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Political Socialization and the Making of Citizens

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Abstract and Keywords

Political socialization describes the process by which citizens crystalize political identities, values and behavior that remain relatively persistent throughout later life. This chapter provides a comprehensive discussion of the scholarly debate on political socialization, posing a number of questions that arise in the study of political socialization and the making of citizens. First, what is it about early life experiences that makes them matter for political attitudes, political engagement, and political behavior? Second, what age is crucial in the development of citizens' political outlook? Third, who and what influences political orientations and behavior in early life, and how are cohorts colored by the nature of time when they come of age? Fourth, how do political preferences and behavior develop after the impressionable years? The chapter further provides an outlook of the challenges and opportunities for the field of political socialization.

Keywords: Political socialization, impressionable years, socialization agents, generations, stability of political preferences

Introduction

Observing the regularity and continuity of individuals' patterns of political behavior over time, already in the 1950s scholars were drawing attention to the need to study processes of early political socialization. Hyman (1959, 25) defined political socialization as an individual's "learning of social patterns corresponding to his societal position as mediated through various agencies of society." It is a process of largely informal learning that almost everyone experiences throughout life as a consequence of interactions with parents, family, friends, neighbors, peers, colleagues, and so forth. Merelman (1986, 279; emphasis added) further describes political socialization as "the process by which people acquire relatively *enduring* orientations toward politics in general and toward their own political system."

Early life experiences are generally considered to form the basis for political attitudes (e.g., political values and identity), political engagement (e.g., political interest and political efficacy), and ultimately political behaviors (e.g., conventional and unconventional forms of political participation). Young citizens, it is believed, are not yet set in their political ways and are subsequently more easily influenced by external factors. Yet today there is no agreement on how enduring these early socialization experiences are. Some argue for lifelong plasticity, based on the idea that citizens update their preferences and behavior as they go through the life span and experience important life events (Alwin and Krosnick 1991). Others argue that basic orientations acquired early in life structure later political orientations and beliefs, and that these orientations and beliefs tend to be enduring and persistent (Easton and Dennis 1969).

This chapter provides a comprehensive discussion of the scholarly debate on political socialization, posing a number of questions that arise in the study of political socialization and the making of citizens. First, what is it about early life experiences that makes them matter for political attitudes, political engagement, and political behavior? Second, what age is crucial in the development of citizens' political outlook? Third, who and what influences political orientations and behavior in early life, and how are cohorts colored by the nature of time when they come of age? Fourth, how do political preferences and behavior develop after the impressionable years?

The first section of this chapter discusses the development of the field of political socialization and its quest for the origin and development of political preferences and behaviors. We address the impressionable years and the mechanisms behind the socialization approach. Then we discuss the influence of socializing agents. An important factor that has often been overlooked in the literature is how the political, economic, and social contexts in which people grow up color the political views of entire generations, leading to potential societal changes. In connection to this we also discuss the idea of generational change. The third section describes the long-term dynamics of socialization through an overview of the age, period, and cohort (APC) approach. In the final section we provide an overview of the theoretical and methodological challenges and opportunities for the study of political socialization.

Political Socialization: History and Key Concepts

Early empirical socialization studies mainly focused on political orientations and behaviors of young children, as it was believed that political attitudes were acquired very

early in life (see, e.g., Easton and Dennis 1969). This early research was driven by two assumptions. First, it was assumed that what is learned earliest in life is most important, as early experiences serve as a value basis for future attitudes and behaviors (Niemi and Hepburn 1995). Second, it was presumed that attitudes and behaviors acquired prior to adulthood remained unchanged in later life. A large volume of research on the formation of political attitudes and behavior assessed these two assumptions (cf. Dennis and McCrone 1970; Jennings and Niemi 1974; Sears and Valentino 1997), and the classical example of an enduring attitude is the concept of party identification, studied in detail in the seminal work *The American Voter* by Campbell et al. (1960).

However, later research showed that the persistence of preferences and behaviors developed in early life had been overestimated (Searing, Wright, and Rabinowitz 1976), and it became evident that political ideas developed during childhood were revised later in life (Searing, Schwartz, and Lind, 1973). In fact, a decade later Kinder and Sears (1985, 724) concluded that a more plausible view of the development of political preferences and behavior is one that combines the impressionable years and persistence hypotheses with the possibility of small but still noticeable levels of change in later life. The focus of scientific discussion at this point shifted from early political socialization to more in-depth studies of aging. Especially Marsh's (1971) critique of the early studies of political socialization changed the understanding of "what, when and how people learn political behaviour and attitudes" (Hepburn 1995, 5). Marsh challenged in particular the assumption that "adult opinions are in a large part the end product of political socialisation" (1971, 455). Such persistence, Marsh concluded, applies only to important personality variables, whereas the enduring nature of political attitudes remains uncertain.

