

POLITICAL ATTITUDES AND POLITICAL BEHAVIOR: THE IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENT vs THE IMPACT OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

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ABSTRACT

One of the conditions that constrains urban areas in their attempts to solve environmental problems is the operation of the political system that manages the area. The nature of the operation could influence the development of political attitudes and, as a result, the development of policies that have environmental consequences. This study looks at the relationship between various political and demographic variables in four different urban contexts for the purposes of isolating any differences that may exist. Most attitudinal research concerning these relationships has ignored this potential contextual influence.

INTRODUCTION

This article investigates the impact of demographic characteristics (education, income, etc.) on the generation of political attitudes. Individuals with common demographic characteristics are often said to have common life experiences and, as a result, common political attitudes [1-3]. Accordingly, individuals that have different demographic characteristics can be expected to have different political attitudes and can be expected to behave in different ways. The attention given to demographic differences in explanations of attitudinal differences is misplaced as demonstrated by the fact that there is no general relationship between political attitudes and education and income. The relationships vary in individual political environments.

This demonstration has implications for explanations of political behavior that rely on individual differences. If these differences (as indicated by differences in education, income, etc.) have no general impact on political attitudes (i.e., if the relationships between demographic characteristics and

attitudes change from one environment to another), then environmental differences (as opposed to individual differences) must be considered as a competing source of attitudinal differences. Demographically induced life experiences may have no general impact on the formation of political attitudes and political behavior. Rather, differences in political attitudes and political behavior may be the result of the particular constraints that are imposed by each political environment.

BACKGROUND

In an early voting study voters were found not to exhibit the characteristics ascribed to the ideal “rational” voter [4]. They were uninformed, without preferences, and non-participatory. This finding generated an approach to understanding voting behavior that uses variation in individual attitudes to explain variation in voting behavior. This approach, described extensively in *The American Voter*, is widely used in studies of voting behavior [2].

One of the major features of the attitude approach is the assumption that group identifications are the primary determinants of attitudes. Attitudes are caused by the life experiences that group identifications provide. Thus, a large part of attitude research focuses on the relationships between individual groupings (i.e., party groupings, income groupings, educational groupings, etc.) and voting behavior. Members of these groups are thought to exhibit shared attitudes that distinguish them from members of other groups. They are thought to differ from members of other groups in politically significant ways. Verba and Nie provide an excellent application of this assumption [5]. Individual variation in level and style of participation is explained in terms of variation in individual demographic characteristics (education, income, ethnicity, etc.).

This use of individual differences in explanations of voting behavior raises a methodological question. To what extent can variation in voting behavior be explained in terms of general rule—rules that govern the behavior of all voters—and to what extent must explanation of this variation rely on individual differences? General rules must certainly be given first priority. For, in explaining variation, it makes more sense to begin with an analysis of the general (i.e., ignore individual differences) and work toward an analysis of the specific (i.e., analyze residual variation in terms of individual differences) than it does to begin with an analysis of the specific. For example, it would not be possible to obtain a useful measure of the behavior deviation caused by an attitude without first obtaining a measure of the behavior norm from which the attitude is thought to cause deviation.

The fact that there are differences in voting behavior (i.e., some individuals vote and others do not; some individuals vote for Republican candidates and others vote for Democrat candidates) does not constitute sufficient evidence for the assumption that individual differences are responsible for the differences

in behavior. Electoral environments do not provide all individuals the same benefits. Some individuals stand to gain, and others lose, as a result of the victory of each candidate. Consequently, individuals cannot all be expected to behave in the same way even though there are no intrinsic differences between them.

This paper investigates the assumption that education and income have systematic impacts on the development of political attitudes. If it can be demonstrated that they do not, then it may be premature to attribute differences in political attitudes and behavior to individual differences without first investigating the impact of environmental constraints on the formation of attitudes and on behavior.

