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Children's Images of Presidents: 
Personalization Versus Role

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Political socialization research has revealed the President of the United States to be the political figure to whom children are first attracted.¹ Easton and Dennis have offered the thesis that children's early and continuing perceptions of the President play a critical role in the development of their attitudes toward, and attachment to, the political system. Through positive attitudes toward the President, they argue, children early develop a reservoir of support for political authority which is later transferred to political institutions.²

Central to this thesis was Easton and Dennis' finding that young children were overwhelmingly positive toward the President and their conclusion that the child's image of the President was that of an officeholder who symbolizes government rather than a particular man to be distinguished from other presidents by the specific events with which he has been involved. Easton and Dennis argue, in fact, that if the child's attitude toward a President reflected primarily his/her perceptions and evaluations of the personal qualities and acts of a single individual, no long-standing support for the role of the presidency would be developing. In other words, children's attitudes toward the presidential role might vary with their perceptions of the incumbent and the presidency would not serve as a universal socialization mechanism for introducing and attracting children's support for the political authority system.

Easton and Dennis' evidence for their argument was straightforward on presidential affect and speculative on role versus individual. In response to a series of questions on attitudes toward the President, Easton and Dennis reported, almost unbelievably, that: "In all our testing and interviewing, we were unable to find a child who did not express the highest esteem for the


² Easton and Dennis, Children in the Political System . . ., pp. 165-193.
In response to a close-ended question on presidential role a clear majority of students at all grade levels said that the President’s job was to “make sure that our country is run well.”

Since Easton and Dennis administered the questions on affect and role during both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations and obtained basically the same results, they concluded that children in responding to the President perceive a representative of the government (role-filler) rather than a particular individual. This conclusion, of course, was particularly critical to their theory of the role of the presidency as a socialization agent. However, given the nature of their investigation, the conclusion was hardly warranted. Easton and Dennis neither tested their respondents for specific information about Presidents, nor did they ask children to compare the characteristics and activities of Presidents. In other words, the children could have perceived Eisenhower and Kennedy as distinct individuals and associated particular, and different, activities and policies with them and still evaluated their role as “making sure that our country is run well.” In fact, there seems to be no reason to believe that personalization *per se* would alter children’s perceptions of the presidential role.

Easton and Dennis’ conclusions, therefore, deserve further investigation. In this paper we will attempt to determine if children saw a particular President (i.e., Richard Nixon) as a symbol of government or as a distinct individual associated with identifiable activities and events. Second, we will attempt to determine if personalization effects children’s evaluation of the role of the President. Third, the theoretical implications of our findings for the socialization process will be examined.

A study by Sigel suggests that at least on information levels, Easton and Dennis were wrong. Sigel found children to be more perceptive of the distinguishing characteristics of a given President than Easton and Dennis’ findings or theory would allow. Shortly after the assassination of President Kennedy, she questioned 1349 primary and secondary school children (grades 4-12) concerning how much they remembered about the late President. Her findings revealed that already in the fourth grade children associated specific, political characteristics with Kennedy even when not prompted to give political responses. Children recalled Kennedy as a peacemaker, a crusader for civil rights, and a leader in search of international friendship. The older the child the more likely he/she was to provide a response with political content. The point is that contrary to Easton and Dennis, Sigel’s children responded to a President not merely as the President (role-filler/office holder) but as a political actor with personal characteristics and political actions peculiar to himself. Sigel, therefore, concluded that contrary to Easton and Dennis’


assumptions, children see a particular individual when they view the presidency.

Sigel's findings warrant some suspicion because they involved a very dynamic President at a period of maximum media coverage (following his assassination); her respondents may have known a great many things about him merely because of the special circumstances. Thus it is important to determine if children manifest considerable political information about other presidents. As one part of our analysis we will replicate Sigel's study with President Nixon as the focus of attention.

Our interviews were conducted in November and December of 1972, a few weeks before and after the presidential election. This, of course, was a period of special coverage of the President but the circumstances hardly equaled an assassination and the media coverage included not only extraordinary cognitive, political, issue-oriented information but also a significant amount of extraordinary effective, personal information. If the students (especially those in elementary school) did not manifest specific knowledge of President Nixon during this period of maximum media coverage, we would know that Sigel's findings were anomalous.

