey if they had not already done so.

Research Questions

The first three research questions this study will attempt to answer are taken directly from the Sheary and Wilhoit studies. Questions Four through Seven are drawn primarily from this researcher's readings of Conway and of Brady, Verba, and Schlozman.

- **Research Question One** asks whether North Carolina academic librarians sampled in 2001 will have a better cognitive knowledge of political events than librarians had in 1976 and 1966.
- **Research Question Two** asks whether more librarians sampled in 2001 will participate more at the higher levels of the Matthews and Prothro scale than librarians did in 1976 and 1966.
- **Research Question Three** asks whether academic librarians in 2001 will have more favorable attitudes toward political participation than their colleagues of twenty-five and thirty-five years ago.
- **Research Question Four** asks whether men will participate more than women.
- **Research Question Five** asks whether respondents with higher incomes will participate more at the higher levels of the Matthews and Prothro scale.
- **Research Question Six** asks whether respondents with higher levels of education will participate more at the higher levels of the Matthews and Prothro scale.

- **Research Question Seven** asks whether librarians with more years of experience will participate more at the higher levels of the Matthews and Prothro scale.

Analysis

On April 2, 2001 analysis of the data began. No responses were accepted after this date. Of the 100 surveys that were mailed out, 45% (N=45) were returned over a five-week period and included in the data for this paper. Sheary's overall return rate was higher (63%), but the actual number of academic librarians responding to his survey (N=31) was lower than the number in the 2001 study. Wilhoit had more academic librarians (N=53) respond to her survey, but her method of sample selection was non-random.

Wilhoit stood at the hotel information desk during a North Carolina Library association conference. From there, she distributed her survey to passersby. Upon completion by the respondents, the questionnaires were to be returned to a large box, also situated in the hotel lobby. In all, combining responses from academic and public librarians, Wilhoit received 169 completed surveys out of the 500 surveys she handed out, for a return rate of 34%.

Due to the small number of responses received in the 2001 survey, statistical analysis was not feasible. For all questions, however, the percentages for each response are given and, where possible, comparisons are made to Sheary's and Wilhoit's study.

Results

Political Knowledge

Respondents were asked to answer four short answer questions measuring political knowledge. The directions for the questions stated that the respondents were to answer the questions based on their personal knowledge without looking up the answers.

Sheary's respondents scored higher than Wilhoit's on the majority of overlapping—repeated from one study to the next—questions. Similarly, librarians scored slightly better on two of the three overlapping questions in 2001, indicating an overall increasing level of political knowledge.

In all three studies, the questions missed most frequently asked the number of Justices on the United States Supreme Court and the length of a U.S. Senator's term. The percentage of respondents correctly answering these questions is increasing, however, exceeding 80% for the first time in any of the three studies.

Librarians in 2001 scored lower than those responding in 1966 and 1976 when asked who is the current Governor of North Carolina. Wilhoit and Sheary reported correct response rates of 99% and 98%, respectively. That number dropped significantly in 2001 to 93%, although the fairly large drop in percentage

correct might be explained and mitigated by the smaller number of returned surveys in 2001. That is, a small increase in the number of incorrect responses can have a large affect on the overall percentage of librarians answering correctly (See Table 1).

Distribution of North Carolina Academic Librarians
Correctly Answering Political Knowledge Questions

Questions	Willhoit Study (N=169)	Sheary Study (N=63)	Current Study (N=45)
Name three 1976 Democratic Presidential candidates.	% ---	% 95	%* ---
Who was the Republican Presidential candidate in 1996?	---	---	93
What were the last 2 states in the Union?	91	---	---
Who is the current Governor of North Carolina?	99	98	93
What is the length of North Carolina's Governor's term?	83	92	---
What is the length of a U.S. Senator's term?	80	78	82
How many Justices are there on the United States Supreme Court?	60	78	84

* Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Political Participation

As discussed in the methodology, political participation was measured in the current study on the same scale used by Wilhoit and Sheary. That is, participation was measured and ranked as one of five levels, listed here from the least participatory to the highest level of participation: (1) No political participation, (2) Talking politics, (3) Voting, (4) Campaigning, and (5) Belonging to political groups or holding office. The scale is hierarchical, meaning that participation at a higher level assumes participation at lower levels.

In Wilhoit's, Sheary's and the current survey, the number of respondents who claimed to have no participation in politics is very small. Sheary, in fact, was surprised to find that as much as three percent of his respondents admitted no participation (14).

At the next highest level of participation, respondents are engaged in talking politics. In the 2001 survey, respondents were asked to tally the number of ways and how often they talk to friends and family about politics. In another question, they were asked to tally the number of ways and how often they talk to politicians about politics. Ninety-four percent of academic librarians in Sheary's study engaged in talking politics. In the current study, the number of respondents talking politics approaches ninety-eight percent. Nearly half of them use at least three different media (i.e. letters, telephone, email, etc.) for their communications and talk politics at least ten times per year.

Additionally, respondents were asked to tally the number of ways and how often they talk to politicians about politics. Over seventy-five percent of respondents claimed to communicate with politicians. Those respondents that do communicate with politicians typically use one to three means of communicating and will engage in the communication five times or less per year.

Voting is the highest of the lower levels of the Matthews and Prothro scale. Thus, an underlying assumption about voting is that more people will participate at that level than at the higher levels of participation. The results of the current survey bear that assumption out. Every respondent to the 2001 survey claimed to be registered to vote. Without exception, all respondents claimed to have voted in the last two Presidential elections, as well. The one hundred percent participation rate among current respondents is greater than respondents' voting levels in Wilhoit's study (95%) and significantly higher than respondent voting levels in the 1976 study (74%).

To ascertain the degree to which librarians are participating at the campaigning level, the questionnaire asked if the respondent:

- Had worked on a political campaign since working in an academic library
- Had contributed money to a political candidate's campaign
- Had attended a state or national political convention since working in an academic library

Wilhoit's 1966 study showed that forty-five percent of librarians who responded to her survey had participated at the campaigning level by attending conventions or other political events or by donating money to a candidate's campaign fund. Sheary observed a decline in the number of librarians participating at the campaigning level in 1976. Thirty-nine percent of the academic librarians responding to his survey could be considered politically active at the campaigning level using the same criteria.

