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The Influence of Family Political Discussion on Youth Civic Development: Which Parent Qualities Matter?

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Evidence suggesting that the growth of civic roots in adolescence may be crucial to the long-term development of citizenship[1] has stimulated research into factors that might influence civic development during this time. One interesting finding to emerge from that exploration is the apparent importance of *discussion* to the development of civic competence. Adolescents who discuss politics and current events with their parents, peers, or teachers tend to score higher than other youth[2] on measures of civic behaviors, attitudes, and skills. They develop higher levels of political knowledge, show greater intention to vote in the future, and do better on a range of civic outcomes from petitioning and boycotting to raising money for charities and participating in community meetings (Torney-Purta et al. 2001; Andolina et al. 2003).

The effects of such discussions may be particularly beneficial for youth when the discussions involve their parents.

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Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995), for instance, demonstrated that individuals who grow up in homes where they discussed current events with their parents and saw their parents participating in civic activities become, on average, more involved in political activities in adulthood than do other persons. Lake Snell Perry and Associates (2002) found in a study of young persons (age 15–25 years) that having parents who discussed politics with them during adolescence was the strongest parent-related predictor of several important civic measures including volunteering (33% versus 22% among other young persons) and registering to vote (75% versus 57% among other young persons age 18–24). In addition, Andolina et al. (2003) reported that young persons (age 18–25 years) who grew up in families where they regularly heard political discussion voted, volunteered, and were otherwise civically involved at higher rates than youth who did not experience this type of home environment.

These findings raise an interesting question: Which qualities, if any, make some parents more effective than others at discussing current events in ways that lead to better civic outcomes for their adolescent children? Do the personal characteristics parents bring to these discussions matter? Or is the act of discussion, by itself, the key element underlying the positive connection between family political discussion and civic outcomes in youth?

Research with high school students indicates that having some prior knowledge about the issue of interest is necessary to have high-quality discussions about current events in social studies classes (Hess 2004). In extending this logic to the family, we ask whether youth-parent discussions of current events may be more effective at enhancing youth civic development when parents have higher, versus lower, levels of knowledge about politics and government. However, researchers also report that the act of discussion creates new knowledge, which can promote the decision-making that leads to civic action (Barber 2003). Thus, it may be that the act of discussion is the more important link in the chain of events connecting family political discussion to youth civic development.

The present study explores these issues by taking advantage of the rich citizenship data gathered from adolescents and their parents by the U.S. Department of Education's National Household Education Survey (NHES) in 1996.[3] In addition to background, school, community, and civic-skill measures of adolescents, the NHES data set includes similar items for parents, as well as measures of parents' civic behaviors such as voting, doing community service, and participating in community organizations (Collins et al. 1997). The current study uses an NHES subsample of 3,662 high school students and their parents, weighted to represent the national population in terms of ethnicity, family income, and other factors.

The Research Design

Four measures were developed from the NHES items to represent civic outcomes in youth: monitoring national news, political knowledge, public communication skill (Could you write to a public official or speak at a public meeting?), and community service.[4] The first three measures were selected because they were found in preliminary analyses to predict voting, contributing money to a cause, and other political behaviors in adults.[5] The last measure, community service, was chosen as a direct measure of youth involvement in the community.

To evaluate parent characteristics, variables were developed to measure parents' civic skills, behaviors, knowledge, and attitudes, as well as background characteristics such as family income and ethnicity (Table 1).[6] The frequency of youth-parent political discussions, as reported by the youth,

Table 1
Correlates of civic outcomes in youth, grades 9–12

	News monitoring	Political knowledge	Public communication	Community service
YOUTH				
Background characteristics				
Male	0.112***	0.158***	−0.070**	−0.078***
School and community experiences				
Grade in school	−0.003	0.165***	0.060**	0.105***
Academic grades	0.049*	0.183***	0.004	0.040
Civics courses	0.076***	0.094***	−0.010	−0.023
Classroom communication skill	0.084***	−0.001	0.147***	0.091***
Participates in youth activities	0.052*	0.088***	0.062*	0.283***
Political attitudes				
Internal political efficacy	0.052*	0.177***	0.125***	0.056*
External political efficacy	0.019	−0.025	0.022	−0.017
PARENTS				
Background characteristics				
Family ethnicity				
Black	0.020	−0.077***	0.027	−0.033
Hispanic	0.024	−0.035	0.016	−0.029
Other non-White	0.030	−0.001	−0.007	−0.001
Family income	−0.004	0.013	−0.011	−0.004
Parent education	0.024	0.115***	0.011	0.028
Homeownership	0.019	0.000	−0.019	−0.016
Employment	0.008	−0.011	0.029	−0.027
Civic behaviors				
Member of community/prof. org.	−0.053*	−0.001	−0.011	0.068**
Attends religious services	0.023	0.004	−0.007	0.036
Voted in last 5 years	0.003	−0.003	−0.038	−0.008
Gave money to political cause	0.017	0.055**	0.008	−0.026
Time-based political activity	−0.017	0.003	0.038	0.012
Does community service	−0.038	−0.018	−0.004	0.044
Civic skills				
Public communication	−0.035	0.006	0.054*	−0.019
News monitoring	0.113***	0.003	0.037	−0.013
Civic knowledge and attitudes				
Political knowledge	−0.021	0.168***	−0.017	−0.005
Internal political efficacy	0.009	−0.047*	0.037	0.007
External political efficacy	−0.003	0.024	−0.029	−0.002
Parent-youth interaction				
Youth discusses politics with parents	0.347***	0.121***	0.105***	0.075***
Adjusted R^2	0.220	0.373	0.093	0.195

