

Parenting and Temperament in Childhood Predict Later Political Ideology

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Political mindsets are the product of an individual's upbringing, life experiences, and environment. But are there specific experiences that lead a person to choose one political ideology over another?

New research from psychological scientist R. Chris Fraley of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and colleagues suggest that parenting practices and childhood temperament may play an influential role. Their study is published online in [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

Existing research suggests that individuals whose parents espoused authoritarian attitudes toward parenting (e.g., valuing obedience to authority) are more likely to endorse conservative values as adults. And theory from political psychology on motivated social cognition suggests that children who have fearful temperaments may be more likely to hold conservative ideologies as adults. Unfortunately, almost all of the existing research looking at these two factors suffers from significant methodological shortcomings. Specifically, the majority of this research has been retrospective—relying on adult's recollections of their early temperaments and their early caregiving experiences.

To better understand the developmental antecedents of political ideology, Fraley and his colleagues examined data from 708 children who originally participated in the National Institute on Child Health and Human Development's (NICHD) Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SECCYD).

When the children in the study were one month old, their parents answered questions from the Parental Modernity Inventory. Fraley and colleagues used their responses to determine the degree to which the parents demonstrated authoritarian (e.g., "Children should always obey their parents") and egalitarian parenting attitudes (e.g., "Children should be allowed to disagree with their parents").

The dataset also included mothers' assessments of their children's temperaments when they were 4.5 years old, using questions from the Children's Behavior Questionnaire. From these assessments, the researchers identified five temperament factors: restlessness-activity, shyness, attentional focusing, passivity, and fear.

Consistent with theory from political psychology, Fraley and colleagues found that children with authoritarian parents were more likely to have conservative attitudes at age 18, even after accounting for their gender, ethnic background, cognitive functioning, and socioeconomic status. Children who had parents with egalitarian parenting attitudes, on the other hand, were more likely to hold liberal attitudes as young adults.

In terms of temperament, children with higher levels of fearfulness at 54 months were more likely to be conservative at age 18, while children with higher levels of activity or restlessness and higher levels of

attentional focusing were more likely to espouse liberal values at that age.

The researchers argue that their work has wide-ranging implications for understanding the variation in political orientation. According to Fraley, “One of the significant challenges in psychological science is understanding the multiple pathways underlying personality development. Our research suggests that variation in how people feel about diverse topics, ranging from abortion, military spending, and the death penalty, can be traced to both temperamental differences that are observable as early as 54 months of age, as well as variation in the attitudes people’s parents have about child rearing and discipline.” They believe that an important direction for future research will be to delve deeper into exploring the underlying mechanisms – including shared genetic variation and parent-child conflict – that might link parenting attitudes and temperament to later political ideology.

“We hope that this work will help enrich theory at the interface of political and personality science but also underscore the value of studying these issues from a developmental perspective,” the authors write.

The study was co-authored by Brian Griffin of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Jay Belsky of the University of California, Davis, King Abdulaziz University, and Birkbeck, University of London; and Glenn Roisman at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.