In the current survey, results are mixed with regard to participation at the campaigning level. In one category—donating money to political campaigns—a slightly higher percentage of librarians today participate than those librarians who participated at the campaigning level in 1976. Forty percent of respondents in 2001 have donated money to a politician's campaign. The other two criteria used in 2001 to measure participation at the campaigning level, however, show lower levels of participation. Twenty-four percent of respondents in the current survey have worked on a political campaign and four percent have attended state or national political conventions. Note that, in reporting their results, neither Sheary nor Wilhoit give percentages for librarians participating in individual acts. All activities, such as donating money to a campaign or attending a political convention, are combined and presented in aggregate form as "Participating at the Campaigning Level" (See Table 2).

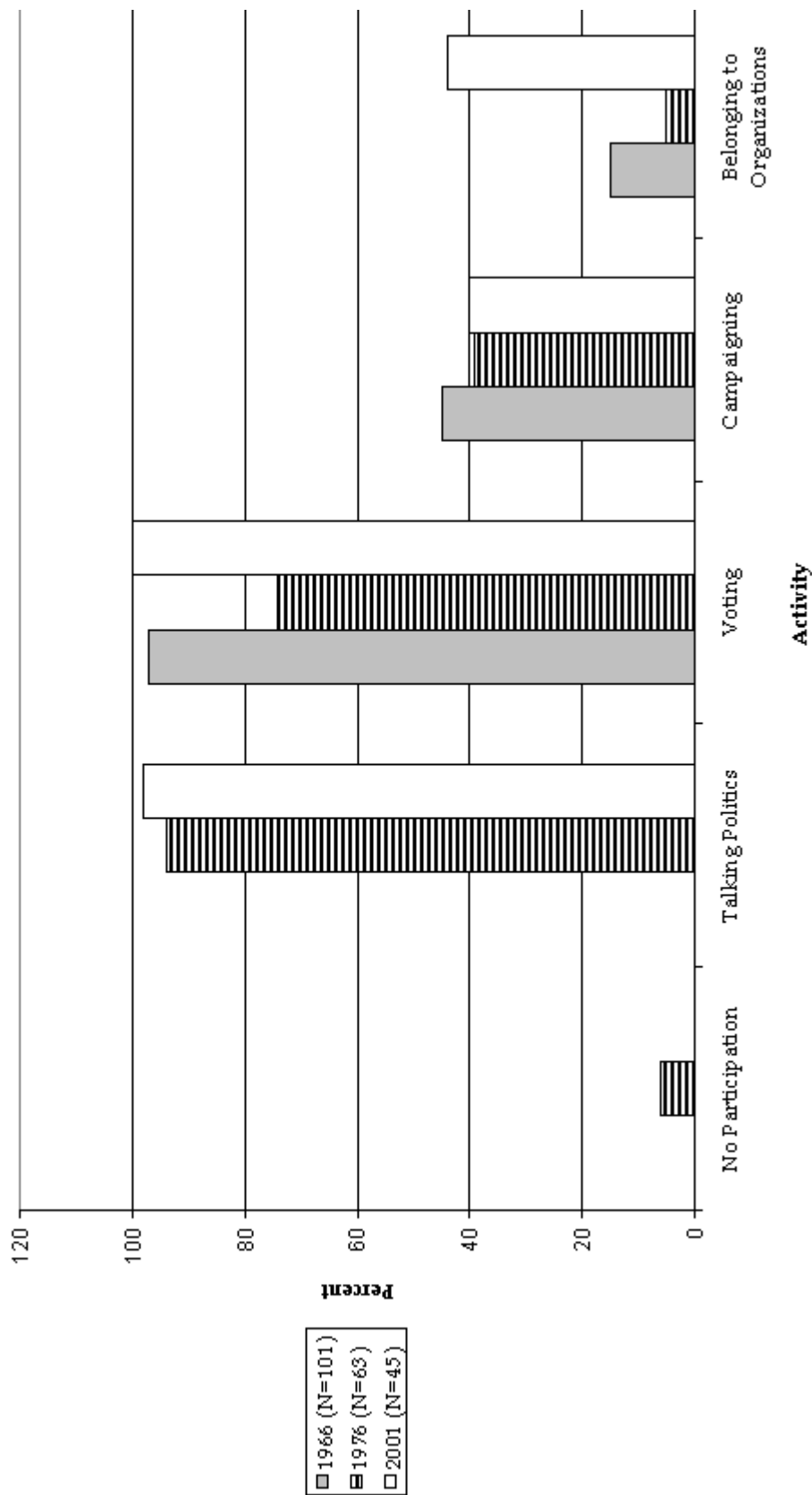
In 1976, Sheary noted a marked decrease in the highest level of participation since 1966. His study showed, for example, a drop in librarians'

membership in political groups from fifteen percent in 1966 to five percent in 1976. Research Question Two of the current study considered a reversal of that trend, asking whether there would be an increase in librarians belonging to organizations with political aims and holding political office. Most librarians, it was assumed, belong to the American Library Association (ALA), a professional organization with clear political agendas and a lobbying presence in government. Membership in the ALA takes little time to obtain. Currently, the cost of an individual ALA membership ranges from \$50 to \$100 depending on the length of time one has been a member. Membership in ALA divisions requires additional dues, usually between \$10 and \$25 per association per year. Holding political office requires a far greater commitment of time and energy from an individual than a typical membership in an organization like ALA.

There was one unexpected result from the questions regarding the highest levels of political involvement. Forty-four percent of respondents claim to be members of groups that lobby the government. This number is lower than anticipated, especially in light of the previously noted qualities of ALA membership. Perhaps many librarians—even those with ALA memberships—perceive ALA as a professional organization only and not as a lobby.

There were no surprises in the number of respondents who have held elected political office. In the current survey, one person answered affirmatively. In 1976 and 1966, the number of respondents who had held an elected political office was two and one, respectively (16).

Table 2
Actual Percentages of Librarians Participating on Each Level of the Scale



Respondents' Rating of Political Participation

The 2001 questionnaire asked respondents to rate their own political participation on a Likert scale ranging from 'Very High' to 'Very Low'. They were also asked to rate their library co-workers and statewide colleagues on the same scale.

