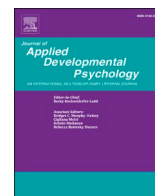


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Editorial

Advances in adolescent political development: An introduction to the special issue



1. Introduction

Today's adolescents are coming of age in unprecedented times as we face heightened political polarization, racialized police violence and a racial justice political movement, and a global health pandemic. Political division and polarization have increased in the US in recent years (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008) along with racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and civic inequalities (Waters & Eschbach, 1995; Wray-Lake & Hart, 2012). The proliferation of technology has ushered in an evolving political landscape characterized by new opportunities for political activism and challenges of navigating disinformation campaigns. Adolescents are in their formative years of political development, as youths' political beliefs and actions can be shaped in lasting ways by sociohistorical moments and their everyday socialization contexts (Wray-Lake, 2019). Developmental research can give valuable insights into how young people become political that can advance theory and inform practices that support youth's political engagement.

2. Defining political development

Political engagement is broadly defined as beliefs, commitments, and actions related to exercising power or influencing the decisions of people or institutions with power (Wray-Lake, 2019). Political engagement can be formal or informal, take place online or offline, focus on exerting influence inside or outside of existing systems, and can be legal or illegal (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). When considering political engagement, most people think of voting, but youth can make their voices heard in multiple ways beyond voting. The papers in this volume illustrate the broad range of ways that young people engage in political life, such as engaging in political actions online (Bowyer and Kahne, 2020), expressing political engagement through clothing or art (Ballard et al., 2020), participating in community organizing, activism, and critical political actions aimed at challenging inequalities (Ballard et al., 2020; Hope et al., 2020; Terriquez et al., 2020), interpersonal political discourse across party lines (McDevitt and Hopp, 2020), and voting and participation in electoral politics (Ballard et al., 2020; Hart et al., 2020; McDevitt and Hopp, 2020). Political engagement goes beyond behavior to also include beliefs, attitudes, interest, efficacy, and knowledge, as illustrated in Metzger et al.'s analysis of civic beliefs and efficacy and McDevitt et al.'s examination of knowledge of political parties. Political engagement falls within the broader construct of civic engagement, which also includes community service and helping behaviors, values, and commitments (Wray-Lake, Metzger, & Syvertsen, 2017). We chose to focus this issue wholly on youths' political development, as the field of youth civic engagement has historically prioritized the study of community service

and helping behavior and values, leaving youth political development under-theorized and under-researched (Walker, 2002). However, in recent years, research and theory on youth political development has started to gain traction (e.g., Diemer, 2020). This special issue brings together a unique collection of papers from scholars across disciplines that begins to address some pressing unanswered questions in the field. The papers in this issue can also inform youth's experiences of political development in the current moment.

3. Relevance to current social issues

It is no accident that this special issue is coming out on the eve of the 2020 presidential election. Through this collection of papers, we seek to draw attention to adolescent political development at a time when youths' contributions to politics are often ignored, devalued, and disregarded. Indeed, the public often laments that youth voter turnout is low and suggests that adolescents under voting age are not capable or qualified to participate in political life (see Chan & Clayton, 2006). Yet, papers in this volume counter those stereotypes. For example, Terriquez and colleagues found that youth exhibit power through grassroots organizing to mobilize peers to vote. Work in this volume also draws attention to structural barriers to youth political participation. For example, Metzger et al. (2020) show that rural mostly white adolescents from less educated families report lower beliefs in standard political action, a finding that builds on a growing body of work pointing to deep, persistent socioeconomic inequalities in voting and political participation that begin in adolescence and are thought to carry through the lifespan (Wray-Lake & Hart, 2012).

Legal restrictions in the US prevent youth under the age of 18 years from voting in local and national elections. In recent years, multiple municipalities have expanded their minimum voting age to 16 years, thereby eliminating an important structural barrier to youth political engagement. Expanding the minimum voting age has been controversial, with critics fearing that allowing 16 and 17-year-olds to vote will only amplify the voices of their parents (Wray-Lake, Wilf, & Oosterhoff, 2020). This perception is based on concerns that 16 and 17-year-olds lack sufficient political, social, and economic independence and thus will be coerced to vote in a way that is consistent with their parents. Using voting records from Takoma Park, Maryland—a municipality that lowered the minimum voting age to 16 years for local elections in 2013—Hart et al. (2020) demonstrate that lowering the voting age had no discernable effect on within-family partisan homogeneity. New voters often had partisan identifications different from those in their households, indicating that allowing 16 and 17-year-olds to vote will not likely amplify parents' political preferences. This research is consistent

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with past findings that 16 and 17-year-olds have similar levels of political interest, knowledge, and efficacy as adults (Hart & Atkins, 2011) and questions a central public concern about changing the minimum voting age.

