

# **Parental Influences on the Political Ideologies of Young People**

Rob Seiden

PS115: Public Opinion and Survey Research

Rob Seiden

PS115: Public Opinion & Survey Research

Professor Portney

Final Paper

One of the most critical influences of the civic and political engagement of young people is the involvement of their parents in these activities. People who are exposed to civic activism in their home from an early age are certainly more likely to maintain a strong communal footprint later in life than those who have never had this experience.

While the overall civic and political activity of young people can be substantially attributed to rituals passed down by their parents, I believe that among these politically active individuals there is a major distinction in the ideologies that they hold. In my personal experience I have found that virtually all of my college aged peers who hold conservative political viewpoints were raised in a decidedly conservative household. My liberal peers on the other hand seem to have come from a more diverse political background, some from liberal households and others from conservative households. Through the implementation and study of a nationwide survey of young people, I hope to provide substantial evidence to support this assertion.

The central research questions at the crux of my proposition and subsequent analysis is first whether liberal ideology is more readily learned than conservative ideology from agents of political socialization other than the family, and secondly, whether there is a difference in the power of the family as an agent of political socialization as a result of that family's specific political ideology. Political socialization, or "the process by which individuals acquire their political beliefs and attitudes" is a heavily researched area of political science (ThisNation). The four commonly identified

central agents of political socialization include the family, schools, peers, and mass media (Sociology Central). While each of these influences exerts a powerful force on the individual, none is more pivotal than the family. The purpose of this study is then first to explore whether or not there is in fact a difference in the influence of the family as an agent of political socialization based on specific ideology, and then secondly to attempt to locate some of the initial causes for this imbalance.

I propose that a young adult who identifies him or herself as politically conservative is more likely to have inherited his or her political views from the family than a liberal young adult. This variation in transfer of political ideology from parent to child is an important and fascinating interaction for a variety of reasons. At face value, it is significant to analyze this ideological conveyance in order to determine whether or not there are any predictable trends that dictate whether certain ideologies are more likely to be transferred from parent to child than others. This trend can later be utilized to anticipate the evolution of political thought into and across the next generation of Americans. Additionally, once these trends have been identified, we can explore and strive to understand their causes. The cause of these variations is somewhat beyond the scope of this particular study but the door will be opened for further examination into the future. Ultimately, there is much insight into American political culture and efficiency of the family as an agent of political socialization to be gained from this study.

I hypothesize that young people (ages 18-24) who identify themselves as politically conservative are substantially more likely to have been raised in a conservative household than young people who identify themselves as politically liberal were to have been raised in a liberal household. In other words, significantly more young people who were raised in a conservative household have since reversed their political ideology than

young people who were raised in a liberal household have reversed theirs. For the sake of this survey it is assumed that, as prior research has confirmed, children widely initially assume the political ideologies of their parents. In accordance with this hypothesis, the major pattern that I expect to find upon analysis of the survey data is an extremely high correlation of young people of conservative ideology to those who have been raised in a conservative household, and a much less substantial correlation of young people of liberal ideology to those who have been raised in a liberal household. This anticipated result would support my theory that young people who consider themselves politically conservative have overall obtained a larger percentage of their political socialization from within the home than young people who consider themselves politically liberal.

The two essential variables that I must isolate to determine the validity of my claim are both the individual political ideology of the respondents and the political ideology of their parents. The independent variable is the political ideology of the respondents themselves while the dependent variable is household/parental political ideology. The examination of the interaction and correlation between these two variables will provide me with the information necessary to determine the accuracy of my hypothesis.

Additionally, survey questions that identify the independent variable of political party affiliation as compared to the dependent variable of household/parental political ideology will provide further statistical support to my hypothesis.

There are several questions included in the “2007 Civic and Political Attitudes of Young People” questionnaire that will address the variables and collect the necessary data for my analysis. Questions pertaining to my independent variable include [polorient] “When it comes to most political issues, do you think of yourself as a liberal,

moderate, or conservative?”, and [pid] “[Of what political party] do you consider yourself?” which establishes political party affiliation. The question pertaining directly to my dependent variable is [polenviron] “How would you describe the dominant political environment of the household where you grew up?”

