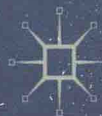PHILO C. WASBURN AND
TAWNYA J. ADKINS COVERT

MAKING CITIZENS

Political Socialization Research and Beyond

Philo C. Wasburn • Tawnya J. Adkins Covert

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In Mara's memory, and for Aaron, Leah, Hope, and Mary Lou.
PCW
For Jason, Thalia, Corda and Kai.
TJAC.

PREFACE

Some "Why" Questions About Citizens

Why do citizens often have very different perceptions of particular political actors, conditions, and events? Why do they adopt different political identities? Why do they have disparate views of the structure of power and authority in the United States today? Why do they sometimes have incompatible understandings of "freedom," "equality," and "democracy" and the importance of these supposedly fundamental American values? Why do they have varying opinions about their political obligations as citizens and about their own ability to influence government? Why do they have highly diverse attitudes toward particular government domestic and international policies, civil rights, and the role of religion in American political life? Why are some individuals avid consumers of political news, while others are content to remain largely oblivious to the political world around them? Why do some citizens initiate no political activity while others vote regularly, contact officials, participate in the affairs of their community, campaign, and even engage in protests?

There are a number of ways of answering these and countless other related questions.[1] The first variety of explanation occurs in the context of conversations. For example, a person is asked "Why did you vote for x rather than y"? Her answer is that "I liked x because he is pro- life." This account justified her choice to herself as well as to the person with whom she was speaking. It was a claim to the appropriateness of her selection rather than the presentation of a causal analysis.

A second variety of explanation appears in media accounts of public events. For example, a lead story explains why x won an election held on the preceding day. The answer refers to the candidate's positions on selected issues such as taxes, immigration, the role of the U.S. military, and to the relative size of their campaign fund. The story provided a simplified cause–effect account. It relied on widely available knowledge rather than technical expertise and helped make the election outcome intelligible to a mass audience.

A third type of answer to a "why" question involves reference to a rule or set of rules to which the individual is committed. For example, they could feel obligated to back candidates and parties whose policies are believed to benefit a group with which he/she identifies. Accordingly, a farmer explains that he routinely votes for Republican candidates because he "knows" farm prices are better with Republicans in office, or a construction worker responds that he invariably votes for Democrats because he "knows" the party supports organized labor. Over time such rules tend to become stable and socially shared. Like some other types of explanations, the statement of a rule that was followed to explain one's behavior can be assessed in terms of its appropriateness rather than its causal accuracy.

Technical accounts constitute a fourth variety of explanation. "By definition, they combine cause-effect explanation (rather than the logics of appropriateness) with grounding in some systematic specialized discipline (rather than everyday knowledge)."[2] This book presents technical accounts of the kinds of questions illustrated above. They draw on the empirical studies conducted by political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, and communication researchers concerned with political socialization, the lifelong processes by which people acquire, maintain, and change their political beliefs, values, attitudes, perspectives, self-identities, and patterns of participation.

Research on political socialization has been conducted since the 1950s. However, all these decades later, empirical findings remain largely uncodified, the various alternative theoretical approaches that have guided the investigations of the topic still appear to be contradictory, and the direction of future studies is uncertain. This book does not add yet additional data on the political socialization process. Rather, it proposes one systematic way of conceptualizing the enormous amount and variety of empirical findings that political socialization research has produced over the past six decades. It elaborates a life course perspective that integrates much exist-

ing research by treating the alternative theoretical orientations that have guided studies over the history of the field as supplementary rather than as competing approaches, each providing some insights into the complex ways in which people are made into citizens.

The book's first section outlines a life course model of the political socialization process.

Chapter 1 describes the field's paradigm shifts. These have both contributed to and thwarted the development of an overall understanding of political socialization throughout the lives of individuals. Some of the basic theoretical and empirical insights provided by each of the perspectives are identified. These will be incorporated into the life course model of political socialization explicated in section one. The second chapter identifies two variables that influence all of the processes of political socialization referenced in the model: the historical context in which they occur and individuals' levels of cognitive development and political sophistication. Inclusion of these influences within the proposed model is consistent with each of the apparently incompatible research paradigms. Chapter 3 discusses the agents of political socialization that play roles of varying importance throughout people's lifetimes: family, school, church, work, voluntary associations, and media. Analysis is complicated by the fact that each of these has a somewhat different meaning in different periods of time.

The process of making citizens occurs within the context of opportunities and constraints associated with social identities. The second section of this book reviews research on the ways in which gender, race/ethnicity, and social class together affect the political socialization people receive in their families, schools, churches, voluntary associations, and the particular media to which they pay attention and their understanding of the material presented by those media.

The final section illustrates the process of political socialization and considers why and how it might be modified. Chapter 7 introduces two imaginary characters. Details of their lives are fictional (although many of the places and events mentioned in their stories are real). Their histories are intended to illustrate how the model plays out in people's lives, that is, how citizens are made.[3] Chapter 8 engages two related, basic "what" questions about making future citizens. First, what could each of the agents of political socialization do to propagate a less superficial and more personally meaningful understanding of political democracy? Second, what could they do to increase popular involvement in such a political

system? It expresses concern about the vitality of a democracy in which so many citizens have little political interest and knowledge, in which rates of political participation are low, but in which expression of dissatisfaction with government is widespread.

