

## THE SOCIAL BASIS OF AMERICAN POLITICS

William Adams

George Washington University  
R. Darcy  
Oklahoma State University

There is much evidence that learning of political attitudes and identity begins in early childhood. School, church, friends, neighbors, and later, adult occupational contacts expand, reinforce, and modify the family based political orientation. Existing research fails to clarify whether the important agents of learning mix in all possible ways to produce a population lacking structure, or whether there are relatively few major patterns in relevant life experiences producing a small number of political voter types. If there is a small number of politically relevant patterns, here called 'lifegroups', which produce political types, then the social basis of politics is researchable. If not, we cannot link psychological and attitudinal micro-level explanations with economic, social, and historical macro-level explanations. We contend that such knowledge can be gained, and that this will fill a gap in present theory.

It is not easy to find the social base of American political attitudes. Current theory suggests that such a basis can be found in economic and occupational status, religion, race, the nature of the community, ethnicity, education, or in some combination of such variables. Yet, when examined singly, the explanatory power of these social variables is negligible (Dawson 1973; Converse 1964).

Perhaps social variables can count for more taken together than separately. There have been few attempts to combine them. While social variables often appear in political research, they typically are incorporated one at a time, to break down political

behavior, or as control variables to determine whether the political effects of other variables are constant for different social groupings (Axelrod 1972; Miller et al 1976). Those who have tried to gauge the explanatory power of these variables on voting, public opinion, or party identity report negative results (Declercq et al 1975; Knoke 1974; Bennett & Kleckla 1970). By default, this leaves only psychological variables like party identity, ideology, political issues, and candidate preference.

## ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL VARIABLES

Interaction between variables exists when we can explain or predict more with two or more variables taken together than we can with the same variables evaluated separately. Why should we expect a great deal of interaction among social variables as they produce political effects? What we know about our lives suggests that the combination of life experiences yields more than the sum of the parts. Growing up in a poor Jewish Atlanta home is not the sum of growing up in an urban community, a Southern home, having a lower income background, and sharing in the Jewish tradition. The difference between growing up black in New York City, and Bluffton, South Carolina is more than the sum of 'region', and 'city size'. There are elements of all of these factors in our life experience, but the combination produces something different. The several factors come together to define a new life experience, and the political effect of growing up on the whole adult is not the sum of analytical parts.

A variable may have a stronger effect in one set of circumstances than in another. It can produce one effect under one set of conditions, and the opposite effect under other circumstances. Thus, income influences the two-party vote of white Fundamentalists more than that of white Catholics. An increased income makes Republican

voting much more likely among the white Fundamentalists.

There are five cases in the 1952-1972 period where interaction results in one effect under one circumstance, and the opposite effect under other conditions.

1) Among white Fundamentalists, farm operators have the largest voting turnout of the occupations examined (75%) but among the blacks they had the lowest (18%).

2) Irish origin Catholics vote in greater proportion than English Catholics (92% vs 83%), but among Protestants, the relation is reversed (75% vs 86%).

3) Among white Catholics, church attendance is associated with increased Democratic voting, and among white Protestants, with more Republican voting.

4) Living in a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA) is associated with more voting among white Protestants, and less voting among white Fundamentalists.

5) Among blacks and Jews, the college graduate group is the most Democratic in voting (92%), and the least educated, with less than grade school education, is less Democratic (86%). Among white Fundamentalists the two party vote shows the opposite relation, at 32% Democratic for the most educated, and 65% Democratic for the least educated.

To what extent can political attitudes and voting behavior be related to one's social circumstances? If we divide the population into socially defined groups which are relatively homogeneous politically, we can seek structure in homogeneous groups of Americans, instead isolating single explanatory variables. We are less concerned with the relative importance of the social variables, and more interested in their combined effects on various discrete groups. Those indicating 'no opinion', 'don't know', 'other parties', or 'didn't vote', may make up 10 to 90 percent of respondents in some areas. They must be included to give an accurate political

picture of our social groupings.

**METHOD** The six Survey Research Center Presidential Election Studies for the period 1952 - 1972 were combined into a single data set. The presidential vote was the criterion used to distinguish the politically relevant lifegroups. The actual vote, rather than claimed party identity, or opinion on a public issue seemed more likely to divide Americans into groups which might be homogeneous both in political opinion and political behavior.