Note. NHES 1996. OLS regression (betas). Values are weighted. N = 3,779.

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

was measured on a 4-point scale ranging from a low of "hardly ever" to a high of "almost every day." A set of control variables was included in regression models to account for factors specific to the individual youth, such as gender, academic grades, the number of civics courses taken in school, and participation in organized youth activities in and outside of school.[7]

In the first step of analysis, we used OLS regression to determine which parent qualities predict the four youth civic outcomes. Given the results of earlier research, we expected that family politi-

cal discussion would be positively linked to youth political knowledge, news monitoring, and perhaps to other outcomes as well. Next, we used interaction analysis to answer the question asked in the title: Which parent qualities matter in regard to the influence of family political discussion on the civic development of youth? Finally, we looked at the results collectively to identify patterns that might provide additional insight about the mechanisms linking parent qualities, family political discussion, and positive civic outcomes in youth.

Important Parent Qualities

Results from the initial regressions support earlier findings that youth-parent political discussion has a strong and broad influence on a range of youth civic outcomes. Family political discussion weakly to strongly predicts all four of the outcome variables and is the strongest parental predictor for all but one of them (Table 1).[8] Youth who discuss politics more, versus less, frequently with their parents report higher levels of national news monitoring, political knowledge, public communication skill,

and community service. The findings also indicate that youth-parent political discussion may be particularly important for youth news monitoring. For this outcome, the effect size of the youth-parent discussion variable is three times larger than any other parent or youth predictor.

The finding that family political discussion is broadly linked to youth civic development conforms to cognitive developmental theory, which argues that young persons construct meaning and knowledge about the political world through social interaction—in this instance, with their parents (Torney-Purta 1992; 1995; Haste and Torney-Purta 1992). The give-and-take of family political discussion, the data suggest, provides opportunity for youth to construct their own political understanding from the civic raw materials at hand (e.g., political information, meanings, and so forth gleaned from parents, teachers, books, television, and other media).

In addition, the regression results identified other parent characteristics that are linked to youth civic development, including the parents' education, political knowledge, news monitoring, internal political efficacy, giving money to a political cause, and membership in community or professional organizations. Each of these measures was related to at least one of the four youth civic outcomes and was therefore tested for possible interaction with the youth-parent discussion variable.

Parent Qualities that Matter for Family Discussion

The interaction tests revealed one interaction—parent political knowledge and youth-parent political discussion interact in predicting the level of youth political knowledge.[9] Figure 1 shows that increases in the frequency of youth-parent political discussion are associated with greater increases in youth political knowledge when parents have high political knowledge (solid line) than when parents have low political knowledge (dotted line).[10] For example, the gain in youth political knowledge associated with frequent family political discussion (weekly or more) versus infrequent discussion (monthly or less) is more than two times greater when parents have