Sheary found that North Carolina librarians rate their own individual participation levels higher than the other two groups. The current study did also. But there is one notable shift in ratings since Sheary's 1976 study. Sheary found that librarians at that time gave the lowest participation ratings to other North Carolina librarians in general and that the librarians' co-workers' ratings were in the middle (20). The 2001 survey shows that librarians now rate other North Carolina librarians' participation levels as 'Low' about thirteen percent of the time and they did not give any 'Very Low' ratings. The librarians rate their co-workers' participation levels as 'Low' nearly twenty-seven percent of the time and there was even one rating of 'Very low' assigned to one respondent's co-workers.

Attitudes Toward Political Participation

Like Sheary, this researcher asked whether librarians' opinions would be generally favorable with regard to their own political participation and the participation of their colleagues. The data from the current survey shows that over three-quarters of responding librarians feel that librarians should be

politically active. Thirty-five percent strongly agree and forty-two percent mildly agree with the notion. Less than five percent were to some degree against political participation by librarians. Sheary found that most of his respondents were to some degree in favor of librarians being politically active. He even reported a higher percentage of academic librarians who *strongly* agreed that librarians should be politically active than the 2001 study. His study also claimed that nine percent of respondents were to some degree against political participation by librarians. In sum, Sheary's results showed seventy-one percent of academic librarians in favor of political activism. The recent totals demonstrate, then, that since 1976, there has been an increase in the overall percentage of librarians with favorable attitudes toward political participation and a decrease in the percentage of librarians who are against political participation (See Table 3).

The current numbers also represent significant differences from Wilhoit's findings in 1966. She reported that only thirteen percent of academic librarians were strongly in favor of political participation by librarians. Also, notably, Wilhoit's results showed a thirty-eight percent undecided rate among academic librarians compared to thirteen percent undecided in 1976 and eighteen percent in 2001.

There were four supplemental statements on the survey designed to examine nuances of librarians' attitudes about political participation. Librarians rated their level of agreement with the following:

- Librarians should not influence the political participation of other librarians (See Table 5).
- A librarian should take a stand only on issues that affect the library profession.
- Librarians have no business in politics.
- To be a good American implies being politically active.

The librarians' responses to these statements seem to support their generally favorable opinion of librarians participating in politics. Sheary asked respondents to evaluate some of the same statements in 1976. In comparing the responses between the two surveys, there appears to be a number of noteworthy shifts in librarians' attitudes.

In 1976, forty-three percent of the librarians sampled strongly agreed that librarians should not attempt to influence the political participation of other librarians (31). None of the respondents strongly disagreed. In 2001, though, the percentage of librarians strongly agreeing on a policy of non-influence dropped sharply to about twenty-seven percent while the percentage of those strongly disagreeing rose by nearly ten percent. Fewer librarians today, it would seem, are content to let their colleagues' political participation be a matter of individual choice (See Table 4).

Very few respondents in the 2001 sample believe that librarians have no business in politics. In fact, an overwhelming majority (75%), strongly disagree with that notion. Sheary experienced similar numbers in 1976, though not quite

as skewed toward the extreme end of the spectrum. He reported that only fifty-two percent strongly disagreed (33).

The statement that to be a good American implies political participation elicited more strong opinions in Sheary's sample, however, than it did in the current study. Forty-eight percent of librarians sampled in 1976 strongly agreed with this statement (33). In 2001, the percentage was half that. Still, as one would expect, in both studies the vast majority—around 80%-- of respondents generally agreed that political participation is a vital element of good citizenship (See Table 5).

Table 3
Attitudes of Librarians toward Political Participation in 1966, 1976 and 2001 as Determined by Responses to "Librarians Should Be Politically Active"

