

The Rosy Side of Teenage Peer Pressure

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Peer pressure among today's teenagers is a subject that has received a great deal of attention. This interest has generally been focused on the negative influences that young people can have on their peers, such as promoting drug or alcohol abuse, sex, cheating, theft, and a host of other harmful activities. Peer pressure can, though, have a positive effect on young people. I believe that one such positive influence is in the realm of political participation, an area where young people today are the least participatory of all cohorts. If a relationship indeed exists between the political participation of young people and their interactions with their peers, perhaps new methods of engaging teenagers could begin to be employed.

Previous research:

Until recently, the bulk of the literature regarding political participation only examined individual traits that promote or discourage participation. These traits can include education, income, race, and religiosity, along with several other personal characteristics. Where political scientists have only recently ventured is into the sphere of social interaction—the interpersonal factors that can push individuals towards political engagement.

Parents have long been considered one of the primary agents of political socialization and a host of studies have examined the relationship between their political activity and their children's participation. One of the best examples of such a study is the 1982 study by Beck and Jennings. The study used the 1965 Parent-Child Socialization

Panel, conducted by the Center for Political studies from 1965 to 1973. Beck and Jennings created two models that demonstrated the strong relationship between parental political activity and civic activity and young adult participation (Beck and Jennings 99-100). This study is significant in that it was one of the first studies to show that perhaps the pathways to participation originate in the childhood and adolescent years.

In 1992, political scientist Christopher Kenny observed that political activities once deemed to be solely individual are actually motivated by social interaction, such as voting or displaying a yard sign. The survey used in Kenny's study, the 1984 South Bend Election Study, was a complex series of surveys that involved asking each respondent to name and describe their own political activities as well as those of three discussants—individuals with whom the respondents discussed politics (261). Kenny determined that discussant participation had a statistically significant effect on respondent participation in each of the activities for which he tested. Kenny explains, “As the discussant becomes more likely to work on a campaign, give money to a campaign, or attend a political rally, meeting, or dinner, the likelihood of the respondent performing these acts increases also” (264). This study paved the way for political scientists to begin to examine the importance of social interaction in determining political participation, but did not, however, take age or cohort into account.

A 2003 study by Scott McClurg found similar results. Using the same survey data as Kenny's study, the 1984 South Bend Election Study, McClurg analyzed with a bit more detail the measurable effect of political talk on participation. McClurg determined that going from the lowest level of political discussion (“never” in this study) to the highest level (“most times”) increases the expected level of participation by a factor of

four or higher, depending on other characteristics such as socioeconomic status (McClurg 458). This study also did not address the issue with which I am concerned: how do these results pertain to young people?

One of the only studies of peer group influence among young people specifically was a 1972 computer simulation study conducted by Ted Harvey. The study used survey data from 992 high school students to create a computer simulation, which rated imaginary “individuals” based on political attitudes and then added another “individual” into an “interaction”; researchers then observed how the two individuals changed as a result of their interaction (Harvey 588). Harvey concluded, “interacting individuals do tend to exert mutual influence on each others’ salient attitudes about politics” (591). This study, while a good indicator of the importance of peer group influence on young people, examines only attitudes and not activity, which is the aspect of this issue that I hope to uncover in my research.

Hypothesis:

In looking at my own interactions with my peers, I am led to believe that peer pressure to participate politically is a very real phenomenon. With a friend as politically active as me, none of my friends would even think of not voting in an election. By constantly talking about issues of political significance as well as my own participation, I am thus motivating my friends to participate. Previous research has already determined a strong relationship between parents and political participation, but I believe that friends play an even greater part in the process.

As mentioned earlier, research on peer pressure among teenagers has generally focused on issues such as peer pressure to drink or use drugs. In those situations, teenagers have been much more affected by the actions of their peers than the advice of their parents, which is why so much emphasis is placed on protecting young people from peer pressure. It is therefore reasonable, in my opinion, to assume that in matters of political participation, young people are also more strongly influenced by their friends than their parents.

Data:

The data on which these analyses are based were collected in the Tufts University 2007 Civic and Political Attitudes of Young People Study. To conduct the survey, researchers created a random sample 1,000 Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. Respondents were randomly selected from individuals in the Americans Community Study, conducted by the Census Bureau. Within the sample of 1,000 individuals, 500 respondents were college students and 500 were not. Respondents were asked a lengthy series of questions regarding their political and civic engagement levels, as well as their feelings about those issues.

I chose to use this survey for several reasons. First, this survey is one of the very few which ask respondents about their interactions with friends at all. While several surveys take parental influence and parental demographics (such as education) into account, interaction with friends is a variable that almost nobody has considered examining in surveys of young people. Additionally, the Tufts survey provides a large, representative sample of young people, a group not generally surveyed alone. I feel as

though these data best suit my needs, as the survey focuses solely on young people *and* asks respondents about their interactions with friends.

