

Parental Influence on the Political Participation of Young
People

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I intend to examine whether individuals whose parents demonstrated political participation while the individuals were young are more likely to be politically active themselves. I will cross tabulate the independent and dependent variables to determine whether young people whose parents voted and took their children to the polls are more likely to be registered to vote and to view politics as important. In this way, I will illustrate that young people whose parents demonstrate political participation are more likely to be politically active.

I chose to examine whether parental voting behavior influences youth voting behavior because this issue has important ramifications for the next generation of voters. If parents do not instill a sense of civic duty in their children, then the coming generation may not feel as obligated to go to the polls as the one that came before it. Indeed, over time we have seen a steady decrease in youth voting with each generation.

Existing research on parental influence on youth political behavior has tended to focus on whether young people inherit their parents' political ideologies and party identifications. Less attention has been paid to whether parents who encourage political participation by taking their children to the polls are more likely to have children who vote. The issue of whether parental voting promotes youth voting has been examined by McDevitt and Kiouisis' investigation of the Kids Voting USA program. McDevitt and

Kiouis determined that the program successfully promotes youth political participation by encouraging parents to take their children to the polls and involve them in the political process.

Kids Voting Tampa Bay is a regional affiliate of the Kids Voting USA program, a national program with chapters in thirty states. It is designed to inspire young people to become interested in the political process. In the Florida counties involved, non-official voting booths are set up alongside official voting booths. School children go with their parents to the polls and cast their own “ballots,” making voting “a family affair” (Stein). The children get very excited about participating in an adult activity, and they take it very seriously. The children’s votes are counted separately, and although they do not count toward the real election, their own winners are announced.

The program is highly educational. Stein writes, “In addition to voting booths, the organization provides schools with curriculum tailored to grade levels to educate students about voting. Its broad mission is instilling civic values in youth and the community.” The curriculum teaches students how to vote and how to analyze candidates’ positions. These skills are important because knowledge about candidates and about how the political process works are important precursors to voting for young adults. Indeed, one of the main reasons young people give for not voting is that they don’t know enough about the candidates or about how to overcome institutional barriers to voting. One supervisor of the program said it was useful because students could learn about, and experience hands on, “those aspects of citizenship we should all be taking advantage of” (Stein). Skerritt writes, “The thinking is that if you get kids interested in voting, they might grow up to become civic-minded adults for whom the first Tuesday in November

matters.” Indeed, many argue that young people do not vote as much as older people do because they simply have not acquired the habit. Young people who participate in this program, however, will have been in the practice of “voting” from an early age.

As I mentioned earlier, it is important for parents to instill a desire for political participation in their children, or else each generation will become increasingly detached from politics (which is the current trend). It is important to note that voter participation has decreased among all age groups in recent years, including the parents of today’s young people. For this reason, the parents of young people today are less likely than parents of previous generations to vote themselves, or to engage their children in the political process. This vicious cycle has produced some of the most apathetic generations of youth in American history. If a young person’s parents hold negative or apathetic views toward the political process, they are likely to pass on these beliefs to their children, as well.

Perhaps one of the best aspects of the Kids Voting Tampa Bay program is that it encourages participation for both children and their parents. Advocates of the program hope that children of future generations will reject the apathy and cynicism that have caused many in recent generations to tune out of politics. In many cases, it is the students in the program who drag their parents to the polls and get them to vote. The program makes election day something both children and their parents can look forward to and be excited about. Skerritt notes that many adults normally don’t bother to vote, and “the initiative’s organizers hope that enthusiastic young voters will encourage their parents to go out and vote.” He writes that young people are often idealistic, and “here’s hoping it rubs off on mom and dad.”