**Figure 1
Youth political knowledge**

Frequency of youth-parent political discussion
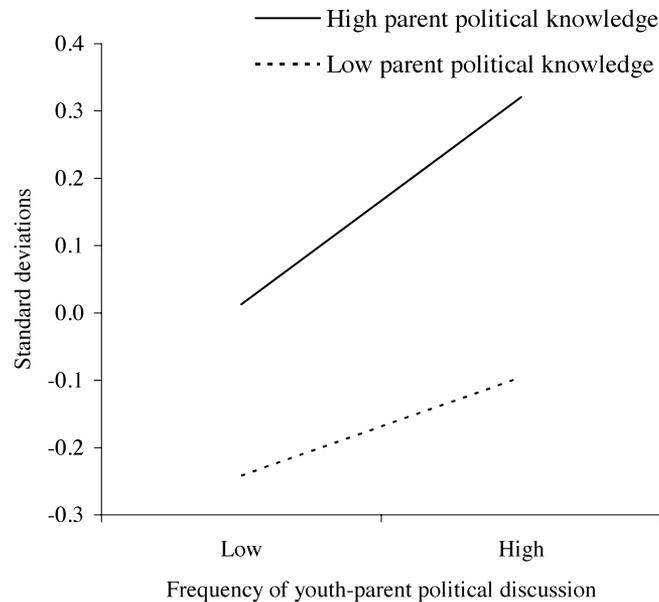
higher-than-average political knowledge than when parents have lower-than-average political knowledge. Previous research has found positive links between parent political knowledge and youth political knowledge and between family political discussion and other youth civic outcomes (e.g., Jennings and Niemi 1974). However, as best we can determine, a possible interaction between parent political knowledge and family political discussion in predicting youth political knowledge has not been reported before.

Although the mechanism of the interaction between parent political knowledge and family political discussion is not specified, the results suggest an interaction between two theories: cognitive developmental and political socialization. The latter theory views civic development as the passing of political knowledge, values, and behaviors from an older generation to a younger one (Dudley and Gitelson 2002; Flanagan and Sherrod 1998; Haste and Torney-Purta 1992; Jennings and Niemi 1981). Cognitive developmental theory, as outlined above, proposes that youth construct their own political understanding of the world. Both theories are supported in the present findings, which suggest that family political discussion allows parents to serve as an important source of political knowledge that youth can use in constructing their own political knowledge.

Further analyses, however, failed to yield interactions with family political

discussion for any other civic outcome apart from youth political knowledge. It follows that the act of discussion, itself, may be the key element when the youth civic outcome is news monitoring, public communication skill, or community service. Also, for these three outcomes, it may be that news media, public officials, and community organizations are, along with parents, important sources of the civic raw material that youth use in constructing their understanding of the political world.

Regression analysis is able to show important links between variables, but it does not indicate the direction of causality. In this study, we generally assume that parents develop their civic-related qualities before their children do, owing to the age differences between them, and that the direction of causality runs from parent to child. Causality can, however, flow in the opposite direction, as demonstrated by evaluations of the Kids Voting USA curriculum, which is taught during election years in several states (McDevitt and Kiousis 2004; Saphir and Chaffee 2002). These studies in four states found that students who participated in the intervention at school often initiated political discussions with their parents that led to enhanced civic outcomes for both youth and parents. In addition, other youth-level factors, such as youth news monitoring or participation in civics courses at school, might lead youth to family political discussions, as suggested by Comber (2006), rather than the reverse.

Are Parent Background Qualities Important?

The pattern of findings presented in Table 1 suggests that *who parents are* in terms of their background characteristics is less important for youth civic development than *what parents do with their adolescent children* and *what parents know* about politics and government. For three of the civic outcomes (news monitoring, public communication skill, and community service), none of the parent background measures (ethnicity, income, education, homeownership, and employment) was significant. For each of these outcomes, which involve the development of civic behaviors or skills, *what parents do with their children* (i.e., discuss politics and current events) is the strongest parental predictor.

The fourth youth civic outcome—political knowledge—differs qualitatively from the other three in that it involves, in part, the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next. In this case, *what parents know* about politics is the strongest parental predictor (Table 1). And, as the interaction analyses demonstrated, parents play an especially important role in the development of youth political knowledge when they function both as a source of political information (i.e., they have a high degree of political knowledge) and as a frequent participant in discussions that help youth fashion that information into their own political understanding.

In addition, the results suggest that parents' background characteristics do play a role when the outcome is youth civic knowledge (Table 1). Parent education—a measure of socioeconomic status—was positively associated with this outcome, a finding consistent with earlier research on youth political knowledge (Niemi and Junn 1998). Although some have argued that well-educated parents confer socioeconomic advantage to their children in the political arena (Gimpel, Lay, and Schuknecht 2003; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), these parents may also provide their children with access to additional sources of civic information such as books, magazines, newspapers, electronic media, and enhanced education from which to draw

in constructing their understanding of the political world.