Research accordingly shifted focus from attitude stability to the conceptualization of socialization as an individual political development and a process of learning. Party identification is a central concept in the study of political science and served as the main battlefield for the advocates of different views. Party identification was originally conceptualized as an identity, that is, something that could be developed without the cognitive skills to fully understand the political world. Later scholars proposed to think of partisanship less as an identity—being stable over the life cycle—and more of an attitude that arises as a function of informed reactions to the performance of governments and opposition parties in a number of policy areas, most notably the economy (cf. Ordeshook 1976; Fiorina 1981; Page and Jones 1979; Franklin and Jackson 1983; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989). Because governments and economic good times are never permanent, an individual's affiliation with a political party is always subject to "rational updating." Hence this research tries to uncover how the nature of the *current* time affects the direction and strength of certain political attitudes such as partisanship.

The focus on performance-based evaluations of government and their impact on party identification diminished the importance of early political socialization. This explains why political socialization disappeared from the academic agenda for a period of time between the 1970s and 1990s, before re-emerging as important and salient in the early 2000s.

The Impressionable Years: When and What

The general consensus after decades of research thus appears to be that political learning is a lifelong process, starting at an early age (Easton and Dennis 1969; Jennings and Niemi 1981; van Deth et al. 2007). The “impressionable or formative years” between childhood and adulthood are generally believed to be a crucial period during which citizens form the basis of political attitudes and behaviors (see, e.g., Jennings 1979; Strate et al. 1989; Highton and Wolfinger 2001; Kinder 2006). Young citizens have not yet developed political habits and are therefore more easily influenced by external factors (Alwin and Krosnick 1991; Flanagan and Sherrod 1998; Sears and Levy 2003). Personal, social, cultural, political, and historical changes affect young citizens disproportionately, thus creating generational differences in patterns of political attitudes and behavior.

The crucial impressionable years are traditionally between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five (Jennings and Niemi 1981). For example, when examining macro-partisan trends among adults, Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002) found that political events had the largest impact at ages eighteen and nineteen. Nonetheless, both a clear definition and operationalization of the impressionable years are lacking, and political learning is certainly not confined to these adolescent and early adulthood years. Moving away from predefining the boundaries of the impressionable years, recent studies have found that children in their first year of primary school, who are not yet literate or numerate, can recognize political problems and issues and already show consistent, structured political orientations (van Deth, Abendschön, and Vollmar 2011). Bartels and Jackman (2014), in their study of political learning, as expected found evidence for a period of heightened sensitivity to political events during adolescence, but the peak period of sensitivity was found to be between the ages of seven and seventeen. Ghitza and Gelman (n.d.), following up on the work by Bartels and Jackman, likewise present empirical estimates of the formative years. Based on their estimation, the height of formative experiences is between the ages of fourteen and twenty-four, with two peaks: one at fifteen to sixteen years and another at twenty-one to twenty-two years.

Recent research therefore suggests that children may be socialized into politics at a very young age. This implies that the lower age band of the impressionable years should be brought down. At the same time there is also evidence that the period of political learning

nowadays is extended. Research by Bhatti and Hansen (2012b), for example, suggests that turnout drops after the first voting experience at the age of eighteen, and that only around the age of thirty-five do citizens bounce back to their first-time turnout levels. This can be linked to the theoretical expectation that life-cycle events experienced during early adulthood influence the development of political interest and political participation (Neundorf, Smets, and García Albacete 2013). Delays in the transition to adulthood imply that defining the impressionable years too narrowly entails missing out on a number of important life-cycle changes (Iacovou 2002; Council of Europe 2005; Smets 2016). Boundaries of the impressionable years may, moreover, be context dependent.

How Does Socialization Work?

If political socialization processes start at a young age, what are the mechanisms through which children learn about politics? First, children learn directly or indirectly about social and political issues from various socializing agents. Such agencies can be diverse: family, peers, school, mass media, and even the political context. There is also a mobilizing element to political socialization, as those around us can influence, encourage, or discourage our behavior. We address these two mechanisms in more detail in the next section.

Thinking about the mechanisms of political socialization, let us make an analogy to describe the idea of socialization as forming relatively stable political preferences. Imagine that we each have a finite bookshelf that holds our political values, identities, and behavior, which is empty when we are born. During our childhood and adolescence these shelves are slowly filled with stories that we receive from the various agents of socialization and our own experiences. We learn about the political world and are exposed to (biased) information about political ideas. Each experience, conversation, and piece of information gets stored on our mental bookshelves. But at some point there is no more space on the shelves, and we start to have pretty definite ideas about politics and our own opinions. If asked what we think about political issues or how we should behave politically, we go to our mental shelves and take out the books that contain information and experiences related to this topic. The problem, however, is that as one's shelf fills up, it is more and more difficult for new information to be considered, as this implies that old books need to be disregarded. New books might pile up somewhere on the floor, but they will not be stored as considerations in our set of beliefs and values. This idea of predispositions that are quite fundamental in a person's belief system and that come from socialization processes goes back to the work of John Zaller (1992).