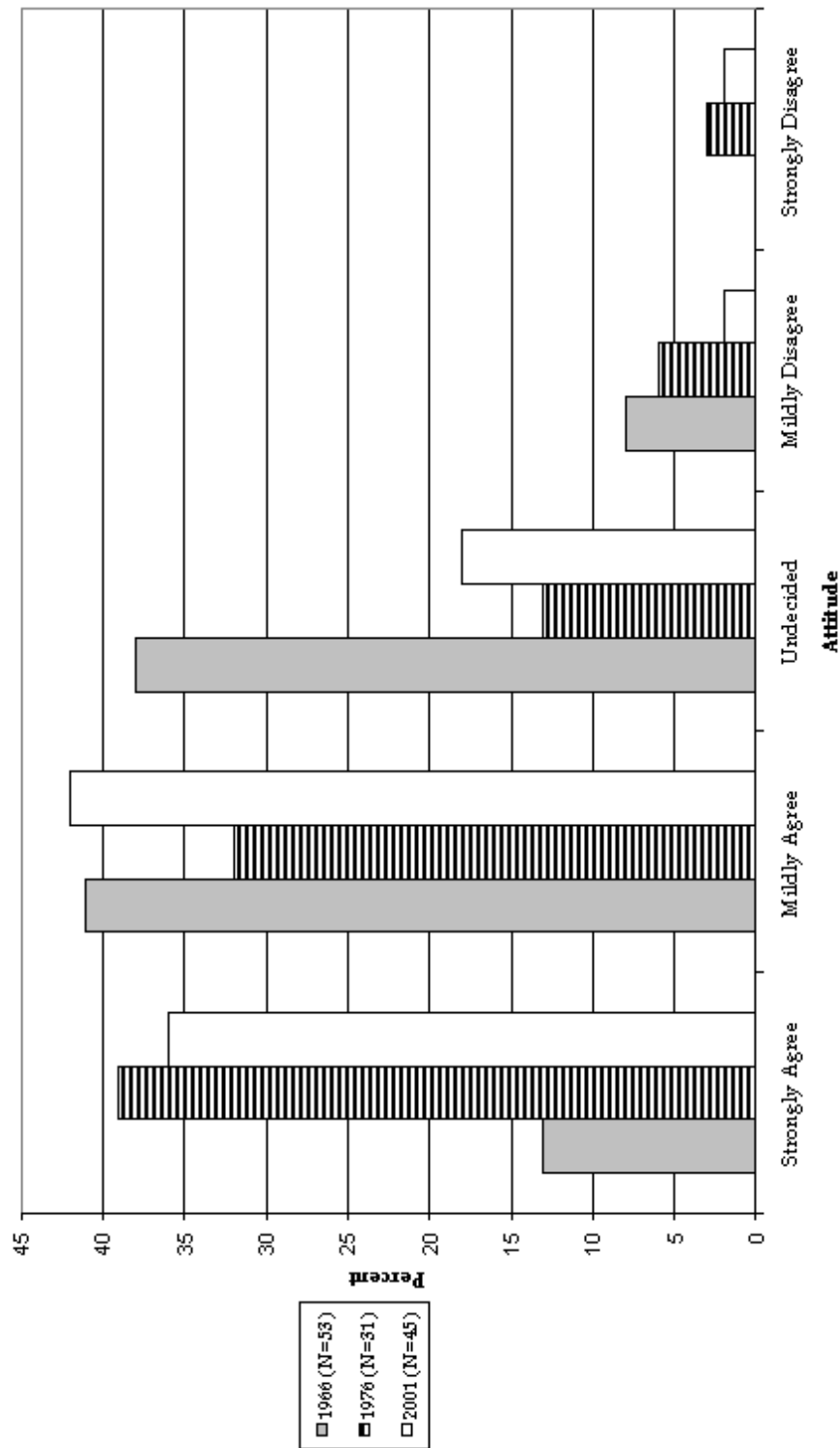


Table 4
 Attitudes Toward Political Participation by Librarians in 1976 and 2001 as Determined by Responses to
 "Librarians Should Not Influence the Political Participation of Other Librarians"

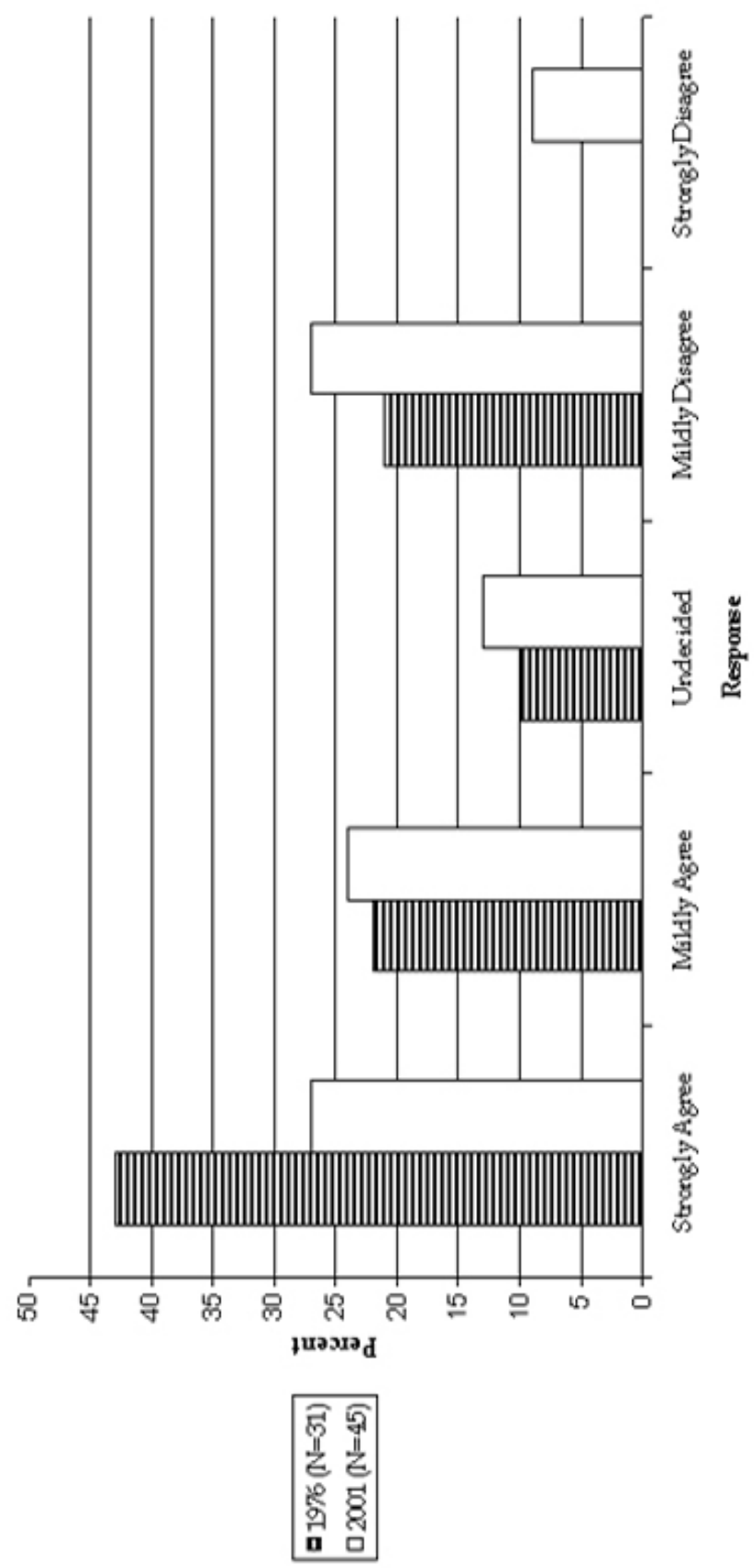
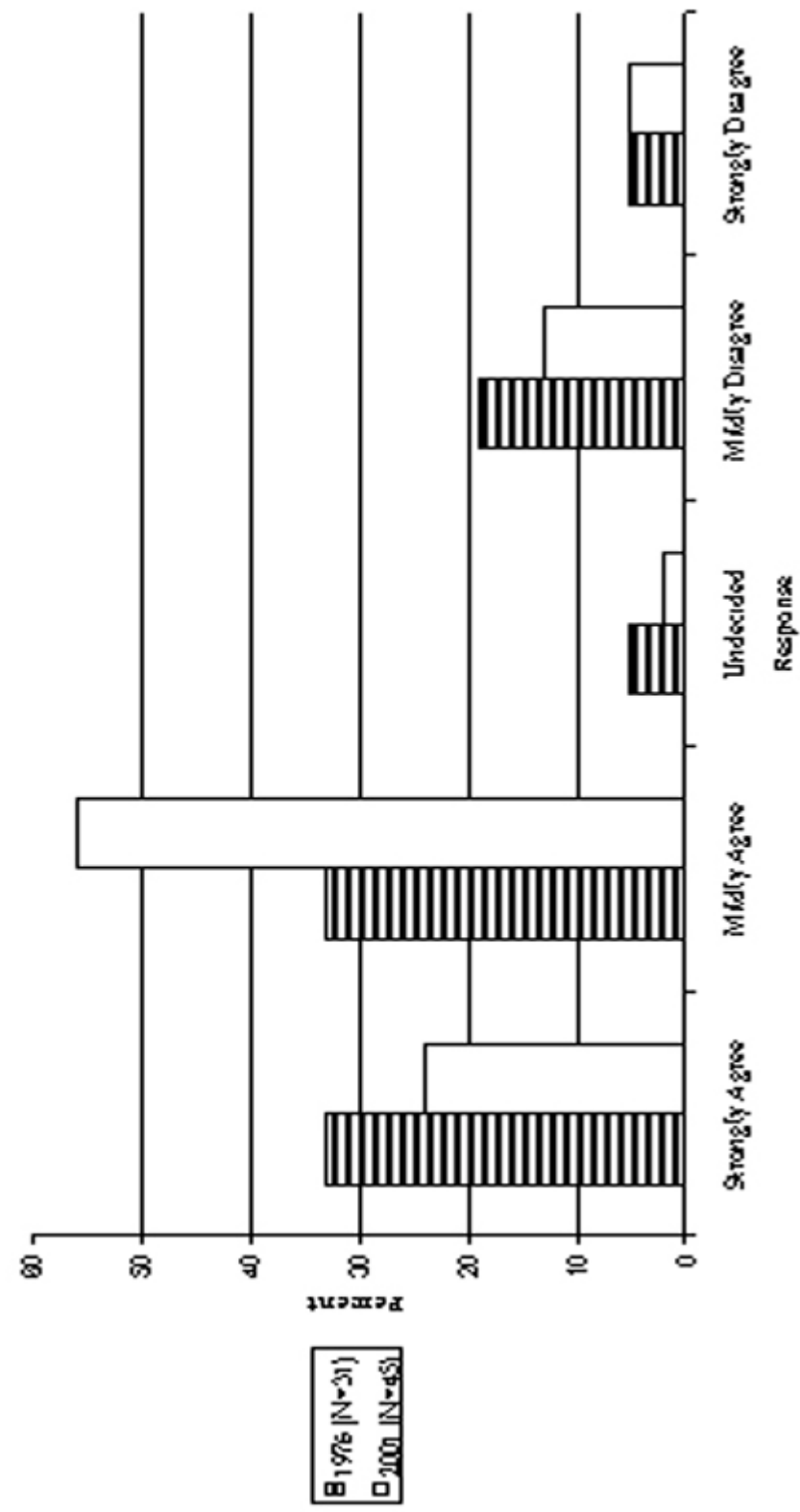


