Political Socialization

IN 1987, an eight-year-old girl named Betsy wrote a letter to her mayor soliciting some advice. Journalists at National Public Radio learned of this letter, leading one of them (Noah Adams) to interview her.

Noah: You wrote a letter to the Mayor of New York, Mayor Koch.

Betsy: Right.

Noah: Tell me about that please.

Betsy: Well I wrote to him because my parents are getting divorced and I really don't know who to turn to. I just told him that my parents are getting divorced and my Dad is with somebody else and I was just getting used to something and now this and it's really kind of hard on me and I'd like an opinion.

Noah: Why did you write to Mayor Koch?

Betsy: 'Cause he's somebody who I thought he's very good to us I guess because he's the mayor and he knows a lot of things and I thought he would know about this too.

Noah: Did you get an answer back?

Betsy: Yes.

Noah: What did he say?

Betsy: He... um ... It's very short. "Thank you for the letter. I was saddened to learn of the difficult times you are experiencing now. It is important for you to share your feelings and thoughts with someone during this time. I wish there was an easy solution to these problems but there is not. Please remember that you are loved and that people care about you. All the best. Sincerely, Edward Koch."

Noah: That's nice. Was that reassuring to you in a way?

Betsy: No.[1]

Young Betsy had already developed views toward political leaders. Befitting her age, her image of Mayor Koch was largely favorable, although subject to revision based on her encounter with him. In other words, her political opinions were forming. The manner by which we all learn about politics and develop political opinions is called **political socialization**. Put another way, "Political socialization is the process by which people acquire relatively enduring orientations toward politics in general and toward their own particular political systems."[2] As we elaborate in the next section, this process begins in childhood.

There are many sources of people's political opinions. Important **socialization agents** include schools, peers, and the news media. Primary among these, however, is the family. In fact, among early socialization researchers, parents were thought to play the most influential socializing role.[3] In the pages that follow, we review the research supporting this conclusion, as well as discuss how the broader political context influences developing political opinions. Recently, scholars have focused on an alternative way that political attitudes are acquired—genetics. We review this hot, and somewhat controversial, area of research near the end of the chapter.

Another way to think of political socialization is as the transmission of key political values and norms from one generation to the next. This view of socialization focuses on how societies "inculcate appropriate norms and practices in citizens, residents or members."[4] David Easton and Jack Dennis were proponents of this approach, linking socialization to the maintenance of a democratic political system.[5] In particular, Easton and Dennis described the main goal of early socialization as fostering confidence and trust in as well as positive affect toward the political system. They further argued that the widespread holding of these attitudes is important for the persistence of a nation's government. Failure to transmit these norms to new generations of children could threaten a nation's stability.

Consistent with Easton and Dennis's view, successful socialization would result in citizens who support the nation's system of government and who respect political authority. Such outcomes would please democratic elitists. First, socializing citizens in such a way could lead them to defer to political leaders and the leaders' expertise. This would preserve the dominance of elite decision making with lesser involvement from the citizens, as democratic elitists prefer. Second, this type of socialization emphasizes system support over individual development, a goal that democratic elitists support, but one that other democratic theorists, most especially participatory democrats, find worrisome.

In contrast, pluralists hope that socialization develops strong political identities and a clear sense of how individuals' interests are best represented in the political system. Especially with a clear sense of their own similarities to the political parties, citizens can more easily pursue their interests and hold elected officials accountable for representing them.[6] Thus, pluralists would favor a

socialization process that results in strong partisan identification. To what degree does socialization accomplish the goals of these democratic theorists? We return to this question at the end of the chapter.

CHILDHOOD SOCIALIZATION

Childhood socialization typically begins during the elementary school years, when children learn about the political world and develop political orientations. From the fourth grade, "children move from near—but not complete—ignorance of adult politics to awareness of most of the conspicuous features of the adult political world" by the eighth grade.[7] One of the earliest political attitudes formed is a highly positive evaluation of the nation. Children believe that the United States is better than other nations and at an early age develop a strong emotional attachment to the nation.[8]

Benevolent Leader Images

Another notable political orientation of elementary school children is their idealization of leaders, especially the president. In one of the classic studies of childhood socialization, Fred Greenstein asked fourth through eighth graders in New Haven, Connecticut, to rate specific political executives in 1958.[9] Substantial majorities of children who knew these leaders rated them as "very good," whereas barely any children (less than 1 percent) rated the leaders as "bad." For example, 71 percent of the children evaluated the president's job performance as very good, with a further 21 percent feeling that the president was doing a "fairly good" job. These evaluations were higher than adult assessments of the president. During the time of Greenstein's study, 58 percent of the adult public approved of Dwight Eisenhower's performance. Similar positive assessments emerged in a study of second through eighth graders living in a Chicago suburb.[10] These children were asked to compare the president to "most men" on a number of characteristics. Large majorities of children felt that the president is more honest, is more knowledgeable, and works harder. When asked to evaluate the president as a person, nearly all (over 90 percent for most grades) students said the president is "the best person in the world" or a "good person."