This replication will provide data not only on the extent to which students personalize the President but also on whether they associate different issues and policies with Nixon than those associated with Kennedy by the children in Sigel's study. This will provide additional insights into whether students perceive an individual as President.

DATA

Six hundred and seventy-one students from grades 4, 6, 8, 10 and 12 successfully completed paper and pencil questionnaires for the study. Nine different schools in a large midwestern city agreed to allow their students' participation at one or more grade levels. In each case, graduate students trained by the lead author administered the questionnaire to the students, assuring them that the activity was not a test. The sample was purposive in nature and no attempt at randomization was made.

INFORMATION LEVELS

Guided by Sigel's analysis, we will attempt to determine if we can find support for the following:

1. Starting with fourth graders children should be able to associate with President Nixon specific political issues and policies peculiar to his leadership and apart from his presidential role.

2. The issues and policies associated with Nixon should be different from those associated with President Kennedy by the children in Sigel's study.
3. The older the child the more likely he/she should be able to provide responses with political, issue-oriented content.

The students in this sample were basically asked the same questions administered by Sigel. We drew from Sigel’s work several of her questions and whenever appropriate, updated them. This, we thought, would ensure that we did not provide the children with stimuli not present in the Sigel study. In our study, as in hers, the most revealing responses were those to two open-ended questions. The first provides no cues for a political response and simply asks what is known about President Nixon, allowing for a spontaneous reaction. This non-cued question reads:

First, what do you know most about President Nixon? In other words, when you think about President Nixon, what things come to your mind?

The second, on the other hand, anticipates a political reaction and so tests for the degree of political awareness. This cued question reads:

What specific kinds of things can you think of that President Nixon has done as president?

These two open-ended questions, which we think were far better probing devices for our research than closed questions, were designed to tell us if children could respond to the President in specifically political terms and if they could distinguish the man from the role.

Children’s responses to these questions were categorized as: role responses (those responses which relate directly to the office of the presidency apart from the particular man who occupies the office); personal responses (those which refer to any aspect of Nixon’s personality or family life); and political responses (those replies which are associated with specific issues, policies, and activities with which the particular man in office has been involved).

To measure degree of political awareness, Sigel included in her questionnaire a list of events with which President Kennedy may or may not have been involved during his presidency. Employing a true/false format, children were to choose those events which had actively concerned the President. This list was updated, to make the events relevant to President Nixon’s term of office. Our contemporized list read:

1. wanting 18 year-olds to have the right to vote,
2. limiting the amount of money that people can earn and limiting how much they have to pay for things,
3. taking a trip to the People’s Republic of China,
4. trying to get the United States to join the European Common Market,
5. selling wheat to the Soviet Union (Russia),
6. giving more money from the national government to each state (revenue sharing),
7. a wage-price freeze,
8. sending American soldiers to fight in Ireland,
9. helping to get Congress to pass an important civil rights law,
10. spending a week in Cuba, talking with Fidel Castro, the leader of that country,
11. taking a trip to the Soviet Union,
12. agreeing with the Soviet Union to make fewer atomic weapons,
13. starting the Peace Corps,
14. bringing thousands of American soldiers home from Vietnam,
15. ordering the courts to use busing the achieve integration in public schools.

FINDINGS

Political Awareness. The first stage of this analysis focuses upon whether children associate with the President specific issues, policies, and activities with which he has been involved while in office. Responses to the open-ended questions proved most significant here.

Most respondents offered at least one political item in reply to the two open-ended questions (the specific items will be covered below). For the non-cued question, 65 percent of those responding noted at least one political issue, policy, or event. Two-thirds responded solely with political replies, failing to mention either personal or role-oriented items. For the cued question, 93 percent of those responding to the question associated President Nixon with specific, political items, and only political items.

