

# Parent–Child Political Interest Transmission

Do Moms Influence their Daughters and Dads Influence their Sons?

Alexandre Fortier-Chouinard

## Table of contents

Political Interest Transmission . . . . .	1
Gender Differences in Transmission . . . . .	2
Parental Socialization Theory . . . . .	3
Data Analysis . . . . .	3
Parent–Child Political Discussions by Gender . . . . .	4
Issues Parents Discuss the Most . . . . .	5
Issues Most Often Discussed with Mothers . . . . .	6
Issues Most Often Discussed with Fathers . . . . .	8
Discussion . . . . .	10

## Political Interest Transmission

Parents’ role in transmitting political interest to their children has been emphasized by numerous studies. Campbell et al. (1960) already suggested that “interest in politics, like partisanship, is readily transmitted within the family from generation to generation” (p. 413). Political interest can be transmitted in parent–child political discussions (Dostie-Goulet 2009; Mayer and Schmidt 2004; Shehata and Amnå 2019), and scholars suggest the development of political interest happens through increasingly complex political discussions at home (Easton, Dennis, and Easton 1969; Greenstein 1965). Studies have generally shown a significant relationship between parents’ political interest and their children’s political interest (Beauregard 2008; Janmaat, Hoskins, and Pensiero 2022; Neundorff, Smets, and Garcia-Albacete 2013; Prior 2019; Shehata and Amnå 2019), although Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers (2009) find no statistically significant relationship. Using panel data in three countries, Prior (2019) estimates a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.3 to 0.4 for parent–child political interest scores, and finds a weak but noticeable causal link in which changes in parents’ political interest often cause similar changes in their children’s political interest.

Parent–child political interest correlations also vary by age. Prior (2019) finds that parent–child correlations are very weak at age 11, but grow steadily until age 15. Parent–child correlations then remain stronger when both parents share a similar level of political interest, when this parental political interest is stable through time, and when children move out late from their parents’ place. Children who move out early of their parents’ place tend to see a quick drop in the extent to which their political interest matches their parents’.

## **Gender Differences in Transmission**

Research has found that the trickle-down effect of political interest from parents to children works in gendered ways. Mothers’ political interest has a stronger effect on their daughters than sons’ political interest, while fathers’ political interest has a stronger effect on their sons’ political interest (Beauregard 2008; Owen and Dennis 1988; Prior 2019). Disregarding parents’ gender, Sabella (2004) finds that parents’ potential to transmit political interest to their sons is stronger than to their daughters. From the other perspective too, daughters’ political interest seems to be influenced mostly by their mothers’ political interest, with the mother–daughter political interest link stronger than all other combinations (Beauregard 2008; Owen and Dennis 1988; Prior 2019), although Rebenstorf (2004) strikes a discordant note on that front, finding that fathers’ potential to transmit political interest to their children is stronger than mothers’. However, where studies disagree the most is whether sons’ political interest is influenced mostly by their father’s (Beauregard 2008; Owen and Dennis 1988) or mother’s (Prior 2019) political interest. Prior (2019)’s findings are more recent and rely on panel data to confirm there is indeed a stronger causal effect of mothers’ political interest on their children’s political interest, compared with fathers.

Studies have investigated the gender patterns in parent–child political discussions, but the amount of political discussions does not seem to vary based on parents and children’s gender. While earlier studies found that children discuss politics more often with their fathers than mothers (Noller and Bagi 1985; Oswald and Schmid 1998), more recent research has found no significant difference between fathers and mothers (Hooghe and Boonen 2015; Mayer and Schmidt 2004; Shulman and DeAndrea 2014). Noller and Bagi (1985) also find that, despite more mother–children discussions about non-political topics, parents discuss politics more often with their sons. However, most studies again find a different pattern in which parents discuss politics with their daughters as much as with their sons (Dowse and Hughes 1971; Lawless and Fox 2015; Mayer and Schmidt 2004). Given those findings, it seems reasonable to assume, as Hooghe and Boonen (2015) does, that political discussions involving the father tend to revolve mostly around partisan politics, while political discussions with mothers might center on other topics — presumably health care, education, gender issues, and so on.