METHOD

The nature of the impact that demographically-induced life experiences have on the formation of political attitudes will be analyzed by comparing four sets of correlations between two demographic characteristics—education and income—and two political attitudes—evaluation of government operation and level of political interest. Each set of demographic-attitudinal correlations is based on a survey of residents from a major metropolitan area. The four metropolitan areas included in this study are Boston, Baltimore, Atlanta, and San Diego.

These areas exhibit a number of different characteristics that are not demographic in nature. For example, San Diego is the only area with a council-manager form of government and is the only area that does not have partisan elections (in Boston, parties slate candidates even though the elections are nominally non-partisan). Boston and Baltimore have strong mayors and Atlanta and San Diego do not. Baltimore relies more heavily than the other areas on contributions from a state government. And, Boston (more than the others) has had a history of machine-style politics.

Admittedly, these differences are not (and will not be in this article) systematically or theoretically associated with attitudinal differences. In this case, the data does not allow it. However, the four environments, by virtue of their differences, do provide multiple contexts for testing the assumed systematic impact of demographic characteristics on the formation of political attitudes. This impact should not vary from one environment to another.

DATA

The data used in this study were originally obtained in 1970 from surveys of citizens' attitudes toward local governments [6]. The surveys were administered to probability samples of approximately 430 residents in each of ten different metropolitan areas. The main topics in the surveys were: perceptions of city governments, the school system, crime, transportation, housing, taxation, and

government priorities. Some standard political topics (i.e., party identification, voting behavior, etc.) were left out. This limits the analysis reported in this paper. The items that focus on level of political interest and on evaluation of government operation are the two best measures of political attitudes included in the surveys.

For a more detailed description of the methods and procedures used in collecting these data see Fowler [6]. For a more extensive analysis of the data derived from the surveys see Caputo [7]. It should be pointed out that respondents who were not at least three-year residents of the area in which they were interviewed were not included in this analysis.

FINDINGS

Evaluation of government operation and levels of political interest were distributed differently in each of the cities included in this study. As Table 1 indicates, Boston respondents tended to be more negative in their evaluation of government operation than did respondents from other cities. Only 37.4 per cent of the Boston respondents rated their government's operation as at least "good enough". The same figure, for San Diego respondents, was 83.5 per cent. 42.2 per cent of the Baltimore respondents indicated they were very interested in politics, and only 20.8 per cent of the San Diego respondents felt the same way.

Differences in the distributions of education and wealth could be given as a possible explanation for differences in the distributions of opinions on government operation and in the levels of political interest. Distributions obtained in cities with high percentages of poor and working class residents may differ from distributions obtained in cities with low concentrations of these same residents *because* of the differences in concentrations. The differences in attitude distributions may not be due to differences in political environments. Table 2 does indicate that the cities do exhibit different concentrations of educational and wealth groupings. Whereas 44.3 per cent of the San Diego respondents have attended some college, only 21.3 per cent of the Baltimore respondents have attended college. And, whereas 48.9 per cent of the San Diego respondents earn over \$10,000, only 29.1 per cent of the Boston respondents earn over this same amount. However, these observations are not sufficient to indicate that differences in the distributions of political attitudes are due to differences in concentrations of education and wealth.

In order to determine whether or not (and to what degree) differences in concentrations of education and income are responsible for differences in distributions of opinions on government operation and in levels of political interest, correlations between demographic characteristics and attitudes must be obtained separately for each metropolitan area and compared. They should not differ from one area to another.

Table 1. The Relationship Between Political Environment and Political Attitudes.

	<i>Government Operation</i>				(N)
	Very Good	Good Enough	Not So Good	Not Good At All	
Boston	7.0%	30.4%	47.9%	14.7%	428
Baltimore	11.7	40.5	37.8	10.2	482
Atlanta	30.8	38.4	28.6	2.2	406
San Diego	35.4	48.1	14.0	2.5	443

	<i>Political Interest</i>			(N)
	Very Interested	Somewhat Interested	Not Interested	
Boston	25.7%	46.8%	27.5%	447
Baltimore	42.2	42.6	15.2	491
Atlanta	37.8	46.3	15.9	411
San Diego	20.8	53.3	25.9	471

Table 2. The Relationship Between Environment and Demographic Characteristics.

