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Christopher C. Joyner

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The Impact of Political Socialization Upon Partisan Identification: An Assessment

By CHRISTOPHER C. JOYNER

Social scientists who study the process of socialization have long been cognizant of the paramount role the family plays in "transforming the mentally naked infant organism into the adult, fully clothed in its own personality."¹ Mother, father, and siblings are the first people with whom the child has contact and the first to teach him how to live with others. As Frederick Elkin so succinctly put it, "It is a world with which he has nothing to compare, and, as such, it (i.e., the family) is the most important socializing agency."² Thus, the family assumes especial import during this nascent period because the high frequency of personal communication between parent and child provides a channel through which basic beliefs and attitudes are instilled for life.³

Many students of politics have generalized from the family's broad function in socialization to its specific impact upon political attitudes.⁴ In large part, this view of the parent's unique role in transmitting political culture stems from the high inter-generational agreement found in party identification and electoral behavior in the United States. Extrapolations from these findings have precipitated inferences that the parents are able to directly pass on a wider range of political values and issue-orientation to their offspring.⁵ However, recent research has evinced significant incongruities in the family's role as total political socializer, despite substantiating the transmission of party identification.⁶ Herein is couched the purpose of the paper, *viz.*, to peruse the available literature and ascertain

¹ James C. Davis, "The Family's Role in Political Socialization", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 361 (September, 1965), p. 11.

² Frederick Elkin, *The Child and Society: The Process of Socialization*, (New York: Random House, 1960), p. 100.

³ Richard E. Dawson and Kenneth Prewitt, *Political Socialization*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1969), p. 107.

⁴ Herbert Hyman, *Political Socialization: A Study in the Psychology of Political Behavior*, (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1959), Chapter IV, "Agencies of Socialization into Politics", p. 69-91.

⁵ *Ibid.* Also see Davis, *op. cit.* and Roberta Sigel, "Assumptions About the Learning of Political Values," *Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Science*, 361, (September, 1965), p. 1-9.

⁶ See M. Kent Jennings and Richard G. Niemi, "The Transmission of Political Values from Parent to Child," *American Political Science Review* (March, 1968),

the nature of the forces which bind a child to the partisan preferences of his family, as well as those which might threaten his rejection.

One of the most important studies to link party identification with familial socialization was that conducted by Dahlgren and McClosky in 1959.⁷ The authors hypothesized that lack of cohesion or change in party affiliation would occur if: 1) the parental family had little interest in politics; 2) one belongs to or enters into primary groups with conflicting political norms; 3) the groups that gave life to the original norms change, experience conflict, or cease to reinforce their earlier views; 4) a voter has become estranged or physically isolated from the groups in which his political outputs had been anchored.⁸

Their final research design consisted of 215 adults from the Twin City area in Minnesota who were interviewed for two hours.

The results of their data provide a cogent analysis of "the role in which the primary group plays in strengthening or weakening party loyalty—in the contribution they make to life-long patterns of political support at the one extreme, or to political apathy, vacillation, or defection at the other."⁹ In essence, Dahlgren and McClosky concluded:

1) The family is a key reference group which transmits, indoctrinates, and sustains the political loyalties of its members.

2) The family's influence on the stability of a voter's preference increases when a) party outlooks of its members are homogeneous; b) political interest and loyalty of members is high; c) the same family preference has been retained over time.

3) A voter's political attachments are strongly affected by both his life-styles; homogeneous life-styles tend to reinforce party loyalties, heterogeneous life-styles attenuate them.¹⁰

The findings further indicated that three of four American voters have accepted the party preference of their family, but with varying degrees of support.¹¹ "Disagreements among the several primary groups," the authors

p. 169-184, and R. W. Connell, "Bibliography and Review of Findings of Two-Generation Surveys of Political and Social Attitudes, Working Paper No. 163," Center for Social Organization Studies, University of Chicago, 1970.

⁷ Harold E. Dahlgren and Herbert McClosky, "Primary Group Influence on Party Loyalty," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (September, 1959), p. 757-776.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 762.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 761.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 762.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 775.

assert, "are among the most important sources of party irregularity and defection."¹²

Nonetheless, one patent shortcoming in their presentation should be noted. Although the authors claim their findings "make it plain that the indoctrinations, retention, or shift in party loyalties are significantly related to and often determined by family and other bonds," they fail to explain causation for voters shifts in particular elections; i.e., nearly all data surveyed reflected similar lack of specificity regarding abrupt switches of party allegiance by family members.¹³ "Rebellion" towards parental authority was proffered as a causal reason for party shifts among adolescents, but no mention was made of the situation wherein a loyal parent and child might both cross party lines when confronted with an attractive opposition candidate or a salient political issue.

