

# Parents, Peers, and Political Participation: Social Influence among Roommates

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March 17, 2022



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Every year, millions of young adults leave the familiarity of their parents' homes to live with complete strangers – the roommates assigned to live with them in a college dormitory. Through these roommates, each student encounters a variety of ideas and experiences that may differ markedly from those their parents provided. What are the consequences of these encounters? Specifically, do these strangers shape students' levels of political involvement? And how might students react when these strangers grew up in households with different political values from their own?

To answer these questions, we examined the validated voting records of college students living in university housing at Florida State University. The students we examined were randomly assigned to live with one or more other first-year students. Since these students were randomly assigned, the correlation between one student's participation and their roommate's participation is likely to be causal—rather than a coincidence, arising from selecting friends who share their orientation toward politics (or other factors that indirectly shape political participation).

The first question we examine is whether roommates engage their peers in politics by encouraging them to participate. As Figure 1 demonstrates, this is indeed the case. Among students whose roommate abstained, 54% voted, compared to 68% among students whose roommates also voted. For comparison, this 14-point difference is about two-thirds the size of the 23-point gap between the participation rates of students whose parents never vote (52% turnout) and students whose parents always vote (75% turnout). In other words, living with a stranger for only a few months can have an effect approaching that of a lifetime of socialization.

The second question we examine is whether students become mobilized or demobilized when they encounter someone from a different background. Academic work on the subject often argues that difference demobilizes; when individuals encounter a different perspective, they become more ambivalent about politics. Ambivalence, in turn, makes voting decisions more difficult because discerning the best choice requires conscious trade-offs. It also makes participation less rewarding—without a clear “team” to root for, participation no longer yields the satisfaction from helping “their team” win. Yet an alternative possibility is that difference may mobilize by broadening their political expertise and making the stakes of the election more apparent.

Table 1 suggests that difference mobilizes, rather than demobilizes. The table shows three distinct measures of “difference.” We measure race/ethnicity difference as cases where

difference based on the difference between the student and roommate's household political profiles, constructed by Catalist, a private voter-targeting firm. And we measure party difference as cases where the most prevalent party registration in the student's household differs from that of their roommate's household. The first three rows of the table display the near-term effect of difference using turnout in the 2016 presidential election. The last three rows display longer-term effects using turnout in the 2018 midterm elections.

The table suggests exposure to difference has no demobilizing effects, on average. In each case, turnout is never lower for students whose roommates differ from them on a given trait than it is for the baseline comparison group. For instance, the baseline for race/ethnicity corresponds to roommate pairs with the same race/ethnicity. In 2016, 68% of these baseline students voted—similar to the 70% turnout among students whose roommates did not share their race or ethnicity.

In contrast, exposure to roommates with different ideological or partisan households in 2016 tends to increase participation two years later. Though political disagreement may be uncomfortable for most people, it seems to promote political participation. And this effect is not fleeting, arising two years after the first meeting.

Our study contributes to our knowledge of interpersonal influence in several ways. First, by taking advantage of the natural experiment that occurs when colleges randomly assign students to be roommates, we eliminate many of the confounds that beset previous studies of interpersonal influence. The random assignment of roommates allows us to overcome observational challenges common to most studies of social influence including the inability to disentangle selection into social interactions from the effects of such interactions. Thus, we can be confident that the evidence of peer-to-peer influence that we observe is unbiased. Our study provides compelling evidence that students' decisions to participate in politics are affected by their peer's decisions to participate. Second, we show that exposure to political, racial, and ethnic differences does not cause people to disengage from politics; indeed, exposure to differences may actually mobilize voters to participate in the political process.

This research was conducted with the generous support of the Leroy Collins Institute at Florida State University.

