Political Socialization and the Creation of Political Beliefs

Inquire: How Do People Acquire their Political Beliefs?

Overview

Why does someone vote Democrat? Why is Texas a red (Republican) state? Why do people of some ethnicities or races tend to vote more for one party than another?

Where do we acquire our political beliefs? The acquisition of a political belief system is called, “political socialization.” What factors go into the political socialization of an individual or a group?

These are important questions, as they allow us to answer what actions certain people or groups may take politically. Altogether, they may shed some insight into why we vote the way we vote.

Big Question: What factors are most important in shaping political thoughts?

Watch: LBJ, Mrs. Hart’s Class, and Political Socialization

Hi - my name is Jay Reynolds, and I am one of the people helping to put together this course and book on the American government. The idea of political socialization, the way we form our political beliefs, is something I clearly see in my own life. One example is so clear, I want to share it here as an illustration.

In 1964, I was eight years old, in the 3rd grade, and living in Austin, Texas where I grew up. There was a presidential election in November 1964 - LBJ was the incumbent, having become President a year earlier when JFK was assassinated. He was running against Republican Barry Goldwater of Arizona. LBJ was a very popular Texas politician and he won Texas with over 63% of the popular vote - one of the largest margins of victory in Texas for any presidential candidate.

As the election drew close, my 3rd grade teacher, Mrs. Hart, had an “election” in class one day. We had discussed the election and the two candidates in class, and so she simply said, “OK, class, let’s vote. Everyone for President Johnson, raise your hand …” and almost every hand in the class went up. Mrs. Hart put the number on the board under Johnson's name. “Now,” said Mrs. Hart, “Everyone for Mr. Goldwater …”

Only one hand went up in the entire room - mine. I was the only child in the room who voted for Goldwater. Certainly at eight years old I had no idea of the issues or the ramifications for supporting one party or the other. I had no understanding of the politics involved. However, I did know my Mom and Dad were voting for Goldwater. So, naturally, I voted for Goldwater.
The 1964 election was a landslide for LBJ, but it was historic for several reasons. Civil rights issues drove several southern states to vote for Goldwater - the first time they had voted Republican since Reconstruction. Also, LBJ's campaign produced and aired “The Daisy Ad,” one of the most famous attack ads of all time. Further, Goldwater's losing campaign was important because, while he failed, his campaign was the genesis of a new conservative movement.

But, for me? I raised my hand as voted as my parents voted - just like so many of us do. Political socialization are the factors that create our political behavior, and family is at the top of the list!

Read: Public Opinion - What, Where, and How

What is Public Opinion?

Public opinion is a collection of popular views about something: perhaps a person, a local or national event, or a new idea. For example, polling companies call Americans at random each day to ask whether they approve or disapprove of the way the president is guiding the economy.

But, where do people’s opinions come from? Most citizens base their political opinions on their beliefs and their attitudes, both of which begin to form in childhood. Beliefs are closely held ideas that support our values and expectations about life and politics. For example, the idea that we are all entitled to equality, liberty, freedom, and privacy is a belief most people in the United States share. We may acquire this belief by growing up in the United States or by having come from a country that did not afford these valued principles to its citizens.

Personal beliefs also affect attitudes. Our attitudes represent the preferences we form based on our life experiences and values. A person who has suffered racism or bigotry may have a skeptical attitude toward the actions of authority figures, for example.

Over time, our beliefs and our attitudes about people, events, and ideas will become a set of norms, or accepted ideas, about what we may feel should happen in our society or what is right for the government to do in a given situation. In this way, attitudes and beliefs form the foundation for opinions.

Political Socialization

At the same time that our beliefs and attitudes are forming during childhood, we are also being socialized; that is, we are learning from many information sources about the society and community in which we live, and how we are to behave in it. Political socialization is the process by which we are trained to understand and join a country’s political world, and, like most forms of socialization, it starts when we are very young. For instance, we may first become aware of politics by watching a parent or guardian vote, by hearing presidents and candidates speak on television or the Internet, or by seeing adults honor the American flag at an event. As socialization continues, we are introduced to basic political information in school. We recite the Pledge of Allegiance and learn about the founding fathers, the Constitution, the two major political parties, the three branches of government, and the economic system.

