



Developmental Roots of Political Engagement

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October 2006

Published as C.A. Flanagan "Developmental roots of political engagement," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 36(2), 257-261 (2003).

Network on Transitions to Adulthood Research Network Working Paper

These working papers have been posted to stimulate research and policy analysis on issues related to the transition to adulthood. The papers have not been formally reviewed by members of the Network. The papers reflect the views of the authors and do not represent the views of the other members of the network nor of the MacArthur Foundation. This work has been supported by the Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Grant No. 00-00-65719-HCD.

Developmental Roots of Political Engagement

Interest in the developmental antecedents of adults' political and civic engagement is once again on the research agenda of the social sciences. Attention to this subject tends to increase when there are concerns about political stability and the younger generation's commitment to the political system. Such concerns motivated two earlier eras of research. The first of these, conducted in the wake of World War II, focused on the developmental foundations of diffuse support and how that support was transferred across generations. The second, in the late 1960s, concerned youth activism and how younger generations grapple with salient political issues as they come of age and contribute to political change. Taken together, these bodies of work help us conceptualize politics from the point of view of stability and permanence but also as a contestation of ideas and a process that contributes to social change. However, neither of these earlier eras of research took as their starting point the everyday lives of young people or conceived of the formation of political views and civic values as integrally related to other aspects of human development (such as the formation of identity, values, and social ties to others).

The renewed interest in the developmental roots of civic engagement has been motivated out of concerns that younger generations today may be less "civically engaged" or at least less inclined toward conventional political participation than were older generations. Questions now on the table include, "What happens in childhood and adolescence that nurtures an ethic of civic participation?" and "What are the practices of formative institutions that develop democratic dispositions including traits such as tolerance and trust?" In this paper I argue two points. First, that the social incorporation of younger generations into the body politic and the development of habits that sustain the system are rooted in young people's experiences of membership in the institutions of their communities and the exercise of rights and fulfillment of responsibilities in those institutions. Second, that the evolving values and world views of youth are a fruitful arena for understanding the kinds of people they are becoming and the kind of polity they will create as younger generations replace their elders in society.

Experiences of Membership in Organizations and Institutions

A host of retrospective studies with adults have shown that engagement in extracurricular and community-based organizations and activities predicts civic engagement in adulthood, with sports as a possible exception to this rule (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Youniss, McLellan, and Yates 1997). Although there has been little research on the mechanisms that would explain this connection, inferences based on the youth development literature suggest that several processes are likely at work.

First, community-based organizations and institutions provide pro-social reference groups where youth learn what it means to belong to a community and to matter to fellow members of that community (Eccles and Gootman 2001). When young people feel connected to community institutions they are less likely to get involved in antisocial activity or substance abuse (Resnick et al. 1997). It is important to note that these organizations play more than a diversionary function. In fact, it is not merely the number of groups a young person belongs to but the opportunities for bonding and connecting with others, for developing a sense of collective identity that those groups provide, which both keeps young people out of trouble and sets them on a path towards life-long civic participation. Longitudinal analyses of eighth graders from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS) revealed that extensive *connections* to others through family, religious institutions, and extracurricular activities were significantly related to political and civic involvement in young adulthood (Smith 1999).

Affective ties to the community develop when young people are treated as assets (rather than problems) who make valuable contributions to their communities (see Villarruel, Perkins, Borden, and Keith forthcoming). According to political socialization theory, affective ties, emotional connections which develop before one fully understands the system, are a foundation

for system support (Easton and Dennis 1969). However, political socialization theorists argue that affection for the system is based on the young person's belief in the benevolence of system leaders. In contrast, I contend that the ties that bind young people to the polity are based on participating in local community groups where they feel respected and where their voice is taken seriously in community decision-making.

By participating in local community organizations and institutions, by exercising rights and fulfilling obligations in those groups, young people become aware that their own goals are realized when the group's goals are achieved. In this way, youth come to see themselves as members of the public who share an interest in the common good. The practices of institutions which enable young people to experience a sense of the collective are important precursors to civic engagement. Cross-national studies have shown that perceptions of peer solidarity at school are positively related to adolescents' commitments to public-interest goals such as serving their country, reclaiming the environment, and helping less fortunate members of their communities (Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csapo, and Sheblanova 1998). Experiences of group solidarity are important because, with few exceptions, political goals are achieved by collective action. People are more likely to act on behalf of the group when they identify with the group (Klandermans, Sabucedo, Rodriguez, and de Weerd 2002).