Significant by their sparsity were responses related to the role of the President. The very few cases of role responses were limited to the youngest children in our sample. Overwhelmingly, if a child responded to either open-ended question, the response was likely to be political. Of the varied responses given to these questions (sometimes two or three per child), the political responses account for a significant portion. Seventy percent of all responses to the non-cued question could be classified as political. Moreover, political responses total 98 percent of all those evoked by the cued question.

For the most part, then, responses which were nonpolitical were associated with the personal characteristics and family life of the President. This ranking by frequency (political, then personal, then role) is in agreement with the findings of Sigel.

These findings indicate that students as they relate to the presidency display an awareness of the issues, policies, and events with which a particular President has been involved. Further, such political responses to the President are more frequent than responses concerning a given President’s per-
sonal characteristics or his role responsibilities. Respondents in this study, moreover, revealed a skill in responding to a political stimulus with a political response. Clearly cognitive awareness of the President is not primarily personal or role-oriented. Rather, the child sees a particular man as President doing specific tasks political in nature. This is the case even in the fourth grade.

The Texture of Political Awareness. Sigel described the texture of what children knew about President Kennedy as follows:

Foreign affairs and peace together were mentioned more frequently than any other issues. However, when peace is separated from foreign affairs, civil rights becomes the most frequently recalled issue; peace ranks second, and foreign affairs third.\(^6\)

As hypothesized, children isolated different factors for Nixon with activities relating to foreign affairs being most salient. The students cite peace only infrequently and associate activities in civil rights with President Nixon hardly at all. Although, some domestic issues, policies, and events were mentioned, the children seemed to find no single domestic activity overwhelmingly interesting. To the contrary, their responses were dominated by references to international relations with special mention of two themes in this area: Vietnam and international rapprochement.

VIETNAM. Forty-seven percent of all responses to the non-cued question refer to the Vietnam issue and President Nixon’s policy concerning it, while 41 percent pertained to Vietnam on the cued question.

RAPPROCHEMENT. The next most readily visible theme is that of international rapprochement. Under this heading appears the second and third most mentioned items: President Nixon’s trip to China and his trip to Russia. Children showed little awareness of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks or trade agreements. It appears that children were well aware of the President’s journeys abroad, but knew little concerning the specific issues which he discussed with Soviet and Chinese leaders. Aggregate findings show that 212 children mentioned either the trip to China or both the China and the Russia trips while 87 mentioned either the trip to Russia or both trips. The President’s journey to China, then, permeated the ranks of the young to a greater degree than his journey to Russia.

DOMESTIC ACTIVITIES. About 37 percent of the sample mentioned at least one domestic activity of President Nixon. This holds for all five grade levels. One such theme was the economy. Seventy-one percent of all those who expressed awareness of domestic activity with which the President had been involved mentioned one related to the economy. Economy-related responses included the wage-price freeze, tax policy, inflation, and unemployment. Apparently, the wage-price freeze best caught the attention of

\(^6\) Ibid., 218-219.
the students here, but even so, only 15 percent of all respondents mentioned it. Most of those revealing an awareness of the wage-price freeze (or at least knowledge of the phrase) were students in grades 10 and 12. No fourth grader noted the freeze in response to the open-ended questions.

Among other activities mentioned, there was a miscellaneous grouping which included only rarely noted items. These items were the 18 year-old vote, policy on drugs, campaign practices and aid to education. References to each of these were limited to a few responses.

For the children in our sample, then, President Nixon emerged as a President most active in international relations, more specifically, in coping with the war in Vietnam and in establishing a détente with China and Russia. No one domestic issue was as salient for the students as Vietnam, the trip to China or the trip to Russia. We can only speculate why this occurred. First, President Nixon in reality expended most of his time and energy in the arena of international relations and students may have been reflecting the actual tendencies of the man in office. Second, perhaps domestic issues such as inflation, tax policy, and unemployment are too complex for children to capsulize in a few words like “the China trip” or “the Vietnam War.” Moreover, those activities in international relations which children mentioned involved certain visible elements (e.g., pictures of Nixon and Mao shaking hands), where a domestic policy such as the wage-price freeze did not. Finally, media coverage of Vietnam and presidential journeys may have had decisive effects on the texture of what students knew about President Nixon.

