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Political attitudes of the young electorate in the 2016 presidential election and parental influences on political identity formation.

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Abstract

We examined the political attitudes of college students and the political identities of their parents to better understand the role that both parent-child political socialization and the liberal university environment play in political identity formation. We compared students explicit and implicit political attitudes and examined the relationships of these attitudes to the political identities of their parents. We also explored the uniqueness of two candidates, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential election. Our results supported the existing notion of parental influences on political identity formation and revealed that the university environment may not play as large of a role in shifting first- and second-year university students away from political identities established at home. However, data revealed greater support for the non-traditional candidate in our left-leaning participants, suggesting that factors other than parent influence could be at play in forming the political identities of the youth.

Keywords: political identity, implicit and explicit political attitudes

Political Attitudes of the Young Electorate in the 2016 Presidential Election and Parental

Influences on Political Identity Formation.

The 2016 presidential election provoked great interest among many Americans. The

nature of this election was different from any election in the past, producing a unique group of

candidates and new voting trends, which revealed a more radicalized electorate than seen in the

past (Leonhardt, 2016). The Millennial generation, those born between 1981 and 1996, and some

of generation Z, those born in 1997 and onward, emerged in this election (Dimock, 2018).

Young voters played a dominant role in swaying political attitudes in this election through their

numerosity and unique political preferences (Fry, 2018; Leonhardt, 2016).During the 2016

election, the Millennial electorate came close in numbers to the Baby Boomers, with an

estimated 62 million millennials of voting age compared to 70 million eligible Baby Boomers

(Fry, 2018).

With this shift in demographics, we are also witnessing a change in voting attitudes. For

example, Senator Bernie Sanders emerged in the 2016 election, campaigning for the democratic

presidential nomination and representing ideas that American electorates would not typically

find attractive in a prospective presidential candidate: a democrat with socialistic leanings, who

does not participate in organized religion (Sellers & Wagner, 2016). A national survey of the

American people's views on presidential candidates conducted in 2014 revealed that 53%

percent of the surveyed population said that they would be less likely to vote for an Atheist, 36%

would be less likely to vote for someone in their 70's, and 22% would be less likely to vote for

someone who has used marijuana (Pew Research Center, 2014). Bernie Sanders embodied most

of these traits and the younger voters in the 2016 Presidential election embraced and supported

his ideas (Fall 2018 National Youth Poll, 2018). Millennials possess very different characteristics

than the generations that came before them. They have more years of formal education than

previous generations, are more racially and culturally diverse (Fry, Igielnik, & Patten, 2018), and

are characterized by their confidence, self-expression, liberal leanings, and openness to change

(Pew Research Center, 2010). Research following the 2016 election revealed that Millennials

were mostly Democratic-leaning voters, with a growing share of liberals and independents

(Maniam & Smith, 2017).

Current research on the political opinions of Millennials has revealed that a large

majority holds egalitarian views, which is the belief in a fair society in which everyone is equal.

A smaller percentage holds libertarian views, which places value in individual freedom and

skepticism towards the government (CIRCLE, 2018). Bernie Sanders was a figurehead for such

egalitarian beliefs in the past election, pushing for democratic socialism under which he would

create "an economy that works for all, not just the very wealthy" (Sanders, 2015). The

momentum that made Bernie Sanders a real contender in the last presidential election was mostly

instigated by the support from this younger generation of voters (CIRCLE, 2016). Data taken

from 20 states during the 2016 primaries and caucuses revealed that nearly two million young

people voted for Sanders, which was almost three times more youth votes than any other

candidate in either party had accumulated (CIRCLE, 2016). However, only 51% of eligible

millennials actually voted (Fry, 2018).