The words children use to describe political leaders and their duties are quite interesting and further demonstrate the positive attitudes children hold.[11] Greenstein asked the children in his study, "What kinds of things do you think the Mayor [President, etc.] does?"[12] Some of their responses appear in Table 2-1. These children generally described the leaders doing good deeds and providing for people's basic needs. Further, this **benevolent leader imagery** exists for most children in the absence of factual information about the leaders. As the examples in the table demonstrate, some children do not describe the leaders' duties accurately, for example, assuming that the mayor pays workers or makes swings. Yet this does not prevent them from possessing positive attitudes about the leaders.

Table 2-1 Children's Descriptions of Political Leaders

Leader	Description
The president . . .	"gives us freedom" (8th grader)
	"[does] good work" (6th grader)
	"has the right to stop bad things before they start" (5th grader)
	"is doing a very good job of making people be safe" (4th grader)
	"deals with foreign countries and takes care of the U.S." (8th grader)
The mayor . . .	"makes parks and swings" (5th grader)
	"sees that schools have what they need and stores and other places too" (5th grader)
	"pays working people like banks" (5th grader)
	"helps everyone to have nice homes and jobs" (4th grader)
	"sends men to build parks for us and make our city be a good one" (4th grader)

Source: Fred I. Greenstein, "The Benevolent Leader: Children's Images of Political Authority," *American Political Science Review* 54 (1960), 939.

In 2000, Amy Carter and Ryan Teten asked Nashville school children the same questions that Greenstein had asked New Haven children in 1958.[13] The results from 2000 were similar to the earlier results in one important respect: fourth- through eighth-grade children continued to hold idealized and benevolent images of the *office of the presidency*. Compared to earlier decades, however, children of today are much more likely to evaluate the *president himself* negatively. Recall that 71 percent of Greenstein's children felt that the president was doing a "very good" job while another 21 percent evaluated the president's performance as "fairly good." The results from Carter and Teten's study were 14 and 28 percent, respectively. Furthermore, 28 percent of the children in 2000 assessed the president as "bad," whereas only 1 percent of the 1958 children held this attitude.

Children come to have political attitudes from a number of different sources. In terms of their idealized images of leaders, children transfer their generally positive feelings toward authority figures they personally know (such as parents) to political leaders.[14] That is, although children might not know exactly what the president does, they understand that the president is a person of authority and deserves respect. In addition, parents serve as agents of socialization by sharing information and assessments of leaders with children. Although these adults may hold negative attitudes toward specific leaders, they probably (although as we note later, not always) temper or sugarcoat their feelings when discussing politics with their children, thus explaining why children's attitudes toward leaders are generally more positive than adults' attitudes.[15]

Another important agent of childhood socialization is the school. Elementary school rituals, such as reciting the pledge of allegiance and singing patriotic songs, foster patriotism and loyalty to the nation among children. In school, children also learn to follow rules and obey authority figures, behaviors that they pursue in nonschool settings as well.[16] Elementary school curricula and teachers generally do not directly inculcate children to hold specific political attitudes, such as support for a specific public policy.[17] By high school, civics curricula have been shown to influence students' levels of political knowledge and trust in government, but curricular effects on political attitudes of elementary school children are uncommon.[18]

Features of the political context, such as current events, also influence children's attitudes. One study assessed the opinions of Detroit-area children in grades four, six, and eight in 1966 and again in 1968.[19] In 1968 children were less likely than in 1966 to believe the president is responsive to the people or that the government is helpful to their families. Why? Children became more critical in part because of the events that transpired during these two years, specifically riots in Detroit, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., and the escalating war in Vietnam.

The Watergate scandal also had immediate and lingering effects on children's images of the president. In 1972, a burglary occurred in the Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate complex in Washington, D.C. Amid allegations that he tried to cover up his involvement in this burglary, President Richard Nixon resigned from office two years later. To examine the effects of this scandal while events were still unfolding, Greenstein compared the attitudes of children in 1969–1970 with those held in June 1973.[20] Although these children viewed the president somewhat less positively in the second time period, assessments of the president did not become significantly more negative during the early 1970s. In a very specific domain, however, children's attitudes toward the president did change. Compared with four years earlier, in 1973 children were much more likely to believe that the president is above the law (31 versus 58 percent, respectively, expressed this view). Finally, Carter and Teten's finding that children's evaluations of the president were more negative in 2000 can probably be traced to Watergate.[21] The Watergate era ushered in a sustained period of increasingly negative views of government and politicians among the American public, including children.