	<i>Education</i>			(N)
	Less Than High School	High School	More Than High School	
Boston	38.9%	35.8%	25.2%	452
Baltimore	46.2	32.4	21.3	487
Atlanta	38.5	24.1	37.5	419
San Diego	20.9	34.7	44.3	455

	<i>Income</i>			(N)
	Less Than \$5000	\$5000-\$10000	More Than \$10000	
Boston	32.7%	38.3%	29.1%	448
Baltimore	21.8	42.7	35.4	483
Atlanta	31.7	32.9	35.4	418
San Diego	20.4	30.8	48.9	459

The results of this analysis are described in Table 3. The correlations between demographic characteristics and attitudes should be the same in each of the cities studied. They are not. In Boston, evaluations of government operation are negatively correlated with education. In the other cities, they are not. In Boston,

Table 3. Correlations Between Demographic Characteristics and Political Attitudes, for Each Government^a

<i>Education</i>		
	<i>evaluation of gov. operation</i>	<i>level of pol. interest</i>
Boston	-.15	.24
Baltimore	.05	.29
Atlanta	.06	.02 ^b
San Diego	.02 ^b	.06

<i>Income</i>		
	<i>evaluation of gov. operation</i>	<i>level of pol. interest</i>
Boston	-.10	.14
Baltimore	.03 ^b	.19
Atlanta	.05	.05
San Diego	-.03 ^b	.19

^aall correlations are gammas^bp<.05 for these correlations

and Baltimore, levels of political interest are positively correlated with levels of education. In Atlanta and San Diego they are not. Again, in Boston, evaluation of government operation is negatively correlated with income. In the other cities, it is not. Finally, levels of political interest are moderately correlated with income in all cities except Atlanta.

The relative impacts of demographic and environmental characteristics on the formation of political attitudes is best illustrated by comparing the proportions of variation in attitudes that can be explained by each of these factors. This proportion is best expressed by η^2 . As Table 4 indicates, environment explains a much larger proportion of variation in both of the attitudes studied than does either education or income.

Finally, because there is a correlation between demographic characteristics and environment (see Table 2), the effects of demographic characteristics on variation in political attitudes should be removed before calculating the effect that environment has on these same political attitudes. Changes in the correlations (η^2) between location and political attitudes that result from removing the variation in attitudes that can be attributed to education and income are given in Table 5. As this table indicates, the effect of environment

Table 4. The Proportion of Variation in Political Attitudes That Is Explained By Demographic and Environmental Factors (η^2)

	<i>evaluation of gov. operation</i>	<i>level of pol. interest</i>
education	.003	.009
income	.001	.012
location	.115	.045

Table 5. The Correlation Between Environment and Political Attitudes, Adjusted and Unadjusted for the Impact of Demographic Characteristics (η)

	<i>eta unadjusted</i>	<i>eta adjusted</i>	
		<i>educ.</i>	<i>inc.</i>
evaluation of government operations	.39	.39	.39
level of political interest	.20	.20	.20

on political attitudes is quite independent of the effects that education and income have on political attitudes. Controlling for the effects of these demographic characteristics has no impact on the correlation between environment and these political attitudes.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that demographic characteristics may not be as important in the formation of political attitudes as they are usually considered to be [1-3]. Demographic characteristics are found to be less important in explaining variation in political attitudes than is political environment. Furthermore, the impact of political environment on political attitudes is found not to overlap with the impact of demographic characteristics.

These results have implications for research strategies that use individual differences to explain differences in political attitudes. These strategies may, in general studies of political attitudes, mask the impacts that environments have on the formation of political attitudes and, as a result, on political behavior.

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