Another viewpoint on political socialization is the idea of habit formation, a mechanism that has mostly been researched in relation to individual level voter turnout, that is, a

citizen's decision to vote or abstain from voting in elections. In the political learning approach to political behavior, it is argued that citizens learn the habit of either voting or nonvoting in the early stages of their adult lives, and that past behavior predicts present behavior (Green and Shachar 2000; Kanazawa 2000; Bendor, Diermeier, and Ting 2003; Gerber, Green, and Shachar 2003; Aldrich, Montgomery, and Wood 2011; Dinas 2012). Plutzer (2002, 44) explains the political learning perspective with the example of someone aged forty with a higher than average income. Based on this information we would expect this man or woman to have an above average level of political participation. What if a couple of years later the person loses his or her job and has to take on one that pays an average wage? Thinking of voting as a habit, a change in income is not likely to influence levels of political participation, even though the possibility of disruptions in the habit of voting can never be completely excluded (Plutzer 2002; Strate et al. 1989).

The large impact of past turnout on current turnout decisions observed in the literature is explained through various mechanisms (see, e.g., Cutts, Fieldhouse, and John 2009; Aldrich, Montgomery, and Wood 2011; Dinas 2012 for overviews). First, turnout is caused by a set of factors such as political interest or partisanship that are relatively stable over the life span (Prior 2010; Neundorff, Smets, and García Albacete 2013). These factors may therefore influence the starting level of political participation (i.e., whether someone will vote at his or her first opportunity) but not so much the subsequent levels of political participation over the life span (Plutzer 2002). Second, the act of voting is self-reinforcing, as it increases positive attitudes toward voting and alters one's self-image to the extent that voting contributes to that image. Third, once voters have been to the polls they face lower information barriers and can make use of their hands-on experience and knowledge of the political system during subsequent elections. Despite a fair amount of empirical evidence for the existence of a habitual voting effect, the literature is not yet settled on the cause of repeated behavior. Whether other forms of political behavior are also habitual is also yet to be determined.

Socialization Agents: Family, Schools, and Beyond

The previous section addressed the importance of the impressionable years as well as the concepts of political learning and habit formation. The question we have not yet answered is who and what influences young people's political perceptions and behaviors during childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood years. With political learning already taking place at a very young age, it comes as no surprise that much of the literature has

focused on the influence that parents have on their children. Likewise, the influence of education, or more specifically civic education, has received ample attention in the literature. Some newer research also investigates the role of other socialization agents: peers, (conventional and social) media, and even political events. Socializing agents either directly or indirectly teach children about politics but also have a mobilizing function as they influence, encourage, or discourage young people's political preferences and political action.

Parents as Socialization Agents

Scholars have emphasized the impact of the family as one of the main socialization agents in the transmission of basic political orientations (Dalton 1980; Jennings and Niemi 1968, 1981; Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009). The determinant influence of parental socialization has mostly been stressed in conjunction with the development of party identification (Taylor, Peplau, and Sears 1994; Campbell et al. 1960; Jennings and Niemi 1974; Kroh and Selb 2009), political ideology (Percheron and Jennings 1981), and political participation (Beck and Jennings 1982; Verba, Schlozman, and Burns 2005).

Parents are considered to influence the development of their children's political orientations in at least two ways. First, parents influence their children's levels of political awareness through the explicit political characteristics of family life (Jennings and Niemi 1968; Beck and Jennings 1982). Highly politicized parents may foster positive civic orientations that stimulate engagement in politics (Beck and Jennings 1982, 98). Moreover, Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers (2009) offer evidence that successful parent-child transmissions occur more often when the family environment is more politicized, arguing that in this case parents provide consistent signals about where they stand politically. The presence of role models, parents in particular, may lead to imitation and subsequently even adoption of behaviors and attitudes (see, e.g., Kandel and Andrews 1987 and Dryer 1998 for more on imitation and socialization).

The second way in which parents influence their children is through parental socioeconomic status (SES). Parental SES can contribute to political involvement due to a direct effect on children's SES. Parents with higher SES have children who are more likely to have high levels of education. Children's levels of education, in turn, influence levels of political interest and knowledge. Parental SES, moreover, can contribute to the development of class-specific political orientations as well as encourage civic attitudes and involvement (Beck and Jennings 1982, 96-97; Verba, Schlozman, and Burns 2005, 97; Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009, 790).

However, Westholm (1999) shows that parent-child socialization is not just a two-step process whereby children create an image of where parents stand politically and subsequently adapt their own behavior and thinking to this. Instead, the image that children have of their parents' political views serves as an intervening rather than as a conditioning factor. Moreover, the relationship between children's own views and the image they have of their parents' views is reciprocal. Substituting children's image of their parents' views for actual parent data obscures some of the socialization mechanisms. Westholm (1999, 542, 548) thus warns that the use of children's subjective images of their parents' political views should be avoided in favor of studies based on multiple sources of parental political preferences (i.e., using both children and parents as sources).

