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Socialization of lifestyle and conventional politics among early and late adolescents

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ABSTRACT

This study uses national survey data from 1231 parent-children dyads to examine the socialization of political participation among adolescents (ages 12–17). In particular, we expand on existing models of political socialization to account for the incorporation of lifestyle practices into the political repertoires of today's youth. We found in comparison to future voting intention, which is rooted largely in background characteristics and the direct influence of socialization agents, political consumerism is fostered more indirectly through communication practices. Moreover, we found some meaningful age differences in the associations among key variables in the model. In particular, we observed a shift from a greater emphasis of socialization agents among younger adolescents to a greater emphasis of communication practices, particularly online communication, among older adolescents. We argue, for older adolescents especially, the controllability afforded by interactive digital media plays a critical role in the cultivation of political behaviors that address individual lifestyle concerns.

Research on youth engagement over the last few decades reveals contention among scholars regarding the civic potential of young citizens. Indeed, scholarly work illustrating diminishing levels of newspaper readership, confidence in government institutions, and political participation has led to a widely publicized view of today's youth as apathetic and disengaged (Mindich, 2005; Putnam, 2000; Turow, 1997). These scholars argue that the younger generations, in particular, have largely withdrawn from public life (e.g., Putnam, 2000).

However, in response to such pessimistic and provocative claims, those subscribing to the engaged youth paradigm contend participation in public life has not declined so much as it has shifted to new realms (Bennett, 2008; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). They explain, as personal identity concerns replace a sense of duty to participate in conventional political activities (Bennett, 1998, 2008; Dalton, 2009), a new locus of citizenship has been found in "life-politics" (Scammell, 2000, p. 351, see also Giddens, 1991). For these scholars, the notion of youth as apathetic results from a narrow attention to dutiful, or conventional, forms of engagement (O'Toole, 2004; see also Bennett, 2008; Dalton, 2009).

New research questions emerging from this approach to youth engagement include how lifestyle politics are developed over the course of young people's lives and how its processes differ from those of conventional politics (e.g., Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2011). To address these questions, this study investigates how the socialization of one particular form of lifestyle politics, political consumerism, compares to the socialization of electoral participation. In particular, we use national survey data collected from parents and children in the United States to examine the roles of parents, school, peers, and communication practices in fostering political consumerism and future voting intention among adolescents.

Because adolescence is a period marked by significant change, both socially and cognitively, we also draw an important and relevant distinction between youth in the early stages of adolescence (12–14 year olds) and those in the later stages (15–17 year olds). We argue this distinction is particularly relevant for understanding the socialization of political consumerism and other forms of lifestyle politics that are rooted in personal identity concerns. Accordingly, we take this distinction into account in our examination of the associations among socialization agents, communication practices, and youth political participation.

Political consumerism as lifestyle politics

Political consumerism is the selection of products "based on political or ethical considerations, or both" (Stolle, Hooghe, & Micheletti, 2005,

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p. 246). This may take the form of boycotting (i.e., avoiding products or services) or "buycotting" (i.e., rewarding companies for engaging in responsible practices). For example, by refusing to wear clothing from companies that use sweatshop labor or using an eco-friendly reusable water bottle, young citizens can make a statement to themselves and others about their social and political values and help to bring about change regarding responsible corporate practices and sustainability. As these examples illustrate, political consumerism, as a form of lifestyle politics, provides a viable outlet for young citizens to address issues central to their identities and empowers them to act as "important agents of political change" through their everyday choices (Micheletti, 2010, p. 16). Bennett (2008) notes the sharp rise in political consumerism among 15–25 year olds reflects a larger trend toward an actualizing model of citizenship whereby youth find meaning in civic activities that center on their personal values.

Although some scholars express concern that participation in such individualized forms of politics has displaced participation in conventional forms of engagement (e.g., Putnam, 2000), others offer a more optimistic outlook. They contend participation in lifestyle politics, such as political consumerism, expands young citizens' political repertoires (Bennett, 2008; Dalton, 2009) and provides them with opportunities to develop civic competencies in their everyday lives, such as expression of voice, cooperation, and collective action (Micheletti, 2010). Scholars have also shown that adult political consumers tend to endorse democratic ideals of public-spiritedness (Scammell, 2000) and solidarity (Dalton, 2009), have an awareness of and concern for issues of global importance (Micheletti, 2010), and are actually more likely than non-political consumers to engage in conventional political activities such as voting and working for a political party (Stolle, Micheletti, & Berlin, 2010). Accordingly, understanding how political consumerism is socialized among youth holds much value for scholars.