This concept of "rebellion" against parental authority by party identification change has been a focal area for much of the later political socialization research. Richard Flacks, in his recent study, "The Revolt of the Advantaged: An Exploration of the Roots of Student Protest", made extensive interviews with student activists, their parents, and non-activist control samples to determine "rebellion's" relation to family political values. Expectantly, he found that activists tend to come from upper status

TABLE 1. Stability of Preferences, When Voters Agree or Disagree with the Party Loyalties of their Parents

Respondents are →	Republicans		Democrats		Total	
	Parents were Republican	Parents were Democratic	Parents were Republican	Parents were Democratic	Voter Supports Same Party as Parents	Voter Supports Different Party from Parents
↓	(%'s down)		(%'s down)		(%'s down)	
Stable Voters	52.8	17.4	54.0	38.5	53.4	28.6
Moderate Voters	30.2	30.4	32.0	26.9	31.1	28.6
Unstable Voters	17.0	52.2	14.0	34.6	15.5	42.8
Sample Size	53	23	50	26	103	49

* SOURCE: Dahlgren and McClosky (1959). p. 763.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 775. Similar influences have been found in other Western nations as well. A study of French political party orientation reports only 25% of the Frenchmen were able to identify a paternal political party preference. This, plus the low frequency of party identification is attributed to the failure of the French family to provide cues, examples, or education about political parties. See Philip E. Converse and George Depeux, "Politicization of the Electorate in France and the United States," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 26, (1962), pp. 1-23.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 774.

families, their parents were more liberal and more permissive than those of non-activists, and activism is related to a complex of values—not ostensibly political.¹⁴ “It seems fair to conclude,” he posits, “that most students who are involved in neither “conversion” nor “rebellion” against the political perspectives (party identification included) of their fathers. A more supportable view suggests that the great majority of these students are attempting to fulfill and renew the political traditions of their families.”¹⁵

Similar observations were evidenced by Robert Lane. “There are three ways in which a father lays the foundations for his son’s political beliefs,” he states. “Through indoctrination; by placing the child in a social context, giving him an ethnicity, class position, and community or regional environment; and, through his personal relations with his son and the way he molds the personality. These three processes produce the ‘Mendelian law’ of politics: the inheritance of political loyalties and beliefs.”¹⁶

For his study, Lane selected at random fifteen working class and lower-middle class men, and interviewed them to assess expressions of adolescent rebellion against their parents. Concentrating upon paternal-directed rebellion, Lane discovered that only four of his subjects had impaired relations with their fathers. Moreover, in none of these cases did the rebellion take a political form. Therefore, he contends, “The low salience of politics for the father means that rebellion against him is less likely to be channelled into politics or political ideology.”¹⁷ From this, the “unfought War of Independence” (as Lane calls it) seems unlikely to manifest itself in the form of a party identification change. A “permissive culture” tends to discourage rebellion, but when it comes, the shallow interest in politics will inhibit its expression as political deviance.¹⁸

Another noteworthy research effort is prefaced with this contention: “Political beliefs can be influenced by family relationships through rebellion; a youth may, for example, express rebellion against his parents by rejecting their political beliefs and adopting a divergent set.”¹⁹

¹⁴ Richard Flacks, “The Revolt of the Advantaged: An Exploration of the Roots of Student Protest,” in Roberta S. Sigel, *Learning About Politics: A Reader in Political Socialization*, (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 182-191.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 190-191.

¹⁶ Robert E. Lane, “Fathers and Sons: Foundations of Political Belief,” *American Sociological Review*, 24 (August, 1959), p. 502.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 511.

¹⁸ For a reflective study on Dutch, French, and Belgian students, see Frank A. Pinner, “Parental Overprotection and Political Distrust,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 361 (September, 1965), pp. 59-70.

¹⁹ Russell Middleton and Snell Putney, “Political Expression of Adolescent Rebellion,” *American Journal of Sociology*, LXVIII (1963), pp. 527-535.

The authors, Middleton and Putney, distributed anonymous questionnaires in 1961 to classes of students in sixteen colleges and universities in the United States. Through correlations of discipline strictness, closeness to parent, interest of parent in politics, political rebellion, and sex of their 1140 size sample, the findings indicated "divergence from parental political views, as measured by our categories, is fairly common, especially among male students."²⁰ Moreover, they concluded that "deviation from parental political viewpoints is associated with estrangements between parent and child—if the parent is interested in politics. . . . Rebellion against the parent arising from strained parent-child relationships, may provoke political deviation." However, "while some students express rebellion in political terms, many, if not most, do not."²¹ Once again, adolescent use of party identification shift as a tool of revolt against parental authority seems far removed and highly exceptional.

