



IS YOUR VOTE YOUR OWN?

Above: [Senator Reid Speaks on House Floor](#)

What is Political Socialization?

Political socialization is a subject of research that generally seeks to explain “what, how, and when political attitudes and behaviors are learned” ([Hepburn 1995](#)). Broadly, the field can be generalized to two categories: a macro and a micro level of examination. On the micro level, political socialization researchers study the process of learning: how citizens develop and learn political behaviors. On the macro level, political socialization examines the making of citizens. Compared to micro level

researchers, those interested in the macro level of socialization are more focused on its intended outcomes, the goals of the field, and how the study can be used to determine and even manipulate behavior.

Hyman, a leading scholar in the field, defined political socialization as a person’s “learning of social patterns corresponding to his societal position as mediated through various agencies of society” in his flagship 1959 book titled “[Political Socialization](#).” Hyman views citizen political engagement as something that is learned. This learning

To what extent are political traits attributable to environment and socialization?

"What, how, and when political attitudes and behaviors are learned" - Hepburn

starts early in life, long before voting age. One of the most evident and poignant instances of political socialization occurs within the four walls of one’s own home. Children learn about political processes in their households by hearing their parents talk about politics. Conversely, children may learn to harbor a disinterest in or distrust of politics through not hearing their parents talk about it or hearing them talk negatively about it.

Political socialization is a tricky concept to grasp mainly because the field encapsulates various outputs corresponding to a multitude of inputs (or lack thereof). Essentially, the idea of political socialization varies based on what is measured. Simply though, one can think of political socialization as the production of citizens via a combination of individual cognitive processes and macro social trends. The lack of conceptual clarity around the field and what it intends to study presents a unique challenge to researchers. Another challenge within the political socialization sphere is that the results tend to be hard to study, both because it is difficult to obtain data and because studies produce mixed outcomes.

Another way in which the field lacks clarity can be found in how many agents there are. Agents, generally, are individuals, societies, organizations, or anything else that transmits and helps shape one’s political attitudes and behaviors. More influential agents include families, schools, peers, media, religion, parties, and institutions, such as the state. Some of these forces that are intrinsic from people’s political identities are detailed below.

Are Political Behaviors Attributable to Nature ...?

While it is seemingly intuitive that people’s social and political attitudes will derive from their surroundings, especially during their most formative years, one subset of political socialization research that is less self evident examines the genetic heritability of political attitudes. As it turns out, political traits can be attributed to both nature and nurture. In 2005, Alford, Funk, and Hibbing were among the first researchers to look into if and how genes play a role in the formation of political identity. What they found was that at least some political variation can be attributed to our genetic dispositions. Their paper is situated in a larger interdisciplinary field of research on the heritability of social attitudes and behaviors. The authors hypothesize that political leanings are not exempt from falling into the category of heritable social attitudes. Thus, they expect to find that political attitudes have genetic as well as environmental origins. They “predict that attitudes on political issues tracking most closely to central personality traits should be the most heritable since personality traits are generally heritable and since the heritability of social attitudes is likely derivative of the heritability of various personality traits” (157).

In order to test their hypothesis, the authors conducted an observational twin study in which they observed the behaviors of two groups: monozygotic (MZ) and dizygotic (DZ) (identical and fraternal) twins. The theory behind using twin groups is that twins, whether MZ or DZ, should have similar environments but different genetic compositions. The twins were administered a short stimulus of items on the Wilson-Patterson (W-P) Attitude Inventory, a scale including 50 items, 25 of which are positively correlated to conservatism and 25 are negatively correlated. Respondents elicited an agree, disagree, or unsure response to each stimulus. Measures of political attitudes and behaviors were then produced using standard polychoric correlation analysis. Heritability was measured by subtracting the correlation for DZ pairs from the correlation for MZ pairs and multiplying by two. Estimates closer to zero indicated no genetic heritability while estimates closer to one indicated great heritability. This research allowed the authors to determine how much of one’s political attitudes were attributable to genes, how much to environment, and how much to measurement error.

TABLE 2. Genetic and Environmental Influences on Political Attitudes: Summary Index and Additional Non-Wilson-Patterson Items								
Attitude Item	Correlation				Heritability, 2 * (MZ – DZ)	Shared Environment, (2 * DZ) – MZ	Unshared Environment, 1 – MZ	z for (MZ–DZ) Difference ^a
	MZ		DZ					
	Corr.	n	Corr.	n				
Pearson's correlation coefficient								
28-item index score	0.65	2,107	0.43	1,384	0.43	0.22	0.35	8.93
Partial corr. for parent, same index	0.64	173	0.37	131	0.53	0.11	0.36	3.08
Opinionation	0.39	2,107	0.20	1,384	0.36	0.02	0.61	5.77
Polychoric correlation coefficient								
28-item mean	0.47	2,648	0.31	1,748	0.32	0.16	0.53	
Educational Attainment	0.86	2,683	0.66	1,771	0.40	0.46	0.14	16.40
Party Affiliation	0.55	2,417	0.48	1,554	0.14	0.41	0.45	2.99
Mean of affect toward Reps. and Dems.	0.48	2,633	0.32	1,730	0.31	0.17	0.52	5.94
Source: Access to the data provided by Eaves et al., principal investigators, Virginia 30K twin study (see note 7).								
^a The MZ–DZ correlation difference is statistically significant for all of the table items at the 0.01 level or above.								