Table 5
 Attitudes Toward Political Participation by Librarians in 1976 and 2001 as Determined by Responses to
 "To Be a Good American Implies Being Politically Active"



Demographic Variables

Education

Neither Sheary nor Wilhoit lists education as a variable in their studies. Perhaps they assumed that all librarians would have similar educational levels, so other variables would be better for explaining political participation. After reading about the importance of education with regard to participation in Conway's work and in the research of Brady, Verba, and Schlozman, this researcher chose to examine the education variable in the 2001 study.

At the participation levels beyond voting, education does seem to make a difference in some activities. It seems that having multiple graduate degrees or a PhD. might lead to greater participation than merely having a degree from library school. Nearly 60 percent of respondents having multiple advanced degrees or a PhD. have contributed money to a candidate's campaign. Only 23 percent of library school graduates claim to have donated money. Also, over 60 percent of respondents with multiple advanced degrees or a PhD. have been members of a group with a political lobby. Less than thirty percent of library school graduates claim such an affiliation.

Conway offers a possible explanation for the different levels of activities among librarians with different levels of education. She states that political engagement—those beliefs and actions that enable citizens to “pursue and protect self-interest in politics”—is competitive (28). Everyone cannot be involved in politics at all levels. The number of opportunities to become

involved is limited. Formal education, she claims, “acts as a sorting mechanism in its influence on political engagement.” Citizens are assigned, based on their level of formal education, to positions of “social and political advantage based on their relative educational attainment” (29). Librarians with multiple advanced degrees or doctorates have relatively more education than librarians with just a degree in library science and, thus, would participate more in politics.

Gender

Over twice as many females as males responded to the 2001 survey (69% v. 31%), but those figures can be deceiving. The sample to which the surveys were originally mailed was estimated to be 20% male. Thus, the 14 males who responded to the survey represent a 70% return rate from their gender. The 31 females who responded to the survey represent only about a 39% return rate from females. On these grounds, it is difficult to make a comparison of the 2001 survey to the response levels achieved from each gender by Wilhoit and Sheary. Neither of them counted the number of males and females to whom their questionnaires were originally given. While this type of comparison of gender response rates is thought provoking, the implications of the results are unclear. Perhaps the current results merely imply that males generally are more comfortable responding to surveys or discussing their political beliefs. Or perhaps only politically motivated females responded while males tended to respond regardless of their level of participation.

