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NEW EVIDENCE ON
TRICKLE-DOWN
AND
TRICKLE-UP
INFLUENCES IN CIVIC EDUCATION
AND ENGAGEMENT

POLICY
BRIEF

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NEW EVIDENCE ON TRICKLE-DOWN AND TRICKLE-UP INFLUENCES IN CIVIC EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT

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FOREWORD

By an array of measures, America's civic health is currently poor.

Recent surveys show that fewer than half of American adults can correctly name the three branches of government, and in 2023 the National Assessment of Educational Progress, for the first time in its twenty-five-year history, reported declines in eighth-grade scores on its civics exam. Meanwhile, Americans' desire and ability to engage each other in civil discourse seems to be steadily degrading—and at the *precise* moment when civil discourse is needed most.

In this environment it becomes all the more important to understand political socialization—that is, the process through which a person learns about politics, develops political opinions, and forms expectations for political participation. It is only through comprehending the methods by which Americans attain their civic identities that policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders can hope to positively influence the nation's civic outcomes.

The focus of this policy brief is on the role of the family in political socialization. Families play a big role in shaping political identities. It is well understood that parents with strong civic habits—parents who follow the news, vote, and talk about politics at the dinner table—are likely to raise children who also prioritize civic engagement. It is less well understood, however, if and how children can influence the political behavior of their parents. Understanding how political socialization works within families and how these dynamics vary for different kinds of families is critical if we are to design effective initiatives and civic education strategies that increase civic engagement across generations.

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KEY FINDINGS

- There is evidence of significant **trickle-down** (mother-to-child) and **trickle-up** (child-to-mother) relationships in civic engagement.
- **Trickle-down** relationships appear strongest for white students and students who do not qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.
- **Trickle-up** relationships appear strongest for non-white students and students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.
- These estimates are statistically significant and often substantial.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is well-documented that political socialization happens within families, but the details of *how* it happens are less clear.

Does political socialization “trickle down” within families, with parents influencing their children? Or can it “trickle up,” with the political behavior of children influencing that of their parents? Does the relative importance of each of these forms of socialization vary for families of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds?

Conducted by Kirsten Slungaard Mumma, assistant professor of Economics and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, *New Evidence on Trickle-Down and Trickle-Up Influences in Civic Education and Engagement* uses K-12, birth, and voting records for over 580,000 students from the state of Indiana to compile descriptive evidence on how trickle-down and trickle-up socialization influences civic engagement.

FINDINGS

- There is evidence of significant trickle-down (mother-to-child) and trickle-up (child-to-mother) relationships in civic engagement.
- Trickle-down relationships appear strongest for white students and students who do not qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.
- Trickle-up relationships appear strongest for non-white students and students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.
- These estimates are statistically significant and often substantial.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

These new findings will be of serious interest to national, state, and local elected representatives who are looking to put in place smart, data-backed policies and civic education strategies to increase the civic engagement of their constituents. They will also interest social scientists trying to understand how gaps in political participation are produced and reproduced across generations, as well as educators interested in targeting interventions to increase civic engagement in their communities.



INTRODUCTION

Political socialization is the process through which a person learns about politics, develops political opinions, and forms expectations for political participation. Political influence can flow down from parents to their children (trickle-down socialization) and may also flow up from children to their parents (trickle-up socialization).

This policy brief presents descriptive evidence of both trickle-down and trickle-up political influences using unique data linking K-12, birth, and voting records for over 580,000 students from the state of Indiana. Trickle-down relationships appear larger for white students and students who do not qualify for free and reduced-price lunch; in contrast, trickle-up relationships appear larger for non-white students and students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