## Figures

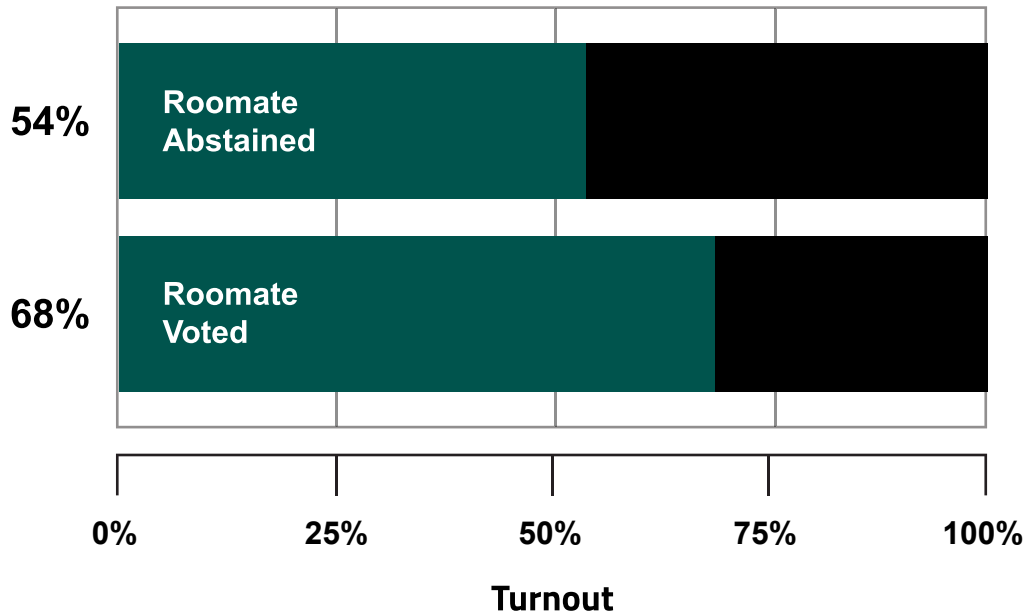


Figure 1. Students' turnout rate in 2016 by whether their randomly assigned roommate turned out to vote in the 2016 presidential election.

Year	Type of Difference	TURNOUT PROBABILITY		Change in Probability	CONFIDENCE INTERVAL	
		Baseline	Different Roommate		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
2016	Race/Ethnicity	0.68	0.70	0.02	-0.08	0.11
	Ideology	0.69	0.72	0.03	-0.01	0.07
	Party	0.66	0.72	0.06	-0.01	0.13
2018	Race/Ethnicity	0.59	0.64	0.05	-0.03	0.14
	Ideology	0.60	0.65	0.05	0.02	0.08
	Party	0.56	0.67	0.11	0.04	0.18

Table 1. The change in turnout rates as students and their 2016 roommates differ more in terms of their household partisan identity, ideology, or race/ethnicity.

**Notes for Table 1:** For race/ethnicity, the Baseline column reflects students whose roommates share their race/ethnicity. The Different Roommate column reflects students whose roommates do not share their race/ethnicity. For party, the Baseline column reflects students for whom the most prevalent party registration in the student's household is the same as that of their roommate's household. The Different Roommate column reflects students for whom the most prevalent party registration in their household differs from that of their roommates. For ideology, the Baseline column reflects students whose roommate's household political profile differs from their own household profile by an average amount. The Different Roommate column reflects students whose roommate's household political profile differs from their own household profile by one standard deviation above average. The Change in Probability is equal to the difference between the Baseline and Different Roommate columns. The Confidence Interval columns represent the 90% confidence intervals of the changes in probability.

## **Methodological Details**

To conduct our research, we examine the validated voting records of college students living in university housing at Florida State University. Our analysis focuses on students beginning their first year at FSU in the Summer or Fall semesters of 2016. We restrict our sample to students who had their roommates assigned to them by university housing. To identify randomly assigned roommates, we sought students' consent to gain access to their university records. These records included students' campus addresses and permanent mailing addresses—typically their parent or guardian's home address. We obtained consent from 2,319 students. University Housing then provided us with a spreadsheet indicating the campus address and permanent mailing address for each of these students and a column identifying which of these students were randomly assigned to their rooms. Using the address data, we then obtained validated voting records from Catalist for each student and all residents of their permanent mailing addresses. Among the consenting students, 438 students were randomly assigned to live with another student who also consented to participate. We are grateful to the LeRoy Collins Institute for providing the funds we used to purchase the Catalist data.

All data collection and analysis reported here were approved by FSU's Human Subjects Committee (STUDY00000474).

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This report was written by Dr. Brad T. Gomez, Associate Professor and Chair, and Dr. Matthew T. Pietryka, Associate Professor at FSU's Department of Political Science.

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