Independent variables were those which seemed to mark the parameters of lifegroups in a tangible way. They included ethnicity and race, religion, frequency of church attendance, residence in urban (SMSA) or non-urban areas, income, occupation, education, and foreign or native-born parents. Claimed party identification and other psychological variables were excluded to permit concentration on the social basis of mass politics. The primary task was to define roughly the homogeneous lifegroups which, although still mutually exclusive and exhaustive of the whole population, evidence some political homogeneity. The OSIRIS III THAID computer program was used to analyze the relationships, using the multivariate search strategy at the nominal level.

**SOCIAL VARIABLES AND POLITICAL LIFEGROUPS** The THAID computer program divided the population into the thirteen groups which could best explain voting over the period 1952 - 1972. First, race divides Americans politically. Blacks either vote Democratic or they do not vote. The Republican vote of blacks was smaller than the third-party voting of some white population groups. White Americans voted in greater proportions and distributed their vote more evenly between the two major parties.

Religion is the variable which

best separates white Americans politically. Jews and Catholics disproportionately vote Democratic in presidential elections, while Protestants and Fundamentalists disproportionately vote Republican. Church attendance is also important, with church attenders voting together more consistently than irregular and non-attenders. Thus, white Americans continue to be politically divided along religious lines long after religion has ceased to have relevance on its own as a political issue (Converse 1966; Knoke 1974). Religion is no longer a source of political conflict. Instead, it provides adherents with a series of identities, unique experiences, values, beliefs, and expectations which condition their political expectations.

Occupation and social class further divide the religious and racial groups. White collar groups have greater turnout and greater Republican voting than the blue collar groups. The effect of the occupation variable varies greatly among the white religious groups. Some blue collar groups, particularly Protestants are more Republican than some white collar groups, such as white collar Catholics who attend church regularly. Among blacks, occupation is also very important. The white collar, skilled, and semi-skilled blacks vote at almost twice the rate of the blacks who are unskilled, farmers, or not in the labor force. Urbanization, measured by living in one of the Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSA) and income level provides no explanatory power. Affluence, the progress of industrialization and the changes resulting from the "New Deal" politics have not created a class basis for the vote, although within the basic religion-race groupings, it does serve to differentiate voting groups.

Ethnic differences, long associated with the Catholic immigrant groups, do not distinguish white Catholics politically (Herberg 1955). For Catholics, ethnic origin

was less important for differentiating on the vote than occupation, income, education, or church attendance. Among Catholics, ethnic differences, though important to the individual, are not as important for political behavior as other social influences. But among blue collar Protestants ethnicity was surprisingly influential. (See Table 1) Northern European Protestants voted in greater proportions, and were more Republican in their voting than "American" or Irish blue collar Protestants.

Education is often assumed to be the instrument to Americanize ethnics and elevate the downtrodden. Though we would expect that education would have its main effects on these groups, it failed to differentiate ethnics, blacks, or blue collar groups. Instead, education best differentiated the high status and mainstream Protestant white collar people and the old stock American white Fundamentalists. Thus, education has its greatest political effect where it presumably has its smallest cultural and economic effects. This, combined with our finding on ethnicity, suggests that a variable's power to define distinct cultural, social, or economic groups can be independent of its power to define political groups. Groups that are becoming culturally or socially undifferentiated may not be politically undifferentiated.

#### LIFEGROUPS AND PRESIDENTIAL

VOTING The voting of the 13 lifegroups shown in Table 1 shows several clear features. First is voting mobility. Blue collar white Catholics regularly attending church shifted the most between the two major political parties. This group voted Democratic in 1952, Republican in 1956, and Democratic, perhaps responding to the Kennedy candidacy in 1960 and again in 1964. It gave reduced support to the Democratic candidate in 1968, and reverted to the Republican side in 1972. Other white Catholics did somewhat less

TABLE 1 LIFE GROUP VOTE: DEMOCRAT (D), REPUBLICAN (R), MINOR PARTY (M)  
OR NON-VOTING & DON'T KNOW, 1952-1972. (Nearest percent)