Other parental characteristics can also affect the development of children’s political interest in gendered or non-gendered ways. Beauregard (2008) and Janmaat, Hoskins, and Pensiero (2022) find that parents’ education has a positive relationship with their adolescents’ political interest regardless of parents’ gender, while Neundorff, Smets, and Garcia-Albacete (2013)

and Koskimaa and Rapeli (2015) find a positive relationship for fathers, Sanjuan and Mantas (2022) find a positive relationship for mothers, Koskimaa and Rapeli (2015) find a *negative* relationship for mothers, and Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers (2009) find null results. Gidengil, O'Neill, and Young (2010) and Cicognani et al. (2012) find that a mother's level of political participation has a positive link with her daughter's political interest. Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers (2009) do not find a relationship between parents' income and children's political interest, but Neundorff, Smets, and Garcia-Albacete (2013) finds a positive relationship between fathers' income and children's political interest. Borkowska and Luthra (2022) find that political interest transmission patterns vary between immigrant and non-immigrant families, with intergenerational transmission somewhat weaker in immigrant families than other families — but no moderating effect for naturalization. [Note for Chris: I could either expand on this paragraph or remove it altogether. Not sure which strategy to adopt.]

## Parental Socialization Theory

This thesis makes the argument that children are influenced by same-gender role models. In the case of parents, political interest is more strongly correlated between mothers and daughters and between fathers and sons than any other combination, but it remains unclear if this finding also applies to interest in various political topics. *Parental socialization theory* suggests that parents transmit their interests to their children and that this process is gendered. Hypothesis 1 further describes that expectation.

***Hypothesis 1:*** *Children's interest in specific political topics is more affected by political discussions with their same-gender parent(s) than other-gender parent(s).*

In other words, a parent's interest in a specific political topic should influence interest in that topic more strongly for their same-gender children than other-gender children. According to Hypothesis 1, on average, a mother will have more transmission potential of her interest in specific political topics to her daughters than sons through political discussion, for example. This reinforces gender gaps in interest in individual political topics.

## Data Analysis

Several questions are then used to assess the role of parents in transmitting interest to their children. First, the following question is asked: "For each of the following topics, which parent do you discuss most often with?" Answers are either "My mother", "My father" or "Don't know/Prefer not to answer". Second, students are asked "Among these five topics, which one do you discuss most often with your mother(s)?" Each of the five topics is listed, and the same question is then asked for the father(s).

Relying on children's assessments of what their parents think can be an imperfect metric. Beauregard (2008) finds that girls tend to rate their parents' political interest more highly than boys do.

## Parent–Child Political Discussions by Gender

Figure 1 shows, for each issue, which parent students report discussing the most often with. Out of 698 students, after removing non-answers and missing data, 82% of students report discussing health care more often with their mother than father, and 74% say the same for education. To the contrary, 64% of students say they discuss law and crime more often with their father, as well as 68% for partisan politics and 71% for international affairs. There are more non-answers and missing data for partisan politics, which presumably means no parent discusses the issue at home with their children. When these results are broken down by students' gender (see Appendix IV), very similar results are found for boys and girls.