One other study of adolescent rebellion *vis-à-vis* party affiliation choice should not go unmentioned. In their 1964-1965 survey research, Langton and Jennings undertook a careful examination of secondary school adolescents in the Caribbean to determine "an explanation of the differential effects of a mother—only family versus nuclear families" in shaping party identification.²²

As in the aforementioned studies, the authors hypothesized that party identification could be a focus of rebellion in the child. Even so, they introduced a novel perspective from which to view this rebellion, *viz.*, mother versus father domination in the orientation of political values.²³ Data revealed 56% of the 1669 students interviewed felt equally close to both parents; 39% felt closer to their mothers; and only 5% felt closer to their fathers.²⁴ The political loyalty implications of these findings are

Where parents shared the same party identification, 76% of the students absorbed it. (It is interesting to note in the case of Republican realized in the accompanying table (for parents with heterogeneous party identification).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 532.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 535.

²² Kenneth P. Langton and M. Kent Jennings, "Mother Versus Father in the Formation of Political Orientations," in Kenneth P. Langton, *Political Socialization*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 52-83.

²³ The prevailing view on intra-familial political involvement in the United States is that the father plays the most active role. Men are more visible politically at the man and leadership level, and politics is generally assumed to be sex appropriate for men. Therefore, within the family, the authors hypothesized the family father will have more influence over children's political values than the mother.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

families, only 68% of the students followed suit, whereas the Democratic families evidenced a full 85% "inheritance" rate).²⁵

Further Langton and Jennings found that a child will follow his father's influences if it is a working class family; but, if the family is heterogeneous and the mother is very active in politics, the child will turn to his mother for party affiliation choice.²⁶

Lastly, the Langton-Jennings data revealed that males from nuclear families in which the mother dominates are not as politically interested nor efficacious, and they are less likely to engage in political activity than those from father-dominant households. Essentially, this relationship weakens, and tends to reverse itself slightly among the more highly educated families.²⁷

It is unfortunate that this research only touches briefly on individual parental influence on the child's party loyalty. Yet, despite "missing some of the trees for the sake of the forest," the revelations from this study should be catalysts for more extensive investigations of family structure and child-rearing practices *vis-à-vis* party identification.

TABLE 3.4 Party Identification of Parents and Offspring among Parents with Heterogeneous Identification, by Five Characteristics.

Characteristic	Student's Party Identification Same As:			N
	Mother %	Neither %	Father %	
1. Student sex				
Girls	47	22	30	56
Boys	33	28	39	73
2. Relative Closeness to Parent				
Closer to mother	51	19	30	48
Equally close to each	26	30	43	69
3. Mother-Father Education Level				
Some college or more	42	28	30	50
High school completed	41	24	35	53
Less than high school	31	23	46	26
4. Campaign Activity Level of Mother versus Father				
Mother higher	59	13	28	23
Equal	41	22	38	55
Father higher	30	34	36	52
5. Partisan level of Mother versus Father				
Mother higher	56	15	29	41
Equal	40	31	29	35
Father higher	26	30	43	53

* SOURCE: Kenneth P. Langton, *Political Socialization*, 1969, p. 67.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

A person's subjective party preference or identification is of great importance in conditioning his attitudes towards political issues, campaigns, and candidates. This is the undergirding theme in a study of two political generations, as revealed in the work of Dodge and Uyeki.²⁸ Their sample entailed 175 undergraduate students from Case Institute of Technology (Cleveland, Ohio) who completed a ten-page questionnaire one week prior to the November, 1956 elections. From "loaded" questions dispersed throughout the questionnaire, two conclusions emerged: 1) There is substantial stability of political preference from one generation to the next; 2) a slight shift toward the Republican party was noted in the generational transfer of party affiliation.²⁹ (This is in sharp contrast to the Langton-Jennings' findings). The authors attribute this occurrence as "possibly reflecting a combination of the effects of the era in which the students have been reared as well as their general striving for upward mobility." More than likely, this overall generational "transfer" was qualified by the fact that most students as a group were both more Republican and more moderate than their parents.³⁰

In 1965, Greenstein's evaluative conclusion from his 1958 New Haven study were made known. A total of 659 New Haven fourth through eighth grade children "of widely diversified socio-economic backgrounds" comprised the test sample.³¹