My hypothesis is aimed directly towards young people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, the same sample population selected for the 2007 Civic Engagement Survey. This age group was chosen deliberately in order to assist in isolating possible additional variables that could cloud the value of the survey data. A sample of young people ages eighteen to twenty-four assures that while any parental influence would by this point in a person’s life have been already experienced, the person also has had a chance to be effected by a variety of “outside” influences such as school and peers and to formulate his or her own political opinions. Also, the respondent is not yet old enough to have concerns such as workplace politics or be financially dependent on the government as in welfare programs, either of which would involuntarily shift the respondent’s political views. While it is possible that the young person surveyed has accumulated a number of student loans, this fact should not significantly skew his or her political ideology.

For the 2007 Civic and Political Attitudes of Young People Study a survey sample of 500 full-time college students and 500 people aged 18 to 24 who are not full-time college students and not full-time military was chosen from the entire American population. Since my hypothesis is designed to sample all “young people” 18 to 24 years old, this overall population and sample will accurately reach the appropriate respondents.

In the 2007 survey, a random sample of 1,000 respondents aged eighteen to twenty-four were chosen from the American Community Study conducted by the United

States Bureau of the Census. This sample was then stratified to ensure that half of the survey responses came from college students while the other half came from non-students.

As the only sample selection in which there can be 100 percent accuracy is a survey of an entire population and considering that this task would be impossible or at least entirely impractical while dealing with large populations, a sampling method must be used to narrow down the massive initial number of possible respondents. For the national survey of “young people”, random sampling has been chosen as the appropriate avenue.

Random sampling is the most common form of probability sampling. In a random sample, every member of the target population has an equal non-zero chance of being included in the survey. The accuracy of this method is based upon the assumption that if every member of a population has an equal chance of inclusion, the sample selection can be extrapolated to represent the population as a whole. A weakness of random sampling however is that in order to choose a sample that is representative of the entire population the sample size must be extremely large (Amazing Space). Otherwise, minority groups could possibly be underrepresented.

Among active panelists, the within-panel response rate for those invited to the survey was 31.2%. This number is extremely typical of the rates seen by survey providers who have access to a large pool of registered respondents. A survey organized by a group without this existing respondent base would likely see substantially lower return rates, possibly consisting of only several percentage points. This average rate would vary depending on the method of survey used (mail, E-Mail, phone, etc.). The relatively high response rate of the 2007 Civic Engagement survey ensures that the

respondents will overall have a high level of interest in the survey and the more engaged overall that the respondents of this survey are, the more accurate the data as it pertains to my hypothesis will be.

Figure 1			polorient Political orientation					Total	
			0 I don't know	1 Liberal	2 Moderate leaning liberal	3 Moderate	4 Moderate leaning conservative		5 Conservative
polenviron Political environment growing up	0 I don't know	Count	95	22	16	20	6	5	164
		% within polorient Political orientation	77.2%	8.0%	12.3%	11.9%	6.7%	2.4%	16.5%
	1 Liberal	Count	0	129	8	8	0	3	148
		% within polorient Political orientation	.0%	46.9%	6.2%	4.8%	.0%	1.4%	14.9%
	2 Moderate leaning liberal	Count	2	50	60	16	4	11	143
		% within polorient Political orientation	1.6%	18.2%	46.2%	9.5%	4.4%	5.3%	14.4%
	3 Moderate	Count	17	34	21	83	13	16	184
		% within polorient Political orientation	13.8%	12.4%	16.2%	49.4%	14.4%	7.7%	18.5%
	4 Moderate leaning conservative	Count	3	28	17	29	39	28	144
		% within polorient Political orientation	2.4%	10.2%	13.1%	17.3%	43.3%	13.5%	14.5%
	5 Conservative	Count	6	12	8	12	28	145	211
		% within polorient Political orientation	4.9%	4.4%	6.2%	7.1%	31.1%	69.7%	21.2%
Total	Count	123	275	130	168	90	208	994	
	% within polorient Political orientation	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

The results from the 2007 survey were extremely compelling and the relationship between the variables that I outlined in my hypothesis turned out to be accurate and true. Figure 1 represents a bivariate crosstabulation between the independent variable, “political orientation”, and the dependent variable, “political environment growing up”. This chart shows that young conservatives were substantially more likely to have grown up in a household of their current ideology than liberals. 69.7% of all conservatives surveyed said that they had been raised in a conservative household. Only 46.9% of liberals surveyed – less than half – stated that they had been raised in a liberal household. This difference highlights the fact that young conservatives are more likely to have attained their political views from the family than liberals.

