# Political Socialization

I N 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 though 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 on in the next section, this process begins in childhood. Also, as we demonstrate there, Betsy's impressions of Mayor Koch were akin to those of children from the late 1950s but diverge somewhat from childhood assessments of political leaders today.

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 conducted by Robert Hess and David Easton 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, 97 percent of 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 President does?"[12] Some of their responses appear in the first column of 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 president gives people freedom. Yet this does not prevent them from possessing positive attitudes about the leaders.

Certainly 1958 was a long time ago. Do we know if children's views of the president are the same today? Two replications of Greenstein's work have been undertaken in the years since 1958. The first was conducted in 2000 by Amy Carter and Ryan Teten among fourth- through eighth-grade children in Nashville.[13] The second, undertaken by Zoe Oxley, Mirya Holman, Jill Greenlee, Angela Bos, and Celeste Lay, surveyed children in grades one through six at four different locations in the United States (greater Boston, upstate New York, northeast Ohio, and New Orleans).[14] Children in the latter study were interviewed in 2017–2018 and were

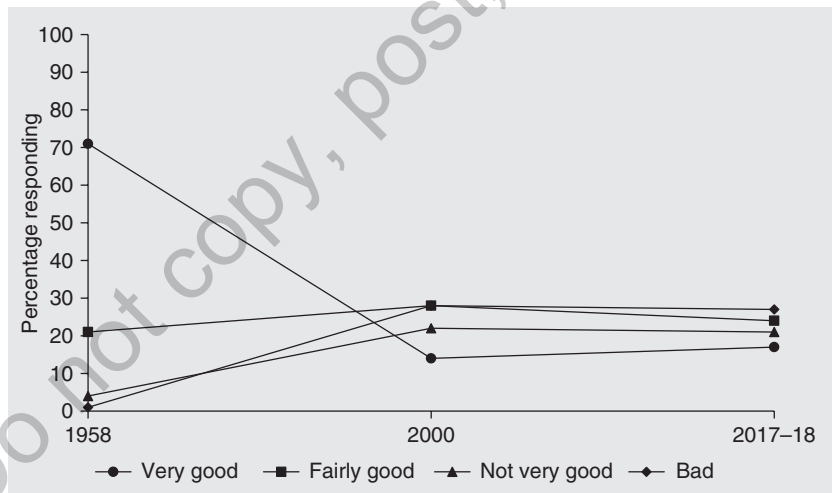| Table 2.1 Children's Descriptions of the President's Duties | |
|---|---|
| **"What kinds of things do you think the president does?"** | |
| **1958** | **2017–2018** |
| "Gives us freedom" (8th grader) | "If someone's being bad he tells them to stop" (1st grader) |
| "[Does] good work" (6th grader) | "Tries to protect our country, make laws and helps the country be stable" (6th grader) |
| "Has the right to stop bad things before they start" (5th grader) | "Helps people in the country with difficult problems in their life" (3rd grader) |
| "Is doing a very good job of making people be safe" (4th grader) | "Lies, [is] destroying our country" (4th grader) |
| "Deals with foreign countries and takes care of the U.S." (8th grader) | "Goes to Florida, plays golf, talks with other political leaders, tries to help our country, insults immigrants and people from other countries" (6th grader) |

*Sources:* Data for 1958 from Fred I. Greenstein, "The Benevolent Leader: Children's Images of Political Authority," *American Political Science Review* 54 (1960): 939. Data for 2017–2018 from Angela L. Bos, Jill S. Greenlee, Mirya R. Holman, J. Celeste Lay, and Zoe M. Oxley, *Gender and Early Socialization Study*.

asked items from Greenstein's as well as Hess and Easton's earlier work. The results from the more recent studies are similar to the earlier results in one important respect: children continue to hold idealized and benevolent images of the *office of the presidency*. They see the president as one of the most important adult roles, and the language children use when describing what the president does is mostly favorable. However, as demonstrated in the right-hand column of Table 2.1, negative images about the president's activity have crept into children's minds.