Besides affective ties and feelings of community solidarity, a second reason that participation in community organizations is related to adult civic engagement is that the practices of these organizations shape the dispositions of young people and peers are a major socializing force in these interactions. Studies of social trust illustrate this point. In research with adults, the relationship between trust and civic engagement has been described as a "virtuous circle," i.e., reciprocal and reinforcing (Putnam 2000). For a young person, trust is a by-product of participating in organizations where members hold one another accountable for fulfilling the group's goals. In contrast to families where acceptance is typically assumed, trust among one's peers is earned by working together toward goals defined in common, by working through differences that could otherwise divide the group. There is a reciprocity between trustworthiness and trust in these group practices. Youth earn the trust of peers by contributing to a group project, by showing up for events, and by fulfilling responsibilities that are the mark of a loyal member of the organization. It is through fulfilling such obligations to others that an individual comes to think of him/herself as a trustworthy person. At the same time, if other members of the organization also are accountable and contribute to the group rather than look out only for themselves, participants develop social trust or a positive view of humanity as fair, helpful, and trustworthy (Flanagan, Gill, and Gally forthcoming).

Non-formal community-based youth organizations (CBYOs) offer a particularly rich opportunity for youth to be exposed to perspectives unlike their own and to learn how to negotiate and reach a compromise. Unlike families or schools where relationships of power tend to be asymmetrical, the structure of CBYOs is more egalitarian, the status of the members roughly equal. This means that young people can gain experience in admitting and resolving differences of opinion in an atmosphere where the consequences of disagreeing are, at least in principle, the same for everyone in the group. To achieve collective goals, individual members typically have to forego some personal preferences. In the give-and-take of group negotiations, young people learn that people (fellow citizens and members of the public) have different perspectives. They learn that (as in community affairs and in politics) resolving differences of opinion may require bargaining and compromise (Flanagan, forthcoming b).

Walzer (1989, 211) defined a citizen as one who ". . . . is most simply, a *member* of a political community, entitled to whatever *prerogatives* and encumbered with whatever *responsibilities* are attached to membership." It is through the exercise of rights and fulfillment of obligations in community organizations that younger generations come to appreciate what citizenship entails.

Community-based institutions are an important context where an ethic of civic participation can be nurtured in younger generations. It is in these institutions that youth can overcome a preoccupation with the self and identify with a group and its goals. When they feel a “sense of place” in their communities, i.e., of inclusion and respect from fellow community members, younger generations come to see their interests realized in the interests of the whole. By extension, as adults, contributing to the community isn’t an option. It is simply the standard one lives by (Flanagan forthcoming a).

VALUES AND POLITICS IN ADOLESCENCE: A CASE FOR CONCORDANCE

Values figured prominently in the two earlier eras of research noted in the introduction to this paper. Political socialization theorists argued that political stability depended on younger generations enculturating to a shared system of values and generational studies were motivated in part out of concerns that young activists were rebelling against their parents’ values. Contrary to popular opinion at the time, empirical studies found that those who were active in the civil rights and antiwar movements were acting on values such as tolerance and compassion that had been emphasized in their families (Dunham and Bengston 1992).

Values have also figured prominently in our own program of work entitled “Young People’s Interpretations of the ‘Social Contract.’” In this paper, I will draw from two empirical studies in that program of work. The first was a seven-nation comparative study of more than 5,000 12–18 year olds. Data were collected from youth in four nations in Central/Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Russia) during these nations’ transitions from command to market economies and from one-party to multi-party rule. We compared the views of youth in these nations with those of their peers in three democratic nations which had capitalist economies in place but which varied on the state’s role in the provision of social welfare (Australia, Sweden, and the United States). The second study concerned the development of political views in 12–18 year olds from African-, Arab-, Latino-, and European-American backgrounds. Of particular interest in this latter study was how political views developed in concert with the identity process and what role family and personal values played in this process.

In these “social contract” studies we have argued that, in the course of growing up, children construct an understanding of their social order, of the principles that make it “work,” and of how the principles of that order work for people “like them.” We have studied values at the macro level with respect to how the principles of a social order guide the practices of developmental settings. At a more micro level, we have studied the correlation between personal values and the political views of adolescents.

Values, Widespread Beliefs, and Diffuse Support for the Political System

We have expanded on Easton’s (1953) famous description of politics as the “authoritative allocation of values” (p. 129), referring to the power of political ideas and policies to shape widespread beliefs. The role of formative institutions is particularly important in this regard. Because system principles guide the goals and practices of institutions, children’s social theories will, over time, incorporate the norms emphasized in these environments. Thus, it is in these mediating institutions (families, schools, community-based organizations) that the principles of the social contract are interpreted and renegotiated. Collectively, the choices of people in these settings give meaning to the broader tenets that bind citizens of the polity together (Flanagan and Campbell forthcoming). In addition, as mediating institutions, families, schools, faith-, and community-based organizations not only stabilize the system but reinterpret the foundational principles of that system within the context of new historical conditions. In the process, new generations contribute to social change. Two examples drawn from our seven-nation study illustrate these points. The first illustrates how everyday practices reinforce the principles of

particular social orders, the second how variation in those practices is associated with social change.

