

## Parenthood Is Political

This book is an exploration into how parenthood and the family have become politicized in American politics. Despite the centrality of raising children in the lives of many voters, and despite the emergence and prominence of topics concerning parents and the family within the national political debate, parenthood has not been a central focus in political science scholarship. There are very few acts more personal and intense in life than raising children. In this book we show how this very personal and intense act of raising a family is a politically defining experience and has come front and center into the political debate.

The central argument of this book is that parenthood is political. The transition to parenthood introduces dramatic and long-term changes into the lives of adults. Becoming a parent and raising children are significant adult socialization experiences, which, like getting married, entering the workforce, or growing older, hold the potential to shape political priorities, attitudes, and behavior. Over the last half century, the social and political environment surrounding America's families has changed in ways that have intensified the parenting experience and the importance of the family in national political debates.

The structure of the American family changed dramatically since the 1950s. Traditional nuclear families, in which fathers take on the role of economic provider while mothers care for the home and the children, are no longer the dominant family structure. The number of single-parent families has increased, and they now represent about one-third of all households with children.

Additionally, parents of both sexes are working longer hours to support their families and cover the costs associated with raising children. This is especially true for mothers, the majority of whom, whether unmarried or married, are now seeking to balance work outside the home with their continued roles as the primary caregivers for their children.

Despite these increased work hours and the demands of contemporary life, surveys reveal that parents place high value on their parental roles and identities, and detailed time diaries document that parents are spending as much and in many cases more time with their children than their parents and grandparents did (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006). Given these changes, it is not surprising to find that parents today report higher levels of stress than other groups in society (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006).

In response to these changes in the American family, there has been a dramatic politicization of parenthood by the major parties and the news media. As we document in this book, in the 1950s and 1960s, when the traditional father-breadwinner, mother-homemaker family was the norm, the topics of family and raising children were not part of mainstream political discourse. Presidents and presidential candidates did not discuss the importance of the family as an institution in American society in their public addresses, nor did they make explicit appeals to parents. Over the last four decades there has been a remarkable change in the content and tone of American politics and campaigns as they relate to parenthood and the family.

Starting in the 1980s and increasing dramatically across the 1990s, the political parties and their presidential candidates have tried to outdo one another in appealing directly to parents and in portraying themselves as the true champions of the American family. In his 1988 State of the Union address, Republican president Ronald Reagan pledged that his administration would “make certain that the family is always at the center of the public policy process.” The Democrats soon followed. In his 1996 State of the Union address, President Bill Clinton stated that “Family is the foundation of American life. If we have stronger families, we will have a stronger America.”

This emphasis on parenthood and the family has continued into the twenty-first century. During the buildup to the 2004 presi-

dential election, both major party candidates and their wives made time to sit down with popular daytime television talk show hosts to talk about raising families (Sweet 2004a). Both parties also spoke explicitly to the concerns of “Security Moms” worried about the safety of their families, and “NASCAR Dads” anxious about the economic and moral health of the nation. In 2008, parents were, once again, given a high-profile role in the presidential campaign. The Republican ticket frequently drew on vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin’s status as a mother and self-identified “Hockey Mom” to underscore the party’s commitment to economic and social policies that would strengthen the family. The Democrats identified “Empowering America’s Families for a New Era” as the lead issue in their 2008 platform and used the language of the family to frame their entire domestic agenda from energy to economics. Simply put, parenthood and the family have moved from the margins to the mainstream of partisan politics and political discourse.

The increased focus on parenthood and the family has been born out of electoral necessity and strategy. As the landscape of American families changed, the parties seized the opportunity to exploit social group divisions that were not previously relevant to politics, such as stressed-out parents and segments of the electorate deeply concerned about the decline of the traditional family (Arnold and Weisberg 1996, 194). Both parties realized that parent appeals make strategic sense. Not only do parents form a significant minority of voters, about 40 percent of the electorate in recent elections, but parenthood and family themes resonate across a range of economic, racial, and geographic divisions.

While both parties have politicized parenthood and the family, their messages about what pro-family and pro-parent policies should look like are quite different. Over the decades, the Republican Party has increasingly wrapped parent-family frames around their proposals for tax cuts and smaller government. In 2008, the Republican platform declared that making tax cuts permanent was vital to helping families survive the economic downturn. The party has also promoted a wide array of social policies as ways to strengthen parental rights and help parents protect their children from illicit societal influences.

In contrast, Democrats appealed to American parents by pledging more government regulation (e.g., mandating family

leave policies, raising the minimum wage, implementing more environmental regulations, supporting a more generous social safety net) and endorsing policies supporting a broader array of lifestyle choices and family arrangements. In their 2008 platform, Democrats argued that increased government action to provide universal health care, ensure Americans get good jobs with good pay, preserve social security, and combat poverty was the best way to help America's working parents through economically challenging times. Scholars have documented the polarization of the parties over issues including abortion and women's rights (Adams 1997; Wolbrecht 2000). We argue that these growing divides are part of the politicization of the American family, a broader trend in American politics.

