

# Theoretical Perspectives and Methodological Approaches in Political Socialization Research

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**Theoretical Perspectives and Methodological Approaches in Political Socialization Research.** This article contributes to the discussion about political socialization concept and research. The paper makes a critical insight in research history and development in the area of political socialization with the conclusions that there is no universal definition of political socialization and the field is still burdened by many theoretical and empirical controversies which could be resolved by examining causal mechanisms operating in the process of political socialization. The literature review describes the development of research in this field and shows that there is persistent need for retesting basic hypotheses. Showing the advantages and disadvantages of panel data design the paper demonstrates why it is most suitable type of data for testing majority of the hypotheses of political socialization. Sociológia 2015, Vol. 47 (No. 6: 605-624)

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## Introduction

In its broadest sense, political socialization is a lifelong process. From the early work of sociologists, psychologists and philosophers it has been consistently argued that the attitudes, beliefs, values, norms and behavior we learn in childhood persist and influence later views and behavior. The comprehensive nature of the socialization processes, of which political socialization is one element, is evident in a 'standard' textbook definition: "We will define political socialization quite loosely as the process by which the individual acquires attitudes, beliefs, and values relating to the political system of which he is a member and to his own role as citizen with that system. Such a definition encompasses a wide range of approaches and theories without commitment to any one in particular". (Greenberg 2009: 3)

The very general nature of socialization concept comes at a cost: there is no single 'theory'. Within the political socialization subfield of political science, there is perhaps an even more eclectic approach to this process than the quotation above shows. In effect, political socialization theory and research methods have been borrowed from diverse disciplines such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, anthropology and psychoanalysis.

For example one of the key findings from the classic political socialization literature is that if both parents share same political preference, it is highly

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probable that their children will have that same political identification. (Jennings – Niemi 1968; Tedin 1974) From a ‘common sense’ perspective this makes sense: a child learns its values from its parents. Often this consistency in political attitudes within the family has been attributed to ‘family socialization.’ There is strong reason to think that the origins of this attitudinal consistency are not simple as common sense suggests. Social scientists have argued that common intra-family attitudes can be the product of three, or perhaps more, distinct causal mechanisms. (Christakis – Fowler 2009)

First, *induction* effects occur where the political attitudes of one dominant person such as an ‘opinion leader’ cause others to have the same attitudes. Here a politically engaged parent may persuade their partner and children to vote in election and support a specific party, for example. (Katz – Lazarsfeld 1955) Second, *homophily* effects highlight the importance of having the same political attitudes for couple formation where like-minded people tend to prefer living together and their children are exposed to consistent political messages leading to intra-family consistency. (Huber – Malhotra 2013) Third, *confounding* effects refer to the community based processes where individual family members all experience the same context effects such as high political participation and partisanship because the district within which they live is an active one and the influence of ‘friends and neighbors’ is strong. (Huckfeldt – Sprague 1995) The impact of the media may also be considered a confounding effect where all family members are influenced by election campaign messages.

The central point here is to highlight that demonstrating consistent political attitudes and behavior among family members is only the start of the research process because it is rarely a simple task to explain such attitudinal consistency because of the problem of ‘observational equivalence’: two or more distinct causal mechanisms can have the same manifest effects and additional information is required to determine what is really happening. The main aim of this article is to give an overview of political socialization research literature and demonstrate problematic points of this research area. Special attention is given to the use of panel data as a mainstream type of data employed in today’s political socialization research.

This article is divided into three main parts. The first section starts with discussing the term socialization and proceeds with the overview of political socialization research to this day. Here, the history of this field is briefly outlined and the main areas of study are presented, stressing the major theoretical and empirical controversies. In the part, the appropriateness of three main survey designs for the study of political socialization is discussed. The concluding section provides a critical overview of studies which used panel data for analyzing political socialization.

