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The Significant Effect of Parental Influence in the Political Party Identification of Children

Plato's *Republic* outlines the necessary components of the ideal city-state. To ensure the longevity of this conceptual standard against which actual city-states are to be judged, Plato stressed the designing of a suitable civic education program. Such is true today: political leaders show interest and concern for the political orientations acquired by the young. The process by which citizens learn politically relevant attitudinal dispositions and behavior patterns, or political socialization, ultimately dictates their experience in democracy and subsequently government itself. Parties and party identification are paramount in understanding American politics as are, subsequently, the ways those affiliations are formed. In other words, since government is affected by the political opinions by its people, then knowledge of the process of formation of political opinion becomes essential. Moreover, "individual political attitudes and aggregates of individual attitudes have an impact on the operation of a nation's political life" (Greenberg, 6).

In attempting to understand what influences vote choice, four main theories that fill the literature on the topic become apparent. The first, presented by Lazarsfeld and Columbia, maintains that social group memberships are the primary determinant of individuals' electoral behavior. This model emphasizes social characteristics as primary arbiter of political preference. A second perspective by Morris Fiorina, building on the work of V.O. Key, Jr., argued that what really drives the vote choice is voters' retrospective evaluations of how parties and officials had performed in office. Nie, Verba, and Petrocik, in *The Changing American Voter* adopted what could be perhaps seen as the most optimistic impetus of vote choice: voters' evaluations of candidates and issue positions. Finally, Angus Campbell, writing in *The American Voter*, held

that psychological factors are most important in shaping an individual's political behavior, especially his or her psychological attachment to a political party.

The factors which drive vote choice is not the topic of the following discourse, however. Rather, Campbell's conjecture will be focused upon as the literature on what types of political socialization result in party identification are adjudicated. Campbell maintained that identification with a specific party is determined by a high degree for many Americans by the partisanship of their parents. Regardless of whether or not party identification is the largest motivation of one's vote choice, the veracity of the claim that it stems chiefly from the family will be examined.

Through examination of the processes, conditions, and influences that lead to the development of certain attitude configurations, Campbell's claim in *The American Voter* that party identification is most closely linked to parent-to-child interaction is the most persuasive argument of the available literature. Sufficient studies from the bulk of writing on the topic reveal political orientation to be a product of socialization essentially within the family. There also exists a compelling practicality to its claims, in terms of the amount of time most children spend with their parents and the existence of political beliefs throughout the life-cycle.

Before the works of prominent political scientists are discussed in order to deduce whether in fact Campbell's model is satisfactory, the difficulties and necessary considerations of researching party identification should be articulated. In their literature, the following authors often prefaced their findings with the disciplinary difficulty of establishing precise empirical connections, sifting through the multiplicity of perspectives with which potential causes of party identification can formed, and assessing causality within complex relationships.

The first argument that will be presented is the only one examined that supports Campbell's findings. Herbert Hyman found in *Political Socialization* that individuals learn their patterns of political participation early, first and foremost from the family (Hyman, 69). The author's studies revealed that when children and their parents are measured independently with established agreements in political view, the inference that the family transmits politics to the children is empirically supported. Moreover, Hyman found that "parents are the agents who transmit politically relevant attitudes to their children" (Hyman, 72). Compiling twelve different studies of the agreement of politically relevant views among parents and children, Hyman concluded with certainty that children primarily adopt the political preferences of their parents.

Robert D. Hess and Judith V. Torney posited in *The Development of Political Attitudes in Children* that the primary deciding factor of party identification is not parents, but rather schools. Hess and Torney argued that the family transmits preference for a political party, but in most other areas its most effective role is to support other institutions in teaching political information and orientations. While Hess and Torney contradicted Campbell's and Hyman's hypotheses that the parents serve as major procedure through which children acquire political behavior, they drew certain points from them to help articulate their own. A child's attachment to care providers, they argued, as one that protects and helps him serves to translate into similar psychological dispositions toward political authority figures. Instead of directly acquiring political orientations from their parents, Hess and Torney deemphasized the role of family by attributing to it contributing to the child's political socialization as only a psychological framework of his inferior and vulnerable place in the system, which is to be later built upon predominantly outside the familial sphere.

