

Where You Grow Up Shapes Your Political Behavior: Evidence from Childhood Moves

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Extended Abstract

Political ideology, partisan attachments, and patterns of political behavior are established early in life and tend to persist across adulthood, highlighting the importance of childhood factors in the development of political affiliations and the creation of politically engaged citizens (Green et al., 2008). Foremost among these early inputs to who people become politically are one's family – including both the inherited characteristics that shape how voters experience politics and the behaviors that are passed down through familial socialization – and the influence of the environment in which one grows up. As such, the relative influence of the family versus childhood environment on political socialization is a fundamental question of the social sciences.

In this paper, we measure the effect of where voters grow up on their partisanship and political behavior as adults. Childhood neighborhoods have large, long-lasting effects on other adult outcomes including earnings, educational attainment, and marriage rates (see Chyn and Katz, 2021). Several recent studies have looked at various components of childhood context on later political outcomes, but the overall impact of childhood environment has not yet been measured. Our question is similar to Cantoni and Pons (2022), who measure the immediate influence of the context in which a voter *currently* lives, but we focus instead on the long-term influence of the neighborhood in which voters *grew up* on their behavior today.

To answer this question, we use administrative data on turnout, whether an individual registered with a political party, and the residential address of nearly every registered voter in the United States from 2012 through 2021. We combine these data with commercial data on residential addresses going back to 2000. Linking young people in the voter file data to these external data on their parents' addresses and moves, we reconstruct these individuals' childhood location histories. We then track households that relocate across areas to assess the extent to which individuals' probability of registering, voting, and affiliating with each of the Democratic and the Republican parties mirrors the average behavior in their childhood neighborhoods. We employ an estimation strategy similar to Chetty and Hendren (2018) that compares the participation and partisanship of individuals who moved from similar origin counties to similar destination counties before turning 18, but at different ages. For instance, differences in outcomes between children who moved at age six vs. age seven enable us to measure the effect of spending one additional year (the seventh year) in the destination. To the extent that the behavior of the voter who moved one year earlier is more like the average behavior in their destination, this provides evidence of the effect of childhood location in shaping adult political behavior. This analysis relies on the assumption that the *timing* of moves during childhood is uncorrelated with potential outcomes, but does not need to assume that the choice of *where* to live is independent of these outcomes. With this setup, we estimate the causal effect of childhood environment on registration, turnout, and partisanship.

The data show that children who move at a younger age and spend more time in a destination county are more influenced by the average voting behavior in that county. Figure 1 shows our baseline estimates. The declining pattern in all four panels indicates that individuals who move at later ages become less like the individuals in their destination

location than individuals who move earlier, consistent with causal exposure effects of childhood environments. The magnitudes of these estimates imply that voters who spend their entire childhood (18 years) in a county where permanent residents end up 10 percentage points more Republican are 1.4 percentage points more likely to register as a Republican themselves. This effect is 1.8 percentage points for Democratic partisan registration. Turnout and registration effects are even larger, with a 10 percentage point increase in permanent resident outcomes corresponding to 1.9 percentage point turnout and registration increases, respectively. The estimates are robust to specifications that look within families to compare siblings who spent different amounts of their childhood in the same origin and destination, alternate estimation strategies that control for parent characteristics, and over-identification tests that test for sensitivity to time-varying shocks correlated with the decision to relocate and political behavior. We also demonstrate the persistent influence of place, estimating the continued effect of place across elections as voters age.

We next conduct a series of analyses to explore possible mechanisms driving place effects. We group mechanisms into three categories – electoral context, income and education effects, and peer effects – and test the plausibility of each of these groups. First, we look at moves within states and other geographies that hold many political and economic factors constant. Second, we examine moves across smaller geographies (ZIP Codes) where peer interaction may be better captured. Third, we explore the role of income and education through subset analyses that hold the effect of neighborhoods on economic outcomes constant. Lastly, we test the role of peer effects by looking at heterogeneity across measures of social connectedness. These analyses indicate that the effect of childhood environment on partisan registration is driven most by peer effects, while turnout and registration appear to be largely driven by peer effects and electoral context. We do not find evidence that childhood environment influences partisanship or participation through effects on income or education.

Taken together, these findings establish that where someone grows up in the United States causally influences their partisan affiliation and political participation as an adult. These results demonstrate the broad consequences that residential segregation – defined along racial, economic, or partisan lines – has for shaping voters and the American electorate. Constraints on where people can live influences who they become politically. Further, as the United States continues to become politically segregated (Brown and Enos, 2021), the extent to which voters are exposed to just one set of political ideas and behaviors during childhood will also increase. Place effects may thus exacerbate ongoing trends in geographic polarization.

References

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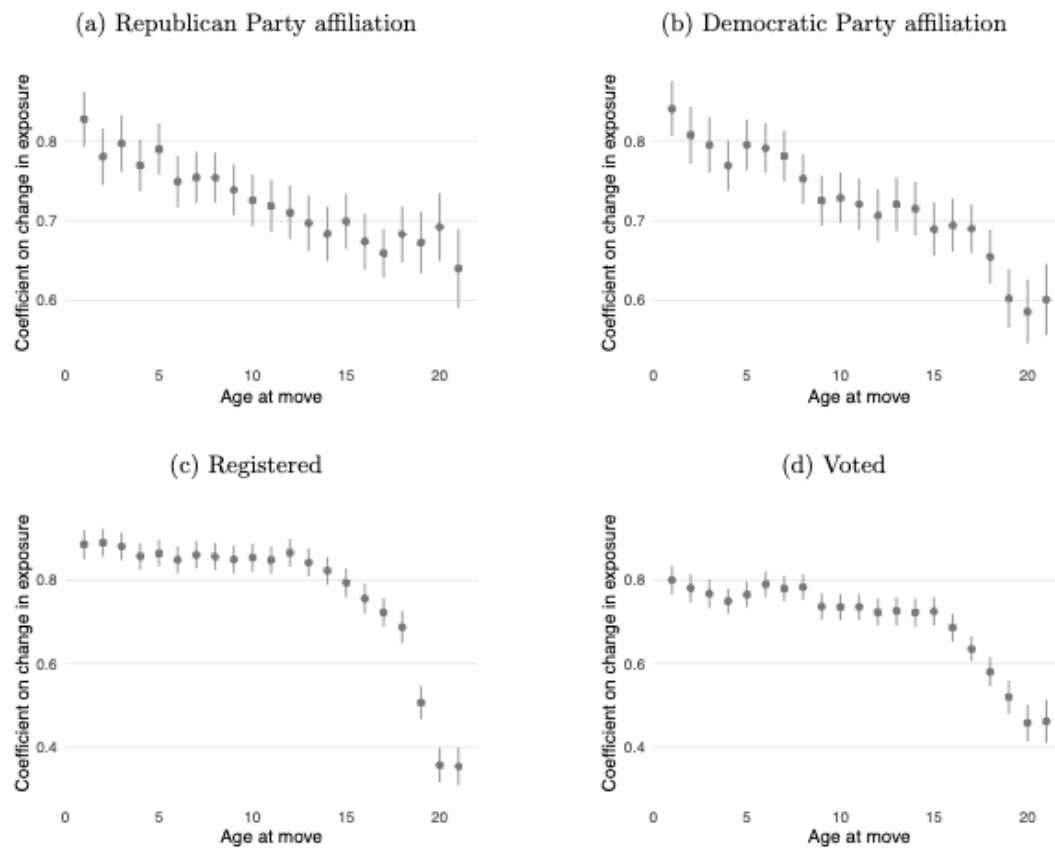


Figure 1: Estimates of Childhood Exposure Effects