## **Political socialization research overview**

Political socialization does not have a definitive meaning and consequently there are a variety of definitions of political socialization. Within the social sciences the conceptualization, often not the subject of explicit theorizing, is evident in the works of such diverse theorists as Cooley (1956), Piaget (1975), Bourdieu (2000), Berger and Luckmann (1966), Kohlberg (1981) and Harris (1995).

Within political science there is also a long list of political socialization scholars. Early researchers would include Hyman (1959), Dawson (1966), and Greenstein (1965). Within a decade of Hyman's (1959) seminal book on political socialization there were criticisms of published research by Dennis (1968) and Marsh (1971) who argued for more theoretical and operational rigor. This issue remains a feature of current political socialization.

The diverse concepts of (political) socialization usually fall into two broad categories. The first type could be represented by Langton (1969: 4) who defined political socialization as a "way how society transmits its political culture from generation to generation." The second perspective emphasizes an individual's personal growth in which the person is forming their own values and personal identity. (Sears 1975: 95) This broad division of conceptualizing political socialization fits into larger debates about the nature of socialization within the discipline of sociology and has resulted in some ambiguity and confusion regarding the importance of socialization.

Given the diverse roots of political socialization scholarship, it is not surprising that the origins of the sub-discipline are debated. Some authors such as Niemi and Hepburn (1995) state that political socialization research developed from political behavior research interest undertaken in the late 1950s. That is probably mainly because the term "political socialization" originates in Hyman's (1959) eponymous work. It may be argued that the innovative design and influential findings from the 'Columbia Studies' fielded in the 1940s represent the first survey based attempts at political socialization research, even though he has not explicitly stated that it is a political socialization research. (Berelson et al. 1954)

The direction of political socialization research has gone through specific phases. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the main focus was ideology and childhood socialization believing that parents are the most important agent. Later, political socialization scholars emphasized proximate (rather than distal) effects such as the impact of media messages. In addition, the focus moved away from studying childhood to adolescence: the latter being considered another phase in citizens' political development.

Political socialization research experienced a golden era in 1970s; and thereafter interest in the topic declined rapidly. Niemi and Hepburn (1995: 1) concluded that by the end of the 1970s political socialization research had “died a premature death.” The reason might be that the researchers felt that there is not much more to analyze. There is an irony here because during the 1980s new statistical methods and models were developed allowing political socialization researchers to analyze change over time in innovative ways. (Singer – Willett 2003)

For almost next three decades relatively little political socialization research was published; and this situation began to change around 2010 (note Gordon – Taft 2011; Abendschön 2013) when motivation to retest hypotheses and findings from early studies by using new statistical methods emerged.

Apart from the recent panel studies, several experiments were conducted to examine classic causal hypotheses. These experiments usually measured short term effects of school or media and led to the conclusion that civic classes (Pasek et al. 2008) or exposure to certain media programs have an effect on adolescents’ political values. (Paluck – Green 2009) Such studies are very important because they contribute to the large debate which originates in 1960s about civic education and agenda setting having a vast impact on democratic development in society. Student-Parent Socialization Study (1965, 1973, 1982, 1997) has been widely used for this purpose because it allows combining data from students, parents and schools in a long-term period. As usual these data come from U.S.

Belgian Youth Survey (2006; 2008; 2011) represents one of the few recent panel surveys of adolescents outside the U.S. Researchers visited over 60 schools and gathered more than 6 thousands of respondents in the first wave. Being one the few European studies, this survey is of high importance as it provides an opportunity to test hypotheses in multiparty environment with a weak party attachment and different political history and culture than the U.S.

Political socialization research, both in its early phases and the most recent forms, revolves around a set o key issues. These are summarized in the following part, stressing that even after decades of research many of them remain unresolved.