Young adulthood is an important time for identity formation. During this time in life, an

individual is deciding which values, beliefs, and goals are most essential to establishing one's

core self and one's roles and responsibilities in society (Erikson, 1968). Identity formation is a

complex process that links together various domains to construct who an individual is, including

her ethnic (French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2006), sexual (Cass, 1996), and political identities

(Yates & Youniss, 1998). While identity formation takes place, there is a strong interplay

between the psychological and the social self and constant influence of these factors on each

other (Erikson, 1959, 1968). One of the most oft-cited explanations of our political identity

formation - affiliation with a particular group that expresses specific political opinions and

attitudes - suggests parental influences (Beck & Jennings, 1975; Campbell, Converse, Miller, &

Stokes, 1960; Niemi & Jennings, 1991). Before young people acquire a mature understanding of

political affairs, their political preferences are heavily influenced by their parents' political views

(Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Jennings, Stoker, & Bowers, 2009; Lewis-Beck,

Jacoby, Norpoth & Weisberg, 2008; Rico & Jennings, 2016; Wolak, 2009). In the past,

researchers have examined the role family plays in the political socialization of young adults

(Dinas, 2014; Jennings et al., 2009; Lewis-Beck et al., 2008; Wolak, 2009). Suggestions about

the mechanism of parent-child political socialization have been made, including the

manifestation of observational and social learning (Dinas, 2014). Kroh and Selb (2009) noted

that young individuals do not require political competence in order to form a political identity.

Rather, they learn to embrace a specific political environment as a process of building his or her

personal identity. If adolescents have formed such identity, they often experience cognitive

dissonance when facing new political stimuli as they evaluate incoming political cues against

their established identity (Dinas, 2014; Wolak, 2009). This phenomenon is useful in

understanding how political identities are maintained after young people leave home for college.

As young adults are exposed to new political stimuli, they are more likely to disregard those that

do not support their prior established political attitudes (Dinas, 2014; Wolak, 2009).

However, by the time individuals reach voting age, this might change. Once they leave

home and become exposed to more political information outside of the parental household, it is

not uncommon for young adults to adopt the values contradictory of their parents' political attitudes (Beck & Jennings, 1975; Dinas, 2013; Niemi & Jennings, 1991). In addition to an individual's upbringing, external political cues also play a major role in political identity formation. These external political cues include contact with campaigns, volunteer opportunities, and media exposure – each of which plays an important role in political engagement and attitudes among younger voters (Acconciamessa, Ahmed, Tang, Brownstein, & Moreno, 2016). If an adolescent is raised in a home that fosters discussion about politics, he or she is typically more attentive to these external political cues when moving on to new social contexts (Dinas, 2013). There are two main circumstances in which external political cues are most prevalent: new social contexts and new political events (Dinas, 2013). College-enrolled electorates voting in the 2016 election not only found themselves in a new social context – a liberal university setting (Astin,1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), but also experienced a very new political event by participating in one of the most unique elections thus far – with the emergence of nontraditional candidates, or candidates that exhibit characteristics that differ from typical election cycles, for major political parties (Leonhardt, 2016).

While many researchers lean towards parent-child political socialization as the anchor for political identity (Dinas, 2014; Jennings et al., 2009; Lewis-Beck et al., 2008; Wolak, 2009), others suggest that the youth stray away from parental influences due to external political stimuli once they leave the home (Beck & Jennings, 1975; Dinas, 2013; Niemi & Jennings, 1991). One method for observing whether external cues have had an effect on the political attitudes of the youth is to examine both their explicit and implicit political attitudes. Hogg and Vaughan (2005, p. 150) defined an attitude as "a relatively enduring organization of beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols." In most

instances, people have conscious control and report explicit attitudes (Rydell & McConnell, 2006). However, implicit, rather than explicit, attitudes can uniquely predict spontaneous behaviors (McConnell& Leibold, 2001). Observing individuals' implicit political attitudes and comparing them to their explicit attitudes has often been used in research to predict voting behavior, with implicit attitudes being more effective than explicit attitudes in predicting election results (Roccato & Zogmaister, 2010; Ryan, T., 2017). Because political attitudes are particularly sensitive to new events during the early years of adulthood (Schuman & Corning, 2012), is it possible that newly-enrolled college students, entering into a new university environment during such a unique election, could have developed new implicit attitudes that deviate from their previously established explicit attitudes? The Implicit Association Test (IAT) is a test that measures these implicit political attitudes in individuals by asking them to associate stimuli with specific political categories (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). It has been shown that the results of IATs reliably reflect voting behaviors (Arcuri et al., 2008).