Lifegroup	Yr	D	R	M	NV	n	Lifegroup	Yr	D	R	M	NV	n
Jewish	52	67	26	--	8	51	White Fundamental- ist, at least high school graduate	52	(Unavailable)				
	56	73	21	--	5	56		56	(unavailable)				
	60	76	10	--	15	62		60	31	52	1	15	150
	64	84	11	--	5	114		64	37	35	--	28	318
	68	82	6	9	3	66		68	13	44	20	23	298
	72	63	28	--	10	40		72	13	54	1	32	229
Blacks who are white collar, skilled or semi- skilled	52	40	10	--	50	48	White Protestant, high school graduate or less	52	24	58	--	18	230
	56	34	24	--	26	74		56	23	54	1	22	237
	60	50	24	--	26	74		60	33	54	--	13	145
	64	78	--	--	22	176		64	43	41	--	16	432
	68	66	3	--	32	158		68	24	53	9	14	238
	72	59	9	--	32	161		72	17	61	1	22	190
Blacks who are unskilled, farmer, or not in labor force	52	20	5	--	75	108	White Protestants, white collar, some college	52	20	73	1	7	135
	56	17	8	--	75	104		56	22	67	1	10	165
	60	22	6	--	72	72		60	20	73	1	7	204
	64	58	1	--	41	204		64	36	53	--	11	438
	68	56	1	--	43	80		68	18	68	2	12	278
	72	46	6	--	49	55		72	28	60	0	12	270
White Catholic, regular church attender, white collar or farm	52	33	58	--	9	85	White Protestant, blue collar, farm or not in labor force; English, German, Scand, oft attend church	52	22	62	--	16	111
	56	39	49	--	13	101		56	27	57	--	16	129
	60	79	16	--	6	108		60	19	75	--	6	156
	64	63	25	--	13	312		64	51	29	1	19	363
	68	46	35	11	8	182		68	26	56	4	14	194
	72	29	62	1	8	120		72	22	57	--	21	152
White Catholic, regular church attender, blue collar or not in labor force	52	60	27	--	13	123	White Protestant, blue collar, farm, English, German, Scand. not oft in church	52	30	42	1	27	126
	56	40	43	--	17	150		56	28	47	--	25	125
	60	82	11	--	8	151		60	41	36	1	22	174
	64	79	14	--	7	294		64	51	30	--	19	315
	68	55	24	3	20	154		68	24	40	13	24	238
	72	36	47	--	17	91		72	24	44	--	32	187
White Catholic, not regular church attender	52	36	44	--	20	124	White Protestants, blue collar, farm, or non labor force & "American", Irish, Polish or Italian	52	28	37	0	35	453
	56	26	43	--	31	102		56	28	38	0	35	471
	60	50	22	--	29	97		60	26	40	--	35	157
	64	57	16	--	27	330		64	46	22	1	31	378
	68	33	29	4	34	226		68	21	31	9	40	236
	72	27	43	1	28	281		72	18	42	1	39	177
White fundamental- ist, less than high school	52	(unavailable)						52	(unavailable)				
	56	(unavailable)						56	(unavailable)				
	60	25	37	1	37	247		60	25	37	1	37	247
	64	47	17	--	37	534		64	47	17	--	37	534
	68	19	21	16	45	310		68	19	21	16	45	310
	72	11	40	--	50	238		72	11	40	--	50	238

TABLE 2 ASSOCIATION OF LIFEGROUP AND PARTY IDENTITY WITH VOTING  
(Cramer's V)

	<u>1952</u>	<u>1956</u>	<u>1960</u>	<u>1964</u>	<u>1968</u>	<u>1972</u>
<u>Political issues</u>						
Lifegroup	.18	.17	.22	.21	.18	.15
Party identity	.15	.10	.12	.14	.11	.06
Number of issues	10	11	12	14	14	13
<u>Presidential voting</u>						
Lifegroup	.28	.24	.34	.24	.31	.24
Party identity	.36	.37	.39	.32	.34	.26

shifting. Black people, Jews, and white Protestant and Fundamentalist groups were more stable in party choice. Only in 1964 did the white Fundamentalist and Protestant groups give more support to the Democratic candidate.

Black Americans dramatically increased their turnout in the period, and by 1972, about half of the unskilled, farmers, and those not in the labor force were voting. In contrast to the increasing turnout among blacks, white Fundamentalists, regardless of education level, showed reductions in voter turnout. By 1972, only half of the white Fundamentalist group with less than a full high school education were voting.