Age, Class, Ethnic, and Racial Differences

Although positive images of political leaders are fairly common among children, there are important exceptions to this trend. Older children were substantially less likely to view leaders in an idealized fashion.[22] Further, children's assessments of a president's personal qualities (such as honesty) became more negative as the children got older, but their evaluations of the president's governing-related

characteristics (such as working hard and being knowledgeable) remained positive. The president is thus "increasingly seen as a person whose abilities are appropriate to the demands of the office."[23] In other words, largely because of cognitive development, children are better able with age to distinguish between the role of president and the person who is the president, with their view of the latter becoming somewhat more negative.

Significant class and racial differences also exist in children's evaluations of political leaders. In 1967, Dean Jaros, Herbert Hirsch, and Frederic Fleron surveyed children from Appalachia (specifically eastern Kentucky).[24] They selected this region because its higher-than-average levels of poverty and relative isolation distinguish it from most middle- and upper-class regions of the United States. Jaros, Hirsch, and Fleron's results are strikingly different than those obtained by Greenstein and others. Appalachian children demonstrated much less positive attitudes toward leaders and the political system. Whereas 77 percent of the fifth to eighth graders in the Chicago area, for example, believed that the president works harder than "most men,"[25] only 35 percent of the Kentucky children held this view. Also, 26 percent of the children in Appalachia believed that the president is "not a good person" compared with only 8 percent of Chicago area children. Rather than Greenstein's benevolent leader, Jaros et al. conclude that **malevolent leader imagery** is more common in eastern Kentucky. Their results are important not only for what they demonstrate about political socialization in Appalachia, a region that is not often studied, but also because they caution us against concluding that positive images of political authority are universally held among American children.

Compared with white children, idealized images of the president are less common among black children. In a 1969–1970 study of children's attitudes, 32 percent of black children possessed positive or idealized assessments compared with 55 percent of white children.[26] These racial differences generally exist at all grade levels but are especially notable as children become older. For example, whereas attitudes toward the president and police officers were similar for black and white second graders, by eighth grade black children held significantly more negative images than their white peers.[27]

Racial differences also exist when we consider other political attitudes. White school children tend to have considerably higher levels of political trust and efficacy compared with black school children. **Trust** assesses the degree to which individuals agree that political leaders are honest and act in the public's interest. **Efficacy** refers to the belief that one can influence the decisions of government officials and the belief that these officials are responsive to public wishes. When levels of trust and efficacy by children's race were compared in the 1960s, black children had consistently lower levels of efficacy than did their white peers. Racial differences in trust, however, only emerged in research conducted after summer 1967, at which point levels of trust were lower among blacks. Before then, white

and black children had similar levels of trust. That year marked a time when the black community as a whole became less trusting of the government, in part because urban riots were occurring in the United States and the policy gains achieved during the civil rights movement had seemingly ended.[28]

Ethnic and racial differences in children's political attitudes continue to exist today. In 2003 and 2004, Kim Fridkin, Patrick Kenney, and Jack Crittenden surveyed white, African American, Latino, and Native American eighth graders in and around Phoenix, Arizona.[29] Compared with the minority students, white students displayed more trust in government and higher levels of political efficacy. Native Americans had the lowest levels of both trust and efficacy.

What might account for these class, ethnic, and racial differences in children's attitudes? According to one approach, labeled a **political reality explanation**, ethnic and racial minorities have less power than whites in the political system and less reason to believe that political leaders will respond to their wishes. Furthermore, past ethnic and racial discrimination at the hands of government (such as school segregation and voter disenfranchisement) has generated mistrust toward the government among affected group members. Black, Latino, and Native American children are aware of these current and past realities, which contributes to their having different attitudes than white children.[30]

Parental communication is also an important factor. Jaros, Hirsch, and Fleron attribute the Appalachian children's less favorable assessments of leaders and the political system to their parents' views. Among Appalachian adults, "there is a great deal of overt, anti-government sentiment. . . . Rejection of and hostility toward political authority, especially federal authority, has long characterized the region."[31] Attempts to explain racial and ethnic differences in trust and efficacy also posit a role for parents. In their work from the early 2000s, Fridkin and her colleagues found that children who discussed politics with their parents had more positive attitudes toward government but also that political discussions were more common in the homes of middle-class white children than black, Latino, Native American, or working-class white children.[32] Fridkin, Kenney, and Crittenden also wonder about the nature of political discussions in the homes. Negative views toward government (particularly the government's past and present interactions with minorities) might be shared between minority parents and children, they argue, more so than in white households. Unfortunately, these researchers did not assess the *content* of family political discussions. Their work, as well as that of Jaros, Hirsch, and Fleron, suggests that future studies of childhood socialization should examine family conversations more fully.