#### *Rise and development of political attitudes*

It is not very surprising that citizens do not experience a massive shift of their political opinions and preferences when they become eligible to vote after reaching their eighteenth birthday. One does not change from a politically apathetic teenager to an actively engaged citizen overnight simply because of becoming an adult. Encouragement to figure out the process of becoming *homo politicus* comes with the debate over low turnout among young cohort which

started decades prior to the early political socialization studies of the 1950s. (e.g. Tingsten 1937)

Systematic research of political socialization starts in the 1960s. Scholars realized that even children under the age of six years are capable of expressing feelings about political parties. (Greenstein 1965) The fact that children were able to respond to questions regarding politics were interpreted as a start of future party identification. It became obvious that even very young children are confronted with politics and are able to perceive it. Those findings even more encouraged research in this area.

Early political socialization scholars argued that early socialization has the biggest impact on citizens' political learning over the life cycle. (e.g. Campbell 1960; Greenstein 1965, Sears 1975) Here the goal has been to see if specific patterns of early political socialization have long term consequences leading some individuals to become highly active citizens and others to be politically apathetic. (Dennis 1968: 99) Within the classic political socialization research, it was hypothesized that early adoption of political attitudes and values results in higher persistence due to a strong imprinting process.

Democratic states usually provide civic courses that are supposed to give their young citizens crucial information about political and electoral system which might also stimulate their civic engagement but primarily give them the information about political and electoral process.

As is evident from the development curve approach, a major debate within the field has been over the persistence of political values and attitudes. Political socialization research has been largely based on the influential assumption that what individuals learn in childhood persists through life.

#### *Do the attitudes persist?*

Sears (1975: 127) highlights that the question of attitude persistence from early socialization through adulthood "has been of anxious concern to virtually all who have written in this area." There were several attempts by Campbell (1960) and Converse (1966) in the United States and Butler and Stokes (1969) in Britain to prove attitude persistence using a retrospective question where adults were asked to report their attitudes as adolescents. Use of this retrospective method was criticized because respondents are known to be unreliable in reconstructing earlier attitudes. (Jaspers et al. 2009)

However, the persistence of political learning from early childhood through the life-cycles is still questioned. The opposing hypothesis claims that individuals adjust their views and behavior to the actual situation. To illustrate this theoretical controversy, Donald Green and his colleagues (Green et al. 2002) favor the "persistence" hypothesis where they are convinced that party identification persists similarly to religious identity. Their argument is that

studies favoring the “openness” hypothesis suffer from measurement error; and if you control for it, issues positions will show no effect on party identification. In contrast, Abramowitz and Saunders (1998) explain the increasing correlation between ideology and partisanship by arguing that individuals simply adjust their partisanship according to their ideological values. Even Campbell (1960) who over the long-term supports the persistence hypothesis admitted more than half a century ago that “if the pressure is intense enough, a stable partisan identification may actually be changed”.

Later research by Niemi and Jennings (1991) revealed that partisanship is relatively stable; however, it cannot be assumed that it persists. There are other factors that influence partisanship such as the economic situation, the behavior of political leaders, implemented policy, scandals, etc. At this point it is worth noting that most political socialization research was undertaken in the U.S. during a period when partisanship was both strong and stable with a unique form of electoral competition based on the dominance of two large parties.

*Political socialization as a means of transmission of political attitudes*

Subject to much discussion from the start was also the issue of “the function of political socialization” (Almond – Coleman 1960: 27), i.e. whether it contributes more to the intergenerational continuity or rather discontinuity. Political socialization thus does not inevitably result in continuity but may also contribute to considerable gaps between generations, as was symptomatic of the 1960s, the dramatic period of western history. Within this context, taking generation effects in account makes some sense as the student generations of the 1950s and 1960s were very different in terms of political activism and behavior. If generation effects are important, this undermines the importance of the family socialization of children. Each new generation may learn some attitudes and values from their parents but most of their political outlook has its origins in peer group and the media. If this was not true, we would observe children as a perfect replication of their parents, but this is not happening.

From this perspective, political socialization would be the study of how each generation invents its own attitudes and values: inter-generational transmission processes are of less importance. If one accepts this ‘generational’ criticism this implies that the study of the political socialization using a parent-child survey research methodology is inappropriate because each generation is unique. Consequently, a ‘cohort-centric’ approach where specific generations are studied separately is a more valid basis for exploring political attitudes and behavior.