NOTES

1. The following discussion of varieties of explanations is based on Tilly, Charles. *Why? What Happens When People Give Reasons...and Why*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006; and Converse, Phillip E. "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics." In *Ideology and Discontent*, edited by David Apter, 206-261. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1964.
2. Tilly, 2006: 130.
3. Ideas for the contents of Chap. 7 originated in papers written in a yearlong seminar on political socialization held in the Department of Sociology at Purdue University. The authors thank the student participants for their enthusiasm, diligent research, original insights, critical responses, and often their sense of humor. The contributors were Brandi Biser, Alexandra Bradley, Mallory Deardorff, Claire Fletcher, Jillian Kolb, Hayden McMurti, Meghan Moore, Andrew Portlock, Maria Rooijakkers, and Kaleigh Simpson. Claire Fletcher was responsible for organizing and supplementing their contributions.

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CONTENTS

A Model of the Political Socialization Process

Changing Perspectives on Political Socialization

The term "political socialization" first appeared in print in the first edition of *The Handbook of Social Psychology* published in 1954. While the chapter in which it was used focused on voting, discussion clearly suggested that the study of the developmental processes by which individuals acquire political identities, beliefs, values, attitudes, and patterns of behavior could be applied to many other features of political life. Five years later, the first book to bear the title "political socialization" was introduced (Hyman 1959). Here the scope of inquiry was more broadly conceptualized in terms of three dimensions: participation or involvement in politics, favoring radical or conservative goals, and supporting democratic or authoritarian forms of government. By 1968, ten major problem areas were distinguished and discussed: the system relevance of political socialization, its contents, life cycle patterns, generational differences, cross-cultural comparisons, subgroup and cultural comparisons, the learning process, the agencies of political socialization, and the extent of its impact on individuals and specialized (especially elite) political socialization (Dennis 1968).

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a vast increase in the number of books and research articles devoted to political socialization.[1] Political socialization came to be recognized as a field within political science, and was considered as a "growth stock" in social science research (Greenstein 1970). The following years of research witnessed irregular periods of stagnation and progress. New periods were initiated by paradigm shifts as described by Thomas Kuhn. While Kuhn's depiction of the history of change within

sciences might not apply to all fields, initially it did seem to describe the development of theory and research in political socialization (Kuhn 1962).

According to Kuhn, while, at times, any science can develop in a cumulative manner, major advances occur during "revolutions" in which a once dominant paradigm is replaced by a competitor. "A paradigm is a fundamental image of the subject matter. It serves to define what should be studied, what questions should be asked, how they should be asked, and what rules should be followed in interpreting the answers obtained..." (Ritzer 1975). The revolution is prompted by empirical findings, resulting from research conducted within the framework of the older paradigm, which the paradigm itself is unable to explain. The ascendant paradigm has the power to explain the anomalies. In addition, the paradigm either offers a new explanation of earlier empirical findings, or ignores them as irrelevant to the central concerns of the science.

David Sears identified four distinct perspectives on the development and maintenance of political beliefs, attitudes, self-identities, and patterns of behavior that can be found in the vast literature on political socialization (Sears 1990). At one extreme, the *persistence perspective* asserts that residues of pre-adult political learning are relatively immune to changes in later years. At the other extreme, the *lifetime openness perspective* maintains that political dispositions have an approximately uniform potential for change at all ages. The *life cycle perspective* and the *impressionable years perspective* fall between these two positions. The former maintains that people are susceptible to adopting particular dispositions at certain life stages, such as radicalism in youth and conservatism in later years. The latter position asserts that political beliefs and attitudes are unusually vulnerable in late adolescence and early adulthood. In other stages of life, people are resistant to the likelihood of change. The following four sections of this chapter briefly review the rise, fall, and contributions of each of the perspectives in the history of inquiry into political learning.

THE PERSISTENCE PERSPECTIVE

Initial studies of political socialization concluded that many, if not most, important political orientations are established by early adolescence.[2] These included compliance to socially legitimated rules and authority, political interest, sense of political efficacy, fundamental loyalties to nation, and political rules of the game in democratic systems. These central components of the political self, developed primarily in the family, the school,

and in peer associations, were viewed as quite stable, and serving as a perceptional screen to evaluate later political stimuli. The paradigm was influenced by learning and psychoanalytic models that were incorporated into theories of political behavior in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The models located the roots of political behavior in early experience (Sears 1990).

The *persistence perspective* incorporated a set of three assumptions about political orientations termed by Searing, Wright, and Rabinowitz as the *primacy principle*. Subsequently, the principle has often been referred to as the *primary principle*. "The first is that they are learned during childhood. The second is that this childhood learning further shapes subsequent modification of them. The third is that the scale of any subsequent modification is small: fundamental political orientations tend to endure through life" (Searing et al. 1976). The principle does not assert that significant political learning does not occur in later periods of people's lives. Nor does it maintain that all political orientations are transmitted unchanged from one generation to another.