Greenstein asserted that the child's initial conception of political authority "seems to have more effective than cognitive content."³² These "affective" tendencies of the child extends particularly into the area of

TABLE I. Political Identification, by Generation

<i>Political Identification</i>	<i>Parents</i>	<i>Students</i>
Republican	42.4%	40.6%
Ind. Republican	20.0	29.8
Independent	2.3	5.1
Ind. Democrat	13.1	9.7
Democrat	21.1	14.8
Not Ascertained	1.1	...
	100.0%	100.0%
	N=175	N=175

²⁸ Richard W. Dodge and Eugene S. Uyeki, "Political Affiliation and Imagery Across Two Generations," *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, 6 (1962), pp. 266-276.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

³¹ Fred I. Greenstein, *Children and Politics*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

³² *Ibid.*, p. 35.

partisan identification. In the fourth and fifth graders, he found children responded more readily to the personality of a party's candidate, even though such fixations "precede the advent of issue orientations or 'mature' evaluations of candidates."³³

He goes on to posit that "the prevalence and stability of party identification and their influence in electoral choice have a two-fold significance for the political system. First, the distribution of party preferences in a

TABLE II. Intergenerational Transfer of Party Affiliation

Affiliation of Sons	Parent's Affiliation			
	Democrat	Ind. Democrat	Ind. Republican	Republican
Democrat	32.4%	47.8%	5.7%	0.0%
Ind. Democrat	18.9	21.7	2.9	1.4
Independent	8.1	8.7	2.9	2.7
Ind. Republican	29.7	17.4	45.7	28.4
Republican	10.8	4.3	42.9	67.6
	99.9%	99.9%	100.1%	100.1%
	N=37	N=23	N=35	N=74

* SOURCE: Dodge and Uyeki, p. 176.

given historical period will have a major effect in control of political office. . . . Secondly, the ability of existing parties to command loyalty of the bulk of voters inhibits the rise of new political groupings."³⁴

Hence, it seems apparent from the New Haven study that political socialization—in the form of intergenerational transfer—tends to encourage the status quo in the process of promoting party preference continuity. Yet, Greenstein did not reveal just how many generations of children in the American political culture did profess the same party preferences as their parents.³⁵

Nonetheless, a major point was crystallized in his findings; *viz.*, "Many of the most fundamental political orientations (such as party preferences) are learned by Americans without deliberate instruction and without much conscious awareness that learning is taking place."³⁶ Concurrently, "The more important a political orientation is in the behavior of adults, the earlier it will be found to emerge in the learning of the

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

³⁵ For an interesting assessment of the generational transfer of political parties in the United States, see Walter Dean Burnham, "The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe," *American Political Science Review*, 59 (March 1965), pp. 1-28.

³⁶ Greenstein, *op. cit.*, p. 80. This is analogous to Roberta Sigel's "Assumptions About the Learning of Political Values," *op. cit.*, pp. 4-6.

child.”³⁷ This is a parallel argument to the question of political saliency in the home, and its influence on strength of partisan commitment.³⁸

A later work by Hess and Tourney focused upon the early stages of political socialization in 12,000 elementary school children in the Chicago area, and devoted considerable attention to the impact of party affiliations.³⁹

One of their more interesting findings was that “children who are independent of party show the most active involvement in political affairs.”⁴⁰ Further, children who expressed this sense of partisan independence were found to be more intelligent and from higher-class statuses than the average student tested, and “less frequently said that children should belong to their parent’s party.”⁴¹ Yet, at this point a caveat is in order. The question used to determine “party identity” was designed in this manner: “If you could vote, what would you be?” The available responses were: 1) A Republican, 2) A Democrat, 3) Sometimes a Democrat and sometimes a Republican, 4) I don’t know which I would be, 5) I don’t know what the words Democrat and Republican mean.⁴² In this study, response to number three, i.e., “Sometimes a Democrat and sometimes a Republican” was interpreted to mean “Independent.”⁴³ Thus the term “Independent”—as related to a child’s perception of voting behavior—actually revealed those children who voiced no firm commitment to either major party.

A response to numbers four and five were designated as an “uncommitted group”, and were found to be “most analogous to the apathetic

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

³⁸ In their 1952 study, *The Voter Decides*, Campbell, *et. al.*, found that voters from homes where their parents didn’t vote, or no party preference was made known, were less likely to develop their own party identification than those whose homes participated in politics. Also, those from homes lacking distinctive party preference cues were 1) less likely to have established identification with a major party; and, 2) when they did acquire identification it was usually weaker than the person from a “partisan” home. See Angus Campbell, *et. al.*, *The Voter Decides* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), pp. 90-100. Conversely, data presented by Levin indicates that the *uninterested* adolescent is more likely to choose the same party as his family than the interested one. See Martin L. Levin, “Social Climates and Political Socialization,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 25, (1961), pp. 596-606.