Within the socialization perspective, the transmission process is carried out through socialization agents, among which family, school and media are

regarded as crucial. Not surprisingly, family is given priority in most of the political socialization literature. (Lesthaeghe – Moors 2001; Whiteley 1999)

Being a socialization agent entails not only similarity to the person who is the subject of socialization in correlation terms, but above all having a real impact on adolescent or child. As in any behaviour research, both direct and indirect effects are likely to be operating in the process of political socialization. A direct effect occurs when the activity of parents influence adolescent's behaviour because they work as a role model. (McFarland – Thomas 2006) An example of direct influence can be the political engagement of parents (Nesbit 2012). Children are more likely to politically participate if their parents participate in elections (Martikainen et al. 2005) or in politics in general. (Plutzer 2002) Indirect influence happens if parents talk and discuss politics with children. Children from families with frequent political discussion are more likely to be politically active later in life. (Schmid 2012) Political agents are discussed in more detail in the following subchapter.

#### *Political socialization agents*

Originally, there have been a huge debate about the question of which agent is the most important. In most of the political socialization literature, the family is considered the most important factor influencing attitude and behavior of young people. (Langton 1969; Dawson – Prewitt 1968) Parents are usually seen as the most influential socialization agent because they spend most of the time with their children and parents' role is to guide offspring's behavior, through direct and indirect action. From the research point of view the congruence between parents and their children stand for one of the first significant findings.

Recent research has shown that young first-time voters who live at home or with others are more likely to vote, suggesting that socialization and social network effects are critically important in explaining turnout. (Bhatti – Hansen 2012) In concordance with Fieldhouse and Cutts (2012) their argument is that youth voting turnout is dependent on whether they moved away from their parents' home or not, although it is strongly conditional on the parental turnout. They argue that parental turnout influences the young adult's turnout and those who still live with their parents vote more often than those who live on their own. These studies imply that context matters and attitudes alone do not explain political behavior among young adults.

It has been suggested that families have an impact on generalized trust and civic participation. (Chan – Elder 2001) If parents are democrats, their children are more likely to be democrats too. They will be more likely to adopt democratic values and accept democratic decision-making procedures. (Quintelier et al. 2007)

School as the second important socialization environment involves two important agents – teachers and peers. Teachers are responsible for transferring knowledge and also developing the cognitive skills of pupils. They also initiate discussions about politics, society and public issues like tolerance towards immigrants and homosexuals. Although teachers are supposed to educate youth about politics and public issues, they do not always have the capacities, means or motivation to transform pupils into politically engaged citizens. Apart from teachers' abilities, this can be caused by pupils' apathy about politics.

Jennings and Niemi (1968) point out that one should not underestimate the role of educational environment. They analyzed high school seniors and their parents and came up with a conclusion that: "...it is nevertheless clear that any model of socialization which rests on assumptions of pervasive currents of parent to child value transmissions of the types examined here is in serious need of modification [ ... ] The data suggest that with respect to a range of other attitude objects the correspondents vary from at best moderate support to virtually no support."

Other scholars indicate significant and meaningful effect of school and curriculum on high school students' political knowledge and behavior too. (Hooghe – Stolle 2003; Niemi – Junn 1998; Yates – Youniss 1999) The reason for different results might be that educational style and curriculums have changed since 1970s and it is not so much about memorizing rather about discussion and interaction activities. Moreover it is not just about changes in teaching style and curriculums but also open-classroom climate, option to visit school councils and participate in youth parliaments have positive effect on political knowledge and future political behavior. (Torney-Purta et al. 2001)

There is large literature (Rosenstone – Hansen 2003; Verba – Nie 1972) that documents a positive relationship between level of educational and electoral participation. Most studies implicitly assume that education somehow causes participation. However, even though the average turnout is declining, general levels of education have increased.