Political Awareness and Age. Previous studies have differed on the relationship between a child’s political awareness and his/her age. Easton and Dennis have emphasized an early, rapid development of political awareness by which most decisive socialization has become stable by the time a child completes the eighth grade.7 Jennings and Niemi, on the other hand, have shown that significant changes in political interest and partisanship occurs in, and after, the high school years.8 Sigel’s study shows that political awareness increases with age into high school.9 Our findings are mixed, but we suspect that this is the result of our survey technique.

On the two open-ended questions we did not find a linear progression. Operationalizing political awareness as the percentage of respondents mentioning at least one political activity and age as grade level, we find that political awareness peaks at grade 6 and regresses slightly thereafter. Seventy-one percent of the sixth graders mentioned at least one political item in response to the non-cued question. In comparison, political responses were provided by 60 percent of the fourth graders, 62 percent of the eighth graders,

7 Easton and Dennis, Children in the Political System . . . , pp. 111-141.
9 Sigel, “Image of a President . . .,” 222.
65 percent of the tenth graders and 59 percent of the twelfth graders. Clearly, there is no linear progression.

However, as mentioned above, our questionnaire included a series of true/false statements, each stipulating that President Nixon was involved in a certain activity. Respondents were to distinguish between the accurate and inaccurate statements. This series of questions revealed a definite progression in political awareness. Each grade level scored higher on correctly identifying political activities as those with which President Nixon was or was not involved. The mean for correct responses were: fourth, 8.2; sixth, 9.6; eighth, 10.6; tenth, 11.0; and twelfth, 11.7. Here, then, we have a clear conformation of the progression by age shown in the Sigel data.

Our measures probably yield different results because the two items (open-ended questions and true/false statements) probably measure different things. The open-ended questions may have simply tapped how many children could or would supply political responses. We suspect that these questions may have seemed a bit naive to the older students. The true/false statements, on the other hand, provided a good measure of just how much the students knew; that is, of the quality not the quantity of their awareness. Although there was no progression through the grades of those who could or would supply political responses, it seems clear that the older the student, the more precise his/her political awareness relative to the President was.

In sum, these findings confirm Sigel’s conclusions concerning children’s levels of knowledge about Presidents and there is little reason to be surprised. The President is the focal point of so much attention in the media and in the public schools that it would be surprising if students did not have considerable superficial information about an incumbent. The fact that the information about a President is probably very superficial is not significant here. The important point is that the students can identify a particular individual as President and associate specific activities with him.

THE PRESIDENT’S ROLE

Easton and Dennis measured students’ perceptions of the President’s role with the following question:

Here are some things that boys and girls have said about what the President’s job is. What do you think the job of the President is? Put an X beside the two things below that say what you think the job of the President is: (1) His job is to keep us out of war; (2) His job is to make friends with other countries; (3) His job is to help people in our country; (4) His job is to stand for our country; (5) His job is to make people obey the laws; and (6) His job is to make sure our country is run well.

This approach to measuring perceptions of the President’s role is troublesome since it is fixed-choice and none of the suggested alternatives is genuinely
trivial or negative. Still, Easton and Dennis found it significant that a majority of even their 3rd graders (54%) selected the most overarching role (i.e., #6), and this choice increased with age (69% of 8th graders).10

Our open-ended questions revealed that when children are asked about a particular President, they respond to him as an individual not as a role-filler; but, this question forces the respondent to select some form of role orientation. We were reluctant to employ the question because basically it is flawed. Still, we deemed it important to determine whether we could obtain generally the same results as Easton and Dennis, even though our respondents definitely perceived a particular individual as President and associated specific activities with him. If so, it would prove that there is not necessarily a conflict between personalization and role evaluation. Thus, we administered the question to our respondents but substituted "people" for "boys and girls." The results were similar to those obtained by Easton and Dennis (see Table 1). A majority of all the students selected "Making sure our country is run well" as the President's role, ranging from 60 percent of the 4th graders to 96 percent of the 12th graders. A large percentage of the students also chose "making friends with other countries" as the President's role, but this is not surprising given the students' awareness of Nixon's trips to Russia and China.

