



ASA NEWS

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EMBARGOED until Thursday, November 19, at 12:00 a.m. EST

More Than Half of 'Children' Misperceive or Reject Parents' Political Party Affiliations

WASHINGTON, DC, November 17, 2015 — A new study finds that more than half of all “children” in the U.S. either misperceive or reject their parents’ political party affiliations.

“This finding turns the conventional wisdom, as well as years of political socialization research, on its head,” said Christopher Ojeda, the first author of the study and a postdoctoral scholar in the Stanford Center for American Democracy at Stanford University. “The public, the media, and the academic world have long believed that children learn their political values, such as which party to support or which policy positions to endorse, from their parents. In this view, learning occurs mostly because parents impose their values on their children. This belief depends on the assumption that children know and choose to adopt their parents’ values.”

Titled, “Accounting for the Child in the Transmission of Party Identification,” the study, which appears in the December issue of the *American Sociological Review* (ASR), relies on data from two family-based surveys that contain self-reported measures of party identification for both parents and children, children’s perceptions of their parents’ party affiliations, and measures of the parent-child relationship. The first, the Health and Lifestyles Study (HLS), is a 1988 survey of 8,636 families in the U.S. The second is the 2006 and 2008 waves of the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY), which focus on 3,356 families. Children in the NLSY data range in age from 18 to 37, and the children in the HLS data range in age from 16 to 82.

In the NLSY sample, which looks at child-mother relationships, 51.2 percent of children misperceived or rejected their mothers’ political party identification. The results for the HLS sample, which considered child-mother and child-father relationships, were similar. In that sample, 53.5 percent of children misperceived or rejected their mothers’ political party affiliation, and 54.2 percent did so for their fathers’ identification.

“Both datasets survey children in adolescence, young adulthood, and adulthood, thereby capturing the full range of the life course,” said Peter K. Hatemi, the corresponding author of the ASR study and a professor of political science at Pennsylvania State University.

The authors also found that more discussion about politics in the home increases the probability that children correctly identify their parents’ party affiliations, but does not increase the likelihood that they will adopt those affiliations. “We were not surprised by this finding,” Ojeda said. “Parent-child communication is a vehicle for delivering information, but it does not always deliver agreement. As we all know, political discussions can sometimes lead to consensus and they can sometimes lead to conflict.”

In contrast, the social support children receive from their parents has no effect on whether children know their parents’ party identifications, but it does make it more likely that children will adopt the affiliations they ascribe to their parents.

“Social support does not necessarily lead to more accurate information about someone,” Hatemi said. “But social support does give us a sense of belonging and it leads us to imitate those we are close with. So, we would expect that social support leads children to adopt what they perceive their parents’ party identifications to be.”

Overall, Ojeda said the study shows that much of what researchers have interpreted about parent-child similarities when it comes to party identification should be updated. "Prior to our work, existing research concluded that when parents and children were similar, parents passed on their political values," he said. "We demonstrate that this view is problematic because it treats children who accurately perceive and adopt their parents' party affiliations the same as children who misperceive and reject their parents' party identifications. In both cases, the children have the same party affiliation as their parents. However, in order for true transmission to occur, children must actually know their parents' political values and then choose to adopt them."

The study highlights the fact that children have a say in determining their own political identities, Hatemi said. "They are not simply carbon copies of their parents," he said.

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The research article described above is available by request for members of the media. For a copy of the full study, contact Daniel Fowler, ASA Media Relations Manager, at (202) 527-7885 or pubinfo@asanet.org.