The finding that being Black is negatively associated with youth civic knowledge (Table 1) may be linked to a historic lack of access to the civic resources described above. It might also be that this finding reflects the effects of a "youth bulge"—a cohort of youth age 16 to 25 that is relatively large compared with the adult population of a society. Hart et al. (2004) found that youth in communities with high youth/adult ratios scored lower on measures of political knowledge than did youth in communities with low youth/adult ratios. However, using a 1996 NHES subsample that overlaps the one employed in the current study, the researchers did not find any correlation (negative or positive) between Black ethnicity and youth political knowledge in a regression that included a youth-bulge measure. When the negative relationship between youth bulge and political knowledge was accounted for (controlled statistically), there was no negative link between Black ethnicity and political knowledge. Together, the results from that study and the current one suggest that Black communities may experience youth bulges that adversely affect youth political knowledge. They also suggest that the current study's findings—that parents are an important source of political discussion and knowledge—may extend to other adults

in the community as well. This interpretation, however, goes beyond the current data and thus remains for the moment in the realm of speculation.

Conclusion

Since at least the 1950s, social scientists have been debating how and to what extent parents influence the civic development of their children. The results presented here suggest that parents who take the time to talk with their adolescent children about the public affairs of the day can have a positive influence on the civic development of those youth. And in some instances, that influence is considerable.

The results also indicate that, yes, the qualities that parents bring to these family discussions do matter when the outcome is youth political knowledge. This finding is theoretically important because it sheds light on the mechanisms of civic development. The positive effects of family political discussion support the idea that youth construct their own political meaning. The interaction finding, in turn, indicates that this construction process is even more effective when youth have immediate access to a supply of civic raw material in the form of parent political knowledge. These theoretical findings will likely find application in settings beyond the family.

Notes

1. As early as the 1920s, Mannheim (1952) suggested that around the age of 17 years, individuals enter a crucial period of experimentation that leads to the creation of a new political generation. In the 1960s, Erikson (1968) described adolescence as the time when individuals develop an identity that helps guide their interactions with society later in life. Such ideas about a critical period for the development of civic roots are supported by research showing, for example, that involvement in organized youth activities during adolescence leads to participation in religious, community, and political organizations in adulthood (Beane et al. 1981; Hanks and Eckland 1978; Ladewig and Thomas 1987; Otto 1976; Verba et al. 1995; for a review, see Youniss, McLellan, and Yates 1997).

2. The term "youth" in this study is used interchangeably with "adolescence," which occurs during approximately the second decade of life (age 11–20 years).

3. NHES is a random digit-dial, computer-assisted telephone survey. In 1996, NHES was conducted in three successive interviews with household representatives (69.9%), parents (62.5%), and youth (53.4%). Response rates for parents and youth include the response rates for the prior interview/s. The data used in the current study are from "CD-ROM: National Household Education Surveys of 1991, 1993, 1995,

1996, and 1999: Data Files and Electronic Codebook" (NCES 2002-005) ordered from the U.S. Department of Education. The data can be downloaded from www.icpsr.umich.edu.

4. "Monitoring national news" measures how often youth attend to national news via print and broadcast media. "Political knowledge" indicates how many of five political-knowledge questions they answered correctly. "Public communication skill" is a 3-point scale (based on two yes/no questions) indicating how capable youth think they are of communicating their ideas in public. "Community service" reports how often they performed community service in the past school year (i.e., never, sporadically, regularly).

5. In preliminary analyses we used a weighted subsample of 1,313 adults (who also participated in the 1996 NHES but were not parents of the youth who were surveyed) to identify civic-involvement (CI) variables that correlated highly with political behaviors such as voting or contributing money to a political campaign. Most youth are barred by age, economic, and other restrictions from participating in many of these political activities, and the 1996 NHES did not assess such behaviors in its youth sample. However, because the survey did measure CI variables in both its adult and youth samples, we were able to use the CI variables linked to political behaviors in the adult sample as surrogate

measures of political behavior in the youth sample. This research approach is supported by the findings of Jennings and Niemi (1981).

6. The ethnicity of the youth was used as the measure of family ethnicity.

7. Some youth who reported doing community service may also have reported that service as an organized youth activity, although this possibility seems low. Our youth activities variable combined NHES measures of participation in student government, other school activities ("such as sports teams, safety patrol, or school clubs"), and out-of-school activities ("such as music lessons, scouting, church or temple youth groups, or organized team sports like soccer"). The community service variable measured participation in service or voluntary activities "like tutoring other students, visiting senior citizens, and so on."

8. Following the example of Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry (1996), we define a strong effect with OLS regression as a standardized coefficient (beta) of .20 and above, a moderate effect as between .10 and .19, and a weak effect as below .10. Also, because even small effects can achieve statistical significance in samples as large as the one used in the current study, small significant effects should be interpreted with caution.

9. A marginally significant ($p < .10$) interaction was also found between parent education

and youth-parent political discussion in predicting youth political knowledge.

10. Mean levels of youth political knowledge were estimated from the regression results. To estimate the means, all predictors in the equations, except for parent political knowledge and youth-parent political discussion, were centered on 0.

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