The agent that performs this indoctrinating of attitudes, behaviors, and values, as Hess and Torney portended, is the school. It "stands out as the central, salient, and dominant force in the political socialization of the young child," while the influence of the family is "much less than has been assumed by many other researchers" (Hess and Torney, 74). The Hess and Torney model stressed the larger networks of behavior that relates citizens to the government and citizens to one another, rather than focusing on the smaller sphere of the family. Interactions of children with their parents and the antecedents of political thought that inevitably emerge are feelings of attachment that must be elaborated on by schooling. By the end of elementary school, the political socialization process is well advanced, with the child's original conceptions of the nation and politics learned from home having been supplemented with "complex information and attitudes" (Hess and Torney, 76). By the end of the eighth grade, in fact, most students adopt the attitudes and orientations of their teachers.

To further their argument that parent-to-child transmission is not the dominant means by which children identify with a party, the authors of *Political Attitudes in Children* delved outside of analyzing only the effects of outside agents such as parents, schools, and peer groups in their introduction of discussing characteristics of the child himself. They found that the intelligence of the child is one of the most important influences in the acquisition of political behavior. The authors also examine the effect of social class difference on party identification, having noted a "tendency for low-status children to feel less efficacious in dealing with the political system than do children from high-status homes" (Hess and Torney, 81).

The work of Kenneth P. Langdon presented a similar discussion to that of Hess and Torney, and one that is more or less an alternative perspective to the more traditional model of political socialization. Raising the interesting distinction between the role of the socializer and

the role of the learner (as Hess and Torney's experimented with), and from which the study of party identification should be viewed, Langdon questioned the family's long-time consideration as the setting for the most important socialization experiences. "To think of the political system as the family writ large is too simple" (Langdon, 17), he argued, thereby lending credence to the intricacies of studying party identification.

Subdividing family influence into two objects of analysis, the authority structure of the family and power relations between parents, Langdon ascertained that autocratic households can actually repel children from adopting parental party alignments. Through what is known as the conformity-rebellion threshold, the author determined that in the most oppressively autocratic households, politicization increases deviancy by illuminating party identification as an object of protest. Meanwhile, in permissive family structures, Langdon ceded that "parental political interest acts as a catalyst in transmitting and maintaining partisan homogeneity in the family" (Langdon, 165).

Another relatively unconventional method which Langdon implements to substantiate his claims is cross-culture analysis. He studied family structures not only in the United States, but also in the Caribbean and Jamaica. Drawing upon his Caribbean sample, in which many families are non-nuclear, Langdon ascertained that in terms of power relations between parents and the impact on children, maternal dominance appears to significantly influence political learning. Within this argument, Langdon's original articulation regarding where to direct analysis (whether the agent or initiator, or to the socializee) is evidenced. This approach studied the impact of race and gender, which focus on characteristics of the learner rather than the initiator. Studies show that school curriculum is more influential on African-American students' party identification development than white students. In addition, Langdon analyzed the impact of

gender in his discussion of conjugal effects of political orientation. He found that mother-daughter agreement to be higher than the son's partisan preference, which is usually split between the parents.

Langdon concluded his study of political socialization and party identification by examining the effects of secondary agents of socialization, namely schools and peer groups. It is important to recognize these environments as capable of inculcating values and behaviors that shape party identification. The orientations children learn from their households, specifically their mothers, and to a lesser degree later on in secondary environments, may mean little for the political system as a whole, however. The relevance of family experiences for the political system depends heavily on the extent to which this political learning is mediated by the intermediary socialization agencies within society. In other words, while the family does indoctrinate political preference, children's secondary experiences in society determine the stability of these values over time.

Inquiring further into the "socializee model" that the likes of Hess and Torney and Langdon incorporated into their literature, Steven A. Peterson submitted that the situations of the voter account for party identification. Viewing the partisanship question through a lens focused on the individual rather than a specific agent, Peterson held that behaviors, attitudes, and orientations are all influenced by situations subjects find themselves in. To clarify, "people come to accept conditions within which they operate and adapt their behavior and views" accordingly (Stevenson, 14). His situational approach to accounting for party identification differed from Hyman and Campbell's in its disregard for a direct agent, and even differed from Hess and Torney and Langdon in its broader parameters of research.

While influence of family, school, peer groups, as well as personal characteristics such as class, race, and intelligence, were not entirely discounted in Stevenson's model, his focus was more so the "everyday contexts and events [which] affect how we see and define the political world and how we interact within it" (Stevenson, 27). Specifically, the author attributes everyday political efficacy to an individual's level of stress, strive for satisfaction, health and nutritional problems, death anxiety and experience, and sexual abuse. Stevenson argues that the work place, religion and the church, and the media are also situations in everyday life that impact an individual's political behavior.

Peterson's widening of research topics beyond the traditional age groups and socializing agencies served to produce the conclusion that on the whole, everyday experiences and institutions act as vehicles of political socialization, affecting Americans' political orientations and behavior.