Unsurprisingly, the political ideology of a young person’s parents was the most likely ideology for that young person to inherit. What is surprising however is that in every political orientation from liberal through moderate leaning conservative, parental/household ideology was only an accurate predictor of the young person’s

political ideology approximately 50% of the time. The large remaining 50% of young people scattered to various points across the political spectrum. Even so, no individual ideology could rival the substantial 50% share of young people that sustained their parents' ideology. Notably, with a 69.7% rate of continuance, young conservatives are substantially more likely – at least 20.3% – to have retained their parental/household political ideology than a person of any other ideology.

Figure 2			pid 3 point party ID			Total
			1 Independent	2 Republican	3 Democrat	
polenviron Political environment growing up	0 I don't know	Count	47	19	43	109
		% within pid 3 point party ID	16.0%	8.3%	12.2%	12.5%
	1 Liberal	Count	39	6	91	136
		% within pid 3 point party ID	13.3%	2.6%	25.9%	15.6%
	2 Moderate leaning liberal	Count	53	9	69	131
		% within pid 3 point party ID	18.1%	3.9%	19.6%	15.0%
	3 Moderate	Count	62	23	83	168
		% within pid 3 point party ID	21.2%	10.0%	23.6%	19.2%
	4 Moderate leaning conservative	Count	42	44	44	130
		% within pid 3 point party ID	14.3%	19.2%	12.5%	14.9%
	5 Conservative	Count	50	128	22	200
		% within pid 3 point party ID	17.1%	55.9%	6.3%	22.9%
Total		Count	293	229	352	874
		% within pid 3 point party ID	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Figure 2 represents a bivariate crosstabulation between the independent variable, “Party ID”, and the dependent variable, “political environment growing up”. While both the correlation between the Republican Party and conservatism and the correlation between the Democratic Party and liberalism are certainly not exact, there is undoubtedly a strong principle association between them. For the purposes of this study these associations will be considered the most accurate manifestation of the ideologies in practical political application. Figure 2 provides evidence that young Republicans are immensely more likely to have been raised in a conservative or moderate leaning conservative household than young Democrats were to have been raised in a liberal or

moderate leaning liberal household. Approximately 75.1% of Republicans surveyed had experienced a politically conservative youth while only 45.5% of Democrats surveyed had experienced a politically liberal youth.

Additionally, only 6.5% of young Republicans were raised in a liberal or moderately liberal household while 18.8% of young Democrats were raised in a conservative or moderately conservative household. This attests to the fact that more young people become liberal from a conservative background than conservative from a liberal background. Interestingly, a mere 10% of Republicans were raised in a moderate household with no substantial political leanings while 23.6% of Democrats were raised in the same type of household.

Figure 3			polenviron Political environment growing up					Total
			1 Liberal	2 Moderate leaning liberal	3 Moderate	4 Moderate leaning conservative	5 Conservative	
Political orientation	1 Liberal	Count % within polenviron Political environment growing up	129 87.2%	50 35.5%	34 20.4%	28 19.9%	12 5.9%	253 31.5%
	2 Moderate leaning liberal	Count % within polenviron Political environment growing up	8 5.4%	60 42.6%	21 12.6%	17 12.1%	8 3.9%	114 14.2%
	3 Moderate	Count % within polenviron Political environment growing up	8 5.4%	16 11.3%	83 49.7%	29 20.6%	12 5.9%	148 18.5%
	4 Moderate leaning conservative	Count % within polenviron Political environment growing up	0 .0%	4 2.8%	13 7.8%	39 27.7%	28 13.7%	84 10.5%
	5 Conservative	Count % within polenviron Political environment growing up	3 2.0%	11 7.8%	16 9.6%	28 19.9%	145 70.7%	203 25.3%
Total	Count % within polenviron Political environment growing up	148 100.0%	141 100.0%	167 100.0%	141 100.0%	205 100.0%	802 100.0%	

An inversion of the independent and dependent variables in this study reveals additional significant information and trends. Figure 3 is a bivariate crosstabulation between the independent variable, “political environment growing up”, and the dependent variable, “political orientation”. This chart shows that 12.8% of young people who grew up in a liberal household have since moved further to the right of the ideological spectrum (towards conservatism). 29.3% of young people who grew up in a conservative

household have since moved further to the left of the ideological spectrum (towards liberalism).