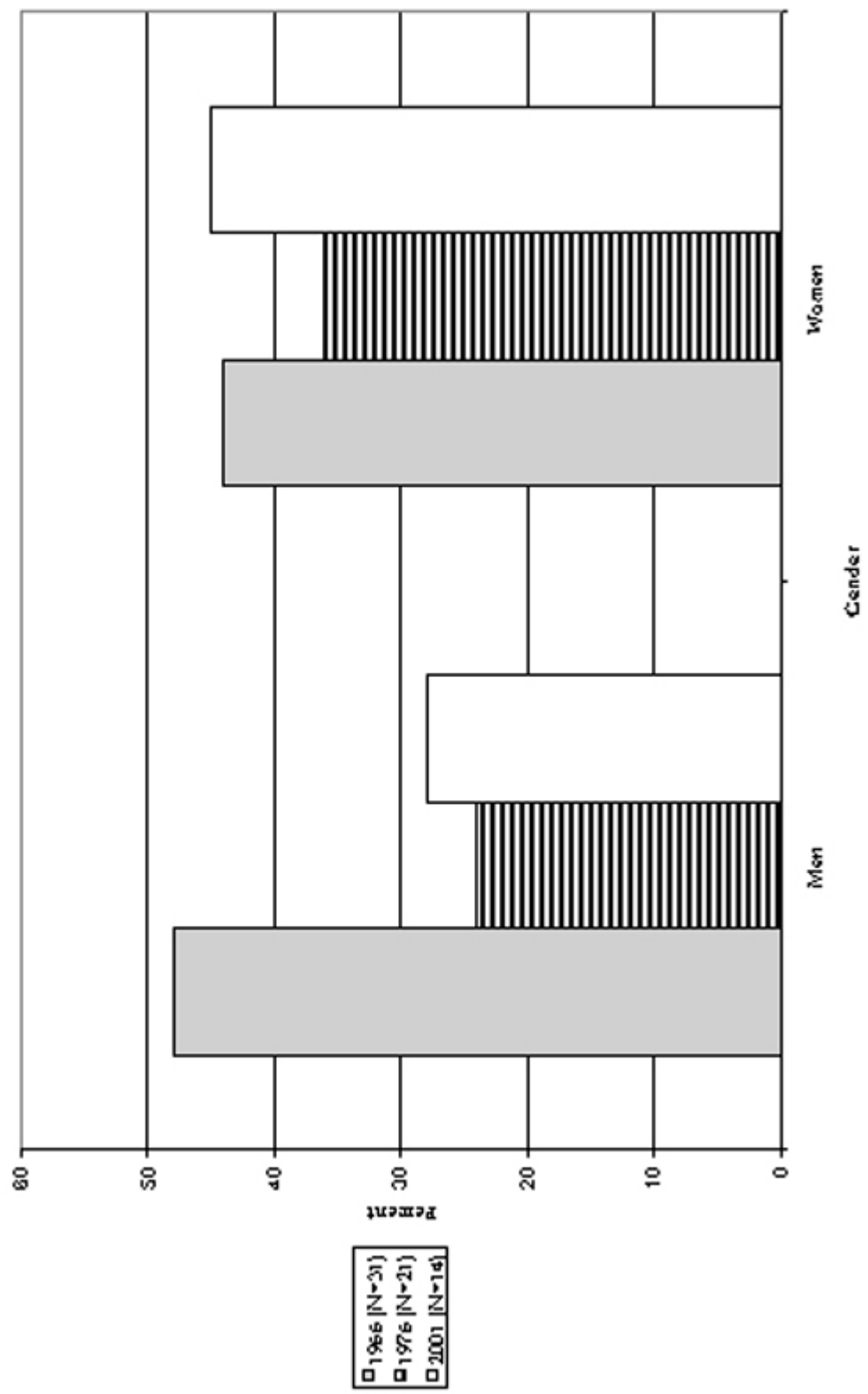
Of those who responded to Wilhoit's survey, 18% were male. This corresponded closely with the percentage of males in the library field in 1965. Sheary reported that thirty-three percent of the respondents to his survey were male, which was more than double the percentage of males in the library field at the time his survey was taken (34).

As already discussed, every respondent to the 2001 survey claimed to be registered to vote, claimed to have voted in the last two Presidential elections, and all but one claimed to be registered with a political party. Given that information and the assumed hierarchical nature of Matthews' and Prothro's scale, we could conclude that all demographics will be represented in the lower levels of political participation. Respondents of all ages, income levels, education levels, and genders vote. Therefore, those same respondents must also talk politics. The data from the current research indicates that such an assumption would be correct, but this researcher believes refinements to the scale could be made that would give a more complete picture of political participation among librarians. Consider, for example the difference between communicating about politics with friends and family and communicating about politics with politicians. Conway acknowledges the distinctly different degrees of participation that these two types of communication entail. She also states that males are statistically more likely than females to contact a politician (36). The 2001 study examined both types of communication and found that Conway's prediction was not accurate for the current sample. All but one of the

respondents to the 2001 survey engages in communication about politics to some degree, but while 70% of males in the current survey claim to communicate with politicians, nearly 80% of females make the same claim.

In the current survey, the percent of men engaged in the higher forms of political participation is substantially less than the percent of women involved in the same activities. Twenty-eight percent of men surveyed and forty-five percent of women surveyed were involved in some higher form of participation in 2001. This disparity represents a continuation of Sheary's observed results, where 24% percent of men and 36% of women were involved in the upper levels of participation. Thus, current results show that, while each gender is participating more in some of the higher forms of participation than in 1976, the gap between the percentage of males and females participating has apparently grown wider overall (See Table 6).

Table 6
 Combined Political Participation at Levels Four and Five of the Matthews and Prothro Scale in 1966, 1976
 and 2001 by Gender



Income

Neither Sheary nor Wilhoit examined librarians' annual income as a possible determinant of political participation. Conway and Brady, Verba, and Schlozman all noted its importance, though, so it was included as a variable in the current study.

Simply put, according to this researcher's results, the income level of librarians does affect political participation. The majority (N=26) of respondents to the current survey have annual salaries between \$30,001 and \$45,000. Among that group, twenty-seven percent (N=7) have donated money to a candidate's campaign. Among those making over \$45,000 annually (N=14), seventy-eight percent (N=11) have made campaign contributions.

Higher incomes also appear to affect membership in lobbying groups. Only 34% (N=9) of librarians earning between \$30,001 and \$45,000 per annum claim to be members of such groups. The percentage of respondents making over \$45,000 who claim membership in lobbying groups is more than double that, at 71% (N=10). Future research into the political participation of librarians may want to ask whether librarians feel that the financial cost of membership in lobbying groups is prohibitive.

Finally, it should be noted that the one respondent who claimed to have held elected political office is currently earning over \$50,000.