Verba et al. (2003: 13) note that "education is in fact the strongest predictor of political activity". In most studies education is the strongest predictor of political participation even when other socioeconomic factors are taken in consideration. (Shields – Goidel 1997)

There are basically two broadly accepted theories explaining why education is such a strong predictor. Firstly, the civic education theory is based on the idea that education provides skills necessary to become politically engaged and also the knowledge to understand democratic principles. (Rosenstone – Hansen 2003) People with higher education participate at higher rates because their schooling provided them with the "skills people need to understand the abstract subject of politics, to follow the political campaign, and to research



and evaluate the issues and candidates”. (Wolfinger – Rosenstone 1980: 136) In other words, higher education reduces the material and cognitive costs of participation. The second approach asserts that the schooling system socializes people into individuals that support voting turnout because of its promotion of political efficacy, interest in politics or civic duty. (Campbell et al. 1960)

The education system operates as an important channel of political socialization, with college attendance viewed as being especially significant source of political learning. However, Highton (2009) argues that education, which is usually seen as a proxy for cognitive ability, is really a proxy for pre-college socialization. Consequently, the correlation between education and political sophistication might be spurious and attention should shift to exploring if, and how, socialization processes determine an individual’s level of political sophistication.

But it is not just teachers that young people meet at school. Classmates are omnipresent and they are constantly interacting with each other. Young people develop their attitudes through discussion with peers. (Verba et al. 1995) Some scholars (Campbell 2008; Hess 2009) report the effects of an open classroom climate on political engagement. Political discussion among peers leads to increased political participation, in part because these discussions function as a mechanism for becoming recruited. (Klofstad 2011)

Within psychology there has been the controversy about the research evidence concerning parents influence over their children’s development. Harris (1995) has shown that the empirical evidence of a ‘parental effect’ on how children turn out as adults is not strong, and in many cases inconsistent. The key implication here is that the main channel of political socialization is not the family, but children’s peer group. Consequently, Harris (1995) has proposed that a ‘group’ rather than ‘family’ socialization model would offer a better explanatory framework for children’s development.

Apart from scholars who are convinced that political attitudes and values are products of environment and socialization agents there are also experts who explain personal attitudes and participation mainly by genetic factors. The argument is that we have been born with some predispositions for certain political attitudes and they influence one’s political behavior more than the environment and context they live in. (Alford et al. 2005; Harris 1995)

Alford et al. (2005) compared the political attitudes and preferences between monozygotic and dizygotic twins. According to this study, party identification is primarily a product of socialization that is what children learn from their parents and learning experiences in childhood. However they explicitly state that: “A political match between parents and children should not be taken to be the result of a socialization process [ ... ] just as political mismatches between parent and child should not be taken as evidence against a

role for genetics. Parent–child mismatches are distinctly possible given the uncertainties of meiosis [ ... ] and the possibility for occasional errors in the transcription and translation of genes.” (Alford et al. 2005: 164)

Although scholars usually find socialization agents as more influential than other variables like genetic disposition, it seems that the theory of political socialization does not rest on such firm grounds as is usually perceived. There is still no convincing conclusion what really matters in building and persisting political values, attitudes and partisanship. Contrary to the classical studies that were oftentimes motivated to find out which socialization agent is the most influential, this has changed rapidly and nobody is asking such question lately. Even though scholars analyze separate effects of socialization agents, it would be very naive to search for only one main socialization agent.

### **Data design in political socialization research**

As has been noted above, literature is not consistent in its conclusions regarding basic hypotheses of political socialization. The diverse findings can be caused by use of different assumptions, methods and data. If we follow the persisting political socialization mainstream research and assume that socialization does exist and matters, we should ask how to test related hypothesis. There are basically three ways how to undertake political socialization research: 1) cross-sectional, 2) (quasi)experimental and 3) panel survey. The following part very briefly summarizes the advantages and disadvantages of the cross-sectional and quasi-experimental design demonstrating the reason for which they are used very rarely in political socialization research. Consequently, the panel data design is described in more detail.