Newer research on the influence of parents on their offspring has challenged the idea that children to a large extent adopt the views of their parents. Dinas (2014) shows that parent-child correspondence in party identification is dependent on parental politicization. Those with politically interested and involved parents are indeed most likely to adopt their parents' party identification as adolescents but are also more likely to revise their party affiliation in (early) adulthood, because "those who are politically engaged are most likely to be exposed to new political stimuli in early adulthood" (Dinas, 2014, 827). Also researching the imperfections of parental transmissions, Wolak (2009) found that both the personality of adolescents and their wider political environment mediated parent-child transmission in party identification. Like Dinas, Wolak (2009, 581) finds that more inquisitive adolescents and those who are more attentive to political news tend to have more volatile party preferences and thus are more likely to challenge their parents' political views.

The Influence of School

Besides parent-child transmission of political attitudes and behaviors, the influence of school on the development of political engagement has been the focus of much research. Education itself is highly correlated with political knowledge, interest, voter turnout, and other forms of political participation. Yet it has been repeatedly suggested that this connection might exist largely because education serves as a proxy for social class or cognitive ability, or that education simply serves as a sorting mechanism that divides the population into higher and lower statuses (Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996; Denny and Doyle 2008; Campbell 2009). These and similar questions about the effects of education mean, in David Campbell's words, that "we know relatively little about the civic development of adolescents. Specifically, we have a limited understanding of how schools

do, or do not, foster political engagement among their adolescent students” (Campbell 2009, 438).

With respect to the influence of civic education, the uncertainty is even greater. For a long time it was argued that civic education and the curriculum more broadly had almost no influence at all on students’ attitudes (Langton and Jennings 1968). That proposition has been under fire for almost two decades (Niemi and Junn 1998; Nie and Hillygus 2001). Still, the precise way in which schooling influences students is unclear. One possibility is that civics instruction itself—the classes students take that teach about one’s government and one’s role as a citizen—is the causal agent. Even then, the influence may stem from specific features of the class: whether it consists mostly of lectures, incorporates class discussions, involves students in group projects, and so forth. Another possibility, which has found support from a major cross-national study, is that the climate of the classroom—how free students feel to express their opinions and have them discussed and respected—underlies student attitudes, political engagement, and even political knowledge (Torney-Purta 2002). Community service, which may or may not be a part of formal classroom instruction, is yet another factor that may influence youths’ feelings and actions about civic and political participation (Finlay, Wray-Lake, and Flanagan 2010).

The role of civic education in mobilization and political participation has not only been explored in Western democracies. Based on research in the Dominican Republic and South Africa, Finkel (2002) finds that civic education also mobilizes citizens in developing democracies, but that the impact depends on citizens’ levels of political resources. Civic education and other mobilizing processes are complementary, which implies that civic education alone cannot overcome the unequal distribution of politically relevant resources in developing democracies.

More recent work on civic education has attempted to gauge the relative influence of multiple socializing agents. For example, Neundorf, Niemi, and Smets (2016) study the combined effect of parental socialization and civic education. As discussed previously, the political environment in the parental home has a strong impact on the political development of children. However, many young people do not come from political families and hence are disadvantaged in developing political preferences and being mobilized into politics. Neundorf, Niemi, and Smets (2016) hence investigate whether civic education in school can compensate for missing parental socialization. Their findings are based on panel data and suggest that civics training in schools indeed compensates for inequalities in family socialization with respect to political engagement. This conclusion holds for two very different countries (the United States and Belgium), at very different points in time (the 1960s and the 2000s), and for a varying length of observation (youth to old age and impressionable years only).

Peers and (Social) Media

School is one of the first environments in which children have contact with other people who are not parents, siblings, or other family members. Not only are children mobilized by their peers, they also discuss sociopolitical issues together, share popular culture, and develop (common or opposing) sets of values (Langton 1967; Tedin 1980). Peer groups also introduce social norms; moreover, being part of a social network establishes useful democratic and economic principles such as the exchange of goods, services, and information (Cochran and Brassard 1979).

Peer cultures are also transmitted via (social) media. Wattenberg (2008) argues that media nowadays socialize young people in a different way than they did in previous generations. Commercialization of the media has had consequences for both the content and form of all items broadcast. As a consequence, young people are less likely to be exposed to political information and more likely to be exposed to entertainment (see also Prior 2005). This in turn has led to a growing lack of interest in politics as well as lower levels of political knowledge among young people.