Experience

In Wilhoit's 1965 study, half of the respondents had worked for 10 years or more. In 1976, Sheary found that the percentage of librarians with at least 10 years of experience had increased to 60 percent. In the current survey, the percentage of librarians with more than ten years experience is still exactly 60%. The number of respondents with 5 or fewer years experience has decreased to twenty percent, down from twenty-nine percent in 1976 and thirty-five percent in 1965 (40).

The number of years a respondent has worked in an academic library seems to be a factor in determining whether or not that respondent will participate in the higher levels of politics. Twenty-two percent of employees with less than ten years experience are members of lobbying groups. Fifty-nine percent of employees with more than ten years claim membership in such groups. The same percent of respondents with less than ten years experience also said that they have given money to a candidate's campaign. Fifty-two percent of the respondents with over ten years of experience have made donations. Finally, a third of respondents with over ten years experience have worked on a political campaign. Only eleven percent of those with less than ten years experience make the same claim.

Conclusions and Summary

Research Question One

Research Question One asked whether the sample would have better cognitive knowledge of political events than those people who answered the two previous surveys.

Respondents in the current study did score higher than respondents in 1976 and 1966 on two of the three questions that have been repeated on all three questionnaires. On the one new question, librarians in 2001 scored a respectable 93% correct.

Taken at face value, it appears that the current sample does have more political knowledge. Not all the scores were better, but most of them were.

Research Question Two

Research Question Two asked whether more librarians sampled in 2001 would participate at the higher levels of the Matthews and Prothro scale than librarians did in 1976 and 1966.

In the current study, there was an increase in the percentage of respondents who had donated money to a candidate's campaign and who are members of lobbying groups. However, there has been a decrease since 1976 in the percentage of respondents who had worked on a political campaign and who had attended a state or national political convention.

Given this mix of results, the answer to Research Question Two appears to be yes and no. In some higher-level activities, librarians are more politically active today. In other activities, participation is less than observed in previous studies.

Research Question Three

Research Question Three asked whether academic librarians in 2001 will have more favorable attitudes toward political participation than their colleagues of twenty-five and thirty-five years ago.

There was, overall, a higher percentage of respondents who had favorable attitudes about librarians being politically active in 2001 than in the previous studies.

The supplemental questions regarding librarians' attitudes toward political participation were useful for examining respondents' reactions to different types of political activity, but due to the mix of opinions, did little to answer the research question.

Research Question Four

Research Question Four asked whether men would participate more than women. This question was based on Conway's work.

According to the results of the 2001 survey, the answer to Research Question Four should be no. Men, who participate in any single form of higher-level activity at a rate of 28%, are participating substantially less than women, who register a 45% participation rate for the same activities. Note that the disparity is a continuation of a trend observed by Sheary, but that the gap between the two genders is growing wider.

Research Question Five

Research Question Five asked whether respondents with higher incomes would participate more at the higher levels of the Matthews and Prothro scale. By all current observations, this answer is yes.

In higher level activities such as donating money to a candidate's campaign and being a member of a lobby, respondents with higher incomes (over \$45,000) were much more likely to participate than those with lower incomes.

Research Question Six

Research Question Six asked whether respondents with higher levels of education would participate more at the higher levels of the Matthews and

Prothro scale. One assumption made for the current study was that most of the respondents would have a degree in library science. So, for the purposes of this study, “higher education level” means having multiple graduate degrees and/or a PhD.

This researcher found a larger percentage of respondents with higher education levels donating money to a candidate’s campaign fund, belonging to lobbying groups, and working on political campaigns. The answer, then, to Research Question Six is yes.

Research Question Seven

Research Question Seven asks whether librarians with more years of experience will participate more at the higher levels of the Matthews and Prothro scale. For the purposes of answering this question, respondents were divided into those with more and those with less than ten years experience in academic libraries.

Results from the 2001 study indicate that those workers with more than ten years experience are more likely to contribute money to a candidate’s campaign, to have worked on a political campaign, and to belong to a lobbying group. The difference between the two groups was always greater than twenty percent. The current study, then, answers Research Question Seven affirmatively.

Sheary assessed the level and nature of political participation among librarians in North Carolina as “a mixed bag” (78). That label apparently still applies twenty-five years later.

Political knowledge is generally higher than it was in 1976 and a higher percentage of librarians in general now believe that librarians should be politically active. Almost all respondents talk politics to some degree and every respondent to the current survey was registered to vote and had voted in the last two Presidential elections. But beyond voting, the percent of librarians involved in the higher-level activities has not increased altogether. Donating money to a candidate’s campaign and/or being a member of a lobbying organization are the most common higher-level activities for librarians to be involved in. Other higher-level activities, though, like working on a campaign, attending a political convention, or holding elected political office seem to involve few academic librarians. This researcher doubts that it is coincidental that the three higher-level activities least practiced by academic librarians are also very likely to be the most time-consuming.

A sketch of the librarian who is most active at the higher levels of participation would show a female with multiple graduate degrees and/or a PhD. making over \$45,000 per year. Groups looking to increase political participation among academic librarians might want to focus their attention on librarians who fall outside this demographic cluster. These groups, however,

may want to call upon a person within this demographic cluster to serve as a leader among her peers with regard increasing their political participation.

It is important to note that flaws in this study, such as the small number of responses to the survey, did not prevent this researcher from making a fairly thorough comparison of the current work to similar studies in 1976 and 1966. However, to get a more complete picture of the current state of political participation among academic librarians, the study should be performed again with a significantly larger sample size, perhaps two to three times as large as was used in the 2001 survey. Also, for future versions should give the respondents the option of answering “I don’t know” on any question for which it is a feasible answer. The 2001 study did not, in some cases, and some respondents noted their frustration over it.

Overall, very few respondents made comments in the section made available to them for that purpose. Two respondents expressed interest in the nature of the study and their hope of seeing more extensive research on political participation among librarians in the future. The two respondents who made critical comments made them inside the survey, next to the questions that they felt needed revising.