Therefore, despite the fact that the students manifested considerable information about the President, and undoubtedly perceived a particular individual as President, they still tended to select the role (i.e., #6) that Easton and Dennis perceived to be the most important. It seems clear, then, that perceiving that the President is a particular individual and having some information about him does not necessarily lower the students' evaluation of the President's role in the political system. Easton and Dennis' conclusion that children would not be developing support for the role of the presidency if they perceived a particular individual as President, does not seem to be correct.

CONCLUSIONS AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Our analysis leads us to confirm Sigel's contention that children are able to respond to a President with an awareness of specific policies, issues, and events peculiar to his leadership and apart from his role or personality. Even when children are not cued to give a political response to the President, their response is most likely to be political rather than role-oriented or personal.

Interestingly, because this study's emerging picture of President Nixon in a child's mind differed from that of Kennedy in the Sigel study, we have shown that children do, indeed, differentiate the man from the office. Concerning Kennedy, civil rights was the most frequently mentioned item; peace was second; and foreign affairs third. For Nixon, on the other hand, foreign affairs

10 The fact that this choice became more popular with age should have cued Easton and Dennis to a flaw in their thinking. Obviously 8th graders could be expected to have more specific information about a President than 3rd graders.
was far and away the most frequently mentioned item with the Vietnam War and his policy on it, the trip to China and the trip to Russia ranking first, second, and third, respectively. Civil rights was rarely mentioned. Indeed, all domestic issues together were not mentioned as often as the three primary foreign affairs items. Children, then, know the man in office.\textsuperscript{11}

Additionally, this study revealed that when children recognize the President as a specific individual and associate particular acts with him, this does not necessarily alter their perception of his role in the political system. Using the same question employed by Easton and Dennis, students who manifested specific information about the incumbent still evaluated his role in the political system as very important.

The theoretical implications of these findings are most significant. Easton and Dennis have argued that the presidency is a universal and central mechanism of political socialization because children's attitudes toward, and perceptions of, the presidency are not occupant-specific. However, the facts would seem to be these. First, children certainly perceive a particular individual as President. This conclusion is supported not only by this and Sigel's investigation but by a number of studies which show that children most recently have manifested very negative attitudes toward the President.\textsuperscript{12} Obviously if they saw a role-filler rather than an individual their attitudes would be consistent and, based on past studies, they would probably be positive. Second, the fact that students perceive a particular individual as President is \textit{per se} probably not terribly important. As we have seen, students tend to see the President's role as important even when they perceive the officeholder. Third, the important factor is probably not whether students perceive an officeholder but whether they like him. Recent studies which have found negative attitudes toward a President have also tended to show that the students perceived the President as being unimportant or nonef- ficacious.\textsuperscript{13} Thus it is affect, not personalization that seems to determine the role of the presidency in the socialization process.

Despite the fact that these findings mean that the presidency does not play a consistent role in introducing and attracting student's support for the polit-
cal authority system, occupant-specific attitudes toward the presidency may still play an important role in developing support for the political system. If a child liked a particular President, there is no reason to assume that this affect would not spill over to the presidency and later this affect might color (or at least bias) a student’s evaluation of the larger political system.

However, if children seriously dislike a particular President, the situation would be much different than that predicted by Easton and Dennis. Since Easton and Dennis’ theory has the President symbolizing not a person but the whole political system, the implications of negative attitudes are very severe. However, if the child’s impressions are occupant-specific, negative attitudes may be less consequential. The child may believe (or more correctly, be taught) that a specific President is bad, but that the rest of the system is viable. Thus the distinction between man and office may be an important support mechanism for children as well as adults.

**TABLE I**

*Students’ Perception of the President’s Job*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Keep us out of war</th>
<th>20%</th>
<th>Make friends with other countries</th>
<th>61</th>
<th>Help people in our country</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>Stand for our country</th>
<th>35</th>
<th>Make people obey the laws</th>
<th>14</th>
<th>Make sure our country is run well</th>
<th>60</th>
<th>Total</th>
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