Our interest in the college-enrolled electorate is derived from the fact that most of this population has been exposed to parent-child political socialization in the home (Dinas, 2014; Jennings et al., 2009; Lewis-Beck et al., 2008; Wolak, 2009), as well as socialization occurring in the largely liberal university environment - due to an increasingly large presence of liberal leaning faculty in colleges (Jaschik, 2017). We chose to focus only on young voters enrolled in a university so that we would be able to examine how the largely liberal university environment might play a role in political identity. Thus, the young electorate not enrolled in the university were not included in our study. We chose to focus on the South because presidential candidate Bernie Sanders gained more support from young voters than the candidate that was more characteristic of a profile from a typical political candidate, Hillary Clinton, in almost every

southern state excluding Mississippi and Alabama (De Pinto, 2019). The deviation from the

profile of a traditional democratic candidate in an area characterized by traditional views, makes

for a particularly intriguing and uncommon phenomenon that merits empirical investigation.

In the current study, we examined political attitudes of college-enrolled electorate in the

historically conservative Bible belt region of the United States in comparison to the political

views of their parents. We explored whether students' explicit political attitudes line up with the

political identities of their parents and with their own implicit political attitudes to determine if

liberal college environment had an effect on students' political beliefs established by parental

influence.

We hypothesize that:

H_1: Students' explicit political attitudes will align with the political identities of their parents.

H_2: Students' implicit political attitudes will not align with the political identities of their parents.

H_3: Students' explicit political attitudes will not align with their implicit political attitudes.

It is important to note that we examined each of these hypotheses exclusively in the

context of the 2016 presidential election. The explicit political attitudes we measured are

reflective of the participant's attitudes towards the candidates who ran only in the 2016 election.

To understand the nature of political identity formation in the young electorate, we examined the

role of parent-child political socialization and the impact of external cues on political identity

formation outside of parental influences. Identifying factors that contribute to the formation of

students' political identity can aim educators toward a better understanding of intrapersonal and

environmental forces that guide students' mature identity formation.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 597 college students from two universities located in the South East region of the United States – Auburn University and The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Participants were collected through professor administration of the survey in a classroom setting. The sample consisted of 67% female participants (age: M=20.96; SD: 4.71years) and 33% male participants (age: M=19.81; SD: 2.31 years). 49% of the sample spent most of their life in Tennessee, 29% in Alabama, 8% in Georgia, and the remaining 14% varied mainly across the South. On average, participants in this study completed 2.22 years of higher education.

Procedure

An online questionnaire was used to collect demographic information, student's explicit political attitude, and the political affiliations of students' parents. Participants' explicit attitudes were gathered using a Likert scale that asked participants to express how much support they showed for each candidate during the 2016 election, ranging from none at all to complete support. Parental political affiliations were gathered by asking participants to identify whether each parent identified as republican, democrat, independent, or not sure. Participants' implicit political attitudes were measured with responses from the political Implicit Association Test (IAT) (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). We compared young voters' explicit political attitudes with their implicit political views as measured by the Implicit Association Test to see if the liberal college environment had an effect on their political identity (Greenwald, Banaji, Rudman, Farnham, Nosek, & Mellott, 2002). When conducting our analysis, we decided to also

explore the uniqueness of two of the most relevantly novel presidential candidates, Bernie

Sanders and Donald Trump. Because data from the 2016 election revealed that Bernie Sanders

received overwhelmingly more support from the younger electorate than did Hillary Clinton

(CIRCLE, 2016), we wanted to see if this same trend could be seen with the more non-

traditional, republican candidate, Donald Trump, as well. More generally speaking, we wanted to

see if college students affiliated their political party with these non-traditional candidates more

so than the other candidates who represented a more traditional political affiliation and policy.

This study was approved by the IRB's at both universities where data were collected and

analyzed. The self-constructed questionnaire was administered through Qualtrics and the IAT

was administered through Project Implicit Services. Participants were sent an invitation email

asking them to complete the survey.