The police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others have shined a national spotlight on the deep-seated institutional racism facing Black individuals and communities. These horrific events catalyzed a new wave of the Black Lives Matter movement, which is now considered the largest social movement in US history (Buchanan, Bui, & Patel, 2020). In a timely analysis for this current moment, Hope and colleagues (this volume) argue that critical reflection and critical political action are ways that Black youth can cope with individual, cultural, and institutional racism. The 2020 Black Lives Matter movement has been the most racially/ethnically diverse in history (Buchanan et al., 2020), and as Ballard et al. (2020) suggest, youth from across racial/ethnic groups who are engaged in political activism may experience more loneliness and lower self-esteem. Future research is needed that considers how to meet the emotional and mental health needs of youth activists. Youth of color who experience racism should not bear the burden of addressing oppression, and broader efforts to reduce and eliminate racism should be a top priority for research and policy.

Political polarization—or the magnitude of differences in attitudes between liberals and conservatives—has reached unprecedented levels in the US. The divide is illustrated in Trump's approval ratings, as 87% of Republicans and only 6% of Democrats approve of Trump, an 81-percentage point gap between parties (Dunn, 2020). There are similarly stark divides between parties on attitudes about immigration, race, and gender (Pew Research Center, 2020). This divided climate can lead to conflict and negative feelings toward individuals with opposing viewpoints, stifling productive political conversations, limiting civic socialization of young people, and encouraging individuals to tune out politics altogether. It is important for research to help us understand how political polarization is shaping young people's political development. Terriquez et al. (2020) show how one conservative context is full of anti-immigrant and racist sentiments in communities and schools that can create a climate of fear and intimidation to deter Latinx youth from political participation. Terriquez et al.'s work highlights youth organizing groups as entities that can provide supportive political socialization for Latinx youth in such hostile climates. Findings from McDevitt et al. (this volume) provide an optimistic perspective on political polarization and show that Democratic-party affiliated youth were more likely to initiate political conversations, openly disagree, and test opinions when they lived in ideologically dissonant, i.e., Republican-leaning areas. Yet, a similar pattern is not observed for Republican-affiliated youth living in liberal climates. Together, these studies seem to suggest that conservative climates can stifle political development for youth who feel marginalized by these settings, such as Latinx youth, yet larger, diverse samples of Democratic-leaning youth may find conservative contexts stimulating for their political development.

In our era of 24-hour a day access to digital news and social media, the prevalence and frequency of fake news sharing constitutes a threat to democracy (Guess, Nagler, & Tucker, 2019). A 2019 survey estimated that 52% of US adults shared fake news on social media, either knowingly or unknowingly (Watson, 2020). Many have difficulties discerning reliable from false news reports, although research suggests that youth are more skilled than adults in identifying the difference (Guess et al., 2019). It is paramount for schools and other contexts to equip youth with the skills and training to navigate today's complex digital environment. In this volume and using a large sample of youth from Chicago, Bowyer and Kahne surprisingly find that when youth report more digital consumption learning opportunities—where they learn about how to critically evaluate news sources—their political engagement online is lower. Perhaps youth become more wary of politically engaging online after learning about the importance of evaluating evidence and sources. However, learning opportunities focused on how to create and share content was related to higher online political engagement. Thus, a range

of civic education strategies may be needed to prepare youth for civic life online, and more research is needed to identify the most effective combination of strategies.

4. Theoretical implications and future directions

A broader goal of this special issue was to advance our collective understanding of youth political development by informing theory. Together, contributions to this special issue emphasize the need to understand political development within context. Across studies, findings consistently demonstrate the importance of considering how proximal (schools, families, peers) and distal (ideological, geographical) contexts may shape the political experiences of young people. Other research stresses the importance of sociohistorical context (Oosterhoff, Wray-Lake, Palmer, & Kaplow, 2020; Syvertsen, Wray-Lake, Flanagan, Wayne Osgood, & Briddell, 2011) and considering youth as agents of their own development (e.g., Ballard et al., 2020). Developmental theory highlights the need to consider interactions between individual and contextual processes. It will be important for future research to empirically examine the intersection between multiple levels of youth's political context along with their own personal characteristics and qualities to build more complete models of adolescent political development.