In contrast, compared to earlier decades, children of today are much more likely to evaluate the *president himself* negatively. Recall that nearly all of the children in Hess and Easton's study considered the president to be either a good person or the best person. By 2017–2018, a slight majority (51 percent) say the president is "not a good person," whereas only 3 percent consider him to be the "best person in the world."[15] When it comes to assessing job performance, children's evaluations have become much less favorable (see Figure 2.1). Not only did the percentage of children



**Figure 2.1   Children's Evaluations of the President's Job Performance**

Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate complex in Washington, DC. 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.[23] 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 vs. 58 percent, respectively, expressed this view). Finally, the findings that children's evaluations of the president as a person were more negative in 2000 and 2017–2018 compared to the 1950s can probably be traced to Watergate. 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 are substantially less likely to view leaders in an idealized fashion.[24] Further, in prior decades, 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.[25] More recently, however, children's evaluations of all three of these traits become more negative as children grow older.[26]

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).[27] 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 from those obtained by Greenstein or by Hess and Easton. 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,"[28] 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 were universally held among American children in prior decades.

Idealized images of the president are less common among Black children than among white 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.[29] These racial differences generally exist at all grade levels but are especially notable as children grow 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.[30] More recently, the 2017–2018 childhood socialization study uncovered differences by race and ethnicity: assessments of the president's personal qualities and job performance were most positive among white school children and most negative among Black children, with the views of Latino and Asian children falling in between.[31]

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.[32]

Ethnic and racial differences in these attitudes have persisted. 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.[33] 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.

In one of the few recent examinations of younger children's political attitudes, Christia Spears Brown, Rashmita Mistry, and Rebecca Bigler

conducted a small survey of African American children in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.[34] Katrina, a powerful hurricane, landed on the Gulf Coast in late August 2005, with devastating consequences. Massive flooding and property damage occurred, notably in New Orleans. Governmental response to the hurricane was widely considered to be too slow and inadequate. Meanwhile, Americans throughout the nation witnessed the crisis unfold on their television sets. The New Orleans victims were disproportionately Black and poor, leading Brown and her colleagues to explore Black children's attitudes toward the government response and attributions of responsibility for the inadequate relief efforts. Their sample was drawn from schools in one city—Los Angeles—and contained only African Americans. Thus, their results cannot speak to racial differences in relevant attitudes or to nationwide attitudes. Yet Brown, Mistry, and Bigler report a number of interesting findings, particularly regarding age differences. Their youngest participants (second graders) were more likely to evaluate President George W. Bush's performance favorably than were the older respondents (eighth graders). In terms of what was responsible for the delay in relief reaching the victims, the younger children were most likely to credit logistical challenges (such as the difficulty in rescuing thousands of people). The eighth graders, on the other hand, were more likely to believe racial discrimination was a factor.

What might account for class, ethnic, and racial differences in children's attitudes? According to one approach, 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, police violence, 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 from white children.[35] In other words, this **political reality explanation** posits that political attitudes respond to actual political events and phenomena.

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."[36] Attempts to explain racial and ethnic differences in trust and efficacy also posit a role for parents. 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.[37] Fridkin, Kenney, and Crittenden also wonder about the nature of political

## Public Opinion in Comparative Perspective

### Box 2.1 Childhood Political Socialization in Europe

Childhood socialization research has seen a recent resurgence in western Europe. Much like in the United States, the scholarly community moved away from studying children, in part because of an assumption that young children "lack basic competencies to deal with abstract and complicated matters such as politics."[1] One question thus guiding newer scholarship is whether children possess meaningful political perspectives. They do.

Children aged eight through twelve interviewed by Lena Haug display an interest in political topics, with especially high interest in topics such as children's rights, war, poverty, and the environment.[2] General knowledge of politics is evident among elementary school children, yet gender differences also emerge by then, with girls displaying lower levels of knowledge.[3] Children are also developing political orientations and an understanding of key political concepts. Jan van Deth, Simone Abendschön, and Meike Wollmar explored children's notions of good citizenship, uncovering that as early as the first year of primary school, children differentiate between characteristics such as helpfulness and obeying the law from being popular or wealthy.[4] Conceptions of economic inequality and meritocracy among eight- to ten-year-old children were the focus of Tanja Betz and Laura Kayser's work.[5] They conclude that children attribute adult's economic success to academic achievement earlier in life, a pattern that did not vary much by the social class of the children studied.

These works provide important insights into the development of political views among children. Furthermore, owing to the fact that children would have difficulty answering standard survey questions posed to adults, these scholars use a variety of creative research approaches. One way that Haug measured topic interest was by asking children to draw a picture about their "World of Politics." Van Deth and colleagues designed a survey that contained pictures corresponding with question topics. Survey response options were presented as familiar objects (such as smiley faces) or in familiar formats (multiple choices, as in a test). Betz and Kayser opted not to survey children but instead conducted in-depth interviews, conversation-style.