According to Zaff, Malanchuk, Michelsen, and Eccles, most researchers have proposed that, “programs to promote positive citizenship should begin with an opportunity for adolescents to participate in positive citizenship activities, such as community service or political volunteering.” However, they “hypothesize that programs and policies to promote positive citizenship may need to begin by first focusing on informal interactions in youths’ lives, such as with parents” (Zaff, Malanchuk, Michelsen, and Eccles). They hypothesize that, “these informal interactions socialize or “prime” youth to have the motivation and values that subsequently lead to positive citizenship behaviors” (Zaff, Malanchuk, Michelsen, and Eccles). They allude to the shortcomings of the existing literature on the topic, stating, “the existing literature suggests that parents, peers, and the culture and society in which youth develop all promote positive citizenship behaviors, but the predominant use of small sample sizes and/or cross-sectional designs has limited researchers’ ability to conclude whether these predictors each provide unique variance” (Zaff, Malanchuk, Michelsen, and Eccles). In their analysis, they choose to focus on whether “having values and motivation to make the world a better place,” values which are passed onto children through socializing agents such as their parents, makes individuals more likely to be politically and civically active (Zaff, Malanchuk, Michelsen, and Eccles).

The measures of family involvement used by Zaff and his colleagues included whether parents were involved in the parent, student, teacher alliance, a school event known as the “Million Man March,” ethnic activities, and religious organizations. I found it curious that Zaff and his colleagues did not choose to examine the relationship between parent’s *political* involvement as a precursor to youth political engagement. Although

Zaff acknowledged that parents were an important socializing influence in their children's political and civic lives, he did not examine the issue in the manner I believe he should have. In fact, I found the entire research in this area to be lacking. For this reason, I chose to examine whether youth whose parents voted and took them to the polls as children are more likely to vote themselves. It was possible that I would not find a relationship between parental voting behavior and youth voting behavior. It may have been that peers, religious figures, schools, and the media and culture have a more powerful impact on the political socialization of young people than parents do. However, I recalled my own experience of going to the polls with my parents as a child, and of how my parents passed their passion for the political process onto me, and I wondered whether such a trend could be found among young people as a whole.

I chose the National Youth Survey (NYS) 2002 Questionnaire to examine my hypothesis. I chose this survey because it included questions about parental voting behavior that could be cross tabulated with measures of youth political participation to determine whether youth whose parents demonstrate political participation are more likely to vote themselves. In this way, the survey included questions that had the potential to illustrate my thesis.

Earlier, I stated that cynical, apathetic attitudes toward politics are often transmitted from parents to their children. These attitudes have increased among all age groups in recent decades, and have coincided with a decrease in political participation for all ages. This trend has therefore produced increasingly apathetic generations of American youth. I hypothesized that young people whose parents did not take them to vote were less likely to view voting as important than young people whose parents did

take them to vote. The data illustrate that hypothesis. Among young people whose parents took them to vote, 69.1% consider voting very or somewhat important. Among young people whose parents did not take them to vote, only 39% view voting as very or somewhat important. The data therefore illustrate that young people whose parents took them to the polls when they were children are more likely to view voting as important than young people whose parents did not take them to the polls.

Data:

11. When you were growing up, did either of your parents take you with them when they went to vote?

8. How important is voting to you personally-very important, somewhat important, a little important, or not important at all?

Parents Take You to Vote					
		Yes	No	Don't Know	Total
Vote Importance	Very Important	162 29.4%	114 12.7%	5 12.8%	281 18.9%
	Somewhat Important	219 39.7%	237 26.3%	10 25.6%	466 31.3%
	A Little Important	110 20.0%	290 32.3%	20 51.3%	420 28.2%
	Not Important At All	41 7.4%	132 14.7%	3 7.7%	176 11.8%
	Don't Know	2 .4%	16 1.8%	0 .0%	18 1.2%
	Total	551 100%	900 100%	39 100%	1490 100%

Young people are also more likely to view voting as important if they remember their parents voting while they were growing up. Among young people who report that their parents voted in every election, 69.9% view voting as very or somewhat important, as compared to only 29.8% of young people who do not recall their parents voting at all.

51.6% of those who remember their parents voting in most elections view voting as very or somewhat important, as compared to 39.5% whose parents voted only in important elections, and 29.5% who can only remember their parents voting rarely.