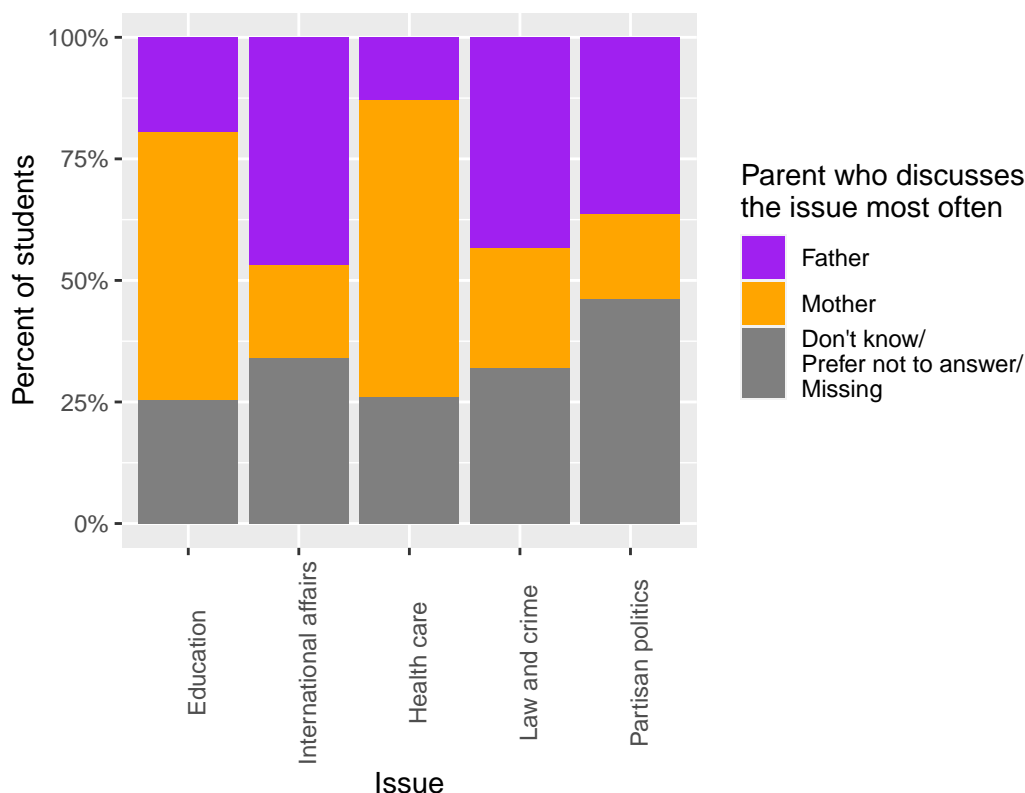


Figure 1: Issue most often discussed with parents, 2023 CCPIS data

The gender gap in political topics discussed is pretty stark between mothers and fathers, according to their children's assessments. It is important to specify that given the question's phrasing, it is not clear if these interactions are initiated by parents or by their children. Moreover, the question does not ask children to specify a percentage of interactions about each topic started by the mother or father; it simply asks them to pick the parent most likely to have these discussions with them. Regardless, the fact that results among boys and girls both strongly point in the same direction is revealing.

These results match with what previous literature has found about women reporting more interest in education and health care, and men reporting more interest in partisan politics, law and crime, and international affairs. However, parents seem to talk about politics just as much with their sons as with their daughters.

### Issues Parents Discuss the Most

When it comes to parents' role in political interest transmission, Table Table 1 shows the relationship between students' interest in each of the five topics and the gender of the parent who discusses the issue with them the most.<sup>1</sup> Children's interest in any of the five topics does not seem to be related to the gender of the parent who discusses the issue the most; all relationships are statistically insignificant.

Table 1: Interest in topic by gender of parent who discusses that topic the most

	Health care	International affairs	Law and crime	Education	Partisan politics
<b>Results among boys</b>					
(Intercept)	4.631*** (0.379)	6.333*** (0.251)	5.504*** (0.222)	4.260*** (0.340)	4.601*** (0.286)
Health care (1 = mother)	-0.411 (0.401)				
International affairs (1 = mother)		-0.332 (0.401)			
Law and crime (1 = mother)			-0.242 (0.381)		
Education (1 = mother)				0.286 (0.379)	
Partisan politics (1 = mother)					-0.182 (0.480)
SD (Intercept Class)	0.705	0.820	0.349	0.649	0.582
SD (Observations)	2.361	2.483	2.638	2.694	2.973
Num.Obs.	241	225	228	252	192
R2 Marg.	0.004	0.003	0.002	0.002	0.001
:	—	—	—	—	—
—	:	—:	:	:	—:

<sup>1</sup>Students who do not have one parent of either gender are removed from the analysis.