Of course nowadays citizens spend an increasingly larger portion of their time online. One of the questions that has garnered a lot of scholarly interest is whether such new media forms foster interaction with people with different views or rather tend to be echo chambers in which citizens interact with like-minded people only. Work on the mobilizing effects of new social media shows that these networks tend to be homophilic and that citizens mostly interact with people who have similar ideological preferences and political views (Barberá et al. 2015). These findings open up avenues for new ways of using big data collected through social media websites. For example, Barberá (2015) shows how social network activity—such as the use of Twitter—can be used to estimate citizens' ideological positions.

Political Events

The political context in which citizens grow up has often been overlooked as a socializing agent. In his contribution on turnout in established democracies and the learning effect of voting, Mark Franklin argues that the way in which young voters react to the character of an election is crucial to this incoming cohort's future turnout levels (2004, 65). Short-term characteristics of elections influence younger citizens' turnout decisions but have much less impact on the decisions of older voters, who have already established a habit of voting or abstaining (Franklin 2004, 80). Electoral competition is especially important in this respect.

As Smets and Neundorf (2014) demonstrate, high-stakes elections tend to attract more voters than elections in which the outcome is a foregone conclusion. This mobilization effect is strongest for young voters. Cohorts that grew up in a highly politicized context have a higher propensity to turn out to vote in later life. However, using data from the US General Social Survey, Smets and Neundorf show that those coming of age in a highly polarized political context are less likely to vote in later life. In a two-party system like the United States, large ideological distances may imply that voters have to choose between two parties that do not represent their views (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2004). This is especially the case for voters placing themselves in the center (Callander and Wilson 2007). Hence, in the US setting large ideological distances are more likely to have a negative effect on individual level turnout.

Schuman and Corning (2012, 25) research the impact of critical periods that occur in the lives of citizens from adolescence onward and show that the experience of a transformative event during the critical years of later childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, as well as the experience of an event after the critical years, can contribute to generation-defining memories. The role of political context in political socialization is certainly not confined to the role of elections and electoral behavior. Dinas (2013), for example, shows how the Watergate scandal disproportionately affected young people's (negative) evaluations of President Richard Nixon. Another example by Erickson and Stoker (2011) demonstrates how the Vietnam War impacted political attitudes related to partisanship and international intervention among young Americans affected by the draft, a selective service system applied by the US military in 1969 and 1971. The idea of critical events influencing behavior has also been addressed outside the realm of political science. Malmendier and Nagel (2011), for example, show that experiencing macroeconomic shocks leads to lower levels of financial risk-taking in later life.

The Dynamics of Socialization: Age, Period, and Cohorts

The previous sections focused mainly on the impressionable years and what triggers political learning in early life. Another key question is whether early socialization experiences persist in later life or are overwritten and updated by newer experiences. For this we turn to the dynamics of socialization through a discussion of APC effects.

Defining APC Effects

Research into the question of how an individual develops specific political attitudes or behaviors will usually hold three different—but highly related—factors accountable: aging, enduring intercohort experiences, and time. The idea behind the life-cycle or age approach is that people's patterns of political behavior change as they age, and that the relationship between age and political behavior is curvilinear: people are most active in middle life and least active in the earliest and latest stages of the life cycle. While the curvilinear relationship with age does not seem to hold for all modes of political participation (see, e.g., Stolle and Hooghe 2011), there is ample evidence that the relationship between age and voter turnout can indeed be described with an inverted U-shape. However, it is not the number of candles on one's birthday cake, but the life experiences that accompany the transition to different life stages, that matter for political participation.

According to the life-cycle argument, young people participate less in politics given their low attachment to civic life, a characteristic that is fueled by young people still going through education, being occupied with finding a partner, establishing a career, having higher mobility, dealing with the psychological transformation into adulthood, and so forth. These characteristics lead young people to be politically inexperienced and to have little interest in politics, low levels of knowledge, and fewer skills (i.e., to have few political resources). This in turn makes political participation both more difficult and less meaningful in this first stage of the life cycle (Strate et al. 1989; Jankowski and Strate 1995).

In middle life participation rates are thought to stabilize at a higher level as people experience life-cycle events that mark the transition to adulthood. Such events include leaving the parental home, starting a full-time job, cohabiting or getting married, buying a house, starting a family, settling down in a community, and so forth (Vogel 2001; Billari 2005). Even though many of these processes put a demand on time, they are associated with activities (involvement in organizations, associations, the community, etc.) that tend to enhance political participation due to increased mobilization, skills, and pressure (Strate et al. 1989, 444; Lane 1959, 218; Kinder 2006). As stakeholders, homeowners are more likely to be interested in property tax and mortgages. To those with (full-time) jobs, issues such as pensions and income tax become relevant (Flanagan et al. 2012). As a result the transition to adulthood increases attention to and familiarity with parties' and candidates' positions, which in turn fosters party attachment and other forms of political engagement. All in all, the middle aged seem to have the best cards to understand politics and their part in it (Jankowski and Strate 1995, 91), which is most likely the reason that this stage of the political life cycle is often used as a base against which to

compare the political participation levels of younger and older citizens (Braungart and Braungart 1986, 210).