The study of the political participation of academic librarians, and of all librarians, is important work in the field of library science. It should not end with the mixed results of the small survey done here. We have seen in this study that, as a profession, academic librarians have favorable opinions about being

politically active and are very willing to exercise their right to vote. Involvement at the higher levels of political activity does not appear to be as thorough. More research is needed, optimally on a national scale, to determine how well the participation of librarians compares with the participation levels of all eligible voters and, possibly, to accurately predict the future political viability of the field.

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Appendix A

2001 Political Participation Questionnaire and Cover Letter

For questions 1 through 8, please check the box that most closely represents your feelings:

- 1) Librarians should be politically active.
 - Strongly agree
 - Mildly agree
 - Undecided
 - Mildly disagree
 - Strongly disagree

- 2) Librarians should not influence the political participation of other librarians.
 - Strongly agree
 - Mildly agree
 - Undecided
 - Mildly disagree
 - Strongly disagree

- 3) A librarian should take a stand only on issues that affect the library profession.
 - Strongly agree
 - Mildly agree
 - Undecided
 - Mildly disagree
 - Strongly disagree

- 4) Librarians have no business in politics.
 - Strongly agree
 - Mildly agree
 - Undecided
 - Mildly disagree
 - Strongly disagree

- 5) To be a good American citizen implies being politically active.
 - Strongly agree
 - Mildly agree
 - Undecided
 - Mildly disagree
 - Strongly disagree

- 6) How would you rate your political participation since entering the library profession?
 - Very high
 - High
 - Average
 - Low
 - Very low

- 7) How would you rate the overall political participation of librarians in your library?
 - Very high
 - High
 - Average
 - Low
 - Very low

- 8) How would you rate the political participation of North Carolina librarians in general?
 - Very high
 - High
 - Average
 - Low
 - Very low

- 9) Which Presidential election(s) did you vote in, if any? (Check all that apply.)
- 1976
 - 1980
 - 1984
 - 1988
 - 1992
 - 1996
 - 2000
 - None
- 10) Rate the frequency with which you have voted in local and state elections since you started working in an academic library.
- Always
 - Almost always
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never
- 11) Since you began working in an academic library, have you ever worked on any political campaign?
- Yes
 - No
- 12) Since you began working in a library, have you ever attended a political party convention, state or national?
- Yes
 - No
- 13) How have you communicated about politics (issues, candidates, etc.) with your family or friends, if at all? (Check all that apply.)
- Talking in person
 - Group Meetings
 - Writing letters
 - Telephone
 - Email
 - Online chat
 - Other (please specify): _____
 - None of the above
- 14) How often do you communicate about politics (issues, candidates, etc.) with your family or friends, if at all?
- 1 - 5 times per year
 - 6 - 10 times per year
 - More than 10 times per year
 - No communication about politics
- 15) How have you communicated with politicians about politics (issues, candidates, etc.), if at all? (Check all that apply.)
- Talking in person
 - Group meetings
 - Writing letters
 - Telephone
 - Email
 - Other (please specify): _____
 - None of the above
- 16) How often do you communicate with politicians about politics (issues, candidates, etc.), if at all?
- 1 - 5 times per year
 - 6 - 10 times per year
 - More than 10 times per year
 - No communication about politics
- 17) Since you began working in an academic library, have you contributed to a candidate's campaign fund?
- Yes
 - No

- 18) Since you began working in an academic library, have you held an elected political office?
- Yes
 - No
- 19) Since becoming a librarian, have you ever been a member of any groups that engage in lobbying?
- Yes (please specify): _____
 - No
 - Don't Know

For questions 20 through 26, please provide demographic information.

- 20) Are you male or female?
- Male
 - Female
- 21) What is your age?
- Under 21
 - 21 - 29
 - 30 - 39
 - 40 - 49
 - 50 - 59
 - 60 - above
- 22) Are you registered to vote?
- Yes
 - No
- 23) If you are registered to vote, how are you registered?
- Democrat
 - Republican
 - Independent
 - Other (please specify): _____
 - Not registered with a specific political party
- 24) How many years have you worked in an academic library?
- 0 - 5
 - 6 - 10
 - 11 - 20
 - 21+
- 25) What is the highest level of school you completed?
- Some College
 - College Graduate
 - Some Library School
 - Library School Graduate
 - Multiple Graduate Degrees
 - PhD.
- 26) Which category best represents your annual earnings?
- Below \$24,000
 - \$24,000 - \$30,000
 - \$30,001 - \$36,000
 - \$36,001 - \$45,000
 - \$45,001 - \$50,000
 - Over \$50,000

For questions 27 through 30, please fill in the blanks based on your personal knowledge.

27) Who was the Republican candidate for President in 1996?

28) What is the name of the present Governor of North Carolina?

29) How long is a U.S. Senator's term?

30) How many Justices are there on the U.S. Supreme Court?

If you have additional information that you think might be useful to this study, please include it in the space below. Feel free to submit concerns or questions about this survey, as well.

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA
AT
CHAPEL HILL

School of Information and Library Science
Phone# (919) 962-8366
Fax# (919) 962-8071

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
CB# 3360, 100 Manning Hall
Chapel Hill, N.C. 27599-3360

March 9, 2001

I am conducting research on political participation for my Master's Paper at the school of Information and Library Science at UNC-Chapel Hill. The object of the research is to assess the level and nature of political participation among academic librarians in North Carolina.

Enclosed with this letter is a brief questionnaire that asks a variety of questions about the respondent's attitudes and experiences regarding political activity. I am asking you to look over the questionnaire and, if you choose to do so, complete the questionnaire and send it back to me. **DO NOT WRITE YOUR NAME ON THE QUESTIONNAIRE.** I do not need to know who you are. The results of this project will be summarized in my Master's Paper. I guarantee that your response will not be identified with you personally.

I hope you will take a few minutes to complete this questionnaire and return it in the enclosed pre-addressed stamped envelope. If possible, please reply by March 30, 2001. Your participation is voluntary and there is no penalty if you do not participate. You may contact the UNC-CH Academic Affairs Institutional Review Board at the following addresses or telephone numbers at any time during this study if you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant:

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If you would like a copy of the results of this study, please send me an email request. I will reply with the results by June 1, 2001.

Without the help of people like you, research on the attitudes and habits of academic librarians would not be conducted. I appreciate your time and effort.

Paul Showalter
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