#### *Cross-sectional*

Even though cross-sectional data are relatively easy to gather and for most of the political behavior analysis sufficient, this approach is not very popular in political socialization research. First and foremost, the concept of political socialization implies research questions that are longitudinal in nature. Be it the development of political attitudes in time or parental influence on children, analyzing a state at a certain time within the cross-sectional design is very limiting.

The cross-sectional approach offers no means of studying the progress of individual political socialization and is not able to disentangle the effect of age, cohort and time period.

Observed age differences thus cannot be unequivocally attributed to aging, since political trust, party attachment or preferences could have been

influenced by the actual political situation or political and social circumstances at the time individual was born and growing up.

The key problem with cross-sectional data is that they do not provide any evidence on causality, which is at the core of most political socialization research. Since main cross-sectional relationships have long been established, the real focus is on explaining causal mechanism behind them. For example if we see high rate of voting turnout among youth in families with certain characteristics, with cross-sectional type of data we will never be able to find out why this is happening. Is it because of one of those characteristics of family; or school they visit? Is it because they live in the same city? Is it genetics?

These major problems were clear very soon and that is the reason why scholars have been working primarily with panel data since 1960s and political socialization studies using cross-sectional type of data are relatively rare.

### *(Quasi)Experiments*

Secondly, it is possible to use (quasi)experimental<sup>2</sup> design, which has potential to solve the causal inference problem by controlling and setting conditions. We identify an independent variable and control other variables in order to see if subsequent manipulation of the independent variable under the controlled conditions produces change in the dependent variable. If this is the case, we can usually declare causal relationship.

Even though (quasi)experiments are powerful tools in capturing causality, they also have a number of features that make them less attractive option for political socialization researcher. As political socialization is effectively a lifelong process, the main disadvantage to using (quasi)experiments is their short-term orientation. (Quasi)experiments could be useful in analyzing short-term effects or media effects but it is virtually impossible to undertake an experiment in order to analyze long-term effect like value transmission between generations or value persistence because. The key strength of experiment, studying events in controlled conditions, cannot be maintained over longer periods. It would be necessary to follow people for many years.

A typical weak point of (quasi)experimental design is that they are not representative. The manipulation uses natural settings and planned repetitions with different subject populations and experimental circumstances.

(Quasi)experiments are usually criticized for their validity problems. Experiment is internally valid as long as we are certain that the outcome was caused by the independent variable. If we consider experiment with two randomly assigned groups where in the first one students attended civics

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<sup>2</sup> Quasi-experiments sometimes called natural experiments differ from true experiment in a way how are subjects assigned to groups. In quasi-experiments subjects are not randomly assigned to the treatment condition.

lessons and in the second one they did not, and we look for the level of political knowledge which was the same before giving the civics lessons but is higher in the first group after attendance of the civics lessons, we can assume that the higher level of political knowledge is promoted by attending civics lessons. However, internal validity suffers if a certain type of individuals drop out or refuses to participate. We call it differential attrition. That would happen if for example bad students dropped out of the whole school and thus also from the experiment.

External validity is threatened by certain groups not being included in the experiment. For example if university educated parents refused participation of their children, we would miss students with a specific family background. Random sampling methods are usually used to make sure that participants from diverse settings are included in order to keep results externally valid. In the example situation described above, this could mean sampling individuals from different cities in order to make sure that effects of civics lessons are not characteristics only of some cities.

Finally, the usual pre-test and post-test design can produce changes in experimental subjects solely by means of measurement taking place prior to manipulation.

#### *Panel survey approaches to the study of political socialization*

As both cross-sectional and experimental design, despite their advantages, does not often suit the purposes of political socialization research, panel studies are commonly employed. The basic condition for panel is that respondents are measured repeatedly in at least two waves. Panel data provide opportunities to describe trajectories of development over the life course and examine the patterns of causal relationships over a longer period; they allow effective comparison in time, so one could investigate the speed, tendency and occasions of political socialization development.

