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Pitfalls along the Path toward a Developmental Science of Politics

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As a political scientist, I find the Patterson et al. (2019) monograph, *Toward a Developmental Science of Politics,* of considerable interest. Their review of earlier research is exhaustive, bringing together systemwide, familial, community, and individual explanations for political development. Their new data on children's views of the 2016 presidential election adds to our understanding of how children perceive politics. I am pleased that those who understand child development best have tackled the political development domain.

Political-socialization research has come a long way. I earlier dipped into it, back in what the authors label the "heyday" of such research, when I explored male-female differences and similarities in political participation (see reviews in Bourque and Grossholtz, 1974; Welch, 1977). At the time, political-socialization researchers tended to overgeneralize small gender differences in what were certainly crude indicators of childhood interest in politics. One example was a conclusion that boys were more interested in politics since they were more interested in war, a conclusion based on a sample of 21 children during World War II (see discussion in Greenstein, 1967). Since then, happily, research on children's political development has come a long way, expanding its sophistication, breadth, and depth, as Patterson and her colleagues describe.

Nonetheless, the exhaustive nature of the Patterson et al. review spotlights the weaknesses in the political development literature. (I include what political scientists often call "political socialization" in that generalization.) First, it seems logical that "development" should be a dynamic process; yet most research is cross sectional. Myriad indicators are found to be related to children's political viewpoints. That is interesting, but where is the "development," the change, the movement? Too often, that's not part of what we study. Age is used as a stand-in for development, and yet it is a far from perfect substitution, as developmental experts know more than anyone. Of course, there are good reasons for the lack of change data, especially the difficulties of collecting longitudinal samples with meaningful developmental indicators.

One interesting use of dynamic change models was Plutzer's (2002) work on how young people transition from not voting to voting. His use of longitudinal data in a theoretically motivated way provides a useful example of how development can be modeled and tested by using an appropriate data set and employing sophisticated theories and methods. He finds that parental

political activity and their higher levels of education promote their children's initial voting turnout. Over time, the impact of parental partisanship kicks in to promote turnout, along with the impact of church attendance, marriage, political knowledge, and continuing political engagement.

A second limitation is that any model of developmental trajectories needs to include biological roots, which interact with contextual factors in complex ways. Political scientists have only relatively recently, and rather belatedly, discovered that political affiliations and beliefs have biological as well as structural roots (cf Hatemi et al., 2010; Hibbing, Smith, and Hibbing, 2013; Verhulst, Eaves, & Hatemi, 2012). Genetic and physiological sources of traits such as sensitivity to perceptions of threat help determine our basic ideology, which in turn has implications for many specific political views and behaviors (see, for an overview, Hibbing et al., 2013) as well as for personality traits. For example, liberals and conservatives react differently when shown photos of disgusting (dirty toilets, maggots on food) or threatening (plane crash, knife attack) photos, but not when shown neutral (a building, a chair) or happy (babies, kittens) ones (Ahn et al., 2014). The authors barely allude to that.

Third, assessing children's political development is complex, in part because so many in the adult population do not model political interest, participation, and knowledge very well. Can we expect high levels of political knowledge and interest among children when adult knowledge is so scanty? For example, about 40 percent don't know who the vice president is. Knowledge about Judge Judy is higher than about the Supreme Court. Many other examples are provided by the authors and can easily be found in mass media reports (see, for example, Cillizza, 2017; Strauss, 2016).

Civics education is one possible remedy that the authors address. We often assume that education itself does and should promote political learning and democratic citizenship. If this is so, we might expect that increases in educational levels should be accompanied by greater political knowledge and activity. Yet, this has not been true, at least in the U.S. Despite large increases in the average years of education during the last half of the twentieth century, political knowledge and activity did not increase. Plutzer's research, discussed above, shows no impact of high school GPA or activities on voting turnout, but does find a significant impact of college attendance on initial voting. However, this impact does not have longer term effects.

Beyond increases in years of education, some think that education specifically about citizenship should help increase political activity and knowledge. The American Political Science Association, the major disciplinary organization of political scientists, has long been concerned about the limited amount of civics education in the schools and the lack of knowledge about the political process among students (see their web page https://www.apsanet.org/RESOURCES/For-Faculty/Civic-Education-amp-Engagement#Books for a current discussion and a list of their recent publications).

So perhaps there are some kinds of education that are more and less effective. The authors provide a good overview of the contemporary research on the impact of schools on political knowledge and activity, and highlight some pedagogies and curricula that seem to promote political interest and engagement. In general, though, civics education in the lower grades, as well as educational practices themselves, promote passivity, being a good citizen, and going

along with those in authority. The mandated recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance is but one of many examples. Even in high schools, there is little to help students understand that disagreement and debate are natural and useful in democracies and that being a good citizen requires participation. For good reason, perhaps, teachers do not want to engage students in discussion of controversial topics often because of fear of community repercussions. The implicit message is that such discussions are inappropriate. Students may learn some of the mechanics of our system (e.g., how a bill becomes a law or how the electoral college works) without understanding the implications of such mechanics for a democracy. Opportunities for meaningful participation in political discussion and debate are limited.

The authors offer three recommendations for how the political development process might produce more informed and active citizens: high quality civic education for children, promotion of fair treatment of women, and lowering the voting age. I agree that each is worth exploring, though, probably like the authors themselves, am pessimistic about the progress that can realistically be made. Improving civic education is a hardy perennial recommendation that never seems to flower, perhaps both because of disagreement about what improvement would look like and the difficulties of scaling promising experiments. Significant progress in political opportunities for women is certainly being made, though misogyny remains deeply embedded in parts of the electorate that particularly manifests itself in presidential campaigns. In terms of lowering the voting age, in the current U.S. climate, the interests that are promoting the diminution of political involvement rather than its expansion are dominant in Washington, D.C. and in many states.

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