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The origins of party identification and its relationship to political orientations

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ABSTRACT

An established position, long recognized in the literature, maintains that political party identification (PID) arises mainly from familial socialization and has a major impact on political outlooks and behaviors. An alternative view, also entrenched in the literature, holds that the direction of causation may go the other way, with political orientations influencing PID insofar as individuals seek out parties that match their ideological viewpoints. Here we use univariate and multivariate twin modeling to examine the underlying etiology assumed by those two positions, and introduce a new perspective that may help researchers make sense of PID, political orientations, and the relationships between them. Our findings indicate that: (1) PID is substantially heritable; and (2) there is empirical support for a model in which genetic and environmental factors influence political orientations, which in turn affect PID.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, a plethora of studies have examined how genetic and environmental factors influence a wide variety of political phenomena, including voter turnout (Dawes & Fowler, 2009), vote choice (Hatemi, Medland, Morley, Heath, & Martin, 2007), political attitudes (Bell, Schermer, & Vernon, 2009; Eaves & Eysenck, 1974; Martin et al., 1986), political sophistication (Arceneaux, Johnson, & Maes, 2012) and several others (see Hatemi & McDermott, 2012, for a review).

One of the most prominent issues in American political studies—the role of party identification (PID) in national politics—has also come under the purview of researchers using genetically informed data, although only a small handful of studies has explored the topic and the findings have not always been consistent. In order to place this issue in its proper conceptual and theoretical context, a brief review of the existing research on PID is provided below.

An early definitive work, *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960), portrays PID as a form of group identification that arises mainly from familial socialization. People with Democratic families and associates grow up to be Democrats, while those with Republican relatives and social networks become Republicans. Barring historical realignment, PID is reportedly quite stable through the life course, and is considered to be only weakly affected by other political variables such as political ideology, vote choice, and opinions on the social and political issues of the day. This perspective, which came to be known as the Michigan school, also maintains that most people rely on partisan opinion leaders to guide them in their political outlooks. Democrats, for example, get their liberal political orientation from following the lead of influential party members, while Republicans are exposed to messages from their party's speakers and writers that promote conservative positions. It is through this process, according to the Michigan paradigm, that PID creates the bulk of the variation in political attitudes. In the decades that followed the publication of *The American Voter*, a large body of research was conducted that was broadly supportive of the positions taken in the book (e.g., Bartels, 2002; Butler & Stokes, 1976; Goren, 2005; Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002; Lewis-Beck, Jacoby, Norpoth, & Weisberg, 2008; Stokes, 1966; Zaller, 1992).

A contrary school of thought also developed, which challenged some of the fundamental assumptions of the Michigan perspective. The competing view, inspired by Downs (1957), Key (1961, 1966) and others, takes what is often described as a "rational choice" approach to the issue by suggesting that PID is for the most part the result of a personal calculation designed to maximize political benefits and minimize costs. Party identification is conceived of as a tentative choice based on that calculation, and hence in flux as political conditions change and as various party positions and policies evolve. Fiorina (1981), for example, asserts that people

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take a "running tally" of what a party stands for and how well it delivers the political goods while in office, which is then used to make a decision on which party to support. This school also maintains that political attitudes and ideologies may substantially influence PID insofar as people seek out parties whose policies and programs match their own political outlooks (Achen, 1992, 2002; Franklin & Jackson, 1983; Jackson, 1975; Markus, 1982; see also: Ansolabehere & Jones, 2010; Ansolabehere, Rodden, & Snyder, 2008; Carmines & Stimson, 1980; Gronke, Koch, & Wilson, 2003; Jesse, 2009, 2010). Unlike the Michigan position, which cites partisan socialization as giving rise to political orientations, the rational choice perspective is largely silent on the issue of how political outlooks arise.

Researchers using genetically informed data have approached the topic mainly with an eye to the Michigan school's position that PID is largely a product of familial socialization. The rational choice notion that political orientations may be an important influence on party ID has received relatively little attention from behavior genetic researchers.

Alford, Funk, and Hibbing (2005) used same-sex twin pairs from the VA30K data set (see Maes, Neale, & Eaves, 1997) to examine whether genetic factors influenced the well-known correspondence in party identification between parents and offspring (Niemi & Jennings, 1991; Jennings, Stoker, & Bowers, 2009). They found that PID had only a modest level of heritability and that both shared and nonshared environmental factors had substantial effects on it.[1]

Hatemi, Alford, Hibbing, Martin, and Eaves (2009) used the full VA30K to examine both the "direction" of partisanship and the intensity with which party affiliations were held. The authors found no significant genetic effects for the direction of partisan affiliation, reporting that the vast majority of the variance could be attributed to shared environmental influences. They also concluded that political attitudes, as measured by six Wilson-Patterson items, accounted for only a small proportion of the social influence on PID.