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[2] Lena Haug, "'Without Politics It Would Be Like a Robbery without Police': Children's Interest in Politics," *American Behavioral Scientist* 61 (2017): 254–272.

[3] Alice Simon, "How Can We Explain the Gender Gap in Children's Political Knowledge?", *American Behavioral Scientist* 61 (2017): 222–237.

[4] Van Deth, Abendschön, and Wollmar, "Children and Politics."

[5] Tanja Betz and Laura B. Kayser, "Children and Society: Children's Knowledge about Inequalities, Meritocracy, and the Interdependency of Academic Achievement, Poverty, and Wealth," *American Behavioral Scientist* 61 (2017): 186–203.

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."[38]

In 1965, Kent Jennings and Richard Niemi began a study to examine directly the similarity between adolescents' political attitudes and those of their parents.[39] 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 children 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.

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. Nearly 60 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). In only 7 percent of the parent-child pairs was 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."[40] One significant difference in partisanship did emerge from their analysis: the children were more likely to be politically independent than their parents (35.7 vs. 23.9 percent identified as Independent, respectively). Unbeknownst to the researchers 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.

As for political attitudes other than partisanship, such as opinions regarding school integration and school prayer, and evaluations of political groups, these appear to be passed from parent to child less often. Finally, there is little agreement between parents and offspring on their degree of cynicism toward politicians and the political system. Overall, high school 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.[41] 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 high school 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 had been 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."[42] 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 when the transmission of party identification from parents to their children would be enhanced. In particular, they identified family characteristics that should result in parents providing frequent and clear cues regarding their political views to their offspring. Two seem to be especially important: **family politicization** (the degree to which parents are politically active and politics is discussed in the household) and parental **attitude stability**. As demonstrated in Figure 2.2, the correspondence of party identification between parents and children was indeed higher in more politically active



Figure 2.2 Parent-Child Correspondence of Party Identification by Family Politicization and Parental Attitude Stability
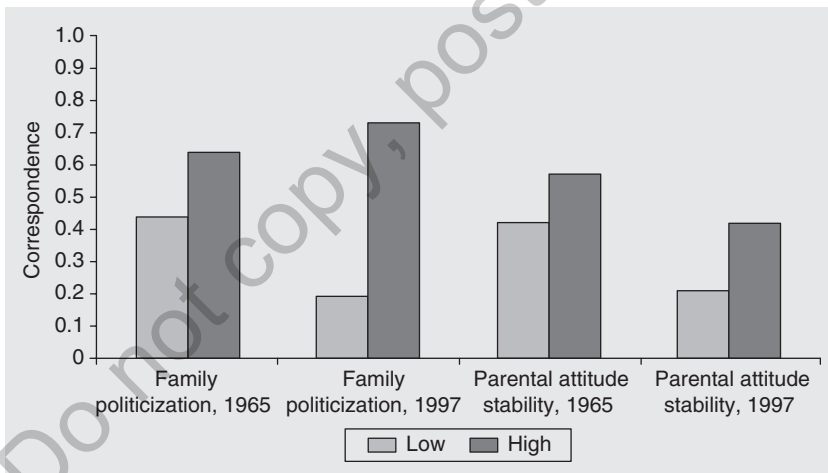
*Note:* Bars represent the correspondence of the parent's and children's party identification, derived from multivariate regression analyses. Correspondence is measured on a scale of 0 to 1, with 1 indicating parents and children shared the same party identification within every pair. A score of 0 would mean that parent and child party identification is not the same for any of the pairs.

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.

Another topic that political socialization scholars have examined is whether mothers or fathers are more likely to pass on their party identification to their children. Early analyses, of the 1965 wave of the Jennings-Niemi socialization data, demonstrate that when parents do not share the same party affiliation, adolescents are a bit more likely to align with mom rather than dad.[43] Zoe Oxley updated these findings, exploring first the 1997 wave of Jennings and Niemi's study, then a 2012 survey of high school and college students.[44] The 2012 survey is not ideal for exploring parent-child transmission because the children were asked to report their parents' partisanship, but it does permit a look at more recent socialization patterns. The results demonstrate that mother-child congruence has continued to be higher than that between fathers and children, although the parental gap is smaller in 2012 than it was for 1997. Also, two of the 2012 results run counter to this overall finding. Children are more likely to share their father's partisanship when they discuss politics more with dad than mom or when dad does the majority of the household tasks and child care. This pattern confirms what was expected (but not directly tested) in earlier analyses: children's party identification follows that of the parent that they spend the most time with, whether discussing politics or not. Today, as in past decades, that parent is typically the mother.[45]