The *primary principle* focused the attention of early political socialization research on the development, during childhood, of those political orientations that contributed to the stability and persistence of political systems—particularly to political democracy as institutionalized in the United States at that time. Deep-rooted attachment to the political system established in childhood was viewed as serving as a source of diffuse support upon which the political system could draw during times of crisis such as war and economic depression. Trust, confidence, and affection are always needed by a polity to help assure that citizens will comply with authoritative directives, tolerate significant personal costs such as paying taxes and serving in the military, and exercise some self-restraint in making demands on the political system (Easton and Dennis 1969). Early political socialization was seen as playing the role of inculcating values espoused by the American political system.

Some of those working within the *persistence perspective* tended to ignore previous studies which found that important individual dispositions do change over time.[3] For example, James Davies maintained that political socialization "begins at about the age of three and is basically completed by the age of thirteen" (Davies 1965). However, many others recognized that "political socialization continues through the life cycle; that not all childhood learning influences adult behavior, and that in dynamic modern societies, political attitudes are rarely transmitted unchanged from one

generation to another. The childhood focus stems instead from an interest in explaining how political attitudes *develop*."[4] Such researchers did not subscribe to the belief that the more an important orientation is in adult behavior, the earlier it is learned in childhood. Rather than adopting this understanding of the *primary principle*, they investigated an alternative *structuring principle* according to which basic orientations acquired during childhood can influence the later learning and adoption of specific beliefs, attitudes, and patterns of behavior.

Nevertheless, the challenge remained of empirically establishing the links between early orientations and their adult outcomes (Searing et al. 1973).

Even while research was going forward guided by the *persistence perspective*, evidence was accumulating to suggest strongly that some important political dispositions acquired during childhood, such as partisan tendencies and political trust, do not endure throughout life and do not structure the later adoption of specific beliefs and attitudes (Marsh 1971). Theoretical arguments that, in general, people maintain considerable flexibility in their attitudes far beyond their early socialization experiences also were being advanced (Brim and Kagan 1980; Gregen 1980; Lerner 1984).

Another factor also furthered the displacement of the *persistence paradigm*. Focus on the contributions of childhood political socialization to political order and stability left unaddressed questions about the origin of orientations promoting political conflict and change. These very topics came to the fore in the early 1970s. Violence in black ghettos, mass rallies demanding greater social, economic, and political equality for various minorities, demonstration in opposition to the Vietnam War, protest, and sometimes violent confrontations on American campuses centering around US involvement in Vietnam and also the rights of students at their colleges and universities—all of these events consumed the attention of many sociologists and political scientists. Existing political socialization research had identified some sources of political stability, not dramatic political change. The pressing need to understand the political context within which they were working, coupled with increasing realization that some political orientations acquired during childhood did not endure, led many of those conducting research on political socialization to abandon the *persistence perspective* to ignore the findings produced under its guidance and to adopt a new paradigm for the conduct of their inquiries.[5]

THE LIFETIME OPENNESS PERSPECTIVE

The *persistence perspective* was largely replaced by its antithesis. Rather than focusing on the lifetime stability of certain political orientations acquired during childhood, the *lifetime openness* approach emphasized that age is irrelevant to the establishment, maintenance, or change of political orientations. Those that appeared to endure simply were seen as the result of a lack of challenge to them over time. There was some empirical evidence to support this view. For example, one study reported that most individuals live in environments whose partisanship was congruent with their early adulthood environments (Brown 1981). Another found that most people live throughout their lives in environments with tolerance norms that are consistent with their early ones (Miller and Sears 1986).

The *openness perspective* advanced the thesis that people's political orientations reflect the socialization they are experiencing in the roles they presently occupy within the spheres of work, family, and voluntary associations. Research on topics such as the impact on political orientations of particular occupations,[6] job satisfaction (Delli Carpini et al. 1983), workplace politicization (Peterson 1992), unemployment (Bank and Ullah 1987), being a working mother (Reece et al. 1983), and religious participation (Beatty and Walter 1984; Houghland and Christenson 1983) exemplified this position.

THE IMPRESSIONABLE YEARS PERSPECTIVE

Research exploring the impact on individuals' political orientations of the sociohistorical context of their present lives might have proceeded to advance the lifetime openness perspective. Instead, it produced a partial paradigm revolution of its own. Rather than emphasizing influence exerted by events such as wars, depressions, government legitimacy crises and the like on all members of society (termed *historical* or *period* effects), numerous researchers began exploring the influence of shared historical experiences on a birth group in a similar stage of the life cycle development (termed *cohort* or *generational* effects). Studies of socializing experiences of the dramatic political events of the 1960s and early 1970s largely were analyses of generational politics.[7] Underlying much of this research were the assumptions that late adolescence and early adulthood was a particularly critical period in the life cycle for developing lasting