Data:

141. From what you remember while growing up, would you say that your parents voted during every election, most elections, only in important elections, rarely, or not at all?

8. How important is voting to you personally-very important, somewhat important, a little important, or not important at all?

		Parents Vote						Total
		Every election	Most Elections	Only in important elections	Rarely	Not at all	Don't know	
Vote Importance	Very important	144 33.9%	84 15.8%	20 9.5%	13 10.1%	14 11.3%	6 8.3%	281 18.9%
	Somewhat important	153 36.0%	190 35.8%	63 30.0%	25 19.4%	23 18.5%	12 16.7%	466 31.3%
	A little important	82 19.3%	178 33.6%	79 37.6%	32 24.8%	26 21.0%	23 31.9%	420 28.2%
	Not at all important	28 6.6%	44 8.3%	34 16.2%	30 23.3%	23 18.5%	17 23.6%	176 11.8%
	Don't know	18 4.2%	34 6.4%	14 6.7%	29 22.5%	38 30.7%	14 19.5%	137 9.9%
	Total	425 100%	530 100%	210 100%	129 100%	124 100%	72 100%	1490 100%

My findings also show that young people who remember their parents voting in elections while they were growing up are more likely to be registered to vote themselves. I cross-tabulated how often youth's parents voted as the independent variable and whether or not youth were registered to vote as the dependent variable to determine whether a positive relationship existed between the two. I found that, among young people whose parents voted in every election, 80.1% were registered to vote. This figure contrasts strongly with young people whose parents never voted, among whom only

30.3% were registered to vote. Among young people whose parents voted in most elections, 73.8% were registered to vote, compared to 64.2% whose parents voted only in important elections, and 48.8% whose parents voted rarely.

Data:

141. From what you remember while growing up, would you say that your parents voted during every election, most elections, only in important elections, rarely, or not at all?

16. Now I want to talk to you about voting. Often things come up and people are not able to register to vote. Would state or local records show that you are currently registered to vote or are you not registered to vote at this time?

		How often parents voted					
		Every election	Most elections	Only in important elections	Rarely	Not at all	Total
Youth registered to vote	Yes	242 80.1%	279 73.8%	97 64.2%	41 48.8%	23 30.3%	682 68.8%
	No	60 19.9%	99 26.2%	54 35.8%	43 51.2%	53 69.7%	309 31.2%
	Total	302 100%	378 100%	151 100%	84 100%	76 100%	991 100%

Overall, the data were well suited to my hypothesis. The patterns I expected to see were confirmed in the cross-tabulations. The predicted positive relationship between parent's participation in politics and youth participation in politics was illustrated, supporting my thesis. The population and sample of 1500 15-25 year olds nation-wide was certainly appropriate for examining national trends among youth. The makers of the survey could have improved the data by enabling the removal of the "don't know" categories of responses, because these categories tended to skew the data tables and made them more difficult to interpret. The inability to remove the "don't know" and "ineligible" categories when cross tabulating the independent variable of whether parents

took their children to vote (question eleven) and the dependent variable of whether youth were registered to vote (question sixteen) skewed that particular data so that it could not be used. This would have been a useful cross-tabulation to have, however, because it could have shown that young people whose parents took them to vote when they were growing up are more likely to be registered to vote, which would have supported my thesis.

In conclusion, the data show that young people are far more likely to be vote and to view voting as important if their parents encouraged political participation by voting themselves and taking their children to the polls. This implies that it is important for parents to encourage political engagement, because if they do not do so, their children are far less likely to vote in the future. Parents themselves have been less politically active in recent decades, a trend that has produced some of the most apathetic generations of youth in American history. This trend is alarming for our democracy because young people are the future, and if they do not vote, then it is unlikely their own children will vote. Therefore, programs like Kids Vote USA, which encourage parents to take their children to the polls, should receive greater support. The future of our democracy depends upon the political engagement of future generations. Therefore, parents must set a positive example for their children by voting themselves, and by instilling democratic values in their children from an early age.

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