

Fleming, David. (2009). *Parents and Politics: How Parenthood and Education Policy Shape Civic and Political Behavior*.

### **Abstract**

This study investigates the relationship between parents and politics. In part one, the effect of having school-aged children on parents' political outcomes is examined. Do the resource constraints associated with child-rearing depress participation, or does the presence of children increase activity? One finds that parents are more active in school-based political participation, such as voting in school board elections. While parenthood does not increase turnout in general elections, parenthood affects mothers and fathers differently for non-voting forms of political participation.

Given their increased interest in education, parents are an issue public. Previous research has determined that parents can be mobilized by campaign messages mentioning education (Sides and Karch 2008). Therefore, candidates may have an incentive to give education a prominent place in their campaigns. To test this possibility, television advertisements from 2004 House and Senate candidates are examined. Candidates with a large proportion of parents in their electorates are more likely to mention education in their advertisements.

According to policy feedback theory, public policies are not merely outputs of the political system. Rather, public policies and institutions can shape future inputs. In this case, education policies may influence parents' political behavior. One particular form of education policy, school vouchers, provides an interesting case study. On one hand, school vouchers may empower low-income parents and lead to higher levels of social capital and political participation. On the other hand, the market-based nature of school vouchers may privatize parents' experiences with education and impede collective action. In part two, original parental survey data from an evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program are used. Comparing voucher parents to a matched sample of public school parents, one sees that voucher parents exhibit higher levels of social capital and internal school efficacy. Further, there is little evidence that school vouchers privatize parents' attitudes. There are limited spillover effects of school vouchers on political attitudes and election turnout, although voucher parents are more politically efficacious than are public school parents. While it is doubtful that school voucher programs will drastically improve political inequality, this reform has the capacity to empower low-income parents.