By the time we complete school, we have usually acquired the information necessary to form political views and become contributing members of the political system. A young man may realize he prefers the Democratic Party because it supports his views on social programs and education, whereas a young woman may decide she wants to vote for the Republican Party because its platform echoes her beliefs about economic growth and family values. Accounting for the process of socialization is central to our study of politics.
understanding of public opinion, because the beliefs we acquire early in life are unlikely to change dramatically as we grow older.

Our political ideology, made up of the attitudes and beliefs that help shape our opinions on political theory and policy, is rooted in who we are as individuals. Our ideology may change subtly as we grow older and are introduced to new circumstances or new information, but our underlying beliefs and attitudes are unlikely to change very much, unless we experience events that profoundly affect us. For example, family members of 9/11 victims became more Republican and more political following the 2001 terrorist attacks. Similarly, young adults who attended political protest rallies in the 1960s and 1970s were more likely to participate in politics in general than their peers who had not protested.

If enough beliefs or attitudes are shattered by an event, such as an economic catastrophe or a threat to personal safety, ideology shifts may affect the way we vote. During the 1920s, the Republican Party controlled the House of Representatives and the Senate, sometimes by wide margins. After the stock market collapsed and the nation slid into the Great Depression, many citizens abandoned the Republican Party. In 1932, voters overwhelmingly chose Democratic candidates, for both the presidency and Congress. The Democratic Party gained registered members and the Republican Party lost members.

In this instance, citizens’ beliefs shifted enough to switch control over Congress from one party to the other, and Democrats continued to hold Congress for several decades. Another sea change occurred in Congress in the 1994 elections, when the Republican Party took control of both the House and the Senate for the first time in over 40 years.

Today, polling agencies have noticed that citizens’ beliefs have become far more polarized, or widely opposed, over the last decade. To track this polarization, Pew Research conducted a study of Republican and Democratic respondents over a 25 year span. Every few years, Pew would poll respondents, asking them whether they agreed or disagreed with statements. These statements are referred to as “value questions” or “value statements,” because they measure what the respondent values. Examples of statements include: “Government regulation of business usually does more harm than good;” "Labor unions are necessary to protect the working person;" and “Society should ensure all have equal opportunity to succeed."

After comparing such answers for 25 years, Pew Research found that Republican and Democratic respondents are increasingly answering these questions very differently. This is especially true for questions about the government and politics. In 1987, 58 percent of Democrats and 60 percent of Republicans agreed with the statement that the government controlled too much of our daily lives. In 2012, 47 percent of Democrats and 77 percent of Republicans agreed with that statement. This is an example of political polarization, in which members of one party see government from a very different perspective than the members of the other party.

Political scientists noted polarization, and other changes in beliefs, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, including an increase in the level of trust in government and a new willingness to limit liberties for groups or citizens who “[did] not fit into the dominant cultural type.”

According to some scholars, these shifts led partisanship to become more polarized than in previous decades, as more citizens began thinking of themselves as conservative or liberal rather than moderate. Some believe 9/11 caused a number of citizens to become more conservative overall, although it is hard to judge whether such a shift will be permanent.
Reflect: Who Would You Vote For?

Poll
If you know, how did your parents, or other important adults in your life, vote in the last presidential election?

- Republican
- Democrat
- Other: ______________________

If you voted, or if you could have voted, how would you have voted in the last presidential election?

- Republican
- Democrat
- Other: ______________________

Expand: What Factors Shape Political Attitudes?

Discover
A common political culture by no means suggests that all Americans think alike. Some are conservative and tend to vote Republican. Some are liberal and tend to vote Democrat. Some have more negative or more positive attitudes toward public officials than others. These attitudes determine how Americans participate, whom they vote for, and what political parties they support. Many factors — including family, gender, religion, race and ethnicity, and region — all contribute to American political attitudes and behavior.

Family
Despite family disagreements and generation gaps, children tend to grow up and vote the way their parents do. Families are generally the first, and often the most enduring, influence on young people’s developing political opinions. As people grow older, other influences challenge the family influence, and naturally attitudes tend to diverge from those of one’s parents. However, the influence still remains. Logically, the more politically active your family is, the more likely you are to hold the same beliefs. Just look at the Bush family! This relationship is less strong on specific issues — like school prayer, abortion, and welfare programs — but they all hold the same general political views.