³⁹ Robert D. Hess and Judith V. Torney, *The Development of Political Attitudes in Children*, (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1968), pp. 223-240.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 226.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

adult citizen.”⁴⁴ Not only did this group refuse to identify with a particular political party, they also showed a general disinterest of local, national, and international events and most often responded to questions with “Don’t know” answers. As expected, these children reported fewer memberships in organizations and clubs and came from the lower I.Q., social status groups.⁴⁵

Hess and Torney also ascertained that while children are most likely to follow the partisan loyalties of their parents,

the child’s image of political parties develops late, and the nature of the differences between the two major parties is not clearly defined. Parties are apparently first associated with candidates who are identified as Republican or Democrat; interest in an election and a candidate may be then the most instrumental mechanism for developing party affiliation.⁴⁶

Furthermore, “children’s attitudes toward partisan commitment appear to be socialized by the school—a conclusion supported by the high intelligence of this group as compared with that of others.”⁴⁷ This is an important facet to the authors’ ultimate overarching conclusion gleaned from this study: The role of the family and peer group in molding and transmitting political attitudes is relatively limited, and schools serve as the single most important factor in the political socialization process.⁴⁸

Finally, Hess and Torney contend the role of the teacher may be highly significant in determining party choice by the child.

They can inculcate the concepts that parties do not really differ, that good citizens do not vote only for party candidates, and that children should not affiliate with the political party of their parents. These are the values that teachers hold, after learning these norms, the resulting student role behavior is partisan independence. Teachers, because of strong community restraints, cannot express partisan preference openly; but they can and do teach norms which orient students toward political independence.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

⁴⁸ A penetrating analysis and critique of *The Development of Political Attitudes in Children* was cogently done by David O. Sears. See *Harvard Educational Review*, (Summer 1968), pp. 573-576.

⁴⁹ Hess and Torney, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

In conclusion, "It is possible that teachers have some influence upon the child's party choice, but this is probably not extensive since they seem to press for independence and non-partisan involvement."⁵⁰

Conclusions

The conclusions which emanate from the above discussion are several and multifaceted.

1. Political socialization is a learning process. It may occur by conscious, deliberate instruction, or more importantly, through a subtle, indirect manner, i.e., "incidental learning". The latter involves social values and notions of morality, and is crucial in determining political perception.

2. Political learning is cumulative; orientations learned early in life determine much of the form and content of orientations acquired later.

3. In the American polity, party identification seems to be the orientation transmitted most successfully and persistently through the family.

4. Correlative to number three, the parents are the most significant factor in determining a child's party affiliation (despite the Hess-Torney argument to the contrary.)

5. When parents do not have well-developed attitudes toward politics, or rarely discuss politics with their children, the child is less likely to be interested in the political world; i.e., the presence of political cues in the family enhances the possibility of a similar party identification.

6. Stability of a voter's party preference is dependent upon homogeneity in the family. A family with varied or divided political loyalties is less effective in passing on firm, stable orientations than a politically homogeneous one.

7. When parental party identifications are mixed, the offspring also become divided on the issue of party loyalty.

8. Children in families having no fathers tend to be more authoritarian, less interested in politics, and lack much sense of political efficacy. Party identification—if it occurs—is likely to be weak.

9. In families with both parents present, the father rather than the mother, will be the most important socializing figure *vis-à-vis* political advice and party identification.

10. Party identification begins early in life, perhaps between the ages of seven or eight; however, this is mere identification with authority figures rather than substantive and cognitive attachment.

11. Adolescent "rebellion" against parental authority by changing party affiliations is largely unfounded. The low salience of politics in the

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

American family makes other forms of "rebellion" more appealing than political deviation.

12. The school's impact upon party identification is manifested in the teacher; i.e., the teacher tends to encourage "partisan independence" through civic education.

13. Transmission of party identification from parent to offspring constitutes a significant step in the total process of political socialization. Nonetheless, the research thus far is still fragmentary and only partially decisive as to how the actual learning process operates. Further, more extensive research in this area will be essential if we are to isolate the mechanisms which transmit these collective events. Only in this way can a comprehensive theory of political socialization be formulated, and the full impact of the niceties surrounding party identification be objectively assessed.