Finally, examinations of parent-child transmission of party identification for all three time periods reveal some evidence of same-sex transmission, with daughters being more likely to align with their mothers' partisanship as sons align with fathers. Research conducted by Nicole Filler and Kent Jennings demonstrates that same-sex parent-child congruence also exists for gender role attitudes, such as preferences for women and men having equal roles in business and politics versus believing women's proper place is in the home as well as views toward the women's movement.[46] Indeed, for these attitudes, same-sex transmission is even more prevalent than for party identification or for other political opinions.

## 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 2.3 demonstrates how stable the high school seniors' party affiliation was from the year of their high school graduation (1965) to their midtwenties (1973) to



Figure 2.3  Stability of Party Identification Over Time, Overall and by Preadult Parent-Child Correspondence
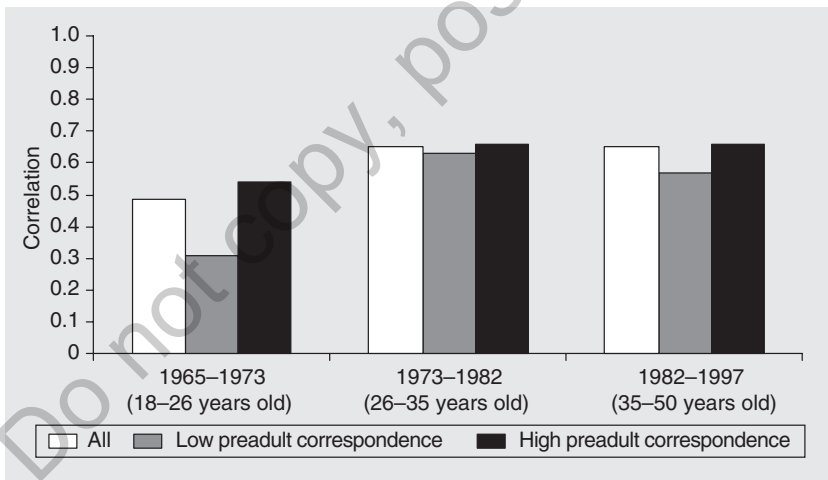
*Sources:* Data for "All" bars from Laura Stoker and M. Kent Jennings, "Of Time and the Development of Partisan Polarization," *American Journal of Political Science* 52 (2008): 623. Data for other bars from M. Kent Jennings, Laura Stoker, and Jake Bowers, "Politics across Generations: Family Transmission Reexamined," *Journal of Politics* 71 (2009): 794.

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

twins as well as nontwin siblings of twins.[76] Incorporating nontwins into this research is an important development, primarily because twin-only designs are open to generalizability critiques. In other words, we should be cautious in assuming that results gleaned from studies of twins apply to all people, twins and nontwins alike.

How are genes linked to political attitudes? Answering this question is not easy. The consensus now is that a complex chain is at work. Genes are known to influence many of our biological systems. These systems can then condition our emotional reactions as well as the processing of incoming information, both of which are probably related to our personality traits and core values, which in turn are related to political ideology and issue attitudes. Throughout this sequence, environmental circumstances are also at work. Conceptually, this is how genes are thought to be related to political attitudes.[77]

Research is now under way to explore some of the links in the chain, such as one study that explores reactions to the September 11, 2001, attacks.[78] An individual's genetic makeup can influence how he responds emotionally to a threatening situation, such as a terrorist attack. Some people felt angry immediately after 9/11 and became more trusting of the government, whereas others were anxious and experienced declines in trust. Anger can produce a desire for retaliation, in this case against the responsible terrorists, and thus increased support for any person or body that can retaliate (such as the federal government). In contrast, anxiety can be accompanied by beliefs that no person or organization can control a situation. Furthermore, in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, genes played a more influential role on levels of governmental trust and environmental factors a less influential role versus before that day. With the passage of time, during which no further attacks on U.S. soil occurred, the influence of genes decreased back to pre-9/11 levels. In short, the shifting dynamics of public trust resulted from the *interaction* between genetics and the environment, not genetic makeup or environmental circumstances alone.[79]