Panel data enable to study regularity and extent of change across defined groups and focus on different life experience. Panel data has an advantage in dealing with potential problems regarding temporal instability and unit heterogeneity. (Halaby 2004) The same units are observed at different times in panel surveys and most of unobserved variables remain stable so we could rule them out as a possible explanation of response differences. (Blossfeld et al. 2009: 15)

With panel data, researchers are able to find out whether respondent achieves what he presumed in previous waves. For example, in the first wave interviewer can ask if respondent is planning to become a party member next year. Consequently, in the following wave, it is possible to check if the respondent actually joined a political party and analyze the reasons why the

respondent has (not) become a party member and why he has (not) chosen a specific political party.

Panel data fits the need of political socialization scholars to follow development of attitudes and values over long periods of time and examine the timing and strength of socialization effects during the lifecycle. Multiple measurement occasions allow describing trajectories of various characteristics, such as cyclical development of political literacy, which tends to be higher before elections when voters obtain information about politics in a greater extent than in periods between elections. . However, it is not possible to capture whole dynamics of socialization even with panel data that are in reality a series of cross-section data.

Despite its popularity in the field of political socialization research, panel data also suffer from several issues. Blossfeld et al. (2009: 16) describe “causation-as-consequential-manipulation” problem which denotes the situation when the intervention itself will quasi-automatically lead to an outcome. Because the same subjects are repeatedly interviewed, panel conditioning can occur, that is responses given in one wave are influenced by those given in the previous waves. (Trivellato – Ruspini 1999)

Though the major advantage of panel design is the opportunity to tap causal mechanisms, this may not always be achieved. Cox (1992) noted that a causal relationship between X and Y must be seen as a product of a process developed by a certain mechanism. Considering causation as a generative process, we should realize that the role of time does not lay just in providing effect order but also include the intervals between cause and effect. In other words, the cause needs time to generate an effect. For example, if mother starts telling the child a list of Slovakian presidents, it will take some time before the child will know names of all the Slovakian presidents. The interval depends on a certain occasions and effects and can be very short or very long but either zero or infinite. (Kelly – McGrath 1988; Blossfeld et al. 2009)

The crucial aspect of panel study closely linked to the quality of resulting data is the issue of attrition. It is highly important not to underestimate communication with respondents in order to achieve as high retention rate as possible. Low retention rate may result in bias and even seriously threaten validity of the whole research. On the other hand, the risk of high attrition rates imposes high demands for perfect planning and organization that make the research usually very expensive and time consuming.

### **Review of longitudinal political socialization studies**

There have been numerous influential publications in the political social sub-field within political science, e.g. Jennings Niemi (1974), Plutzer (2002), Quintelier et al. (2007), Fieldhouse and Cutts (2012) and since panel data

design seems to be the most suitable and used approach in analyzing political socialization hypotheses this section provides few examples of how panel data can be used in political socialization research.

One of the first influential studies using panel data was Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) *The People's Choice* which explored the nature of voting in the US Presidential Election of 1940 and highlighted (a) the importance of family socialization, (b) electoral choices are made within a social context, (c) individuals' social networks tend to be homogeneous in terms of political attitudes and (d) the mass media tends to reinforce pre-existing attitudinal biases. These results highlighted the sociological nature of voting and led Berelson et al. (1954) and his team in their next large voting study to map out an individual's voting intentions over the course of a political campaign using a panel survey design.

Berelson et al.'s (1954) *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign* primarily used data from a four wave panel study conducted in Elmira during the 1948 presidential elections. They also gathered data from the local press and candidates' speeches, and observed the activities of local party organizations in order to be able to analyze the effect of media on a voting decision.

An influential panel survey was fielded by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center (SRC) and Center for Political Studies (CPS) and has been the subject of numerous published studies, e.g. Healy and Malhotra 2013; Jennings et al. 2009. The *Youth-Parent Socialization Study* consisting of four waves: 1965 (N=1669), 1973, 1982, and 1997 (N=935) was a dedicated longitudinal study of parent-child political socialization that consisted of interviews with a national sample of high school seniors.