Figure 4			polenviron Political environment growing up					Total	
			0 I don't know	1 Liberal	2 Moderate leaning liberal	3 Moderate	4 Moderate leaning conservative		5 Conservative
pid 3 point party ID	1 Independent	Count	47	39	53	62	42	50	293
		% within polenviron Political environment growing up	43.1%	28.7%	40.5%	36.9%	32.3%	25.0%	33.5%
	2 Republican	Count	19	6	9	23	44	128	229
		% within polenviron Political environment growing up	17.4%	4.4%	6.9%	13.7%	33.8%	64.0%	26.2%
	3 Democrat	Count	43	91	69	83	44	22	352
		% within polenviron Political environment growing up	39.4%	66.9%	52.7%	49.4%	33.8%	11.0%	40.3%
Total		Count	109	136	131	168	130	200	874
		% within polenviron Political environment growing up	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Figure 4 exhibits a similar variable inversion and highlights a similar trend. Figure 4 is a bivariate crosstabulation between the independent variable, “political environment growing up”, and the dependent variable, “Party ID”. The results of this chart reveal that while 4.4% of young people who were raised in liberal households have since altered their ideologies to the opposite side of the political spectrum and become Republicans, 11% of young people who were raised in conservative households have done the reverse and become Democrats. This disparity represents a 150% difference in political conversion in favor of the Democrats.

All together, charts “Figure 1” through “Figure 4” each provide statistical and factual support to my original hypothesis. All of the patterns that I expected to find did indeed exist in the data and a few additional surprises were also made apparent.

Figure 1 identifies that young conservatives are more likely to have attained their political views from the family than young liberals. Accordingly, across American society there must be some outside factors pulling young adults in a liberal direction. These factors could be evidence that the American education system promotes liberalism at the societal level or that education in itself increase the likelihood of liberalism.

Regardless of the cause, this data forms the statistical backbone of my hypothesis as the numbers confirm that young conservatives are more likely to have been conservative since their youth than young liberals are to have been liberal since their youth.

Figure 1 also highlights the fact that conservatism is more likely to pass from the family onto a young person than any other ideology on the political spectrum. This trend reveals that conservative ideology has a particularly strong hold on young people. Political strategists can leverage this fact to generate future Republicans if they so desire by gearing their campaigning towards family men and women. The survey data proves that conservatives will be better generated from within the family than from outside factors, at least among young people. Ultimately Republicans can direct their efforts to support conservative families which will eventually generate a higher rate of conservative voters.

Figure 2 asserts that young Republicans are substantially more likely than young Democrats to have been raised in a household of similar ideology. Inversely, substantially fewer young Republicans were raised in a liberal or moderately liberal household than young Democrats who were raised in a conservative or moderately conservative household. This reveals that young people are much more commonly drawn towards liberal ideology than conservative ideology and it is uncommon for a young person who comes from a liberal background to now be a conservative or Republican.

Figure 3 provides further evidence of the trend towards liberalism among young people and provides a statistical measure of the extent of this flow. While 12.8% of young people who grew up in a liberal household have since moved further to the right of the ideological spectrum (towards conservatism), 29.3% of young people who grew up in a conservative household have since moved further to the left of the ideological spectrum

(towards liberalism). This is a substantial difference and fully supports my hypothesis that a young conservative is substantially less likely to have generated this political leaning as the result of a change in viewpoint that is in disagreement with his or her parental/household views than a young liberal is to do the same.

Figure 4 carries this same theory over from abstract ideology into actualized political party affiliation. The results highlight the fact that more young Democrats were raised in conservative households than young Republicans were raised in liberal households. This trend is a manifestation of commonly understood American political culture that young people tend to be more liberal and subsequently more Democratic than older Americans. Unfortunately the severe lack of young people heading to the polls on Election Day mitigates the relevance of this fact as a useful political tool for Democratic strategists.