Results

A Chi-Square test of independence with Bonferroni adjusted p-values was conducted to

control for type 1 error to analyze students' explicit political attitude and parents' political

identity. A significant association was found between mothers' and participants' explicit political

affiliation ($\chi2$ (4) = 106.192, p <.001). Post hoc analysis was conducted using a Bonferroni

adjusted alpha level of 0.005556 per test. This analysis revealed that if mothers were identified

as Democrats, participants also were showing explicit preference for this party more frequently,

p <.001. Likewise, there was a significant association between father's and participants' explicit

political affiliation ($\chi2$ (4) = 63.876, p <.001). Post hoc analysis with adjusted Bonferroni alpha

level of 0.005556 revealed that if fathers were identified as Democrats, participants more

frequently showed explicit preference for the Democratic Party, p <.001. Similarly, when fathers

were identified as Republicans, participants revealed explicit preference for this party more

frequently (p <.001). These results support our hypothesis that participants' explicit political

attitudes aligned with the political identities of their parents.

We analyzed students' implicit political attitude and parents' political identity. Contrary

to our prediction, we observed a significant relationship between participants' implicit political

attitude and mothers' political affiliation ($\chi2$ (4) = 39.035, p <.001). Post hoc analysis with a

Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of 0.005 revealed that when mothers were identified as

Democrat, participants showed implicit preference for the Democratic Party more frequently *(p<*

.001). Likewise, when mothers were identified as Republicans, participants showed implicit

preference for the Republican Party more frequently ($p < .001$). We also detected a significant

relationship between participants' implicit political attitudes and fathers' political affiliation ($\chi2$

(4) = 32.775, p <.001). Post hoc analysis with a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of 0.005

revealed that when fathers were identified as Democrats, participants showed implicit preference

for the Democratic Party more frequently ($p < .001$), and when fathers were identified as

Republicans, participants showed implicit preference for the Republican Party more frequently

($p = .003$).

Furthermore, we analyzed students' explicit and implicit political attitudes. Contrary to

our prediction, we observed a significant relationship between participants' explicit and implicit

political attitudes ($\chi2$ (4) = 64.647, p <.001). Post hoc analysis with a Bonferroni adjusted alpha

level of 0.005 revealed that participants who were implicitly oriented toward Democratic Party,

more frequently explicitly identified as a Democrats ($p < .001$). Likewise, if participants were

implicitly more Republican oriented, they identified as Republican explicitly ($p < .001$).

Finally, we sought to explore the candidates' uniqueness in this election. When we

separated two contenders for Democratic nomination, it became apparent that most participants

affiliated the Democratic Party with Bernie Sanders. In a post hoc analysis using a Bonferroni

adjusted alpha level of 0.004, we found that when participants implicitly were more affiliated

with the Democratic Party, they showed significantly more explicit support for Bernie Sanders (p

< .001). Interestingly, when fathers' political affiliation was Democratic, participants showed

more explicit support for Bernie Sanders ($p = .003$), but not for Hillary Clinton ($p = .230$). When

mothers' political affiliation was Democratic, students' explicit affiliation was significant for

both Bernie Sanders ($p < .001$) and Hillary Clinton ($p < .001$).

When we separated explicit support for Donald Trump from the Republican Party, using

the same Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of 0.00417, we found that when participants IAT

revealed them to be more Republican, they showed significantly greater explicit support for the

Republican Party as a whole ($p = .0014$), but not for Donald Trump alone ($p = .009$). When

participants' parents, both mothers and fathers, were identified as Republican, participants

showed significant support for both Donald Trump alone and the Republican Party as a whole

(Mothers: Trump $p < .001$, Republicans $p < .001$; Fathers: Trump $p = .001$, Republicans $p <$

.001).

Discussion

Our findings supported the existing notion of a strong parental role in the formation of a

child's political identity – both mothers' and fathers' political affiliations were aligned with

participants' explicit political attitudes. Contrary to our prediction, participants' explicit and

implicit political attitudes aligned. While some research shows that young people, especially

from politically active families, tend to deviate from their parents' political beliefs in response to

the external political cues (Beck & Jennings, 1975; Dinas, 2013; Niemi & Jennings, 1991), it is

possible that participants in our study were not exposed to the political cues outside of their

families long enough to see a significant change in their political beliefs. On average, our participants were out of their family environment for just a little over two years.