PARENTAL TRANSMISSION OF POLITICAL ATTITUDES

As they move into adolescence, children begin to acquire specific political opinions to add to the more general orientations toward government and political leaders gained during early childhood. Parents are thought to be a key source of

these political attitudes, perhaps even the most important source, as the following quotation illustrates: "Whether the child is conscious or unaware of the impact, whether the process is role-modelling or overt transmission, whether the values are political and directly usable or 'nonpolitical' but transferable, and whether what is passed on lies in the cognitive or affective realm, it has been argued that the family is of paramount importance."[33]

In 1965, Kent Jennings and Richard Niemi began a study to examine directly the similarity between adolescents' political attitudes and those of their parents.[34] Their research—one of the most influential political socialization studies conducted in the United States—improved on prior socialization studies in important ways. Thus, we profile their study in this section. We begin with the socializing role played by parents during their children's adolescence and then explore whether attitudes acquired by the children remain stable during their adult years. For both **adolescent socialization** and **adult socialization**, we focus heavily on the acquisition of one important attitude—party identification.

Parental Transmission during Adolescence

Empirically, one could assess the influence of parents' attitudes on their child(ren) by using a number of approaches. One method involves surveying the children, asking them their political attitudes and also asking them to report their parents' attitudes. (Similarly, one could survey parents, querying them about their and their children's attitudes.) This approach is limited, however, because of the possibility that the children either do not know their parents' attitudes or assume that their parents' attitudes are the same as theirs. If the latter occurs, this projection could lead to the parents' and children's attitudes appearing to be more similar than they really are. To avoid these problems, Jennings and Niemi surveyed children and their parents separately, with members of each group completing their own questionnaires. In total, 1,669 high school seniors took part in the first (1965) wave of their study. For approximately one-third of these students, their father was randomly selected to complete a questionnaire. The mother was randomly selected for another third, and both parents were selected to be surveyed for the final third. Nearly 2,000 parents participated.

Another advantage of Jennings and Niemi's study is that their research participants were selected to represent the entire nation. Rather than studying parents and children from one city or one geographical area, these researchers used a national sample. High schools across the nation were randomly selected, with steps taken to ensure that this sample accurately represented the entire population of high schools in the United States. Thus, the ninety-seven selected high schools included those from cities, suburbs, and rural areas; those with varying numbers of students; those from every geographical region of the nation; and both public and private schools. Within each selected school, fifteen to twenty-one seniors (depending on the size of the school) were randomly selected to participate in

the study. This approach to selecting study participants, known as a **national probability sample**, allowed Jennings and Niemi to make inferences from their participants to the entire nation of high school seniors and their parents. With other methods, researchers must be more cautious in their conclusions. Selecting participants from one's local area, for example, does not allow a researcher to draw conclusions about the entire nation. Further, if participants volunteer to participate instead of being randomly selected, we cannot be certain that these self-selected participants' attitudes mirror those of the greater population. In fact, these people very likely may have more intense attitudes or be more politically aware, factors that increase the likelihood that an individual will voluntarily participate in a political survey.

To assess how thoroughly parents transmit their political attitudes to their offspring, Jennings and Niemi compared a variety of political attitudes between parents and their children. One of their most significant conclusions is that children are more likely to share their parents' **party identification** than other political attitudes (see Table 2-2). The figures presented in Table 2-2 are tau-bs, which measure how closely associated two items are. The possible range of tau-b is from

Table 2-2 Similarity of Political Attitudes between Parents and Offspring

Political attitude	Correlation between parents and offspring (tau-b)
Party identification	.47
Political issues/civil liberties	
School integration	.34
School prayer	.29
Communist should be allowed to hold office	.13
Speeches against churches and religion should be allowed	.05
Evaluations of groups	
Catholics	.28
Southerners	.22
Labor unions	.22
Negroes	.20
Whites	.19
Jews	.18
Protestants	.13
Big business	.08
Political cynicism	.12

Source: Data from M. Kent Jennings and Richard G. Niemi, "The Transmission of Political Values from Parent to Child," *American Political Science Review* 62 (1968): 173, 175, 176, 178.

0 to 1.0. In Jennings and Niemi's study, the higher the value of tau-b, the more children shared the same attitudes as their parents. Smaller values, then, indicate that offspring and parents had very dissimilar attitudes. In contrast, if tau-b equals 1.0, all children and parents would be in complete agreement.