For my research, I used two independent variables: the first asked respondents how frequently they engage in discussions about politics or social issues with friends, the second asked how often they have those discussions with their parents. For my dependent variables, I examined a variety of measures of political engagement. These measures included the respondent's history of voting, registration status, as well as several measures of less widely practiced activities, such as donating to a campaign, displaying a yard sign, or boycotting a company.

Results:

When discussing political participation, the activity most commonly noted is voting behavior. In looking at the voting patterns among respondents based on frequency of discussion, it seems that both political or social discussion with friends and parents are major motivators for young people to vote, and as I predicted, discussions with friends are even more of a predictor than are discussions with parents. Tables A and B present the relationship between these two variables. In Table A, we see that as the frequency of discussions with friends increases from never to every day, the likelihood of respondents to vote rises dramatically, with a percentage increase of over twenty-five percent. In Table B, on the other hand, the increasing frequency of discussions with parents has a much smaller effect on the respondent's propensity to vote, with a mere nine percent change as discussions increase from never to every day. In terms of voting, friends clearly exert much more of an influence on young people than do their parents.

Table A: History of voting and frequency of political or social discussions with friends

		Frequency of discussions with friends*				
Ever voted?		Never	Several times/month	Several times/week	Every day	Total
	Yes	42.5%	55.8%	63.7%	68.0%	57.4%
	No	57.5%	44.3%	36.3%	32.0%	42.6%
	Total	214 100.0%	294 100.0%	281 100.0%	181 100.0%	970 100.0%

*How often do you discuss political or social issues with your friends?

**Have you ever voted?

Table B: History of voting and frequency of political or social discussions with parents

		Frequency of discussions with parents*				
Ever voted?		Never	Several times/month	Several times/week	Every day	Total
	Yes	46.4%	63.8%	60.3%	54.9%	57.4%
	No	43.6%	36.2%	39.7%	45.1%	42.6%
	Total	267 100.0%	395 100.0%	219 100.0%	91 100.0%	972 100.0%

*How often do you discuss political or social issues with your family?

**Have you ever voted?

Tables C and D present similar results. Registering to vote is a complicated process—especially for very mobile young people—that is often easily overcome with the encouragement of others. For this reason, it is not surprising that those who have political discussions more frequently are more likely to be registered to vote. The most striking number here is the whopping ninety percent of individuals who discuss with their friends every day being registered to vote. In 2004, the Census Bureau reported that just 51.5 percent of Americans between the ages of eighteen to twenty-four were registered to vote, and just 65.9 percent of all Americans of voting age (“Voting and Registration in

the Election of November 2004”). In a nation where so few young people are registered to vote, the ninety percent figure in Table C is astounding.

Additionally, similar to the trends observed in voting patterns, discussions with friends exerted more of an influence on young people than did discussions with parents. As portrayed in Table C, those respondents who never discuss politics or social issues with friends were thirty-two percent less likely to be registered to vote. To the contrary, in Table B we can see that those who never discussed with their parents were just fifteen percent less likely to be registered to vote than those who discussed with their parents every day.

Table C. Registration and frequency of political or social discussions with friends

		Frequency of discussions with friends				
Registered?		Never	Several times/month	Several times/year	Every day	Total
	Yes	57.8%	75.9%	82.0%	89.8%	76.3%
	No	42.2%	24.1%	18.0%	10.2%	23.7%
	Total	204 100.0%	286 100.0%	272 100.0%	176 100.0%	938 100.0%

*How often do you discuss political or social issues with your friends?

**Are you registered to vote?

Table D. Registration and frequency of political or social discussions with friends

		Frequency of discussions with parents				
Registered?		Never	Several times/month	Several times/week	Every day	Total
	Yes	66.3%	81.3%	77.6%	80.9%	76.3%
	No	33.7%	18.7%	22.4%	19.1%	23.7%
	Total	255 100.0%	380 100.0%	214 100.0%	89 100.0%	938 100.0%

*How often do you discuss political or social issues with your family?

**Are you registered to vote?

Registering to vote and voting are two of the easiest and least time-consuming avenues for political participation. Other routes of participation, on the other hand, are much more difficult and are thus less widely practiced. In analyzing the effect of discussion on the likelihood of young people performing these more effortful activities, I again found that discussion is a strong motivating factor for young people. Take political campaign work, a cause in which few Americans ever take part. Tables E and F compare political or social discussion frequency with the number of hours worked for a political campaign. In looking at the data, it is somewhat hard to see a pattern because eighty percent of respondents did no campaign work at all. However, it is clear that the more frequently an individual discusses, the more likely it is that he or she will work for a campaign.

Table E: Working for a campaign and political or social discussions with friends

		Frequency of discussions with friends				
Hours worked for campaign		Never	Several times/month	Several times/week	Every day	Total
	None	95.8%	86.9%	76.0%	57.0%	80.1%
	10 or less	1.9%	6.9%	11.6%	19.6%	9.5%
	11-25	2.3%	2.4%	6.9%	12.8%	5.6%
	26-60	0.0%	2.8%	1.1%	3.4%	1.8%
	60-120	0.0%	0.0%	2.9%	2.2%	1.3%
	120+	0.0%	1.0%	1.5%	5.0%	1.7%
	Total	213 100.0%	289 100%	275 100.0%	179 100.0%	956 100.0%

* How often do you discuss political or social issues with your friends?