Settle, Dawes, and Fowler (2009) used data gathered at the Twins Day Festival in Ohio to examine genetic influences on PID. The authors found partisan intensity but not partisan direction to be substantially heritable, although their best fitting model for direction also indicated that shared environmental influences were not significant, contrary to what the other two studies found. Using Canadian data, Bell et al. (2009) found considerable heritability levels for Conservative and Liberal Party identification, with the remainder of the variance for each party attributed to nonshared environmental factors.

2. Aims of the current study

In this study, we analyze data from middle-aged twins to determine whether their party identification and political orientations are substantially heritable. This is done to assess the Michigan hypotheses that PID results primarily from familial socialization and that political orientations are formed mainly by following partisan social influences. The data are also brought to bear on the rational choice hypothesis, which as noted holds that political orientations may influence party identification. We then extend the analysis beyond both the Michigan school and the rational choice model by examining whether there is any empirical justification for a model in which genetic and environmental factors influence political orientations, which then affect PID.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 1322 adult individuals and a total of 596 complete twin pairs, including 143 monozygotic (MZ) male pairs, 213 MZ female pairs, 86 dizygotic (DZ) male pairs, and 154 DZ female pairs taken from the 2008 Minnesota Twins Political Survey. MZ or "identical" twins share 100% of their genetic makeup, whereas DZ or "fraternal" twins share on average about 50% of the genetic material that varies between human beings. Twin data are very useful in estimating genetic and environmental sources of variation and covariation in human attributes, as outlined below. The participants ranged in age from 51 to 61 years ($M = 55.2$, $SD = 2.5$). There were no significant age differences between the twins based on their sex ($t = -1.23$, $p > .22$) or their zygosity ($t = -1.88$, $p > .06$).

3.2. Measure of party identification

To measure PID, a five-point scale patterned after the Michigan school instrument was used, based on the question: "Generally speaking, which of the following best describes your partisan affiliation?" The "Independent," "I support a third party," and "None of these" responses were combined to form a medium category, resulting in five categories: (1) Strong Democrat ($n = 107$); (2) Democrat ($n = 401$); (3) Independent/Other/No Affiliation ($n = 403$); (4) Republican ($n = 360$); and (5) Strong Republican ($n = 51$).

3.3. Measure of political orientation

Political orientations are organized most often in terms of a single dimension from left to right or from liberal to conservative, which is a meaningful and parsimonious way to capture political viewpoints among the general public (Jost, 2006a, 2006b; Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008). Although a number of studies suggest that more than one liberalism–conservatism dimension exists (see Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009, and Jost & Amodio, 2012, for reviews), here we are concerned with global liberalism–conservatism and so a single-item, self-placement scale is used to capture political orientations. Following the question: "Generally speaking, which of these best describes your political views?" participants had to decide between seven categories: (1) Extremely liberal ($n = 24$); (2) Liberal ($n = 191$); (3) Slightly liberal ($n = 148$); (4) Moderate/Middle of the road ($n = 394$); (5) Slightly conservative ($n = 231$); (6) Conservative ($n = 296$); and (7) Extremely conservative ($n = 38$).

4. Results

4.1. Phenotypic correlations

The analyses were done using the statistical software package *IBM SPSS Amos 21* (Arbuckle, 2012). Table 1 shows the scale intercorrelations and correlations with sex and age. Party identification correlated significantly and substantially with political orientation. This will come as no surprise to researchers in the Michigan school, as comparable findings were reported in *The American Voter*. Under their interpretation, people take their cues on these matters from partisan sources and adopt them as their own, so the correlations

[1] Heritability refers to the proportion of observed differences between individuals on a given characteristic that is due to genetic factors. Typically, an attempt is made to partition the total variance on a trait into the proportion attributable to genetic influences (i.e., heritability), shared environmental effects (experiences that increase the similarity of family members) and nonshared environmental influences (experiences that make particular family members less similar to each other). See Alford et al. (2005), and Neale (2009) for a detailed explanation of the methodology and logic underlying twin studies along with limitations and criticisms.

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