With a tau-b of .47, the correlation between parental and offspring party identification is stronger than for the other political attitudes studied by Jennings and Niemi. Analyzing this relationship in another way, the researchers found that 59 percent of high school seniors had the same general partisanship as their parents (for example, if the child was a strong Democrat, the parent was either a strong, weak, or Independent-leaning Democrat), and that in only 7 percent of the parent-child pairs were one person a Democrat and the other a Republican, or vice versa. This result led Jennings and Niemi to conclude that the "transmission of party preferences from one generation to the next is carried out rather successfully in the American context."[35] One significant difference in partisanship did emerge from their analysis: the children were more likely to be politically independent than their parents (35.7 versus 23.9 percent identified as Independent, respectively). Unbeknownst to them at the time, Jennings and Niemi's data capture a snapshot of a decades-long trend of Americans becoming more weakly attached to the political parties, a topic we return to shortly.

Political attitudes other than partisanship appear to be passed from parent to child less often, as demonstrated in Table 2-2. Among political issue opinions, parents and children were more likely to hold the same attitudes regarding school integration and school prayer compared to civil liberties items, such as allowing individuals with unpopular views to hold office or give public speeches. Parent-child agreement on evaluations of political groups, such as "Catholics" or "Negroes," falls in between their similarity on attitudes toward policy issues and civil liberties. Finally, there is little agreement between parents and offspring on their degree of cynicism toward politicians and the political system. Overall, seniors are much less likely to be cynical than their parents, a result that coincides with the childhood socialization research presented earlier. Jennings and Niemi attribute this finding to the fact that schools serve as powerful socializing agents, inculcating positive views of the nation (through rituals and curricula) while avoiding much critical analysis of the U.S. government.

These results tell us something about adolescent socialization in the 1960s, but what about in more recent decades? Fortunately, Jennings and Niemi were not done exploring political socialization in 1965. The high school seniors they first interviewed in 1965 were reinterviewed three more times, the last time in 1997. The children of the former high school seniors were also interviewed in 1997. This research design permits an exploration of parent-child transmission for two different time periods, which is exactly what Kent Jennings, Laura Stoker, and Jake Bowers did.[36] In other words, they compared the correspondence between the attitudes of the 1965 high school seniors and their parents (in 1965) with the correspondence between these former seniors and their children (in 1997).

Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers found that, across a variety of political issues, the likelihood that a child in his late teens will hold the same attitudes as his parents was largely the same in 1997 as it was in 1965. Furthermore, parent-child correspondence was higher for party identification in 1997 than almost all other issues. In a departure from 1965, however, parental transmission of two attitudes—toward gay rights and abortion—was higher than for party affiliation. The authors attribute this to the high salience and moral basis for both of these issues. In the end, they conclude that "the patterns of political reproduction do not differ appreciably across the generations."[37] Jennings and Niemi's initial results were thus not timebound; that is, they were not a product of the political times of the 1960s.

Taking this work a step further, Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers explored which family characteristics enhanced the transmission of party identification from parents to their children. Two seem to be especially important: **family politicization** (the degree to which parents are politically active and politics is discussed in the household) and **attitude stability** of the parents. As demonstrated in Figure 2-1, the correspondence of party identification between parents and children was

Figure 2-1 Parent-Child Correspondence of Party Identification by Family Politicization and Parental Attitude Stability
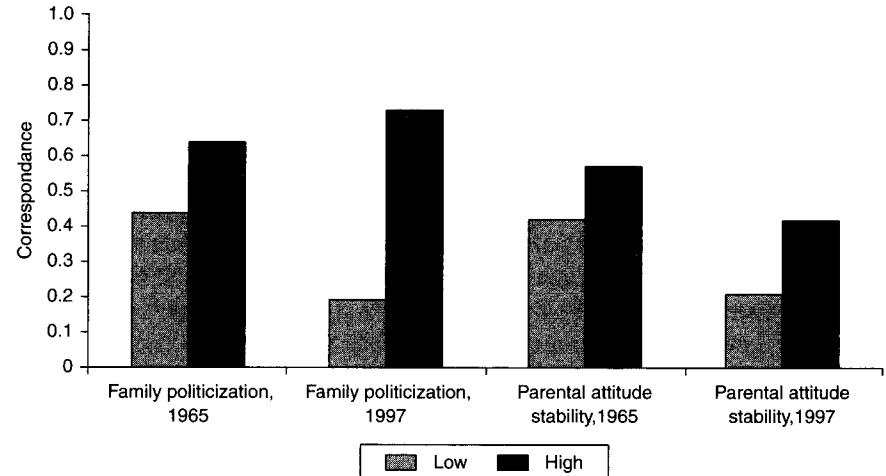
Source: Data from M. Kent Jennings, Laura Stoker, and Jake Bowers, "Politics across Generations: Family Transmission Reexamined," *Journal of Politics* 71 (2009), 789.

