

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE POLITICAL ATTITUDES

When pollsters divide people into groups before they conduct random samples, they are acknowledging a well-proven fact: group identifications often influence political attitudes. Political attitudes are shaped by **political socialization**, a lifelong process through which an individual acquires opinions through contact with family, friends, coworkers, and other group associations. Today the media also plays a major role in political socialization, with political news and opinions widely available on TV, radio, and the internet. Political attitudes in turn determine how individuals participate, who they vote for, and what political parties they support. Many factors - including family, gender, religion, education, social class, race and ethnicity, and region - all contribute to American political attitudes and behavior.

FAMILY

The family is probably the most important source of political socialization, and so it plays a major role in shaping political attitudes, particularly of party identification. Polls show that the majority of young people identify with their parents' political party. The process begins early in life (by the age of ten or eleven), and even though individuals generally become more independent as they grow older, the correlation between adult party identification and the parents' party is still very high. A parallel trend, however, is a tendency for this correlation to be lower than it has in the past. This trend may be related to another trend: the growing number of voters who call themselves "independents" rather than Democrats or Republicans.

Logically, the more politically active your family, the more likely you are to hold the same beliefs. For example, most members of the extended Kennedy family are Democrats, and most Bush family members are Republicans. The relationship weaker on specific issues - like gun control, school prayer, and government welfare programs - but still holds strong for overall political views and identifications.

GENDER

A person's gender also influences political views. For example, more women consider sexual harassment in the workplace to be a serious problem than do men, and more men than women tend to support military actions and spending in foreign affairs.

Party identification is also affected by gender, but the relationship has shifted through the years. In the 1920s when women first began to vote, they were more likely to support the Republican Party than were men. Some experts explain this correlation by pointing out that the Republicans tended to be more the party of "hearth and home" in the 20s. Whatever the explanation, the tendency for women to vote for Republicans continued through the 1930s. Although most women supported the Democrat Franklin Roosevelt over his Republican opponents, the percentage of women supporters was lower than the percentage of men who supported Roosevelt.

The trend held until the late 1960s, when the correlation reversed. Since that time women have been more likely than men to vote for Democrats. This "gender gap" has been explained by the advent of the modern women's rights movement and the Democrats' tendency to support points of view women support: equal opportunity for women, abortion rights, and welfare programs. On the other hand, some experts argue that Republicans are more concerned about defense issues, and thus they attract more men to their party. In the election of 2004, the gender gap appeared to be closing, with Republican George W. Bush garnering about 48% of all women's votes. However, Bush's support among men was significantly higher.

A more recent gender-related issue has to do with male vs. female support for women political candidates. Although common sense may tell us that women would be more likely to support women candidates, the research does not show a clear correlation. One problem is that relatively few women run for political office. Although their numbers have increased in recent elections, more women candidates run as Democrats than as Republicans, so it is difficult to know if the candidate's gender alone affects voting patterns of women and men.

MARRIED VS. UNMARRIED

Pollster John Zogby has pointed out that the gender gap (especially as evidenced in the 2004 presidential election) is not nearly as significant as the gap between married and unmarried voters. He found that on most issues single and married voters were often 25-30 points different, with singles more likely to vote for Democratic candidates, and married voters more likely to support Republicans.

RELIGION

An individual's religion is a factor in determining his or her political attitudes. Although the relationships are not as strong as they once were, these patterns still hold:

- Protestants are more conservative on economic matters (such as minimum wage and taxes) than are Catholics and Jews.
- Jews tend to be more liberal on both economic and social issues (such as civil liberties and rights) than are Catholics or Protestants.
- Catholics tend to be more liberal on economic issues than they are on social issues.

Some special research on fundamentalist Christians indicates that they tend to support more conservative candidates for public office, and that they are more likely to contribute to the Republican Party than to the Democratic Party. This more conservative tendency is stronger for attitudes about social issues (such as abortion, civil rights for minorities, and women's rights), than it is for foreign affairs and economic issues (such as government services and job guarantees).

In recent elections, a distinction has emerged between the political attitudes of those that attend religious services regularly and those that don't. The trend was particularly apparent in the election of 2004, when churchgoers were more likely to vote for Republicans, and non-churchgoers were more likely to support Democrats.

EDUCATION

A person's level of education also affects political attitudes, but the evidence provides conflicting results. In general, the higher the individual's educational level, the more likely they are to hold conservative political points of view. However, many studies show that college education often influences an individual to have more liberal social and economic attitudes than they had before they started college. These studies show that the longer students stay in college and the more prestigious the institution they attend, the more liberal they become. The reasons for the correlation are unclear, but some experts believe that the liberal attitudes of professors may influence students. Others believe that the differences lie not in the schooling itself, but in the characteristics of people who attend college vs. those that don't.

SOCIAL CLASS

A number of years ago, the relationship between social class and political attitudes was clear: the higher the social class, the more conservative the individual, and the more likely he or she was to belong to the Republican Party. Today, that relationship is much less clear, perhaps partly because of the correlation cited above between college education and liberalism. Even though the broad affiliations between blue-collar workers and the Democratic Party and businessmen and the Republican Party still have some credibility, those relationships are much weaker than they once were.

RACE AND ETHNICITY

Much research has focused on the relationship between an individual's race and ethnicity and his or her political attitudes. The oldest and largest numbers of studies focus on black Americans, who tend to identify with the Democratic Party and are still the most consistently liberal group within that party. In recent presidential elections, blacks have voted in overwhelming numbers (close to 90%) for the Democratic candidate.

Much less research has been conducted with Hispanic Americans, but preliminary results indicate that they too tend to be more liberal than the majority, with a tendency to affiliate with the Democratic Party. However, the correlation appears to be weaker than that of black Americans.

A very limited amount of research among Asian Americans indicates that they are more conservative than blacks or Hispanics, although attitudes of the various nationalities of Asians fluctuate widely. For example,

preliminary research indicates that Korean Americans are more liberal than are Japanese Americans. Overall, more Asian Americans voted in the 2000 presidential election for Democrat Al Gore than for Republican George W. Bush, so the influence of Asian ethnicity on political attitudes is still not clear.

GEOGRAPHIC 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 problems in defining that tendency because the rule is overbroad. For example, many Californians are very conservative, as are a number of New Englanders. However, part of the reason for the trend is probably an urban/rural differentiation, with coastal cities inhabited by minorities, recent immigrants, and members of labor unions. Cities in the rust belt of the Great Lakes region also tend to vote Democratic, partly because they have strong labor constituencies.

The Southeast presents some special problems with applying the rule, partly because party affiliations of Southerners have been changing over the past fifty years or so. Since the 1950s, many southerners have broken their traditional ties with the Democratic Party. From the time of Reconstruction until the 1950s, the **Solid South** always voted Democratic. Virtually all representatives, senators, governors, and local officials in the South belonged to the Democratic Party. Since the 1950s, more and more political leaders have affiliated with the Republicans, so that today, in most Southern states, both parties have viable contenders for public office. Some experts explain this phenomenon by pointing out that many southerners disagreed with the Democratic Party's support for the black civil rights movement starting in the 1950s, with the result that many white southerners changed their party affiliation.

Although some research indicates that white southerners tend to be less liberal than others on social issues, such as aid to minorities, legalizing marijuana, and rights of those accused of crimes, southern attitudes on economic issues (government services, job guarantees, social security) are very similar to those from other regions. Although there is some evidence that southerners are more conservative than they were fifty years ago, political views today of white southerners are less distinct from those in other regions than they used to be.