While structure, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, lifegroup does appear to differentiate the voting behavior of Americans. From Table 2 we see that lifegroup does almost as well as party identity to indicate voting preference. For the presidential candidate, the difference between the predictability of lifegroup and party identity is often small. Other studies relying on party identity, issue preference, and candidate evaluations have achieved better predictive power, but this was at the expense of ignoring the large portions of the population not voting or voting for minority candidates (Kelly & Mirer 1974). The degree of predictive power achieved here, without knowing the voter's political attitudes, candidate perceptions, or political identity, is an interes-

ting commentary on the stability of the American electorate over the past two decades. The search for a social basis of long-term political continuities seems justified. In comparison to party identity, long considered the best single determinant of the vote, the social variable, lifegroup does quite well (Pomper 1970).

#### LIFEGROUP AND PUBLIC OPINION

For the period 1952 - 1972, Table 2 summarizes the extent to which lifegroup can also structure opinion on a variety of domestic and foreign policy concerns. The relative explanatory power of lifegroup for these issues can then be contrasted to that of other variables in the presidential elections.

For each year, the strength of association was calculated between each of 14 political issues and the lifegroup variable and party identity, to compare their explanatory power. Since we are interested only in the relative importance of the lifegroup variables, and not in the patterns of association, only summary measures of association are given.

As with presidential voting, lifegroup accounts quite well for a wide range of issue positions. It explains more than the party identity variable. The rather weak performance of the lifegroup variable in 1952 and 1956 is due to the religious coding scheme which did not identify the two Fundamentalist lifegroups in the Protestant population.

**CONCLUSIONS** Before the broad adoption of survey research and multivariate statistical analysis, social scientists used historical election returns at state, county, and precinct levels (Rice 1928; Key 1950; Lipset 1963). They portrayed voting and opinion patterns as an intricate tangle of region, ethnic origins, religion, and social class, confused by historical evolution. In recent years social scientists have stopped trying to describe small and homogeneous groups which make up the American electorate. Instead, we have favored a search for the explanatory variables whose effects would cumulate across all Americans to explain their political behavior. This shift from groups to variables paralleled a shift away from the examination of voting returns and toward a reliance on national survey samples. The more sophisticated scientific samples and complex statistical analyses have found far less structure and far less social basis for voting and opinion than expected. Variables long theorized as the basis of political conflict, such as social class, income, region, age, religion, urban or rural living, have demonstrated little or no explanatory power in statistical analysis of variables of political expression. This may not be due to a change in the nature of mass politics, but may result from a change in the analytic model. The shift away from locating groups with similar experiences, interests, and ways of looking at things to detecting and gauging the forces operating on the entire electorate may be the reason. Social conditions interact, often in unsuspected ways to produce lifegroups which do as well as party identity in predicting the vote, and far better than party identity in predicting attitudes, opinion, and concern on many issues.

## REFERENCES

Axelrod R 1972 Where the votes

come from: an analysis of electoral coalitions, 1952 - 1968. *American Political Science Review* 66 11-20 March

Bennett S, W Klecka 1970 Social status and political participation: a multivariate analysis of predictive power. *Midwest J of Political Science* 14 355-382 May

Converse P 1964 The nature of belief systems in mass publics. 206-261, *Ideology and Discontent* Apter ed. New York Free Press

1966 Religion and politics: the 1960 election. 96-124 in *Elections and the Political Order*, A Campbell, P Converse, W Miller & D Stokes, New York, Wiley

Converse P, W Miller, J Rusk, A Wolfe 1969 Continuity and change in American politics. *American Political Sci Review* 63 1083-1105 Sept

Dawson R 1973 *Public Opinion and Contemporary Disarray* New York Harper Row

Declercq E, T Hurley, N Luttbeg 1975 Voting in American presidential elections: 1952 - 1972. *American Politics Quarterly* 3 222-246 July

Herberg W 1955 *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*. New York Doubleday

Kelley S, T Mirer 1974 The simple act of voting. *American Political Science Review* 68 572-591 June

Key V 1950 *Southern Politics* New York Knopf

Knoke D 1974 Religion, stratification and politics: America in the 1960's. *American J of Political Science* 18 331-354 May

Lipset S 1963 *Political Man*. New York Doubleday

Miller A, W Miller, A Raine, T Brown 1976 A majority party in disarray: political polarization in the 1972 election. *American Political Science Review* 70 753-778 Sept

Pomper G 1970 *Elections in America*. New York Dodd Mead

Rice S 1928 *Quantitative Methods in Politics*. New York Knopf