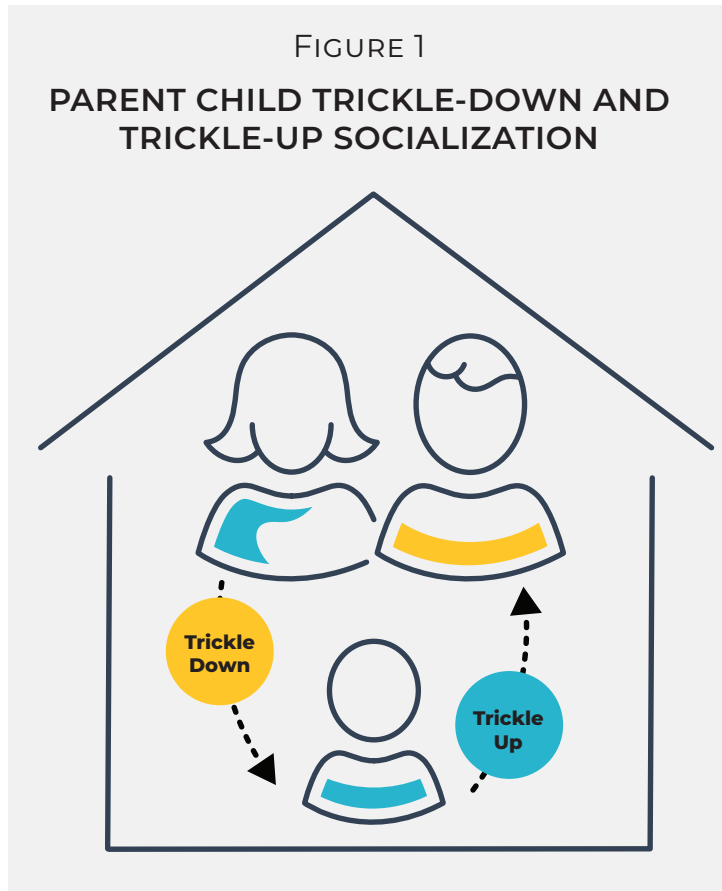
BACKGROUND

Political attitudes and actions are strongly associated across generations. Children whose parents are politically active, for example, are more likely to be politically active themselves, and children are likely to identify with the same political party as their parents.ⁱ On the one hand, the strong intergenerational links in political behavior can facilitate the perpetuation of civic engagement across generations, as parents pass on their civic habits to their children. On the other hand, these links may contribute to inequalities in political participation and influence, as children who grow up in lower-socioeconomic-status households—with parents who are statistically less likely to be politically active—are less likely to grow up to become politically active themselves.ⁱⁱ

Families are considered the primary drivers of political socialization, though schools, peers, and the media may also play a role.ⁱⁱⁱ Conventional models of political socialization depict political influence flowing down from parents to their children—i.e., trickle-down socialization.^{iv} Parents facilitate trickle-down socialization by bringing politics into the home environment, by modeling interest in political news, and/or by helping their children become politically active.^v People who grow up in homes in which the parents discuss politics and are politically active are more likely to be politically engaged as adults.^{vi}

More recent models of political socialization propose that children also influence the political behavior of their parents—i.e., trickle-up socialization. Trickle-up influences may be particularly important in households where parents have lower levels of political knowledge or engagement at baseline, including lower-socioeconomic-status households and households with immigrant parents.^{vii} Some of the earliest and most cited evidence of trickle-up socialization comes from an evaluation of Kids Voting, a civic education program, which found that Kids Voting led to long-term increases in attention to political news, formation of political opinions, and discussion of politics in the home for both participants *and* their parents.^{viii} Follow-up research suggested that these trickle-up effects were mediated via child-initiated conversations with their parents.^{ix} Related work found that parents of newly enfranchised voters in Denmark were more likely to vote themselves, but only if their children also lived at home.^x

Trickle-up socialization has not been studied to the same degree as trickle-down socialization. To date, only a handful of studies besides those previously discussed have explicitly looked for trickle-up effects of civic interventions for children, with mixed results.^{xi} This brief adds descriptive evidence to the study of trickle-down and trickle-up political socialization using unique data that allow me to account for an individual's own civic activity and that of their mother.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study addressed two questions:

1. What is the relationship between maternal and child voter engagement (trickle-up and trickle-down)?
2. How do these relationships vary for different types of students?

DATA AND SAMPLE

Data for this project come from three sources:

1. K-12 administrative records from the Indiana Department of Education
2. Birth records from the Indiana Department of Health
3. Indiana state voting records from January 2021

The sample is approximately 580,000 individuals who:

1. Matched to Indiana birth records,
2. Enrolled as a 9th grader at an Indiana public school between the 2008–2009 and 2017–2018 school years, and
3. Were at least 18 years old at the time of the 2012, 2016, or 2020 presidential elections

Limiting the sample to individuals matched to birth records allowed me to link individuals to their mother’s voting records. This study looks at child/mother socialization because the paternal records are less complete. (Research suggests that mothers exert more political influence on their children than fathers.^{xii})

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Summary statistics for children who did and did not grow up to vote in their first age-eligible presidential election are presented in Table 1. These descriptive comparisons showed strong correlations between mothers and children in terms of voting behavior.

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

	FULL SAMPLE	DID VOTE	DID NOT VOTE
	585,450	185,891	399,559
Voted in First Presidential Election (%)	31.8	100	0
Registered to Vote (%)	66.1	100	50.4
Matched to Father (%)	90.8	94.4	89.1
Mother is Registered to Vote (%)	53.1	68.2	46
Mother Voted in 2020 (%)	41.1	61.2	31.7
Mother is an Immigrant (%)	4	4.6	3.7
Male (%)	51.1	49.7	51.7
Black (%)	9.3	8.1	9.9
White (%)	81.1	83.1	80.1
Hispanic (%)	5.3	5.1	5.3
Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (%)	39.4	26.1	45.6

Descriptive statistics of analytic sample.