Note: Bars represent the correspondence of the parent's and children's party identification, derived from multivariate regression analyses. Correspondence is measured on a scale of 0 to 1, with 1 indicating all parent-child pairs share the same party identification. A score of 0 would mean that parent and child party identification is not the same for any of the pairs.

higher in more politically active and conversant families than low-politicization families. Also, the more stable a parent's party affiliation was, the more likely a child identified with the same party as her parent. These two results held for both time periods, but the effect of both family characteristics was stronger in 1997 than in 1965, as demonstrated by the larger gap between the light- and dark-colored bars for 1997 than for the earlier time. Why might family politicization and stable parental attitudes enhance parent-to-child transmission? Because both characteristics suggest families where parents provide frequent and clear cues regarding their political views to their offspring.

Do Preadult Attitudes Persist into Adulthood?

Once children leave adolescence and enter adulthood, do their political attitudes remain the same? If not, do they change in predictable ways? There are a number of methods to study adult socialization. One of the most effective ways is to survey the same group of people when they are adolescents and then again when they are adults. This method, called a **panel** or **longitudinal study**, is the approach taken by Jennings and Niemi. As already mentioned, they interviewed their sample of high school seniors four times: in 1965, 1973, 1982, and 1997. Although they were not able to reinterview all of the 1,669 seniors who had participated in the original study, they did reinterview nearly 1,000 of the participants in all four waves of the study. This study design allows a comparison of the attitudes of these individuals at various points in their life—as high school seniors, at twenty-six years old, at thirty-five years old, and again at fifty years old—to directly assess whether their late adolescent political attitudes persisted into and throughout adulthood. This panel study has resulted in a rich array of information and has produced a number of interesting insights into adult socialization.

In particular, we have learned a lot about the stability of party identification over time from analyses of this panel study. Figure 2-2 demonstrates how stable the high school seniors' party affiliation was from the year of their high school graduation (1965) until they were in their mid-twenties (1973), and also for two other time periods: 1973–1982 (when the former seniors were ages twenty-six to thirty-five) and 1982–1997 (when they were ages thirty-five to fifty). For now, focus your attention on the white bars for each time period. The bar is shorter for the 1965–1973 time span than for the other two. This means that these respondents' party identification was most likely to change between the ages of eighteen and twenty-six. After passing through their mid-twenties, their party affiliation remained more stable. In fact, the level of stability was the same between the ages of twenty-six and thirty-five as between thirty-five and fifty.[38] Finally, similar findings exist for opinions toward political issues such as racial policies, school prayer, and political tolerance. Attitudes shifted around a fair bit when the students of the high school class of 1965 were in their early twenties, but did not change as much throughout their later adulthoods.[39]

Figure 2-2 Stability of Party Identification Over Time, Overall and by Preadult Parent-Child Correspondence
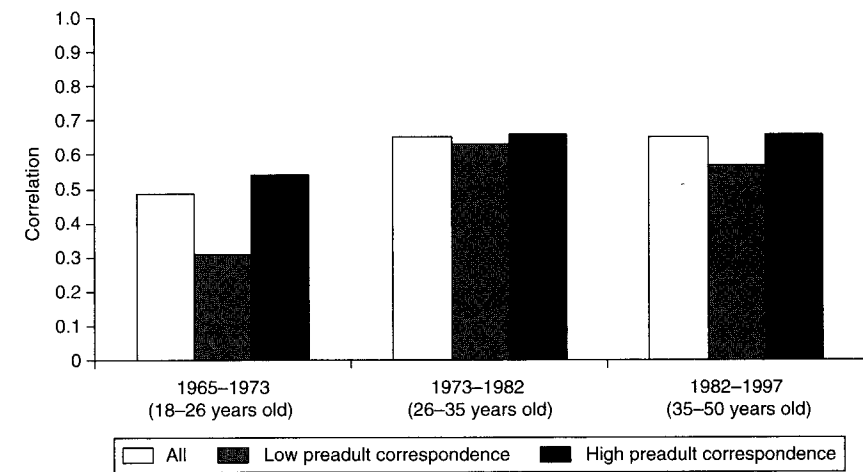
Source: Data for "All" bars from Laura Stoker and M. Kent Jennings, "Of Time and the Development of Partisan Polarization," *American Journal of Political Science* 52 (2008), 623; data for other bars from M. Kent Jennings, Laura Stoker, and Jake Bowers, "Politics across Generations: Family Transmission Reexamined," *Journal of Politics* 71 (2009), 794.

Note: Bars represent the stability of party identification across each time period, as measured by continuity correlations.