We asked the adolescents in our seven-nation comparative project about their normative beliefs (their views about what is normal and "right") concerning children doing household chores —i.e., at what age children should be expected to do chores, what they learn from doing them, and whether they should be paid an allowance for doing household chores. Across countries, youth felt that children should be doing some chores around the age of seven or eight. But, disproportionately, youth in the capitalist nations felt that children should be paid for doing their chores. In fact, 10% of the participants from the United States even endorsed a piece work principle, i.e., that children should be paid for each job they did. In contrast, adolescents from the four countries that were just beginning to adopt market principles generally felt that children should not be paid for doing household chores. Although giving children spending money and expecting them to do chores were both common practices in those countries, the two were not typically linked as normative child-rearing practices. That is, children had household responsibilities and their parents gave them spending money but their allowance was not contingent on doing their chores. In contrast, the link between wages and work was more normative in the capitalist nations. The perceived function of doing household chores varied as well. Americans and Australians said that by doing chores children would learn to be responsible for themselves whereas youth from nations with a strong social welfare contract said that doing chores taught children responsibility for the group (Bowes, Flanagan, and Taylor 1999).

The second example focuses on differences in the views of youth from well-educated and less-educated families in the Central/Eastern European nations. In past work, we have argued that young people don't simply grow up as individuals but as members of groups (i.e., as females, African-Americans, from families that are well educated, wealthy, or poor) and that their normative beliefs reflect their perceptions of how the social contract works for people "like them." For example, in the socialist era in Central/Eastern Europe, youth from less-educated families had benefited from the seamless connection between secondary schools and industries through which they were guaranteed jobs upon graduation. As their nations were in the throes of transition to market economies, these youth wanted schools to continue such paternalistic practices which provided security for their social group. In contrast, youth from better-educated families were more likely to benefit under a new system where there were market returns for investment in education. Thus, this group was more likely to endorse changes in schools toward increased student autonomy and competition. The benefits of this new "social contract" were more likely to accrue to people "like them" (Flanagan and Campbell forthcoming).

In summary, the principles of a social order are instantiated in the practices of mediating institutions such as families and schools. Diffuse support for system principles develops as children come to adopt as normal and right those practices to which they are accustomed. In this way, mediating institutions contribute to political stability. However, those institutions also contribute to change as their practices adapt to changing political and economic realities.

Values and Political Views

At a more micro level, we have investigated adolescents' personal values and those that are espoused in their families as a basis for their political views. Values are standards we use to judge our own behavior and are also a basis for organizing our political views and positions on public policies (Jennings 1991). Values figure prominently in the adolescent years when identity is focal. As youth grapple with a direction for their lives, they make assessments of who they are and what they stand for including where they stand on social and political issues.

Families clearly have one of the most profound influences on value formation. In our work, we have conceived of family values as a reflection of parents' worldview and have paid particular attention to the way that parents admonish their children to relate to "other people." We have employed two value clusters which reflect an ethic of social responsibility vs. one of social

vigilance. The former emphasizes compassion and trust and the latter rugged individualism and guardedness about others getting an upper hand. As would be expected, these family values are correlated with the degree to which adolescents endorse self-interest or public-interest as core personal values.

These value clusters broadly reflect two core value orientations in American culture, i.e., communalism with an emphasis on egalitarian and humanitarian principles on the one hand and individualism emphasizing self-reliance, personal freedom, and material achievements on the other. These orientations are rooted in American historical traditions of liberalism and civic republicanism with the former emphasizing individual freedom and rights and the latter ideals of equality, social justice, and concern for others (Sandel 1996).

We have related these family and personal value clusters to a wide range of political views and civic behaviors. For example, we asked more than 400 12–18 year olds to "pretend that someone from another country came to the United States and asked you to explain some things to them. How would you explain poverty; unemployment; and homelessness to them?" Their open-ended responses for each problem were coded for references to individual or systemic/situational causes. We found that adolescents' attributions were logically consistent with their personal goals and with the values espoused in their families (Flanagan and Tucker 1999). Compared to their peers who felt that these problems had systemic or situational roots, those who held individuals accountable (i.e., the unemployed don't try to find jobs; people are poor because they didn't work hard in school) were strongly committed to materialist goals and heard messages from their families about the importance of self-reliance and social vigilance. They were also more likely to believe that all Americans enjoyed equal opportunity and that government support programs encouraged dependency in people. In contrast, youth endorsing societal or situational causes for these problems (i.e., they don't have jobs because the company where they worked closed down; maybe they're homeless because their house burned down) had life goals that transcended self-interest and reported that compassion and social responsibility were espoused in their families.