Participation rates among older age groups, finally, tend to drop under the influence of, for example, health problems, the loss of a politically active spouse, retirement, and declining family income. To summarize, the more general disengagement from social life leads to a lower attachment to political life (Cutler and Bengtson 1974, 163).

Focusing on individuals' life experiences, the political life-cycle or age approach neglects the fact that social, cultural, and historical events can impact political attitudes and political participation. This is how the cohort or generation approach entered the spotlight of socialization research. Common within these cohort and generation approaches is the idea that it is not so much the dynamics of biological aging that make one grow into political life, but rather social, cultural, and historical factors that shape the political participatory patterns of a cohort or generation (De Graaf 1999; Braungart and Braungart 1986). Historical differences and social change are thus considered to be the driving factors behind age differences in political preferences and behavior.

The resulting *cohort effects* or, as they are sometimes called, *generation effects*, are defined to be "enduring intercohort distinctions that are attributable to the common 'imprinting' of cohort members. With regard to attitudinal dependent variables, generation effects are often presumed to be the result of cohort members having shared similar socialising experiences, especially during late adolescence and early adulthood" (Markus 1983, 718; cf. Mannheim 1952; Ryder 1965).

A cohort is very generally defined as a "number of individuals who have some characteristics in common" (Glenn 2005, 2). This common characteristic is often the year of birth. Usually cohorts are divided into equal time periods (e.g., five- or ten-year birth year periods), whereby the span of years for each cohort may be dictated by theoretical concerns or data constraints. But cohorts may also be defined with reference to other variables of interest (e.g., persons who came of age at the same time or individuals who finished high school in a particular year).¹

Finally, specific observed attitudes or behavior may be a function of the current political, economic, or societal situation, as well as idiosyncratic events that produce fluctuations over time. These *period effects* are therefore major events, such as the presence of war or economic downturn, that affect the population as a whole, not just certain age, regional, gender, education, or income groups (De Graaf 1999, 261; Norris 2003, 9; Cutler and Bengtson 1974, 165; Alwin, Hofer, and McCammon 2006, 21).

Conover (1991, 130) argues that life-cycle and cohort effects are interwoven, as "people change in political orientations throughout their life, (but) generations respond

differently to the same events.” In his famous studies on value change (Inglehart 1977; Abramson and Inglehart 1995), Inglehart also argues that later learning must overcome the inertia of preexisting orientations. Jennings (1989, 347) summarizes these considerations:

Young adulthood is the time of identity formation. It is at this age that political history can have a critical impact on a cohort’s political make-up in a direct, experiential fashion.... The political significance of the crystallisation process lies in the content of that which is crystallising, the social, political, and historical materials that are being worked over and experienced by the young during these formative years. For it is this content that colours the cohort. If the colour differs appreciably from that attached to past cohorts, we have the making of a political generation.

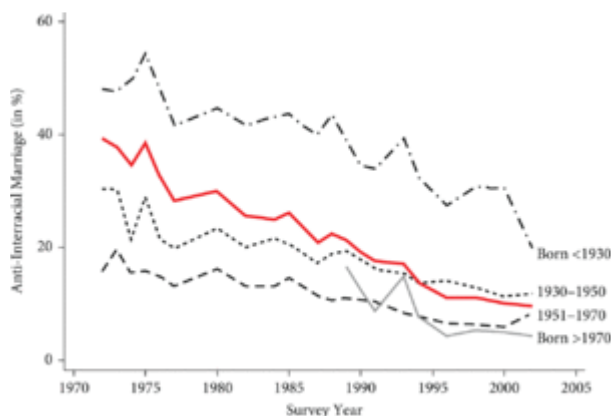
In another work he adds that “what each cohort brings into political maturity has a good deal of continuity and provides a certain degree of stability in terms of what that cohort is likely to draw on as it moves through the rest of the life cycle” (Jennings 1996, 249). But as Niemi and Sobieszek (1977, 228) pointed out twenty years earlier: “Sorting out the relative impact of life cycle, generational, and period effects will no doubt prove to be extraordinarily complicated.” Disentangling these various effects was and remains one of the central challenges of socialization research.

Generational Change and Generational Replacement

Political research on socialization processes has accumulated a vast body of valuable insights into how citizens acquire their political attitudes. Nevertheless, we still know relatively little about whether these socialization experiences lead to true generational differences in how citizens perceive and evaluate politics or behave in the political arena. Taking into account constantly changing societies, it is important to understand generational features of the electorate in order to make predictions for the future.