The key value of these panel data is that it is possible to trace three generations across a three-decade time span. The original questionnaire focused on attitudes related to civil liberties, religious orientations, political trust, political engagement and partisanship. During the first three waves interviews were conducted with at least one parent in order to be able to analyze the responses of parent-child dyads. For the four waves the SRC-CPS research team managed to gather 636 pairs consisting of parents from the first wave (Generations 1) and their offspring (Generation 2).

Jennings et al. (2009), using also Michigan's Survey Research Center data, examined interpersonal trust in the USA over a three decade period and showed that the decline in trust during 1970s and 1990s occurred mainly within the youngest cohort. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents, aged 17 years old, agreed that most people can be trusted in 1965. Three decades later, in 1997, only one third of the children of these respondents shared such a trusting outlook while their parents retained their trusting outlook. Such findings have

been used by scholars who support the 'Generation X' explanation for the decline in trust and social and political participation. Jennings et al. (2009) also showed that there are strong age and life cycle effects for trust and political and social engagement. These findings reveal that scholars have to be very careful when making inferences about trends in cohort effects using cross-sectional data. This is because the assumptions that life cycle effects are constant are not always valid. (Hooghe 2004: 39)

An important channel of political socialization is the education system where college attendance is viewed as being especially important source of political learning. In order to test this assumption, Highton (2009) analyzed if there are differences in political sophistication between those who attended college and those who has not using the four-wave panel *Youth-parent Socialization Study* data. He focused on examining the attitudes of adolescent respondents before and after they attended college to observe the impact of education on their level of political sophistication. Highton (2009: 1573) concluded that education is a proxy for pre-college socialization and the correlation between education and political knowledge is spurious.

Valentino and Sears (1998) analyzed the influence of political campaign, using a (three-wave) panel study. They observed pre-adults and their parents during and after the 1980 presidential campaign. Their conclusion implies that adolescents exposed to higher levels of political communication experience the largest socialization gains. Moreover, Valentino and Sears (1998: 127) conclude that "the socializing effects of political communication are limited to the campaign season." This study provides evidence that some of the assumptions that have been made on basis of cross-sectional studies show up as spurious because correlation does not mean causation; and socialization is a broad process where scholars are not able to statistically control for all potential confounding variables and effects.

## **Conclusion**

Political socialization research has produced many findings which, though still enjoying widespread acceptance, may be in the light of more recent studies no longer relevant or could be a product of a spurious variable. Firstly, it is usually uncritically accepted that family is still the most influential socializing environment for developing political attitudes and preferences even though there are studies that show contradictory results. This may divert the attention from studying effects of other socialization agents. Secondly, researchers tend to defend basis of their research by accepting that attitudes and preferences learned in early childhood are relatively stable and they persist. Consequently, it is usually assumed that early adoption of political attitudes and values results in their higher persistence. Thirdly, some scholars tend to assume that the aging

effect make a great difference in the magnitude of attitudinal change, thus likely underestimating the potential for attitudinal change in adulthood. Finally, the importance of generation effects is often overlooked which may result in the false impression of socialization as a process contributing exclusively to intergenerational continuity.

Matters are even more complicated because some evidence supports the claim that socialization agents are not that relevant as was assumed in the past and genetics or contextual effects may play the key role in developing individual's attitudes and preferences.

Such controversies underscore an important characteristic of socialization research literature: it is often interdisciplinary in nature, and this is reflected in the diverse origins of the concept of socialization. Even though political socialization research ran for more than 60 years, it seems that there is apparently no convincing conclusion about almost any of political socialization hypothesis.

There are diverse views on the primary cause of one's political attitudes and political participation which could be summarized as contextual, genetic or cause of socialization agents and environment. Testing the causal mechanisms requires repeated measures of political attitudes among members of the same observed group (family, friends, colleagues etc.) using a panel survey research design. Moreover, information about the context or community in which the individual and their family live can be equally crucial.

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