	Health care	International affairs	Law and crime	Education	Partisan politics
<b>Results among girls</b>					
(Intercept)	4.138*** (0.424)	5.057*** (0.240)	5.652*** (0.265)	4.602*** (0.423)	3.449*** (0.279)
Health care (1 = mother)	0.158 (0.442)				
International affairs (1 = mother)		-0.118 (0.415)			
Law and crime (1 = mother)			0.047 (0.397)		
Education (1 = mother)				-0.434 (0.445)	
Partisan politics (1 = mother)					0.110 (0.475)
SD (Intercept Class)	0.665	0.345	0.492	0.849	0.360
SD (Observations)	2.376	2.687	2.777	2.599	2.748
Num.Obs.	237	199	212	228	156
R2 Marg.	0.001	0.000	0.000	0.004	0.000
:					
—	:	—:	:	:	—:

**Note:**  $\sim$  +  $p < 0.1$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

**Note:**  $\sim$  Multilevel regression with random effects at the classroom level

### Issues Most Often Discussed with Mothers

Table 2 shows students' interest in a specific topic depending on it being the topic they most often discuss with their mother(s). For both boys and girls, interest in law and crime is related to their mothers discussing law and crime ( $p < 0.05$  and  $p < 0.01$  respectively). If a girl's mother discusses mostly law and crime among the five topics, her interest in law and crime is expected to increase by a large 3.1 points on the 11-point scale. For boys, the expected increase is 1.6 points. For girls, interest in education is also related to their mothers discussing the issue at home ( $p < 0.01$ ), but not for boys. If a girl's mother discusses mostly education among the five topics, her interest in this topic is expected to increase by 0.9 points. All other relationships are non-significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level.

Table 2: Interest in topic most often discussed with one's mother

	Health care	International affairs	Law and crime	Education	Partisan politics
<b>Results among boys</b>					
(Intercept)	4.093*** (0.227)	5.981*** (0.208)	5.077*** (0.167)	4.339*** (0.249)	4.210*** (0.207)
Health care	0.355 (0.303)				
International affairs		1.113 (0.733)			
Law and crime			1.747* (0.677)		
Education				0.253 (0.335)	
Partisan politics					1.519 (1.231)
SD (Intercept Class)	0.706	0.631	0.000	0.567	0.537
SD (Observations)	2.377	2.722	2.706	2.744	2.931
Num.Obs.	275	277	278	277	277
R2 Marg.	0.005	0.008	0.023	0.002	0.005
:_____:	_____:	_____:-:	_____:	_____:-:	_____:-:
<b>Results among girls</b>					
(Intercept)	4.046*** (0.225)	4.739*** (0.202)	5.226*** (0.196)	3.834*** (0.277)	3.136*** (0.167)
Health care	0.278 (0.310)				
International affairs		1.226+ (0.644)			
Law and crime			3.057*** (0.620)		
Education				0.881** (0.338)	
Partisan politics					2.864+ (1.579)
SD (Intercept Class)	0.691	0.590	0.438	0.974	0.000

	Health care	International affairs	Law and crime	Education	Partisan politics
SD (Observations)	2.370	2.651	2.761	2.579	2.719
Num.Obs.	270	267	265	267	267
R2 Marg.	0.003	0.013	0.084	0.024	0.012
:—————	—————:	—————-:	—————:	—————-:	—————-:

**Note:**  $\sim$  +  $p < 0.1$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

**Note:**  $\sim$  Multilevel regression with random effects at the classroom level

### Issues Most Often Discussed with Fathers

Table Table 3 shows students' interest in a specific topic depending on it being the topic they most often discuss with their father(s). Again, for both boys and girls, interest in law and crime is related to their fathers discussing law and crime ( $p < 0.05$  and  $p < 0.001$  respectively). If a girl's father discusses mostly law and crime among the five topics, her interest in law and crime is expected to increase by 1.6 points on the 11-point scale. For boys, the expected increase is 1 point. Boys' interest in partisan politics is also related to their fathers discussing the issue at home ( $p < 0.01$ ), but the same result does not apply to girls. If a boy's father discusses mostly partisan politics among the five topics, his interest in this topic is expected to increase by 1.9 points. All other relationships are non-significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level.