Figure 1 illustrates the interrelationship of period and cohort effects by plotting the annual averages of attitudes against interracial marriage for four different birth cohorts from the United States between 1972 and 2004.² While same-sex marriage may have now replaced interracial marriage as a salient political issue, the example illustrates the idea of generational replacement by focusing on a concrete political attitude. Figure 1 allows us to explore whether birth cohorts differ in their racial attitudes. The oldest cohort—born before 1930—was still socialized in a highly racially divided country, whereas the cohort born after 1970 grew up after the turbulent times of the civil rights movement in the 1950 and 1960s, when racial discrimination was legally abolished.³ These changing

historical legacies during the formative years of these four cohorts are assumed to have shaped racial attitudes and “colored”—as Jennings would put it—each group in a different way.



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Figure 1 Illustration of Cohort Differences on Anti-Interracial Marital Attitudes

According to figure 1, the cohort born before 1930 consistently exhibits the highest anti-interracial attitudes, with as many as 50% of the respondents advocating laws against interracial marriage in the mid-1970s. Each cohort born and socialized later in time is less averse to interracial marriage. This simple graph reveals three findings. First, we observe

a period effect, as all cohorts seem to become less racially intolerant over time. Second, the declining parallel lines of each cohort confirm that clear differences exist regarding racial attitudes depending on the time a respondent was born and hence socialized. Third, figure 1 further illustrates what some people call *generational replacement*. The thick solid line plots the overall trend in anti-interracial statements, which is declining. From the mid-1990s the overall trend is lower than the average attitude among the cohorts born before 1950. The issue of interracial marriage becomes less salient over time; the explanation for this observation is simply that the weight of “older” cohorts in the overall population is declining. The absolute number of members dwindles as the members of the two cohorts born before 1950 age. To use Ryder’s (1965) words: “Cohort succession, aging, and period-specific historical events provide accounts of social and demographic change” (cited in Smith 2008, 287). The importance of cohort effects remains manifest today. Using longitudinal data, Watson (2015) shows how interaction with welfare state programs influences cohorts’ patterns of democratic engagement.

Bartels and Jackman (2014) propose a new model of political learning and how to think about these dynamics. They conceptualize two interrelated factors that capture the dynamics of political preferences: (1) period-specific “shocks” that reflect the distinctive political events of a given time period and (2) age-specific “weights” that reflect the extent to which these shocks are internalized by individuals at various points in the life cycle. Generational patterns of political change arise endogenously from the interaction of these basic elements. This model is a critique of the classic “running tally” model by

Fiorina (1981) and Achen (1992), who assume that the age-specific “weights” are equal. This posits that political scandals; presidential or government approval rates; natural disasters; economic crises; and any other political, economic, or social events impact each citizen equally no matter where a person is in the life cycle.

Challenges and Opportunities for the Study of Political Socialization

This chapter has discussed four main questions that arise in the study of political socialization and the making of citizens. First, what is it about early life experiences that makes them matter for political attitudes and behavior in later life? Second, what age is crucial in the development of citizens’ political outlooks? Third, who and what influences political behavior in early life, and how are cohorts colored by the nature of the times when they come of age? Fourth, how do political preferences and behavior develop after the impressionable years?

The problem in finding answers to these questions is usually of an empirical nature. Previous studies have often used inappropriate data (e.g., cross-sectional data) or methods (e.g., macro correlations over time) to answer questions about attitudinal and behavioral dynamics. More recently, researchers have used multiwave panel studies that follow the same individuals over time to study the stability or volatility of political preferences (see, e.g., Clarke and McCutcheon 2009; Prior 2010; Neundorf, Stegmueller, and Scotto 2011; Neundorf, Smets, and García Albacete 2013). These studies provide convincing evidence that the impressionable years are indeed important for the development of political orientations, and that there is a great deal of stability in citizens’ political identities and engagement in later life. There are, however, limitations to these studies, which rely mainly on household panel studies. Not designed by political scientists, the indicators available in these data sets are limited to just a few political variables: often only partisanship and political interest. It is both important and interesting to investigate attitude stability for other more policy-oriented preferences as well. Such preferences are, however, usually only included in election panel studies that span just a few years.

New Internet-based panel studies might provide an exciting new avenue for this type of research. For example, the Dutch Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences (LISS), based on a probability sample, includes a wide range of questions on political preferences and behavior. The more than eight thousand respondents have been interviewed annually since 2007. A similar online panel study, the German Internet Panel

(GIP), which includes numerous political variables, was initiated in Germany in 2012.⁴ These studies have the potential to provide data to test remaining questions about the dynamics of political preferences. Unfortunately, comparable data collection efforts have not yet been initiated in the United States or the United Kingdom.