Above
Genetic and Environmental Transmission of Political Attitudes (Alford et al. 2005)

What Alford et al. find is that, in all 28 of the observed W-P items, the MZ correlations are larger than the corresponding DZ correlations, showing that not only do genetics play a very tangible role in political attitudes, but that their role is also very pervasive. Furthermore, they found that, on average, the combination of genetics and environment account for around half of political variation in people’s traits and ideology, although partisan identity is not as affected by genetics. So, what does this imply for the field of political socialization? One must be careful not to take these results to suggest that citizens are not politically autonomous beings. In fact, despite the findings of Alford et al., there is still great debate regarding how much political variation is attributable to nature and how much is a result of environment. This brings us to our next area of interest: families as agents of political socialization.



... Or to Nurture?

Of all of the agents of political socialization, families stand out as the most pertinent and formative. Families’ roles in socialization have been the site of much research within the field. Generally, researchers across the board have found that, when parents show attitude stability, families serve as a primary agent in the formation and crystallization of political attitudes. In 2009, Jennings, Stoker, and Bower took a deep dive into the topic, performing a comprehensive review of [the effect of families on political traits](#). In their paper, Jennings et al. asked the following four research questions: what evidence is there that political traits are inter-generationally transmitted? What conditions make transmission of political traits more or less likely? How can one be sure that transmission occurs through families and not external factors? What are the long-term consequences of inter-generational transmission of political traits?

Previous research conducted in the 1960s and 70s comparing the political traits of children to those of their parents pointed to there being great inter-generational variability of political traits. [Jennings and Niemi \(1968\)](#), for example, suggested that whether or not a child inherited their parents’ political views depended on the salience of the political object for the parents, the homogeneity of the parents’ views, and larger opinion climates. Jennings et al. (2009) call into question whether the results of these studies conducted in the 1960s and 70s were generally true, or, whether they were the result of children’s attitudes being dramatically swayed by the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement. Put

simply, this 2009 study seeks to address whether the 1968 findings can be generalized, or whether they are cohort specific.

The authors gather data through conducting interviews with participants in the longitudinal parent-child political socialization project carried out by the University of Michigan’s Survey Research Center and Center for Political Studies. This study conducted interviews with a sampling of 1,669 high school seniors of the class of 1965 from 97 public and private high schools. The authors interviewed 935 participants of the original study in 1973, 1982, and 1997. Jennings et al. used ten core measures to collect their data. These measures included party identification, presidential vote choice, racial attitude, opinion on school prayer, evaluation of business versus labor, tolerance, political trust, political knowledge, interest in politics, and religiosity. They then aggregated these measures using multi-level regression in order to determine variability between the political traits of children and their parents. [1]

What Jennings et al. found is that the correlation between the partisan identities and opinions of parents and their children is very high. The following table shows the results of their regression analysis, indicating that, on average for children in their late teens, 55% of their opinions match those of their parents. By the time the child reaches their mid-twenties, this match rate is still significant at 34%.

TABLE 4 A Multivariate Test of the Transmission Model. First and Second Generations

Dependent Variable: (Youth Attributes)	Bivariate	Multivariate Results on Selected Variables				
	Parent Attribute	Parent Attribute	Parent Education	Family Income	School Climate	School SES
Party Identification (n = 473)	.55**	.51**	.13*	-.14 [#]	.17**	.03
Vote Choice (n = 395)	.55**	.54**	.09	-.30*	.28*	.24*
Racial Attitude (n = 487)	.31**	.21**	-.02	.00	.30**	.10 [#]
School Prayer (n = 406)	.32**	.21**	-.02	.13	.09	-.38**
Business vs. Labor (n = 485)	.14**	.13**	.04 [#]	.10**	na	-.03
Political Tolerance (n = 469)	.12**	.05	.15*	.00	.24*	-.08
Political Trust (n = 439)	.14**	.13**	-.06 [#]	-.04	.27**	.07
Political Knowledge (n = 475)	.42**	.31**	.12*	.08	na	.11
Political Interest (n = 474)	.10**	.04	.06	.01	.05	-.02
Religiosity (n = 488)	.43**	.39**	-.02	-.17*	.20**	-.09 [#]

Note: Entries were obtained from two-level random-effects analyses, with pairs nested within high schools, estimated using GLS with the Swamy-Arora variance components estimator. Cell entries are the estimated effect (b) of the column variable on the child’s response on the row variable, with each variable scaled 0–1. Other predictors included in the multivariate analysis besides those shown in the table are dummy variables for region, parent marital status, sex of the parent, working status of the mother, parent media exposure, and child’s race, sex, organizational involvement, church attendance, and exposure to civics courses. [#]p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01, one-tailed.