This pattern supports an **impressionable years model** of attitude stability. The impressionable years, typically late adolescence and early adulthood, can be a time of personal growth and development. As an individual goes through her impressionable years, personal experiences (such as moving away from the childhood home, beginning a career, or getting married) can have political ramifications. In particular, her political views may fluctuate. According to this understanding, those in their early twenties lack the experience to have consistent political opinions. As young adults grow older, they experience fewer genuinely new events that influence their political opinions. Their political views then become more firmly grounded in their past experiences and are thus more resistant to change.[40] The impressionable years model is a specific type of a broader class of socialization dynamics—**life cycle effects**. The life cycle explanation presumes that people's political attitudes are influenced by their age (by their place in the life cycle). Theoretically, these effects could occur at many different stages in a person's life. Yet the most consistent effects of age on political attitudes that socialization researchers have uncovered are the ones we have already mentioned:

attitude volatility during the impressionable years followed by relative stability later in adulthood.[41]

From the Jennings-Niemi panel data, we have learned that political opinions of many people undergo changes as they enter adulthood. This is the case regardless of whether the young adult has the same attitudes as his parents. Now, let's bring parents back into our discussion, particularly the degree of parent-child attitude similarity at the end of adolescence. Return your attention to Figure 2-2, focusing now on the darker bars. Recall that this figure presents the overtime stability of party identification for Jennings and Niemi's panel respondents for three different time periods. The gray bars represent stability over time among those whose party affiliation did not correspond closely to that of their parents' party affiliation when they were eighteen years old. The stability among preadults that had a high correspondence with their parents is represented by the black bars.

This analysis, which was conducted by Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers, uncovered two interesting findings.[42] First, from ages eighteen to twenty-six, people who possessed a party affiliation similar to their parents experienced less volatility in their partisanship compared to those whose partisanship was dissimilar from their parents. As Jennings and his colleagues explain, "Those young adults entering [adulthood] more securely attached to the political 'apron strings' of their parents were more likely to withstand the novelties they were to encounter. Those less anchored in that way proved to be far more vulnerable, and thus more apt to change."[43] Second, between ages twenty-six and thirty-five and again between thirty-five and fifty, the stability of the party identification of these individuals over time was much less dependent on whether they had shared their parents' partisanship when they had been eighteen. The story here is much more about increases in stability over time as an individual leaves the impressionable years (the gray and black bars for both of the later two periods are taller than for the first period) rather than about differences in stability with respect to the degree of preadult correspondence with that person's parents (the gap between the gray and black bars is much smaller for the final two periods compared to the first).

Finally, in another example of the lingering effects of parental socialization, Niemi and Jennings compared the parents' party affiliation and their offspring's affiliation separately for those offspring who held consistently conservative versus consistently liberal opinions toward specific political issues (such as school integration, support for American involvement in Vietnam, and the proper role of government in providing jobs).[44] We might expect that individuals with strong and consistent conservative opinions would identify as Republicans. Yet for offspring with such conservative opinions who were raised in a home of strong Democrats, the typical party identification at age eighteen was weak Democrat. Eight years later, these individuals identified more often as political independents, albeit leaning somewhat toward the Democratic Party. Nine years after this, these offspring (now about thirty-five years old) were quite clearly Independent in their political

affiliation. So, although the partisanship of these individuals moved away from the Democratic Party and became more in line with their ideological leanings, the pull of their preadult socialization (particularly their parents' partisanship) prevented them from identifying as Republicans, even though they held conservative issue opinions.

POLITICAL EVENTS AND SOCIALIZATION

So far, we have primarily discussed the role that individuals and institutions play in shaping the political attitudes of children and adolescents. The development of political opinions is also influenced by the political context. Both specific political events and broader political trends can influence the development of political attitudes.

Influence of Political Campaigns during Adolescence

Political opinions can be shaped by discrete political events, especially highly salient events such as presidential campaigns. More specifically, David Sears and Nicholas Valentino examined whether adolescents make **socialization gains** (such as increases in knowledge or the development of more concrete political attitudes) during presidential election years.[45] Their conclusions are drawn from interviews of Wisconsin adolescents (ages ten to seventeen) conducted in early 1980, in October 1980, and in autumn 1981. These adolescents demonstrated significant gains in knowledge and attitude crystallization between the first two waves of the study, but only for attitude objects centrally related to the campaigns, such as political parties. Gains were much smaller in the year after the election and essentially nonexistent for other types of attitudes, such as racial tolerance, ideology, and political trust.

In terms of **attitude crystallization**, the adolescents began the study with what Sears and Valentino term relatively "immature" partisan attitudes.[46] Although the adolescents did express opinions toward the candidates and the parties, their attitudes were not often based on accurate knowledge. Further, their evaluations of the candidates were neither consistent along partisan lines (for example, displaying positive evaluations for both Democratic and Republican candidates) nor strongly related to their own party affiliation. Months later, near the end of the presidential campaign, these adolescents demonstrated much more crystallized partisan opinions, with higher levels of consistency across candidate evaluations, a stronger relationship between their assessments of candidates and their own party affiliation, and stability in their party identification over time.