As better data sources and better statistical methods become available, more fine-grained theoretical questions can be tackled. Recent research, for example, focuses on the interaction of different socializing agents (see, e.g., Neundorf, Niemi, and Smets 2016), as well as on more complex household dynamics (see, e.g., Dinas 2014). Other work seeks to understand whether socialization processes known to exist in Western democracies can be extended to new and emerging democracies (see, e.g., Finkel 2002 for work on the impact of civic education on political participation in emerging democracies; Neundorf 2010 for work on the legacy of post-communist and post-authoritarian regimes; and Lupu and Peisakhin n.d. for a study of the long-term impact of political violence on parental transmission of political views in post-Soviet states). Potentially heterogeneous political socialization processes have also recently gained scholarly attention. As Ghitza and Gelman (n.d.) demonstrate, socialization patterns are different for people from different ethnic backgrounds.

With regard to the timing of the formative or impressionable years, shifting away from predefining the age boundaries of this crucial period, recent studies point to socialization processes starting at a much younger age than previously assumed. Both van Deth, Abendschön, and Vollmar (2011) and Bartels and Jackman (2014) suggest that the impressionable years are in late childhood and early adolescence, not only in late adolescence and early adulthood. The study by van Deth, Abendschön, and Vollmar (2011) only includes young children and does not follow them growing up. It is therefore not clear whether these early imprints have a long-lasting impact. On the other hand the study by Bartels and Jackman (2014) relies on a mathematical estimation of the formative years. These results, again, have not yet been fully put to the test. Both studies, however, point to the importance of including in panel studies younger respondents who can then be followed as they grow older.

The timing of the formative years is important for studying the making of political generations. If we want to understand which are the factors that shape such generations, we need to make important assumptions about when citizens are most receptive to external influences. Hence, the timing of political, economic, and social circumstances needs to be determined based on the age when citizens are socialized. However, the scientific debates of APC effects on the one hand, and the origins of political attitudes and behavior on the other, are often unconnected.⁵ We see, however, an enormous opportunity in the study of cohorts and the making of citizens. Cohort analysis, for

example as done by Dinas and Stoker (2014) and Smets and Neundorf (2014), provides us with a tool to understand social changes. Based on new and innovative statistical methods,⁶ these studies allow testing of the impact of factors such as the political, economic, and social environment during a cohort's formative years on long-term political preferences and behavior. These APC cohort studies thus allow us to gain insights into the socialization processes and what colors whole generations or what makes political citizens.

By definition, studying socialization processes focuses on the impact of the personal and social environment of an individual on his or her values, attitudes, and behavior. This ignores the potential impact of biology. The last decade has seen fascinating new opportunities in studying the link between genetics and political attitudes, demonstrating that "nature" or inheritance can have a strong impact on a person's political beliefs (Hatemi et al. 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Oxley et al. 2008; Smith et al. 2011). Questions about which factors and contexts can enhance or weaken certain genetic predispositions are still unexplored. There is still very little research on the interplay between genetics and environmental factors and how these interact over the life span (with the exception of Hatemi et al. 2009a, 2009b), which is an exciting new avenue for future research in the field of political socialization.

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Notes:

⁽¹⁾ The terms *cohort* and *generation* are often used interchangeably. Generations are characterized by some common historical event such as the Great Depression (Elder 1974). The distinction between generations is therefore not necessarily as strict as for cohorts. A common way to distinguish between generations in Western democracies is the following: prewar generation (born before 1944), the baby boomers (1945–1959), the 1960s generation (1960–1969), the 1970s generation (1970–1979), and the post-1970s generation (born in 1980 or later) (see, e.g., Bhatti and Hansen 2012a; Blais et al. 2004; Wass 2007).

⁽²⁾ The exact wording reads as follows: "Do you think there should be laws against marriages between Negroes/Blacks/African-Americans and whites?—Yes or No." Figure 1 plots the percentages of those agreeing with the statement. The data were taken from the US General Social Survey, which was administered annually or biannually between 1972 and 2010. The question on interracial marriage, however, was not included after 2004.

⁽³⁾ Most important for the abolition of discrimination in public life was the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

(⁴) For more information on the LISS, see <http://www.lissdata.nl/lissdata/Home>, and for the GIP: http://reforms.uni-mannheim.de/internet_panel/home/.

(⁵) Examples of studies that explicitly focus on APC analysis are Baker (1978); Abramson (1979); Claggett (1981); Markus (1983); Miller (1992); Tilley (2002) and Tilley and Evans (2011)—partisanship; Klecka (1971); Lyons and Alexander (2000); Franklin, Lyons, and Marsh (2004); Bhatti and Hansen (2012a); Smets and Neundorf (2014)—turnout; Cutler and Kaufman (1975)—ideology; Jennings (1996)—political knowledge; Jennings and Stoker (2004)—civic engagement; Down and Wilson (2013)—support for the European Union; Mishler and Rose (2007) and Neundorf (2010)—democratic attitudes. This list is by no means comprehensive.

(⁶) Neundorf and Niemi (2014), for example, present a series of articles in a special issue of *Electoral Studies* on methods of age, period, and cohort analysis.

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