

Adults' political leanings linked with early personality traits

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Our political attitudes in adulthood have roots in early childhood temperament, according to new findings published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science. Analyses of data from more than 16,000 participants in two longitudinal studies in the United Kingdom reveal links between conduct problems at ages 5 and 7 and economic and political discontent 25 years later.

"Findings from both studies indicate that children who showed higher levels of conduct problems—that is, aggression, fighting, stealing from peers—were more likely to be economically left leaning and distrustful of the political system as adults," says study author Gary J. Lewis of Royal Holloway, University of London. "Some, but not all, of this link was explained by [educational attainment](#) and socioeconomic status in adulthood."

The findings shed light on the relationship between personality traits and political sentiment, suggesting a link that spans more than two decades.

Lewis investigated this link by analyzing data from the British Cohort Study and the National Child Development Study, two longitudinal cohort studies following individuals in the United Kingdom.

Participants' parents completed an assessment of their children's behavior when the children were either 5 or 7 years old, reporting on behaviors related to anxiety, conduct problems, and hyperactivity.

At age 30 or 33, the participants completed measures that gauged their economic conservatism, political cynicism, racism, authoritarianism, and attitudes about gender inequality. These measures cohered into two broad factors: economic/political discontent and social conservatism.

The studies also included data about the parents' social class and the participants' childhood intelligence, educational attainment, and social class in adulthood.

Modeling the relationships among these variables, Lewis found that childhood conduct problems were associated with economic/political discontent in adulthood, even after parental social class and childhood intelligence were taken into account. It is possible, Lewis notes, that conduct problems in childhood may reflect difficulty with self-control and long-term planning or early rejection of authority, either of which could lead to economic/political discontent.

The models also indicated indirect pathways in both cohorts, by which [conduct problems](#) were associated with lower educational attainment and adult [social class](#) and, ultimately, greater economic/political discontent.

These associations may be modest in strength, says Lewis, but they are stable over a 25-year span, suggesting early foundations of later [political attitudes](#). Future research with more detailed and frequent assessments will help to illuminate the exact nature of these long-term associations.

"We all wonder from time to time why it is that those on the other side of the fence came to be that way," Lewis notes. "These findings take us a little further down the road to answering that question."

More information: Gary J. Lewis, Early-Childhood Conduct Problems Predict Economic and Political Discontent in Adulthood: Evidence From Two Large, Longitudinal UK Cohorts, *Psychological*

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