Expanding on these results, Valentino and Sears explored what conditions facilitate such socialization gains during presidential campaigns.[47] The more these preadults engaged in **interpersonal communication** about the presidential campaign (with family and peers and in school), the larger were their gains. Exposure to media communication about the campaign in newspapers and on television

was not related to differences in attitude crystallization or increased knowledge. In other words, those adolescents who followed the campaign news more did not have larger socialization gains. Valentino and Sears argue that *active communication* rather than *passive reception* of news produced the gains. They also highlight the complexities of parental involvement in this socialization. Parents can encourage more interpersonal communication about campaigns by "stimulating a climate of interest in and attentiveness to the campaign, and the motivation for discussing it."[48] Yet it is communication with a wide range of individuals, not only parents, that encourages socialization gains. And it appears that the communication between parents and their children is a dialogue, a sharing of opinions, rather than only parents transmitting their partisan attitudes to their children.

Sears and Valentino's research contributes to our knowledge of adolescent socialization in important ways. First, they focus attention on the importance of the political context and political events. Socialization does not happen in a vacuum. Second, they demonstrate that socialization occurs episodically, during times when politics is very salient, rather than incrementally. Third, they integrate the socializing effects of political campaigns with the agents of socialization that other scholars have shown to be important (particularly the family and others through interpersonal communication), thus presenting a more nuanced picture of adolescent socialization.

Generational and Period Effects

When changes in the political context influence the political socialization of an entire age cohort, a **generational effect** on political attitudes occurs. In other words, the opinions of an entire generation of people can be influenced by the nature of the times. This is especially likely for those who are in their impressionable years. Take, for instance, the formation of party affiliation among those who came of age during the post–World War II period.[49] They were socialized at a time when the political parties were weakening on the national stage. Beginning in the 1950s, national politicians began to build personal campaign organizations rather than tying themselves clearly to the national parties. Television coverage of campaigns tended to focus on the candidates rather than the parties, and the candidates could bypass the parties and their grassroots campaign organizations by using television to disseminate their messages directly to the voters. These changes in the broader context influenced the partisanship of individuals whose formative socialization occurred during this period. In particular, they were less likely to identify strongly with either the Democratic or Republican Party than were cohorts who had been socialized earlier, when parties had been more dominant.

As the political parties were changing nationally, regional developments were also afoot. Notably, white voters in the southern United States began to shift their allegiance to the Republican Party in the 1960s. During the decades immediately prior to this, Democratic support among whites in the South had been strong, so strong that the region was known as the Solid South. Much to the chagrin of

Southern Democratic whites, however, the national Democratic Party championed civil rights legislation in the 1960s. The partisan context in the region thus changed, with the Democratic Party becoming much less popular over time. Following a generational effects model, this changed context produced effects on partisanship in the region among those who were leaving adolescence. Southern whites who were in their formative years during or after the 1960s were less likely than older whites in the region to adopt a Democratic Party identification. Successive generations became less and less Democratic as they entered adulthood.[50] In fact, by 1984, Southern whites who were just then becoming eligible to vote were more likely to be Republicans than Democrats.

Period effects occur when salient features of the political period influence the political attitudes of many, *regardless of age*. Note that period effects differ from generational effects in one important way: generational effects result when aspects of the political context shape the political attitudes only of people who are similar in age (such as those who are in their impressionable years). A few examples should serve to illustrate this difference. In fact, both studies we used to demonstrate generational effects in the two previous paragraphs also uncovered period effects. Recall the first example. It demonstrated that Americans were less likely to hold strong partisan attitudes after World War II because generations of citizens were socialized in an era when the national political parties had weakened.[51] At the same time, across many age cohorts, the percentage of people identifying as Independents increased. This turn away from the parties and toward partisan independence happened among younger citizens who were just entering adulthood as well as among older adults. In other words, citizens of all ages were somewhat influenced by the decline of parties on the national political stage, a period effect.

Similarly, a changed political context produced period effects in the South. Not only have new generations of white Southerners displayed lower levels of identification with the Democratic Party than prior generations, but also Southern whites *across many generations* have been less likely to identify as Democratic over time.[52] For example, the average party identification of white Southerners who entered adulthood in the 1960s was between Independent-leaning Democrat and weak Democrat. By 2004, the average party affiliation of this cohort was between Independent and Independent-leaning Republican. In other words, the partisanship of this group continued to change as they aged, even when they were well past their formative years. The drift toward Republican Party identification occurred among more recent generations of Southern white adults as well. Key features of the 1960s help to explain why. That decade was "a time of considerable political strife that would have been difficult—if not impossible—to avoid. Civil rights protests, government action to promote civil rights without precedent since Reconstruction, the assassination of high-ranking leaders, ghetto riots, and the like all went beyond normal headline news. . . . The seemingly uniform change in partisan attitudes found in all of our cohorts may reflect this uniquely powerful barrage of information."[53]