Table 3: Interest in topic most often discussed with one's father

	Health care	International affairs	Law and crime	Education	Partisan politics
<b>Results among boys</b>					
(Intercept)	4.275*** (0.194)	5.838*** (0.215)	4.987*** (0.175)	4.479*** (0.219)	4.110*** (0.215)
Health care	-0.206 (0.499)				
International affairs		0.557 (0.343)			
Law and crime			1.013* (0.424)		
Education				0.037 (0.405)	
Partisan politics					1.887**



	Health care	International affairs	Law and crime	Education	Partisan politics
					(0.644)
SD (Intercept Class)	0.650	0.370	0.000	0.614	0.626
SD (Observations)	2.336	2.730	2.677	2.715	2.849
Num.Obs.	278	281	281	281	280
R2 Marg.	0.001	0.009	0.020	0.000	0.030
:-----	-----:	-----:	-----:	-----:	-----:
<b>Results among girls</b>					
(Intercept)	4.057*** (0.205)	4.816*** (0.238)	5.213*** (0.214)	4.052*** (0.261)	3.167*** (0.185)
Health care	0.383 (0.444)				
International affairs		-0.018  (0.371)			
Law and crime			1.559** (0.507)		
Education				0.036 (0.395)	
Partisan politics					0.199 (0.653)
SD (Intercept Class)	0.704	0.674	0.537	0.994	0.290
SD (Observations)	2.341	2.678	2.787	2.578	2.724
Num.Obs.	259	257	256	257	257
R2 Marg.	0.003	0.000	0.035	0.000	0.000
:-----	-----:	-----:	-----:	-----:	-----:

**Note:**  $\sim + p < 0.1$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

**Note:**  $\sim$  Multilevel regression with random effects at the classroom level

Results from Tables Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3 are somewhat intriguing. On the one hand, whichever parent discusses an issue with them has little impact on students' interest in that issue. Moreover, parents' interest in law and crime seems to be transmitted to their children in a consistent way, while interest in health care and international relations seems to have little to do with parents' discussion of these issues at home. It is relevant to note that substantively, daughters seem to be more influenced by their parents' discussion of law and crime than boys:

their rating of law and crime increases by 1.6–3.1 points on the 11-point scale, compared with 1–1.7 points for boys.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, parental socialization theory partly seems to apply for the transmission of interest in education and partisan politics. Mothers’ frequent discussion of — and perhaps higher interest in — education seems to trickle down to their daughters but not their sons, while fathers’ discussion of education is unrelated to their children’s interest in the issue. The opposite pattern can be observed for partisan politics: fathers’ frequent discussion of it — and perhaps higher interest in partisan politics — is associated with their sons’ higher interest in the issue, but not their daughters’, while mothers’ discussion of partisan politics is unrelated to their children’s interest in the issue. Since adult women are generally more interested in education and men in partisan politics, these patterns match with the theory — but nothing similar can be said for international affairs and health care. It may be the case that for these topics other socialization agents have more influence.

## Discussion

For parental socialization theory, descriptive results show a clear trend: mothers are much more likely to speak about education and health care, while fathers are more likely to speak about the other three issues. These trends mirror previous literature on interest in these topics. Moreover, fathers’ discussion of partisan politics is related to their sons’ interest in the issue, while mothers’ discussion of education is related to their daughters’ interest in the issue. However, other findings show the limitations of this theory, since transmission of interest in health care and international relations does not seem to happen in the family. Moreover, when students are interested in one specific topic, it does not seem that this interest is necessarily related to a parent’s gender.

While results are mixed, they highlight the role parents can have on transmitting some forms of interests to their children and they reinforce the idea that, in some respects, there are different socialization routes for girls and boys.

Beauregard, Katrine. 2008. “L’intérêt politique chez les adolescents selon les sexes.” Université de Montréal.

Borkowska, Magda, and Renee Luthra. 2022. “Socialization Disrupted: The Intergenerational Transmission of Political Engagement in Immigrant Families.” *International Migration Review*, 1–28.

Campbell, Angus, Philip Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald Stokes. 1960. *The American Voter*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Cicognani, Elvira, Bruna Zani, Bernard Fournier, Claire Gavray, and Michel Born. 2012. “Gender Differences in Youths’ Political Engagement and Participation. The Role of Par-

---

<sup>2</sup>Appendix V reproduces Tables Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3 while adding controls for age, age squared, language, immigrant status and race. The same relationships are found. Mother–daughter international affairs interest transmission also becomes marginally significant at the  $p<0.05$  level.