SOME HIGHLIGHTS:

- More than two-thirds (68%) of children who voted in their first presidential election had a mother who was registered to vote, compared to 46% of those who did not.
- Similarly, 61.2% of children who voted in their first presidential election had a mother who voted in the 2020 presidential election, almost double the share of students who did not (31.7%).

CONTROLLED RELATIONSHIPS

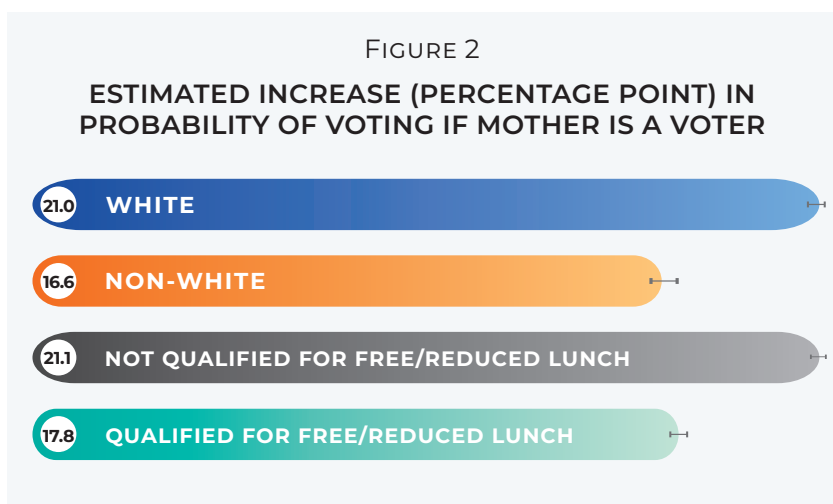
Table 1 shows that voters and non-voters differ across a number of dimensions (e.g., maternal civic engagement, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, etc.). To learn more specifically about trickle-down and trickle-up relationships, I estimated a series of models that included control variables to better isolate the role of each type of political influence. These estimates express controlled associations between mother/child voting—they cannot be interpreted as causal evidence of these relationships.

TRICKLE-DOWN RESULTS

To identify trickle-down relationships, I estimated the relationship between a child voting in their first age-eligible presidential election and whether the child’s mother voted in the previous presidential election.¹ These models sought to answer the question, “Do children with mothers who were voters grow up to become voters themselves?”

Children with mothers who voted in the previous presidential election were 20.3 percentage points more likely to vote in their first election. These estimates are statistically significant and substantial, indicating a 64% increase in the probability of voting relative to the sample average. The relationship with voter registration is also strong: having a mother who votes is associated with a 15.6 percentage point increase in the probability that the child is registered, a 24% increase.

The size of these mother-child relationships varied for different groups of students, as shown in Figure 2.



Estimated coefficient on indicator for mother voting in prior election from “trickle-down” model, as described in text and in table notes for Appendix Table 1, from separate regressions for the indicated group. Bar represents 95% confidence interval of estimates using robust standard errors. Coefficient is multiplied by 100 to express percentage point differences.

Trickle-down relationship estimates are **larger for white students than for non-white students and are larger for students who did not qualify for free or reduced-price lunch than for those who did.** Taken together, these estimates are consistent with the theory that trickle-down political socialization is most salient for white, economically advantaged students.



¹ See Appendix Table 1 for details on statistical models at oconnorinstitute.org/research

TRICKLE-UP RESULTS

To identify trickle-up relationships, I estimated the relationship between a mother voting in the election following their child’s first presidential election and whether the child voted in their first election. Importantly, these models also control for whether the mother was a registered voter and whether the mother voted in the prior election—measures of maternal civic engagement before their child was eligible to vote and eligibility to vote. These models sought to answer the question, “Does having a child who votes predict maternal voting, controlling for the mother’s prior civic habits?”²

Trickle-up estimates imply that having a child who voted in their first age-eligible election is associated with a 5.3 percentage point increase in the probability a mother votes in the next presidential election.