The collective findings from this special issue also draw attention to the dynamic interactions between political engagement and other dimensions of adolescent development. Theory on adolescent political development can be informed by questions seeking to identify sources of variability in political behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge, but also how political experiences can have lasting effects on other dimensions of development, such as well-being, identity, and social relationships. Political development is therefore a dynamic process that can inform and be informed by other developmental systems (Metzger et al., 2018). Research from this volume highlights the importance of understanding the possible antecedents and consequences of political engagement and thus emphasizes the need to consider political development in tandem with other developmental processes.

Research from this special issue also emphasizes the interdisciplinary nature of political development. Contributions are represented from a wide variety of fields including communication, sociology, and psychology. The interdisciplinary nature of research on adolescent political development is an important strength that can be leveraged to advance and accelerate our understanding of the field. Contributions to this special issue leveraged a range of methodologies and levels of data, including mixed-methods approaches, planned missingness survey designs, voter registration data, and state/county level data. The methodological diversity in this volume provides creative and robust solutions to many of the research questions posed. Moving forward, these methodologies can be further enhanced by incorporating best-practices in open science. For instance, registered reports and pre-registration would aid in separating exploratory and confirmatory hypotheses. Data and analysis code sharing would further allow for computational reproducibility and easy incorporation into individual-level meta-analyses or integrative data analytic designs, both of which may be especially useful in obtaining the necessary sample size to adequately model individual and contextual diversity. Advancing research and theory in adolescent political development will therefore require multi-discipline collaboration, multi-method approaches, and leveraging best-practices in open science.

Although the research presented in this special issue has certainly advanced our understanding of adolescent political development, additional questions remain. Despite considerable efforts over the past 20 years, effect sizes for interventions that seek to increase voting among young people have been underwhelming (Gerber & Green, 2017). How can we leverage developmental science to improve voting rates among young first-time voters? Questions also remain regarding whether or how adolescence serves as a sensitive period for youth political

development. Several studies draw on research and theory that suggests normative change in social, cognitive, and biological processes to characterize adolescence as a potentially sensitive period of civic and political development (e.g., Sherrod & Lauckhardt, 2009). Yet, empirical evidence demonstrating this sensitivity is rare. Additionally, the context-dependent nature of adolescent political engagement demonstrated in this volume calls for greater cross-cultural research on youth political development. Developmental theory is modeled based on empirical evidence from mostly White, middle-class youth from democratic countries (Nielsen, Haun, Kärtner, & Legare, 2017). Examining political development among youth who live in non-democratic political systems will be important to fully understand how political contexts shape and are shaped by young people.

One shared limitation across most of the studies in this special issue concerns their cross-sectional designs. Addressing questions with implications for policy and developmental change will require causal evidence, greater attention to effect sizes, and longitudinal modeling. Experimental research designs are uncommon in research on political development (although see Ballard, Muscatell, Hoyt, Flores, & Mendes, 2020), yet hold promise for enhancing the field. Further, despite many calls for longitudinal research on youth civic development, relatively few longitudinal studies dedicated to youth political action exist in the US. The lack of longitudinal research makes it challenging to test theories about mediating and moderating mechanisms or understand and explain developmental change over time, all of which is necessary to build comprehensive theory. We suggest that a main barrier to longitudinal research on political development is an overall lack of funding sources with interest in this topic. The funding sources that are available are mostly from foundations that are limited in size and time frame, making longitudinal research an implausible endeavor. Funding agencies seeking to advance theory on adolescent political development should consider investing in research designs that use large-scale, longitudinal approaches to address their research questions.

5. Conclusions

Advancing knowledge about adolescent political development is a challenging task, but the social and political changes and crises facing youth in this moment remind us of the critical importance of understanding political development contexts and processes. Rapid changes in technology, growing political division, and persistent experiences of racial injustice create a civic landscape that will have lasting effects on how young people approach politics for years to come. Understanding these effects will enrich our knowledge of political development, provided guidance to policy makers seeking to promote youth political engagement, and amplify youths' voice within a system that often minimizes or ignores them. The articles presented in this volume demonstrate the complexities of adolescent political development and provide a guide for future research. Such efforts will benefit from utilizing multidisciplinary research teams, using mixed-method approaches and diverse research designs, and from embracing open science research practices. Further efforts to meaningfully advance our understanding adolescent political development will need to be met by sustained investment by funding agencies. The knowledge presented in this special issue exemplifies the importance of such investments for improving democratic health.

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