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Multivariate Regression showing transmission of political attributes from parent to child (Jennings et al. 2009)

One critique of this paper worth noting is that Dinas references shifts in partisan identification within the Jennings-Niemi-Stoker Parent-Youth Socialization Study Data as evidence that children were abandoning the views of their parents. These shifts took place in the 1960s and 70s, when, as Jennings himself references in his 2009 follow-up study, parties were undergoing significant

When do Schools act as Sites of Learning? In Politics, it turns out not as often as you would think

Under the study, more than one thousand students from 59 high schools across the country were placed in enhanced civics education courses. In these courses, students learned about the Bill of Rights and every-day, real-life examples of its effects. What they found was that treatment students, or those who completed the enhanced course, displayed significantly more knowledge of civil liberties than the control students, or those students who completed the standard civics course. However, these students did not display an increased support for civil liberties, as previous observational research had contended. The research of Green et al. suggests that there is not as strong of a causal relationship between knowledge and attitudes as previously thought, indicating

[illegible]

that families are likely more important than schools, or at least high schools, in forming citizens. This of course does not take into account the role of higher education in forming voters. In Vesla Weaver's [2010 article](#), explicated in a later discussion of the role of the state in socialization, the authors note that citizens holding a college degree are 25% more likely to vote than those with only a high school degree.

Are Your Political Views Determined by “The Man”?

The last agent of political socialization that this article will examine is the state. People often focus on the ways in which citizens shape politics and policies. This is fairly intuitive considering citizen power is integral to a functioning democracy. Less attention, however, has been paid to the ways in which politics and policies shape citizens. This is where the role of the state as an agent of political socialization becomes important. Two major studies have been done, each examining one out of a multitude of different ways in which citizens interact with the government. The first study, which was conducted by [Suzanne Mettler in 2002](#), is titled “Bringing the State Back in to Civic Engagement: Policy Feedback Effects of the G.I. Bill for World War II Veterans.”

Civic engagement peaked in the mid-1900s, following an unprecedented expansion of government into people's lives. One of these governmental expansions was the provision of education for veterans offered by the G.I. Bill. Mettler looks at the effect of the G.I. Bill on voting habits and democratic participation in order to understand how public social programs might encourage and expand citizen involvement. What Mettler found was that people who received and used the G.I. Bill to pay for an education were more likely to be active members of civic organizations and to participate in politics. The G.I. Bill increased participation by more fully incorporating citizens, especially those from less privileged backgrounds. Generally, it seems that when there is governmental provision of a resource, that the service should inculcate a greater predisposition for civic duty and an increased civic capacity. [2]

On the opposite end of this debate, Vesla Weaver and Amy Lerman argue that while positive interactions with the government might inculcate a sense of civic duty, that negative interactions with the state can have the opposite effect. In their [2010 study](#), “Political Consequences of the Carceral State,” Weaver and Lerman examine the relationship between social control and democratic engagement. They find that contact with the criminal justice system is a potent predictor of the

probability of whether or not one will vote. There was a 60% chance of someone voting if they had no interaction with the criminal justice system. On the other end, individuals who served serious time in prison were far less likely to vote. This difference in voting was comparable to the aforementioned difference between voting rates of high school and college graduates. These findings seem to be partly resource-based as, in some states, current and former convicts cannot vote. Additionally, interactions with the government, especially early interactions with authority, tend to shape one's perceptions of their place as a citizen and their trust in the government.

Clearly, there are a multitude of different factors contributing to one's civic engagement, many of which are not discussed here. While Jennings et al. make a compelling case that families are the chief site of political attitude formation, Dinas offers a retort indicating that, while those findings may be true, they may not function in the way that Jennings contends. Alford et al. also have a role to play here, proving that, while families are salient transmitters, that this transmission may not occur solely in the manner offered by Jennings and Dinas. Using a twin study, Alford et al. provide compelling evidence that political traits are genetically as well as environmentally heritable. Outside of families, there is also a strong case to be made that institutions such as schools and the state play a role in developing citizens. Although, these studies seem to examine the effects of interactions that are not guaranteed, such as with higher education and law enforcement. If it seems as though a lot of these studies offer questionable results or seem to have fundamental flaws, that is likely because the field of political socialization is complicated. Researchers lack clarity on how to conceptualize the central tenants of the field and data tends to be mixed or hard to gather. Generally, what can be contended is that political attributes, traits, and behaviors are both inherited and learned from a host of interactions with various actors, each helping to compose one's civic identity.



Source: David Horsey, Seattle Times Cartoonist