- ents and of Adolescents' Social and Civic Participation." *Journal of Adolescence* 35 (3): 561–76.
- Dostie-Goulet, Eugénie. 2009. "Social Networks and the Development of Political Interest." *Journal of Youth Studies* 12 (4): 405–21.
- Dowse, Robert E., and John A. Hughes. 1971. "Girls, Boys and Politics." *The British Journal of Sociology* 22 (1): 53–67.
- Easton, David, Jack Dennis, and Sylvia Easton. 1969. *Children in the Political System: Origins of Political Legitimacy*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Gidengil, Elisabeth, Brenda O'Neill, and Lisa Young. 2010. "Her Mother's Daughter? The Influence of Childhood Socialization on Women's Political Engagement." *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 31 (4): 334–55.
- Greenstein, Fred I. 1965. *Children and Politics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Hooghe, Marc, and Joris Boonen. 2015. "The Intergenerational Transmission of Voting Intentions in a Multiparty Setting: An Analysis of Voting Intentions and Political Discussion Among 15-Year-Old Adolescents and their Parents in Belgium." *Youth & Society* 47 (1): 125–47.
- Janmaat, Jan Germen, Bryony Hoskins, and Nicola Pensiero. 2022. "The Development of Social and Gender Disparities in Political Engagement During Adolescence and Early Adulthood: What Role Does Education Play?"
- Jennings, M. Kent, Laura Stoker, and Jake Bowers. 2009. "Politics Across Generations: Family Transmission Reexamined." *The Journal of Politics* 71 (3): 782–99.
- Koskimaa, Vesa, and Lauri Rapeli. 2015. "Political Socialization and Political Interest: The Role of School Reassessed." *Journal of Political Science Education* 11 (2): 141–56.
- Lawless, Jennifer L., and Richard Logan Fox. 2015. *Running from Office: Why Young Americans are Turned Off to Politics*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Mayer, Jeremy D., and Heather M. Schmidt. 2004. "Gendered Political Socialization in Four Contexts: Political Interest and Values Among Junior High School Students in China, Japan, Mexico, and the United States." *The Social Science Journal* 41 (3): 393–407.
- Neundorf, Anja, Kaat Smets, and Gema M. Garcia-Albacete. 2013. "Homemade Citizens: The Development of Political Interest During Adolescence and Young Adulthood." *Acta Politica* 48 (1): 92–116.
- Noller, Patricia, and Stephen Bagi. 1985. "Parent-Adolescent Communication." *Journal of Adolescence* 8 (2): 125–44.
- Oswald, Hans, and Christine Schmid. 1998. "Political Participation of Young People in East Germany." *German Politics* 7 (3): 147–64.
- Owen, Diana, and Jack Dennis. 1988. "Gender Differences in the Politicization of American Children." *Women & Politics* 8 (2): 23–43.
- Prior, Markus. 2019. *Hooked: How Politics Captures People's Interest*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rebenstorf, Hilke. 2004. "Political Participation of Adolescents in Brandenburg: The Significance of the Family Context." In *Democratic Development?: East German, Israeli and Palestinian Adolescents*, edited by Hilke Rebenstorf. Springer Science & Business Media.
- Sabella, Bernard. 2004. "Political Participation of Adolescents in the West Bank of the Pales-

- tinian Territories: The Significance of the Family Context.” In *Democratic Development?: East German, Israeli and Palestinian Adolescents*, edited by Hilke Rebenstorf. Springer Science & Business Media.
- Sanjuan, Renee, and Eleni M. Mantas. 2022. “The Effects of Controversial Classroom Debates on Political Interest: An Experimental Approach.” *Journal of Political Science Education* 18 (3): 343–61.
- Shehata, Adam, and Erik Amnå. 2019. “The Development of Political Interest Among Adolescents: A Communication Mediation Approach using Five Waves of Panel Data.” *Communication Research* 46 (8): 1055–77.
- Shulman, Hillary C., and David C. DeAndrea. 2014. “Predicting Success: Revisiting Assumptions About Family Political Socialization.” *Communication Monographs* 81 (3): 386–406.