The link between genetics and politics is an active area of public opinion scholarship. Nevertheless, not everyone has climbed aboard the genetics train.[80] In their 2005 article, Alford, Funk, and Hibbing correctly predicted that some people would greet their finding of a genetic source for political attitudes as "far-fetched, odd, even perverse."[81] Up until that time, much public opinion research, certainly including political socialization, focused on environmental sources of attitudes. That is, factors external to the individual were thought to play the largest role in developing political opinions. Peering internally, all the way down to our genes, has the potential to upend conventional wisdom regarding opinion formation.[82] On the other hand, some socialization scholars have been open

to this new research. Kent Jennings, for instance, describes the genetics work as a "provocative addition to the political socialization literature" and has called for integrating it with traditional approaches for studying socialization.[83]

## Conclusion

The acquisition of political attitudes begins fairly early in life and often with positive feelings toward the nation and idealized views of political leaders. Would democratic elitists thus be satisfied with the socialization of children in the United States today? Although it is true that levels of system support tend to be high among children, as these theorists would hope, support is not uniformly high across all children. For some children, such as those who are older, Black, Latino, Native American, or from impoverished backgrounds, childhood attitudes are less benevolent. More worrisome for elite democrats is that over recent decades children are more likely to have cynical attitudes toward those holding political power. Elite democrats assume that citizens are neither interested in nor knowledgeable about politics and rely on the expertise of elected officials to make governing decisions. As Americans, including young Americans, have come to hold these officials in lower esteem, there is less deference to political authority than elite democrats prefer. Even when children hold more uniformly positive attitudes toward leaders, however, there is good evidence that these attitudes do not persist into adulthood, further undermining elite democrats' hope for socialization to produce system-supporting adults. For instance, although the children of the 1950s trusted government and possessed idealized images of leaders at that time, they "wound up rioting in the streets of Chicago or smoking dope in Vietnam or working as carpenters under assumed names in Toronto" to avoid the Vietnam War draft.[84]

Adolescence brings with it the development of partisan leanings and opinions toward a variety of issues. The family plays an important socializing role, particularly when it comes to party identification. Other agents of socialization—schools, peers, and current political events—also shape political attitudes. Yet, over years of socialization research, the family continues to emerge as an important shaper of children's attitudes, whether through genetic transmission or postnatal socialization. The imprint of our parents' political attitudes is often still visible into adulthood, after a period of attitude instability that many of us experience in our early twenties.

Pluralists would be pleased by the fact that the transmission of party identification continues to be more complete than the transmission of

most other political attitudes. Pluralists, after all, hope for socialization to develop strong political identities before adulthood, chief among these being party identification. Yet the development of preadult partisanship is not as complete as pluralists would prefer, partly because the party affiliation of young adults is not entirely stable. This suggests that adolescents' party identification is not very crystallized, certainly not as crystallized as pluralists would want for citizens about to reach voting age. Also of concern for pluralists is the movement away from strong party affiliations that Americans have experienced over the past few decades. As generations of adolescents have been socialized during a time of weaker national political parties, the effect has been to produce more Independent voters who, in the pluralists' eyes, are less able to have their interests represented through the party system.

How would participatory democrats assess the state of political socialization? They would have a more difficult task, given that much political science research on this topic has generally not focused on the features of socialization that these theorists feel are most important. Having said this, we can point to one conclusion from the research that certainly troubles participatory democrats: the fact that children who are Black, Latino, Native American, or poor develop less trusting attitudes toward government at an early age. The more trust in government citizens have, the more likely they will participate in politics throughout their life. Participatory democrats worry that children who trust government less will grow up to be adults who do not participate in politics, thus undermining the goal of political equality across citizens that participatory democrats value so strongly.

More centrally for participatory democrats, teaching children to be active participants in democracy is crucial. Most socialization research has not gauged the participatory skills and activities of children or adolescents, certainly not to the degree that participatory democrats would like. Rather than emphasizing which agents of socialization influence preadult attitudes most strongly, for example, researchers could focus on whether parents and other agents pass on their civic engagement perspectives to children.[85] Philosophically, it is worth considering whether institutions in the United States do or even should provide opportunities for civic skill development. Take universities. The decades-long national trend has been "toward a higher-education system driven by the need to prepare people for the workforce rather than the need to prepare people to participate in democracy."[86] Should we worry that the civic mission of universities is slipping away? Participatory democrats do, just as they would welcome more thorough assessment of courses and programs that develop in children, adolescents, and young adults the civic skills that are relevant for political participation.