**How many hours were you involved with [working or volunteering for a political campaign] in the past twelve months?

Table F: Working for a campaign and political or social discussions with parents

		Frequency of discussions with parents				
Hours worked for campaign		Never	Several times/month	Several times/week	Every day	Total
	None	92.1%	82.3%	66.8%	67.4%	80.1%
	10 or less	3.4%	6.9%	11.6%	19.6%	9.5%
	11-25	2.3%	2.4%	6.9%	12.8%	5.6%
	26-60	0.0%	2.8%	1.1%	3.4%	1.8%
	60-120	0.0%	0.0%	2.9%	2.2%	1.3%
	120+	0.0%	1.0%	1.5%	5.0%	1.7%
	Total	213 100.0%	289 100%	275 100.0%	179 100.0%	956 100.0%

* How often do you discuss political or social issues with your parents?

**How many hours were you involved with [working or volunteering for a political campaign] in the past twelve months?

Despite this positive relationship, the data do not show that discussions with friends are more influential than discussions with parents. In looking at comparisons with other more difficult political activities, including making campaign donations, contacting public officials, attending demonstrations, and boycotting certain products, I found similar results (these tables are not displayed). In all of these activities, discussion had a positive effect on the likelihood of the respondent participating in that activity, but discussions with friends did not seem to have more influence than discussions with parents in any of these cases.

Discussion:

The results reported here undoubtedly support the notion that having political discussions with friends is a predictor of political participation. Whether friends serve as a stronger influence than parents remains to be seen. For the more run-of-the-mill forms

of political engagement, voting and registering to vote, friends clearly have a much larger influence than parents. While the more uncommon forms of participation are certainly motivated by political discussion, “peer pressure” seems to be no more of an influence than parental. In my opinion, the reason for this divergence rests with the fact that the individuals who do choose to engage in those more uncommon activities do not need extra motivation from their friends in addition to what their parents have already given them. An individual who is motivated to perform a political activity above and beyond registering to vote and voting is probably having discussions, but does not need any added pressure from his or her friends. Thus, peer influence may only be more important in some instances, but in a society where only about half of the citizens vote, that deserves ample attention.

In addition to my findings regarding the effect of discussion on political participation, it would also be interesting to look at the effect of discussion on the civic engagement of young people. While no research has been done dealing with this issue, my interactions with my peers at Tufts have also triggered my belief that a similar relationship to the one that I found with political participation exists in the civic realm. Beginning in the fall of 2007, the Think Outside the Bottle organization began gaining strength among students at Tufts. The mission of the organization is to expose the harmful effects of bottled water production as well as the dishonesty of the bottled water industry. Several of my peers are extremely involved with this project, and have taken to convincing my friends and me to “think outside the bottle.” In doing so, they have motivated me, an avid bottled water drinker, to limit my consumption. Not only have they convinced me of the environmental costs; I have become almost embarrassed to be

seen drinking bottled water at Tufts. The effect of this peer pressure on the Tufts community has allowed the group to expand to levels that I do not think it would have reached had discussions between friends not been a factor.

Additionally, my hypothesis that discussions with friends are a stronger motivator than discussions with parents still holds true with the case of bottled water. For years, adults have been telling me to avoid bottled water and instead choose tap water; that's what they drank back then, after all. It was not until my friends became involved with the cause, though, that I finally started to take notice of the issue and feel like I should to change. As I said earlier, I have done no empirical research about this issue; I merely wonder whether other young people share my feelings.

While the conclusions I have presented should not be downplayed, one major flaw ought to be corrected in future research. Previous studies on social interaction and political participation included controls for factors other than social interaction that most likely affect participation. These factors include socioeconomic status, education, race, and other demographic categories. Accounting for these variables in my research would add legitimacy as well as confidence that peer influence does play as large of a role in determining political participation as I observed.

Despite these blemish, the results of this study provide support for methods of encouraging political participation by increasing social interaction. Seeing that interaction with friends plays an even larger role than interaction with parents in improving political participation levels, we should begin to take measures to encourage political discussions among young people. In my opinion, the approach that would best achieve this aim is through the implementation of civics classes in middle schools, high

schools, as well as colleges and universities. By promoting political discussions in the classroom, students are more likely to take those conversations out of the classroom and into their everyday interactions. Once young people are talking about politics, the political process might not seem so distant and hard to understand. In turn, young people will more readily choose to participate in elections and the political process. In order to finally bring young people up-to-speed in the realm of political participation, both parents and educators must play a role in promoting political discussions among young people and their peers. If a simple conversation is all it takes, changing the political behavior of young people might not be so difficult after all.

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