Political socialization

Agents

Across much of the political socialization literature, parents, school, and peers are regarded as important agents in shaping young citizens' political identities. Research has shown that socialization begins early in the home. Parents help to shape political identity by "framing a view of the world and how one should relate to 'others' in that world" (Flanagan & Faison, 2001, p. 10), and they play an important role, along with siblings and extended family, "in igniting and passing on a spirit and praxis of participation" (Youniss et al., 2002, p. 130). Although this top-down view has been challenged by those advocating "trickle-up" socialization (Lee, Shah, & McLeod, 2013; McDevitt & Chaffee, 2000), parent role modeling and frequent political discussion in the home are consistently found to be important precursors to participation among 15–25 year olds in a host of political activities, both conventional and unconventional (Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, & Keeter, 2003).[1]

School also constitutes an important venue for political socialization. Although early approaches to civic education were textbook-bound and focused narrowly on the formal aspects of politics, recent approaches have incorporated more interactive, participatory learning (Campbell, 2008; Feldman, Pasek, Romer, & Jamieson, 2007; Hess, 2002; Torney-Purta, 2002). Empirical evidence from civic education programs such as Kids Voting USA (e.g., McDevitt & Kiousis, 2006, 2007) and Student Voices (e.g., Feldman et al., 2007) supports the educational benefits of incorporating interactive components for students' civic learning and future engagement (e.g., McDevitt & Kiousis, 2007). Bennett (2008) explains that such approaches to civic education are better able to appeal to the learning styles of today's young citizens who seek opportunities to voice concern about issues central to their identities.

Lastly, peer groups play a critical role in political socialization, both formally and informally through participation in youth-led activist groups (Gordon & Taft, 2010), extracurricular activities, and interaction at school (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Zukin et al., 2006). Regarding the latter, Lee et al. (2013) observe, "young people who interact with peers who value knowledge and discussion of public affairs content are likely to be encouraged to consume and reflect on news content" (p. 5). Such peer-to-peer socialization experiences provide youth with opportunities for developing important civic competencies and values such as self-determination, tolerance, and feelings of solidarity (Flanagan & Faison, 2001).

Communication practices

Although early models of political socialization implied a top-down process in which youth were construed as the passive recipients of information handed down directly from parents, teachers, etc., shifts in psychological and education theory have stressed the importance of considering youth as active agents in their own development (Haste, 2010; Lerner, 2004; Sherrod et al., 2010). Specifically, scholars have argued that youth actively create meaning and a sense of identity from their everyday experiences and interaction with socio-cultural contexts (Conover & Searing, 1994; Flanagan & Sherrod, 1998; Metzger & Smetana, 2010). The trajectory of political development, therefore, is both socially constructed and communicatively mediated by youth as participants (Chung & Probert, 2011; Lerner, 2004). It is this sense that Youniss et al. (2002) limit the role of adults to contributing the raw material, explaining that "it is ultimately youth themselves who synthesize this material, individually and collaboratively, in ways that makes sense to them" (p. 133; see also Yates & Youniss, 1999). Communication scholars promote a similar view of youth as active agents who seek out and use information to interpret the world around them (Lee et al., 2013; McDevitt & Kiousis, 2006; McLeod, 2000; McLeod, Shah, Hess, & Lee, 2010). These scholars focus specifically on the role of such practices as political discussion, news consumption, and use of interactive digital media for political purposes in mediating the influence of socialization agents and facilitating pathways to participation.

In terms of the contributions of these communication practices to political socialization, interpersonal political discussion promotes the development of communication skills such as opinion expression and active listening (McLeod et al., 2010). It also contributes to the emergence of democratic norms that are crucial for engaging in public life (McDevitt & Kiousis, 2007). With regard to news consumption, the control that adolescents exert over their own media diet makes this agent of socialization very different from others (e.g., parents, school, peers), who may have a vested interest in passing on their beliefs and values (Arnett, 1995; Wrong, 1994). Indeed, Bennett, Freelon, and Wells (2010) note that today's youth approach news media with a healthy skepticism and "sample their information more broadly as media genres blur and information channels proliferate" (Bennett et al., 2010, p. 399; see also Bennett, 2008). Lastly, use of interactive digital media contributes significantly to the development and maturation of political identity by empowering youth to be active agents in the creation and dissemination of information (Haste, 2010; McLeod et al., 2010). Text messaging, e-mail, and online video sharing, for example, enable public self-expression and information sharing, both of which are important civic learning opportunities (Bennett et al., 2010). They also provide youth with the means to voice concerns directly relevant to their lifestyles (Bennett, 2008), such as vegetarianism, green living, and socially-responsible consumption practices.

[1] It is important to note that in highlighting the importance of these socialization agents, we are not arguing that the process of political socialization is merely top-down or unidirectional. Rather, we view young children as active agents who are cognitively and emotionally maturing, and whose construction of meaning and identity is embedded within a socio-cultural network of influences that include these key socialization agents (Lerner, 2004; Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010).