## KEY CONCEPTS

## SUGGESTED SOURCES FOR FURTHER READING

Elder, Laurel, and Steven Greene. *The Politics of Parenthood: Causes and Consequences of the Politicization and Polarization of the American Family*. Albany: State University of New York, 2012.

Greenlee, Jill S. *The Political Consequences of Motherhood*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014.

Sharrow, Elizabeth A., Jesse H. Rhodes, Tatishe M. Nteta, and Jill S. Greenlee. "The First-Daughter Effect: The Impact of Fathering Daughters on Men's Preferences for Gender-Equality Policies." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 82 (2018): 493–523.

*Becoming a parent is one of the most transformative experiences of a person's life, but can parenthood shape one's political views? Yes. In their book, Elder and Greene document a variety of issue opinions for which the views of parents and nonparents, as well as mothers and fathers, diverge. Greenlee does much the same in her thorough analyses of the opinions of mothers versus women who are not mothers. Sharrow and her collaborators uncover evidence that fathers whose first child is a daughter have more liberal views toward gender-equality policies. Having more daughters or a daughter who is not a father's first child does not alter these policy opinions.*

Hibbing, John R. "Ten Misconceptions Concerning Neurobiology and Politics." *Perspectives on Politics* 11 (2013): 475–489.

McDermott, Rose, and Peter K. Hatemi. "DNA Is Not Destiny." In *Oxford Handbook of Evolution, Biology, and Society*, ed. Rosemary L. Hopcroft. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

*As the title of Hibbing's article suggests, he rebuts ten common criticisms of biological approaches to politics. He argues that political scientists need to move beyond false assumptions regarding biological bases for political behavior and toward valid critiques of this approach. Not everyone agrees with Hibbing. His essay is followed by eight that collectively present a variety of contrary views. McDermott and Hatemi's chapter presents research demonstrating that one's genetic makeup does not solely determine specific political behaviors or attitudes but rather interacts with environmental factors.*

Lay, J. Celeste. *A Midwestern Mosaic: Immigration and Political Socialization in Rural America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012.

Hagerman, Margaret A. *White Kids: Growing Up with Privilege in a Racially Divided America*. New York: New York University Press, 2018.

*These two books explore adolescents' views regarding race and diversity. Lay compares perspectives regarding racial and ethnic diversity among teens in Iowa towns that were experiencing high levels of immigration versus towns that were not. Hagerman focuses on the racial beliefs of affluent white teens.*

McAdam, Doug. *Freedom Summer*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

*A fascinating study of college students who participated in the 1964 voter registration drive in Mississippi that came to be known as Freedom Summer. Through interviews with many of the participants, McAdam uncovers much about their motivations for volunteering on this project as well as the lifelong effects this formative experience had on their political outlooks and behaviors.*

Urbatsch, R. *Families' Values: How Parents, Siblings, and Children Affect Political Attitudes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Families' Values *extends socialization research into new, or previously understudied, directions. Urbatsch explores family socialization agents other than parents, such as brothers, sisters, spouses, and children, finding that each can influence our political attitudes. He also studies a wide range of political attitudes and behaviors, beyond the oft-studied topic of party identification.*

"The Next America," Pew Research Center, 2017, http://www.pewresearch
.org/packages/the-next-america

*This section of the Pew Research Center's website presents results from their analyses of generational differences in the United States. Pew's site contains loads of other information about Millennials and Generation Z, with results from new surveys added often. Select "Millennials" or "Generation Z" under their "Topics" link from Pew's home page for the most recent additions.*

GenForward Survey Project, University of Chicago, http://genforwardsur
vey.com/

*GenForward Surveys are conducted bimonthly, on a representative sample of eighteen- to thirty-four-year-olds. As stated on their web page, their surveys are designed to pay "special attention to how race and ethnicity shape how respondents experience and think about the world." New reports, which address a wide variety of political and social topics, are added throughout the year.*

CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement), http://www.civicyouth.org

*CIRCLE conducts and disseminates research related to the civic engagement of youth. Its website contains a wealth of information, including research reports, tools for engaging in political and civic activity, and links to other civic engagement sites.*