The 2007 Civic and Political Attitudes of Young People Study and the survey questions contained within relate specifically to my hypothesis and provide substantial evidence that my hypothesis is in fact accurate. The questions did work just as I had hoped although several factors were not accounted for at the time of the drafting of question wordings that may influence the precision of my data. Question [polenviron] “How would you describe the dominant political environment of the household where you grew up?” does not specify the time frame in which the parents’ ideology should be assessed. The question asks for an “overall” response but if a respondent’s household ideology was liberal for his early youth and then switched direction later in his youth closer to the present time, the value of the question in later assessing conveyance of political ideology from parents to children would be lessened. My hypothesis depends on understanding the political leanings of the respondent’s parents throughout his or her

entire adolescence and any ideological variation during this time period would be a disturbance.

Additionally, question [pid], which inquires as to the respondent's political party affiliation, fails to acknowledge that a person may align him or herself with a party that contradicts his or her ideological values simply past on personal preference. For example if a generally conservative respondent does not approve of President George W. Bush, he may temporarily align himself with the Democrats although this does not reflect his true beliefs. The same holds true for the inverse. This possibility should not however have had any substantial impact on my data analysis as the number of respondents who exemplify this scenario to those who do not is assuredly minute.

I initially expected the survey data to reflect an extremely high correlation between young people of conservative ideology and young people who were raised by conservative parents, and a much less significant correlation between young people of liberal ideology and young people who have been raised by liberal parents. Despite these few obstacles, the data did ultimately reflect these tendencies.

The population and sample selection was quite appropriate for the evaluation of my hypothesis but could have been improved by an increase in the sheer sample size. A larger pool of respondents would have greatly increased the accuracy of my data as in some response categories there were as few as two or even zero respondents. When discussing a national issue such as this, it would certainly be advisable to sample as large a percentage of the overall population as is possible. Nonetheless, I feel that the data accurately represents trends that would only be strengthened by a larger sample size.

The 2007 Survey was implemented via an online system, which inherently comes with a certain level of bias. Internet access is still not quite affordable enough for all

American socioeconomic classes to be evenly represented as would be more likely on a phone survey. This strategy unfortunately comes with an inherent level of bias towards the more well off socioeconomic classes. In years to come this bias will likely be minimized as computer technology and Internet fees become increasingly more affordable. For now however the Internet still represents a quite viable survey choice as its ease of implementation and data collection makes a survey like this one a possibility where it might have otherwise been out of reach. The tradeoffs of an Internet survey were inconsequential in this instance compared to the long list of benefits.

The results collected from the 2007 Civic and Political Attitudes of Young People Study support the hypothesis that young people who consider themselves politically conservative have overall obtained a larger percentage of their political socialization from within the home than young people who consider themselves politically liberal. This difference can be attributed to a variety of factors including education, religion, mass media, and other forces of political socialization. The identification and confirmation of this trend sheds great insight into modern American political culture and the significance of the family as a unit of political socialization.

Works Cited

"Agents of Socialization." Sociology Central. 4 Dec. 2007

<<http://www.sociologycentral.com/text/soc1/agentsocialization.pdf>>.

"Political Socialization." ThisNation.Com. 3 Dec. 2007

<<http://www.thisnation.com/socialization.html>>.

"Q&A: Statistics", Amazing Space. Online. 23 Oct 2007. <[http://amazing-](http://amazing-space.stsci.edu/resources/qa/statistics.php.p=Astronomy+basics@,eds,astronomy-basics.php&a=,eds)

[space.stsci.edu/resources/qa/statistics.php.p=Astronomy+basics@,eds,astronomy-basics.php&a=,eds](http://amazing-space.stsci.edu/resources/qa/statistics.php.p=Astronomy+basics@,eds,astronomy-basics.php&a=,eds)>.

"Systematic Sampling." Coventry University. 10 Jun 2004. Online. 23 Oct

2007. <<http://www.mis.coventry.ac.uk/~nhunt/meths/system.html>>.