In a second study, middle- and high-school students were asked to "describe in your own words what democracy means to you." Cluster analyses revealed three emphases in the personal meaning they attached to democracy: Individual rights and freedom (30%); representative democracy (40%); and civic equality (30%). There were significant differences in the familial and personal values of the individual rights and civic equality groups. Compared to the group who focused on rights, the civic equality group had lower materialist and higher public-interest goals and lived in families with higher levels of social trust and environmental responsibility.

Others have found similar patterns between the value priorities of individuals and their endorsement of democratic principles. For example, in a study of undergraduate students Katz and Hass (1988) found a positive relationship between entrepreneurial values and the inclination to stereotype African-Americans as a group with little initiative or motivation to achieve. In contrast, undergraduates who endorsed humanitarian-egalitarian values were more likely to believe that there were systemic or structural reasons for the disadvantaged position of African-Americans. In their studies of German youth, Boehnke, Hagan, and Hefler (1998) found that those who endorsed a value they referred to as hierarchic self interest (a combined commitment to competitiveness, materialism, and individualism) were more likely to be xenophobic and to harbor anti-foreigner sentiments. In fact, analyses of trend data among American youth suggests that materialist values may be related to misanthropic views of humanity in general. High school students who endorsed such values were less likely to believe that "most people" were fair, helpful, and trustworthy (Rahn and Transue 1998).

CONCLUSIONS

In recent years, there has been progress on several fronts which, taken together, hold promise for moving the agenda of youth civic engagement forward. First is a shift in the field of adolescence, away from a "youth at risk" to a "youth as asset" paradigm. Youth civic engagement is a logical extension of this framework which focuses on the contributions adolescents make to local communities rather than the risks they pose for them (Flanagan and Van Horn forthcoming). Diffuse support for the system is maintained when youth are integrated into the lives of their communities via membership in local institutions where they can exercise rights and fulfill obligations that are collectively defined by the group. By insisting that young people should have a voice in community decisions, the "assets" approach reframes political socialization from an emphasis on preparing for the future when youth are old enough to vote to enabling adolescents to act as citizens in the present.

In the earlier era of political socialization research, a vertical transmission model predominated. The image in that model was one in which the "system" was handed down, relatively intact, from one generation to the next. In contrast, contemporary models emphasize the active role of young people in contributing to their communities and the importance of peers as well as adults as socializing agents. By actively engaging in community affairs, younger generations reinterpret the principles of the social contract—the ties that bind citizens to their polity—for their generation. In so doing, they create both stability and change in the system. The importance of peers as socializing agents in this process cannot be underestimated. In community-based institutions, peers work together deciding on projects defined in common and holding one another accountable to collective goals. In the process, young people develop democratic dispositions including traits of trust, tolerance, and an ethic of civic participation. They also learn what it means to identify with the common good. In other words, they develop a collective identity.

Identity is focal during the adolescent and young adult years and the development of an ideology is part and parcel of this process. As young people reflect on who they are and the future to which they aspire, they will inevitably think about what they stand for and take stock of their societies. Political views as a language for explaining social problems are taking shape in these years and a concordance between personal values and political views is emerging. If, as political scientists have noted, the political views and actions of adults are motivated out of a concern for what they believe is morally right or socially just, not only on what benefits them personally (Jennings 1991), then the values with which children identify are an important source for understanding their emerging political views.

The Importance of a Developmental Perspective

To their credit, scholars in the early political socialization and generational schools looked at the formative years as a period when political views and attitudes were germinating. What was missing in their theories and what is needed now is a firm rooting of political development in the social realities and relations of the formative years. What does such a developmental perspective add to the conversation?

First, it enlarges the meaning of politics from a focus on the electoral arena to one that includes civic and community life. It makes focal those opportunities young people have to experience membership in local groups, organizations, and institutions and to practice the skills that citizens in a democracy need. Second, this perspective would emphasize that political development is not captured as a snapshot in time or in a discrete act but rather is revealed as a meaningful sequence or pattern of activities over time.

There is little about social development that is firmly fixed in adolescence and politics is no exception. But much of relevance to politics—experiences of inclusion and exclusion; stereotypes and prejudice; membership in and identification with a group; rights and accountability; self-determination and respect for difference; status and power; trust and loyalty; and of fairness in process and justice in outcome—are themes that resonate with adolescents. It is

incumbent on those of us who focus on this period of life to be more clever in listening to what young people have to say and in hearing the political insights in their conversations.

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