Four integral arguments that endeavor to account for party identification have been identified. Before an assessment can be made to uncover the one that is most persuasive, the life-cycle that party identifications take place within must first be discussed. While the aforementioned authors of Campbell, Hyman, Hess and Torney, Langdon, and Stevenson disagree on where political orientations emanate from, they do agree that individuals gather them. An important question must subsequently be explored: do transmitted allegiances persist throughout the life-cycle or do other factors become more important as one ages?

Philip Converse produced empirically grounded literature that intimately examined this question. His work is also worth mentioning because it introduced another perspective to the debate already containing the impact of family, school, and everyday experiences, which is that of age. The primary contributions from Converse's work are his overview of how party

identification and political opinions interact with time, and whether party identifications can be attributed to generational differences, life-cycle or maturational processes, or period effects.

First and foremost, Converse delineated that identifications strengthen as a function of time one holds on to that preference. Correspondingly, absorption of new ideas slows down with age, whatever the ideological stripe of these new ideas may be (Converse, 13). Such is in accordance with the arguments of Hyman, where he maintained that "party attachment may tend to persist into adult life" (Hyman, 78). Furthermore, describing party identification in terms of strength and direction, Converse articulated that the main components of party support are a life-cycle process that results from social learning. The author identified the life-cycle as a fundamental aspect of party identification, one that is more evident than generational differences or period effects. Party identification is not strictly divided across generational lines, nor is it entirely subject to the effects of certain periods of history. Converse's life-cycle theory fits most seamlessly with Campbell's argument regarding the origin of party identification. A strong mechanism behind one's initial opinion formations is necessary in order for those beliefs to last over time. Since the greatest amount of time for most children is spent with their parents (rather with than teachers, peer group members, or intertwined in specific situations one may encounter) it is rational that parental influence is the prominent indicator of how a child will digest politics as he grows.

Schwartz and Schwartz also recognized implementing an "inclusive view of the life-cycle is necessary in view of the salient and critical changes in human experiences that accompany these maturational stages" (Schwartz and Schwartz, 21). The authors offered the research of Stanley Renshon which showed that one's basic beliefs about the world are learned early in life and play an important role in shaping later political attitudes and behaviors. Renshon added that

his findings were conditional on the individual's interest and level of satisfaction toward engaging in politics.

The study of the sources of party identification is complex, and it is only one of the possible explanations for why people choose to vote a certain way. Over their lifetimes, Americans interact with a myriad of factors that impact their behavior and political ideologies. Discovering which one is most significant is a challenge for political scientists, due to the immense scope of one's life and all the events that take place within it. However, it is clear that Campbell's assertion that party identification is largely transmitted from parent-to-child is the most persuasive due to its pragmatics and the amount of supporting literature.

After juxtaposing Campbell's notions with the wide variety of claims from other authors (including the school-centered argument of Hess and Torney, the "socializee" model of Langdon, and the life experiences model of Stevenson), it is evident that arguing for any one effect as completely indicative of party identification is irresponsible. That being said, viewing the family as the primary influence on political preference is the most persuasive and practical argument presented. Even if the family unit is viewed as only establishing a baseline for other agents to build upon, those initial values (no matter how small) persist more often than not throughout the life-cycle. Due to the period of time that children spend learning and interacting with their parents, children are very likely to replicate the personalities, behaviors, and values as they develop at home.

Moreover, the theory makes sense when viewed in light of the political socialization that children undergo from a young age in America. "Every political regime seeks to instill in young people values, beliefs, and behaviors consistent with the continuance of its own political order" (Greenberg, 4). Children begin forming views about complex systems from a young age, views

their intelligence is not developed enough yet to understand. A good example is a child who wears a campaign button even though he almost assuredly is incapable of comprehending the politics behind such an action. Since children are unable to grasp the larger political message of aligning with the values of a party, they instead attach themselves to a party or idea of a party. Children therefore adopt the orientations which are important in the behavior of their parents.

In should be noted that a personal bias may emerge in supporting Campbell's argument. Since it easy for one to look back at which source of influence contributed most to his present preferences, one may realize that one agent or event was unequivocally more impactful than another. Even when analyzing the evidence prudently and ensuring for impartiality, it still appears that Campbell's work that identified parent-to-child transmission as the largest source of party identification is the most consistent and researched debate, and makes the most sense.

With a greater grasp of the sources of party identification, citizens can participate more responsibly and effectively in government. Awareness of the sources of one's political thoughts has the potential to produce a more mindful and responsible electorate, and in turn an improved city-state.

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