Gender
Political scientists have noticed some major shifts in gender influence since women first got the vote in 1920. Through the 1950s, women tended to vote for Republicans. By the 1960s, women began to shift their loyalty to the Democrats.

In recent elections, women have voted strongly Democratic. Why? Most observers believe that women think the Democrats more strongly support “women's issues,” such as equal work, equal pay, and equal legal rights. Polls indicate that many issues about which women feel most strongly, such as education and health care, are more favorably addressed by the Democratic Party. Does this voting behavior mean that women are more likely to vote female candidates into office? The evidence doesn't provide any clear evidence that they do.
Religion
Older studies, dating to the late 1940s, generally show that Jewish voters are more likely to support Democrats than Catholic or Protestant voters. Catholics tend to be more liberal on economic issues (such as minimum wage and taxes) than they are on social issues (such as abortion and divorce.) More recent studies have focused on how affiliates of the “Religious Right” differ in their political attitudes and behavior from everyone else. The Religious Right tends to support more conservative candidates for public office, and they are more likely to contribute to the Republican Party than to the Democratic Party. This tendency is more clearly associated with social issues such as school prayer, abortion, and divorce than with economic issues or foreign affairs.

Race and Ethnicity
As a general rule, African Americans have been the most loyal Democrats, compared to any other identifiable group, for the past half-century. Some experts believe that this loyalty is weakening, but recent elections have confirmed the strong tendency for black Americans to vote Democratic. Latinos, as a whole, have a tendency to vote Democratic, but the relationship is not as strong as it is for black voters. To further complicate matters, various Latino groups have very different voting patterns. For example, Cuban Americans overall have a strong tendency to vote Republican and Mexican Americans have an equally strong tendency to vote Democratic. Some studies indicate that Asian Americans tend to vote conservative, but there is still a lack of concrete evidence to prove this trend.

Region
As a general rule, people on either coast tend to be more liberal than those in the middle of the country. However, there are many exceptions to this tendency. Many Californians are “archconservatives,” as are a number of New Englanders. The Southeast presents some special problems with the general rule, partly because their political affiliations have been changing over the past 50 years or so. The “solid south” — the tendency to vote for Democrats, no matter what — began to erode during the 1950s, so that both Republicans and Democrats are competitive across the South today. However, recent presidential elections indicate a general support for Republicans in the South.

Tracking trends in political culture is very tricky. There is no “typical American.” These factors, and others, are merely indicators of tendencies. Within these tendencies there are many exceptions. In the end, Americans are influenced by a wide array of factors when they cast their secret votes on Election Day.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings
Public Opinion: Crash Course Government and Politics #33
- A Crash Course video covering public opinion in politics
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJLDgb8m3K0&t=123s

Political Ideology: Crash Course Government and Politics #35
- A Crash Course video covering political ideologies in the U.S. and why people hold certain beliefs
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_k_k-bHigM&t=29s

Political Socialization
Lesson Glossary

archconservatives: a person who is extremely averse to change and strongly adheres to traditional values

Religious Right: religiously motivated right-wing voters or conservatives

solid south: the tendency in the South to vote for Democrats, no matter what, that began to erode during the 1950s

public opinion: a collection of popular views on a topic, person, or event

political socialization: the process of learning the norms and practices of a political system through others and societal institutions

political ideology: views of the world that reflect an individual’s attitudes and beliefs

political polarization: when members of one party see the government from a very different perspective than members of the other party

political culture: the widely shared beliefs, values, and norms that define the relationship between citizens and the government, and citizens to one another, that is unique to every country

Check Your Knowledge

1. Most of our political opinions are formed from our beliefs and education, which were formed in childhood.
   A. True
   B. False

2. Political stratification is how we are trained to understand and join a country’s political world.
   A. True
   B. False

3. ________________ is the process by which we learn the norms and practices of a political system through societal institutions and other people.
   A. Political socialization
   B. Public opinion
   C. Political stratification
   D. Political culture

Answer Key:
1. B  2. B  3. A

Citations

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