The magnitude of these trickle-up relationships in voting behavior varies for different groups of children, as shown in Figure 3.³

In contrast to estimates for trickle-down relationships, trickle-up estimates are **larger for non-white children than for white children.**

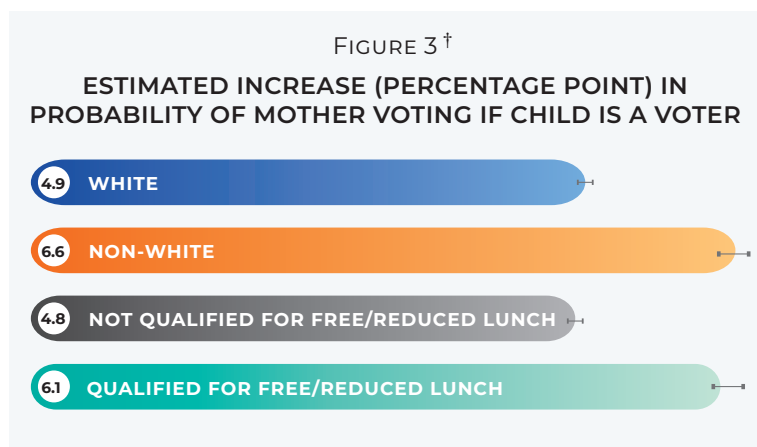
They are also **larger for children who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch than for those who do not.** These findings are consistent with the theory that trickle-up influences are stronger for individuals in groups with lower average levels of civic participation overall.

CONCLUSION

Political identities are developed within families. Using data from over half a million public school students in Indiana, this study provides descriptive evidence on the nature and relative strength of mother-to-child and child-to-mother associations in political behavior.

Although the findings of this study are not causal, they are consistent with a two-way (trickle-up and trickle-down) model of political influence. One important implication of this model for policymakers is that it suggests a pathway for “spillover effects” for civic engagement interventions, meaning these interventions could improve civic outcomes not only for participants but also for participants’ families. These descriptive findings also suggest differences in the magnitude of trickle-up and trickle-down relationships for different types of students, with larger trickle-up estimates for non-white students and students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. While this is not causal evidence that such a difference exists, this evidence could imply that civic interventions that target students from groups with historically lower levels of political engagement may also be more likely to have these secondary effects. Identifying effective interventions—and understanding when, where, and for whom these spillover effects actually occur—should be the topic of future research using causal research designs.

The dearth of civics knowledge and engagement among Americans is well-documented. At a time when school systems across the country are seeking to address our civic health crisis through civic education reforms, policymakers should prioritize evaluating the effectiveness of these initiatives for both future voters and their family members.



² See Appendix Table 2 for details on statistical models at oconnorinstitute.org/research

³ Results for trickle-down and trickle-up estimates remain of similar magnitude and are statistically significant for a number of other specifications, including models that incorporate school dummy variables, squared terms for age at eligibility, and test score controls and a high school graduation indicator.

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ⁱ e.g., Dinas, 2014; Jennings & Niemi, 1968

ⁱⁱ Brady, Schlozman, & Verba, 2015

ⁱⁱⁱ Hyman, 1959; Langton & Jennings, 1968; Chaffee, Ward, & Tipton, 1970

^{iv} Beck & Jennings, 1982; Jennings & Niemi, 1981

^v Gidengil, Wass, & Valaste, 2016

^{vi} Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 2003; Andolina et al., 2003

^{vii} Terriquez & Kwon, 2015; Bloemraad & Trost, 2008; Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 2015

^{viii} McDevitt & Kioussis, 2006; Simon & Merrill, 1998

^{ix} McDevitt & Chaffee, 2002

^x Dahlgaard, 2018

^{xi} e.g., Gill et al, 2020; Cohodes & Feigenbaum, 2021; Syvertsen et al., 2009; Maheo, 2018

^{xii} Campbell, 1979; Oberle & Valdovinos, 2011; Shulman & DeAndrea, 2014

^{xiii} Fraga, 2018; Brady, Schlozman, & Verba, 2015

† Estimated coefficient on indicator for child voting in prior election from "trickle-up" model, as described in text and in table notes for Appendix Table 2, from separate regressions for the indicated group. Bar represents 95% confidence interval of estimates using robust standard errors. Coefficient is multiplied by 100 to express percentage point differences.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kirsten Slungaard Mumma is assistant professor of Economics and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. She holds an A.B., an Ed.M., and a Ph.D., all from Harvard. Her research is in the economics of education. She studies how education programs and policies affect the economic, social, and political outcomes of children and adults.

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The Sandra Day O'Connor Institute for American Democracy, a 501(c)(3) organization, continues the distinguished legacy and lifetime work of Justice Sandra Day O'Connor to advance American democracy through multigenerational civics education, civil discourse, and civic engagement. Its vision is to create a nation where important policy decisions affecting our future are made through a process of critical analysis of facts and informed participation of all citizens.



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