Political Socialization in Late Adolescence: The Effects of Parents, Peers and Media on Changes in Adolescents’ Voting Intentions

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Introduction

Compared to previous generations, today’s young people are less engaged in conventional political participation, such as voting (Norris, 2003; Putnam, 2000). This trend is troublesome particularly because fundamental political habits and attitudes are formed during this young age and often remain stable over the course of a lifetime (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989; Sears & Levy, 2003).

Therefore, it is important to understand how young individuals develop their voting intentions and what factors influence their actual voting behaviour. Previous studies have found that young people’s intentions to participate in politics are strengthened by personal involvement in political discussions with parents (e.g., Zukin et al., 2011), their political discussions with peers (e.g., Ekstrom & Ostman, 2013), and their exposure to political news in media (e.g., Pasek et al., 2006).

Research question

This study aims to understand how first-time voters’ intentions to vote and actual voting behaviour change during a pre-election period as a consequence of their political discussions with parents, political discussions with peers, and exposure to political news in media.

This goal encompasses three specific questions.

First, previous research has not conclusively differentiated between the effects of parental and peer political discussions (Richardson, 2003; McDevitt & Kioussis, 2007); therefore, we examine whether changes in voting intention and voting are induced by political discussions with parents or with peers.

Second, the causal order between political discussions in different contexts remains unclear (Kioussis et al., 2005; McDevitt & Chaffe, 2000; 2002; Saphir and Chaffee, 2002); hence, we explore whether political talk with parents precedes political talk with peers, or vice versa.

Finally, previous research has suggested that following politics in the media stimulates one’s greater involvement in political talk, but political discussions with peers and parents have not been differentiated from each other (Cho et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2013; Shah et al., 2005; Shah et al., 2007); therefore, we examine how exposure to political news affects political talk when discussions with parents and peers are considered separately.

Participants and procedure

Data come from a larger panel study that examined changes in late adolescents’ sociopolitical attitudes during an election year 2010. Since the national parliamentary election was held at the end of May 2010, the present study uses pre-election data from February (T1) and May (T2) as well as post-election data from June (T3).

Participants were students of secondary schools at the age of 18 or more (69% female). Out of them, 21% lived in a big city (with a population above 400,000), while 79% lived in smaller towns and villages; 52% students were from academically oriented grammar schools, while 48% were from vocationally oriented secondary schools.

N(T1) = 479
N(T2) = 290
N(T3) = 276

Our analysis was performed using all available data from 454 participants who had participated in at least at one wave and completed at least some target measures. Missing data were treated by a full information approach.

Measures and data analysis

Voting intention (T1 and T2). One question: “A parliamentary election will be held this year to decide on a new government for our country. Are you going to take part in this election?” A three-point response scale was used (0 = no; 1 = I’m not sure; 2 = yes).

Political discussions with parents (T1 and T2). One question: “In the last month, how often did you discuss political issues with your parents?” A five-point response scale was employed (0 = never; 1 = once a month; 2 = several times a month; 3 = several times a week; 4 = daily or almost daily).

Political discussions with peers (T1 and T2). One question: “In the last month, how often did you discuss political issues with your friends or classmates?” The response scale was the same as that which was used for parental discussions.

Exposure to political news in media (T1 and T2). Three items: “In the last month, how often did you follow political news on 1) TV or radio, 2) newspaper or journals, and 3) the internet?” Five-point response scales used (0 = never; 1 = less than once or twice a week; 2 = once or twice a week; 3 = three or four times a week; 4 = daily). Cronbach alphas were .68 at T1 and .74 at T2.

Voting (T3). One question: “A parliamentary election took place at the end of May. Did you vote?” (0 = no; 1 = yes).

A cross-lagged model (see Figure below) was estimated in Mplus 6.1 using a weighted least squares estimator with mean- and variance-adjusted J2 statistic (WLSMV).

Concurrent correlations among the variables at T1 were freely estimated as well as residual correlations among the variables at T2. Because one of our outcome variables – voting intention – was ordinal, we estimated parameters using a polychoric correlation matrix (Kline, 2011; Muthén and Asparouhov, 2002).

Results

Main findings

First-time voters’ intentions to vote are developed through political discussions with their peers but not with their parents during an election campaign.

This finding seems to contradict the findings of previous studies that a positive relation exists between exposure to political news and voting intention (Lee et al., 2009; Vissers et al., 2006; McDevitt & Chaffe, 2002). Through political talk with parents, young people may develop self-confidence and political competences that are necessary in order to initiate political communications outside the family, such as with peers.

Exposure to political news in media does not predict changes in late adolescents’ voting intention or in their political discussions during a pre-election period.

This finding is consistent with the general knowledge that transitions from adolescence to adulthood are characterized by the decreasing influence of parents on adolescents’ socio-political orientations (Arnett, 2006; Vollebergh et al., 2001). At the same time, peer relationships gain growing importance in this life period (Fraleý & Davis, 1997; Kobak et al., 2007).

Note. Standardized regression coefficients are presented. Coefficients predicting voting intention and voting are probit regression coefficients. Residual correlations at T2 are not shown. Solid paths are significant (p < .05).

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