



## Exploring elites' first political memories: A case study of presidential electors<sup>☆</sup>

Alixandra B. Yanus<sup>a,\*</sup>, Karen O'Connor<sup>b,1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Political Science, High Point University, 833 Montlieu Avenue, Drawer 34, High Point, NC 27268, USA

<sup>b</sup> Department of Government, American University, 4400 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20016, USA

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 11 June 2014

Received in revised form 29 January 2015

Accepted 29 January 2015

Available online 25 February 2015

#### Keywords:

Electoral College

Political memories

Socialization

Partisanship

Gender

### ABSTRACT

Political elites provide a unique perspective on political socialization. By examining these individuals' experiences and viewpoints, scholars have an opportunity to evaluate methods to increase political engagement among the mass public. This paper undertakes such an exploration using a 2013 mail survey of Electoral College members, specifically considering responses to an open-ended question about electors' first political memories, accounting for respondents' age, partisanship, and gender. This study finds that elites' earliest political memories often involve electoral—particularly presidential—politics and note these findings' implications for political socialization scholars.

© 2015 Western Social Science Association. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Political science scholarship examining political socialization has been rejuvenated in recent years (Elder, 2004; Fox & Lawless, 2014; Hooghe & Stolle, 2004; Lawless & Fox, 2013). Researchers have applied more sophisticated methodologies to reexamine how citizens form political opinions and the factors that influence citizens to become involved in the political process. One careful and important distinction made in this scholarship is between political elites and the mass public. Political elites, or those who are most interested and engaged in the political process, may be particularly noteworthy for several reasons. They are more likely to run for office, are active in party committees, and are frequently more engaged in civic organizations.

Their experiences, therefore, may be instructive in devising strategies to expand political engagement among the mass public.

Although attention has been devoted to potential candidates (Lawless & Fox, 2011), party convention delegates (Jennings & Farah, 1981; Jennings & Thomas, 1968; McClosky, Hoffman, & O'Hara, 1960), and other elected officials at the state and national levels, some political elites have received less attention. Among these less considered, but still politically significant, individuals are Electoral College members (but see Alexander, 2012). Studying these individuals, who are either elected or selected to elect the president of the United States, provides an interesting window into elites' positions on public policy issues, willingness to run for public office, and pathways to political engagement and success.

This paper includes an analysis of a 2013 mail survey sent to all individuals who served as electors in 2004, 2008, and 2012. The electors answer questions about their earliest political memories. The analysis reveals interesting patterns in the issues and ideas mentioned among elites' earliest political memories. These memories most often

<sup>☆</sup> The authors would like to acknowledge the financial support of Jonathan N. Helfat and the research assistance of Madeline McPherson, Isabel Shaw, and Melissa Wiak. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2014 Annual Meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, New Orleans, LA, January 9–11.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 336 841 9247.

E-mail address: [ayanus@highpoint.edu](mailto:ayanus@highpoint.edu) (A.B. Yanus).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +1 202 885 6237.

concern national politics, and especially campaigns and elections. They frequently mention active engagement in the political process, as well as family members as political socialization agents. Few variations exist as a result of age, partisanship, and gender. These results shed new light on the socialization experiences shared by political elites.

## 1. Scholarly context

Political scientists and sociologists assembled a substantial body of research on political socialization during the 1960s and 1970s (Acock & Bengtson, 1978; Beck & Jennings, 1975; Bengtson, 1975; Connell, 1972; Hyman, 1959; Jennings & Niemi, 1968, Jennings & Niemi, 1974, Jennings & Niemi, 1981; Jennings & Thomas, 1968; Niemi, Ross, & Alexander, 1978; Tedin, 1974; Thomas, 1971). The most notable work for political scientists was the longitudinal study by Jennings and Niemi (1968), Jennings and Niemi (1974), Jennings and Niemi (1981), which followed a familial cohort to better understand the political value transmission. The data collected in this University of Michigan study continue to influence political socialization research even today.