This explanation could also account for the inaccuracy of our prediction that students' implicit attitudes would not line up with the political identity of their parents. Students' implicit attitudes are more likely to deviate from parents' political identities if they pay attention to new external political cues (Beck & Jennings, 1975; Niemi & Jennings, 1991, Dinas, 2013). These cues, as mentioned before, include contact with campaigns, volunteer opportunities, and media exposure, which are each common forms of civic engagement (Millennials in 2016, 2016). It is possible that our students' implicit attitudes did not deviate from their parents' political identities because civic engagement is too low at this age. Data gathered about the civic engagement levels of different age groups has revealed that individuals at ages 18-24 are less civically engaged than any other age group from the range of 25-64 years old (Smith et. al, 2009). When we asked our participants to report the total amount of primary and general elections in which they had voted, almost half (47%) of our participants reported that they had never voted in a primary election and 31% had never voted in a general election. If our participants had voted before, it was typically only once, with 43% having only voted in one primary election and 57% having only voted in one general election. The lack of participation and interest in political stimuli in this age group could explain why the university setting did not play as large of a role in changing implicit attitudes as we thought.

The past election revealed a major shift in the voting attitudes of the American population exemplified by the rise of two non-traditional candidates in major political parties. Analyzing the political affiliations of the younger electorate with traditional political parties, we found that our left-leaning participants associated the Democratic Party with a non-traditional candidate like

Bernie Sanders. However, for the right leaning participants, this trend toward the non-traditional candidate was not as evident. The Republican Party-oriented participants in our study showed equal support for non-traditional candidate Donald Trump alone and the Republican Party as a whole.

Past research revealed that when people are faced with new political information, they use their prior established partisanship to interpret this information (Wolak, 2009). The concept of cognitive dissonance describes the discomfort that occurs when an individual recognizes that his or her own attitudes, beliefs, or actions are incongruent with each other (Vraga, 2014). People often try to avoid cognitive dissonance by engaging in selective information seeking – paying attention to the information that supports their prior beliefs and ignoring information that does not (Vraga, 2014). When examining this phenomenon in the context of political identity and party formation, cognitive dissonance is seen as the tendency to ignore political information that contradicts the values and beliefs of one's political party, while embracing information that supports one's established party (Vraga, 2014) As noted in the literature review, the university climate is largely viewed as liberal due to the increasingly large presence of left-leaning faculty in universities, which creates an environment that fosters left-leaning political discussion (Jaschik, 2017). Using this framework to analyze the results of this study, it is possible that left-leaning participants, who developed their liberal political identity at home, may have shifted with ease toward the non-traditional candidate because they were more open to new liberal political cues in the university setting that helped them to support and strengthen their existent political identity. On the contrary, participants that identified as more conservative, possibly ignored the same left-leaning cues because they contradicted their previously established identity – a product of cognitive dissonance.

Younger voters are going to be the dominating force in the elections to come. Hence, it is useful to understand how political identities are maintained after young people leave home. While the present study provides a useful information about political identity of younger voters, it has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, our sample was limited to only college students exposed to the liberal college environment. Young adults that are not enrolled in college may differ in important ways in their political preferences and this difference needs to be explored. Second, research regarding the 2016 Presidential election is limited due to its recent occurrence. The unique context of this election and novice voting trend in favor of the non-traditional candidates lay a foundation for future research on voting behaviors of young electorate. If the same trend continues in the upcoming elections, and young voters show growing support for non-traditional candidates, it begs the question of what factors are driving this shift. With the strong parental role present in the formation of political identity (Dinas, 2014; Jennings et al., 2009; Lewis-Beck et al., 2008; Wolak, 2009), it is imperative to understand the mechanisms that lead to a shift in support toward non-traditional candidates after young adults leave parental households. The liberal university environment might play the role in this move and exemplifies a critical context in which we may observe change.

Understanding how young people develop their political identity is an important hallmark of developmental theories. Yet, there is a scarcity of research devoted to the examination of college students' political identity formation (Haskell, Fleming & Quirolgico, 2005). In addition to the long-standing explanation of parental influences on political identity development, it is important to understand other factors that contribute to this process after young people leave their parental households. This study contributes to the extant literature on parental influences on

political identity development and taps into other factors (i.e. liberal college environment) that

might influence college students' political attitudes.

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