Elected officials, candidates, and the national parties were not alone in politicizing parenthood. As we empirically document in this book, they were joined in this development by the news media. Parenthood and the family first emerged as an identifiable theme in election coverage in 1980, but did not become a dominant theme until the 1992 presidential election. That is the year the Republican Party held a "Family Values" night during their national convention and Vice President Dan Quayle criticized the fictional television character Murphy Brown for mocking the importance of fathers in raising children. In every election since 1992, the news media have relied heavily on parents and the family as central frames in their coverage. Parent-based political labels such as "Soccer Moms," "NASCAR Dads," and "Security Moms" have become a predictable feature of each election cycle. They are now household phrases used by average citizens in discussing politics and elections. Reflecting the electoral environment of the 2008 election, new parent-based labels, including "Mortgage Moms" and "Walmart Moms," were employed by the news media as a way of discussing the parties' contrasting domestic agendas.

The media's politicization of parenthood is in part a reflection of political reality, the increasingly family-friendly language and policies offered by the political parties. Additionally, the news media have politicized parenthood because of the journalistic value of stories about "NASCAR Dads" or "Walmart Moms." Stories about how each party's proposals may or may not help struggling moms and dads are enticing to readers, quick and inexpensive to

report, and provide an attractive way to discuss the issue positions of the candidates and frame the significance of poll results. Finally, the politicization of parenthood has been driven by the increasing number of news stories portraying parents as swing voters who have the power to determine the outcome of elections. Some news commentators have argued that the most significant divide in the American electorate is no longer the red state–blue state divide but a “baby gap,” a divide between parents and non-parents (see Brooks 2004; Kotkin and Frey 2004; Sailer 2004). In a *New York Times* editorial titled “The New Red-Diaper Babies,” David Brooks argued that there is a significant group of people in the United States for whom “personal identity is defined by parenthood” and that these people make their political decisions based on what will best protect their children. In the minds of the media, parenthood has joined the ranks of race, gender, class, and geography in becoming a highly significant political force.

At the center of these converging trends are parents themselves. They perceive their job of raising children to be harder than ever and more important than ever, and they are deeply concerned about providing for and protecting their children. One of the central questions we address in this book is how these changes in political rhetoric and media coverage have been reflected in the politics of America’s parents and whether parents truly are the distinctive political bloc assumed by the parties and the news media. Most of the social science literature concerning parents and families has focused on how parents and the family environment shape the political leanings of children, but very few studies have looked at the reverse—the impact of having and raising children on the political beliefs and voting behavior of parents.

In a *Reader’s Digest* article on “The Family Gap,” Fred Barnes stated, “You think differently when you have kids” (1992, 50). In this book we provide compelling evidence, and the first systematic empirical data, that parents do “think differently” when it comes to politics. Our analyses show that parents are distinctive from their peers without children in terms of their political attitudes on many important issues. The fact that parents have greater concern for issues directly related to raising children such as funding for education may not be surprising. Nevertheless, this is one of the first studies to empirically document this basic parenthood effect.

More surprising is that parenthood has effects on issues beyond those directly or intimately connected to children including a general orientation toward the role of government.

The ideological directions of parenthood effects are not always consistent with the media's portrayal and conventional wisdom about parents. Rather than finding parents to be a distinctively conservative group, our results support the idea advanced by many feminist thinkers that time spent raising children has liberalizing political effects. Moreover, on several key issues parenthood pushes women and men in opposite ideological directions. All together these findings add richness to our understanding of political socialization throughout the life cycle and provide a more complete understanding of the causes of the gender gap.

### Research Approach and Data

This book offers a comprehensive, objective, and empirically rigorous analysis of how and why parenthood has become politicized over the last half century, and what this means for American elections and politics. Most books concerning politics and the family are normative or prescriptive analyses reflecting the starkly different reactions to the changes in American families over the past fifty years. These books argue over what a true pro-family policy agenda entails, what elected officials should do to better support America's families, and the best way for parents to structure their lives. This book takes a very different approach, relying on multiple empirical methods to present an objective analysis of the politicization and polarization of parenthood and the family in American politics.

To document the politicization of parenthood and the family in elite political discourse and within the news media, we rely on rigorous content analyses of party documents including presidential speeches and party platforms, and print news media from 1952 to the present. Extending back to 1952 allows us to track changes in the use of "family language" before, during, and after the significant changes to the family. We also provide a detailed contextual analysis of these documents, so as to identify not just how much the political parties, presidential candidates, and major news media are talking about parent and family themes, but what they are saying. Multivariate analyses are employed to show that

the increased references to parents and the family are statistically as well as substantively significant.