Scholarship on political socialization experienced a rebirth in the 1990s and 2000s (Sapiro, 2004). As a result, modern scholars benefit from more complex understandings of how and why citizens engage in the political process (Elder, 2004; Galston, 2001; Gidengil, O'Neill, & Young, 2010; Gimpel, Lay, & Schuknecht, 2003; Hooghe & Stolle, 2004; Lawless & Fox, 2013; Rosenthal, Jones, & Rosenthal, 2003; Sears & Levy, 2003; Settle, Bond, & Levitt, 2011). These studies place an increasing emphasis on childhood experiences and social connections in shaping political preferences. They also examine race and gender, which received less attention in previous research. They also focus on the role of media, pop culture, and celebrity, which assert increasing levels of influence on individuals' political choices (Frizzell, 2011; Morin, Ivory, & Tubbs, 2012; Zwarun & Torrey, 2011).

These studies are unified by the argument that events that occur during adolescence and early adulthood have a powerful and profound effect on citizens' later political engagement and efficacy (Galston, 2001; Schuman & Scott, 1989). Having parents or grandparents who are ardent Democrats or Republicans increases the probability that a child identifies with the same political party, although this relationship may also be mitigated by an individual's shifting issue positions throughout their lifetime (Jennings & Niemi, 1968; Niemi & Jennings, 1991). Being taken to vote at a young age may increase the probability that a citizen is a regular voter as an adult (Hooghe & Stolle, 2004). Transformative political events may also leave a life-long impression on citizens' views toward political institutions. Scholars, for example, focus on how events such as President John F. Kennedy's assassination (Banta, 1964; Zelizer, 1992), the Vietnam War (Erikson & Stoker, 2011), the Challenger explosion (Bohannon, 1988) and September 11, 2001 (Birkland, 2004; Gross, Aday, & Brewer, 2004; Hetherington & Nelson, 2003; Matsaganis & Payne, 2005) have transformed citizens' civic engagement, trust in government, and policy priorities.

The events that engage citizens in the political process are a particularly interesting question among political elites, who are the most civically engaged and politically active citizens. Previous research demonstrates that many elites have "internalized an interest and sensitivity to politics" (Jennings & Thomas, 1968, p. 479). This interest often results from having family members who were politically active. In addition, many elites' interest in politics is inspired by critical mobilizing events. These events are akin to preschool teacher Patty Murray being told by her state senator that she was just a "mom in tennis shoes" and could not influence the political process. Murray, of course, took inspiration from this moment and ran first for state legislature and then the U.S. Senate, where she has served since 1993.

Identifying patterns in the events that inspire citizens to engage in the political process is an important effort. If these events are replicable experiences, such as taking children to voting booths, they can be emphasized among the general public. It is, therefore, important to consider whether elites' earliest political memories focus on campaigns, include particular types of politicians, or are built around family members. It is also worthwhile to consider if there are important age, gender, and partisan differences in respondents' first memories.

This paper focuses specifically on political elites who served as presidential electors for several reasons. First, electors—the individuals who actually select the president of the United States—have received relatively little scholarly attention (but see Alexander, 2012). Second, electors have interesting variations in their engagement and qualifications due to the varying selection systems employed by the American states. Finally, most electors are well connected politically. These connections are diverse, including political leaders' spouses and children, those who went on to become members of Congress, current and former state legislators and governors, just to name a few.

## 2. Data

The data used in this study result from the National Elector Survey, a mail survey sent to individuals who served as electors in 2004, 2008, and 2012. These surveys were administered during the summer 2013, with follow up reminders sent to non-responders six weeks after the initial mailing. A second survey wave was also mailed to non-responders in late 2013. The overall response rate, after accounting for electors who served in multiple years, was 38%.

Respondents answered political and demographic questions that tap attitudes on political issues, examine beliefs on reforming the Electoral College, and consider personal and political histories. This paper relies on an open-ended question and follow-up: "What is your first political memory? How old were you?"

To analyze these responses more systematically, respondents' answers were coded into several categories based on common themes in previous political socialization literature. The first codes whether a memory was active or not (Pennebaker, Páez, & Rim, 2013). Active is defined as formally participating in some political event,

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/140010>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/140010>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)