To explore the political attitudes and voting behavior of parents, we rely on two long-standing data sets, the American National Election Studies, which goes back to 1952, and the General Social Survey, which goes back to 1972. These two well-established data sets allow us to track the political attitudes of parents versus non-parents as the family and the political environment have undergone significant changes. While these two data sets have some overlap, each also contains unique measures of several important concepts not contained in its counterpart. Using both data sets allows us to examine the effects of parenthood on a wide range of important issues and provides greater analytical power. Additionally, these data sets contain a rich array of demographic and socioeconomic variables, which allows us to employ multivariate models controlling for potentially confounding variables so that we can better isolate and explore the impact of parenthood.

### Overview of the Book

The next chapter of this book, chapter 2, highlights the major changes to the American family over the past half century, with particular emphasis on how these changes are politically relevant. The chapter draws on recent U.S. Census data, as well as the latest research of demographers, family studies experts, and sociologists to document and interpret changes in the structure of American families. This chapter also explores the important interaction between gender and parenthood. Despite major changes to the American family, parenting continues to be a highly gendered activity both in terms of societal attitudes about the appropriate roles of mothers and fathers and in terms of the actual roles and responsibilities male and female parents take on. Female parents are expected to and continue to play a much larger and more nurturing role in the parenting process than their male counterparts, a reality that has multiple political consequences. Thus, while this is a book about the politicization of parents, a major theme is that men and women are affected by parenthood in very different ways.

Chapter 3 shows that parenthood and the family have gone from being essentially non-political and non-partisan issues—

rarely being mentioned in platforms, speeches, and presidential campaigns—to providing a fundamental frame for the broad domestic policy agendas of both parties, and providing the basis for new policy initiatives explicitly directed toward parents. We argue that the politicization of parenthood has been driven by strategic political parties and candidates seeking an advantage in the new political environment created by the dramatic changes in the American family discussed in chapter 2. In contemporary politics, American parents find themselves sought after by both parties, who promise to strengthen their families and empower them to better protect their children. The politicization of parenthood and the family by the parties and their standard-bearers not only reveals much about party behavior and issue evolution, but is significant given the demonstrated potential of issue frames to influence how voters think and act politically.

Chapter 4 documents that the news media have politicized parenthood and the family in three important ways. First, the print news media have increasingly relied on parenthood and the family as a way of making sense of election events and as a means of communicating what they believe is at stake in policy disputes and election outcomes. Secondly, the media have increasingly used parents and families as a lens through which to discuss a wide range of issues, including the most pertinent and pressing issues during each electoral cycle. Finally, the media have increasingly portrayed parents as pivotal swing voters, which heightens their attractiveness as targets for politicians. The increasing media usage of parent-family frames reinforces and is reinforced by political actors, but also serves the increased commercialization of news values.

Responding to all the changing pressures of parenthood and the increased discussion of parenthood and the family in political discourse has been the parents themselves. Chapters 5 and 6 look at the effects of parenthood on the political attitudes of mothers and fathers. Chapter 5 provides overtime analysis of the politics of parents—their political attitudes on major policy issues as well as their partisanship, ideology, and vote choice. Given that parenting remains a very different experience for male and female parents, we break down all of our results by sex. We find that parenthood is indeed political. Men and women with children in the home are significantly different than their counterparts without children



on a wide range of issues, not just on issues directly related to childrearing.

Additionally we find that parenthood affects women and men differently. Women are more affected by parenthood than men, not surprising given their much greater role in parenting. On the majority of issues parenthood is associated with ideologically opposing effects for women and men. Motherhood is associated with more liberal attitudes, whereas fatherhood is associated with more conservative attitudes. The issue domains where parenthood effects are strongest vary by gender as well. These results are significant in not only providing insights into the political impact of parenthood as an agent of political socialization, but in providing some of the first empirical evidence that parenthood contributes to the gender gap on political issues, vote choice, and partisanship.

In chapter 6 we delve more deeply into the effect of parenthood on political attitudes. By employing multivariate regression models we explore whether the motherhood and fatherhood effects documented in the previous chapter remain significant predictors of political attitudes on major policy issues as well as broader political orientations when potentially confounding factors such as age, income, education, and religion are controlled. We also deepen our understanding of the political impact of parenthood by taking a more extensive look at the relationship between parenthood and two potentially mediating variables: the marital status and the race/ethnicity of parents. We find that not only do parenthood effects remain in multivariate models, but parenthood appears to politicize the politics of men and women in similar ways regardless of race. We also find that for men parenthood and marriage act as reinforcing pressures both pushing attitudes in a conservative direction, but for women parenthood and marriage act as cross-pressures. Motherhood is associated with liberal effects while marriage is associated with conservative effects.

Chapter 7, our concluding chapter, takes a broader look at both the theoretical and practical significance of the empirical findings presented in the book. In this chapter we take a step back to examine what the politics of parenthood teaches us about public opinion, political socialization across the life cycle, and the gender gap. We also look to the future of parenthood and family politics given demographic trends and the evolving national age-

nda. Moreover, we argue that the way parenthood and the family have been politicized in the U.S. political system is not neutral in its impacts. Rather it highlights and advantages some types of parents, while marginalizing the concerns of other groups in society including women, poor families, and single parents. We conclude by laying out several avenues for further research on the politics of parenthood.