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Growing into citizenship: The differential role of the media in the political socialization of adolescents

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Chapter 6: General conclusion

In times of dwindling turnout rates among young voters and a growing gap between traditional politics and the young, understanding the process of political socialization is possibly more important than ever. Yet, the youth's alienation from politics leaves us puzzled. We neither fully comprehend what keeps adolescents from politics, nor do we have a convincing plan in place to overcome the distance between politics and the young. Especially the role of the media needs to be investigated thoroughly, as it has been neglected by science despite its prominence in the everyday lives of adolescents. In this dissertation I shed a light on the question if and how media can influence the process of political socialization by investigating three aspects of the process: the development of political attitudes, political knowledge, and political engagement. I provide evidence that media can contribute to growth in political knowledge and mobilize political engagement, depending on media content and characteristics of the users. Thereby this dissertation contributes to the field of media effects research, as well as ongoing political socialization research in the social sciences.

In this final I chapter I will first give a brief overview of the findings. In the second part of this final chapter I focus on a number of overarching key conclusions and their implications for future research as well as media policy.

Summary of findings

The first empirical study (Chapter 2) of this dissertation served the purpose to place the subsequent studies into context. It compares the demographic group investigated in this dissertation – Dutch adolescents – to European adolescents and older media users using multi-level regression modeling based on European Social Survey data. When comparing Dutch adolescents to other European adolescents, I find that media effects on political socialization do not vary greatly across Europe. I did find, however, that countries characterized by a consolidated and mature democracy, like the Netherlands, are more likely to bring about engaged young citizens than countries in which democracy is less developed. With regard to the second comparative perspective – age - I find that media effects on political

attitudes, in particular attachment to a political party as well as political trust and political participation become stronger with age. For adolescents, these effects were statistically insignificant or just about significant. So why should we study media effects among a group in which the influence of media on political knowledge, attitudes, and behavior is hardly developed? The answer is already hidden in the question itself: Because it allows us to study the dynamics of the development of media influence on political socialization. As media effects are best conceptualized as mutually self-reinforcing spirals (Slater, 2007), it is particularly interesting to analyze the stage at which this spiraling process begins to understand the mechanism and opportunities to stimulate the process.

In the second empirical study (Chapter 3) I set out to do so by undertaking an in-depth analysis of such a self-reinforcing spiral using Structural Equation Modeling on three wave panel data. Focusing on growth in political knowledge and news use, I provide evidence that the starting point of the spiral is rather located on the side of political knowledge than news use. News use, on the other hand, does contribute to political learning over time, independent of the background characteristics of the user.

In Chapter 4 this argument is taken one step further: from political knowledge to the effect of being informed, or rather the perception that one is knowledgeable about politics. Here I present the results of a study that investigates causes and effects of internal efficacy defined as the perception that one is informed enough about what is going on in politics and capable to participate in the political process. Using data from all four panel waves I analyze news the influence of news media on the development of internal efficacy. In this study news media are not treated as one bulk of information, but I differentiate between different types of media sources and level of involvement of the users. The results indicate that whereas TV news use has no effect on growth in internal political efficacy, reading newspapers and using classic (non-interactive) online news sources has a positive impact on political efficacy. The strongest effect, however, is found for interactive online media that require users to participate in message creation. In a second step of the analysis, it becomes clear that higher

levels of internal efficacy among adolescents significantly increase the likelihood to turn out at elections.

In the final study, presented in Chapter 5, I am interested in finding out if targeted media content can be strategically used to stimulate political participation among the young in a real-world scenario. I do this by studying the effects of exposure to a political information program, which fulfilled a number of criteria that have been theorized to be effective to stimulate a young audience. The findings imply that a program specifically designed to be relevant for a young audience in style and content can in fact mobilize the young, independent and additional to effects of classic news use. A second noteworthy finding is that despite its somewhat 'silly' presentation of politics, watching the program did not affect the level of cynicism. Finally, the effects on mobilization were strongest among those viewers that had the lowest level of political interest, implying that such formats can be a first step to bridge the gap between those who are knowledgeable, interested and likely to participate and those adolescents who are disengaged from politics.

Key conclusions and discussion

In this dissertation I posed the question whether media play a very prominent role in the process of political socialization, given that the influence of other agents of political socialization, most notably parents, has changed or even diminished over the past decades. According to the findings of my studies, the answer to this question has to be "no" at first sight. The size of the effects of media use, be it entertainment media, news media or even interactive online news sources, on political knowledge, trust, or engagement, are arguably small. In the case of political attitudes, like political cynicism and trust, I even find in two studies that it is unrelated to media use at this age, whereas there is a traceable relationship at later stages in life. Moreover, once I take an in-depth look at the causal relationship between news use and a variable of political socialization, namely political knowledge, it becomes apparent that the causality goes both ways, with pre-existing political knowledge being the stronger source of influence (see Chapter 3).

So, does that mean that media are irrelevant to the process of political socialization? Again, the answer has to be “no”. The effects I present in this dissertation might be small, but their statistical significance can also not be denied. In fact, small effect sizes are common in studies on media effects among children and adolescents, including non-political outcome variables (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013; Ekström & Östman, 2013). Moreover, they mark the starting point of a life-long process of mutual influence between media use and political attitudes, political knowledge and political engagement (see Chapter 2). The role of media use in political socialization becomes particularly visible if we do not look at the influence of ‘the media’ as one cohesive institution on the full process of political socialization. Instead we should focus on specific aspects of the process as well as effects of specific media content. In the following section I will discuss specific media effects on each of the political outcome variables I introduced in the first chapter thereby combining the results of the studies presented in this dissertation.

Political knowledge and internal efficacy

Media are first and foremost a source of information. Therefore, it is theoretically sensible to begin by investigating media effects on political socialization by analyzing political learning. Do adolescents learn about politics from the media? What seems to be a trivial question is in fact a very complex process. In order to learn it is not enough to simply be exposed to political information – the information also needs to be processed and remembered. Whether this happens and depends on three factors: a) how much a young person already knows about politics; b) the type of medium they are using; and, c) whether or not they have an active role in the message creation process.

These findings have a number of implications for political socialization and political communication research. Let me start with the first result that growth in political knowledge and news use are interdependent, although political knowledge is the more powerful factor of the two. This finding contributes to research on the widening knowledge gap between the information rich and the information poor (Eveland & Scheufele, 2000). This dissertation adds to the

existing literature by providing evidence that the separation of those who benefit to a great extent from news media and those who do not, starts earlier than the age of fifteen. This implies that the foundation of the knowledge gap is laid out during childhood. It also means that childhood is the period in life during which we would have to start intervening in order to bridge the knowledge gap.

Turning to the second major conclusion, differential media effects on political knowledge, the findings of my dissertation are very much in line with previous research on the matter (Frank & Kanihan, 1997). That being said, my research indicates that the differences in the degree to which TV, newspapers and online news media affect political learning have become stronger over the past decades. Whereas Chaffee and others found that newspaper reading had *stronger* effects on political learning than TV news, I find that adolescents do not feel that they are learning anything from watching TV news at all that helps them to understand politics. As TV news is still the most popular news source among the young, this finding means that it crucial to incorporate features into the general news that facilitate picking up information for adolescents. Such features should increase the relevance of the news presented to young audience: for example by reporting on topics that have a large impact on the lives of the young (Graber, 2001).

Political attitudes

Contrary to the results on political learning, I do not find any significant effects of media use on political attitudes among adolescents: Neither on political trust, nor the proximity to a political party, nor political cynicism. Likewise, the type of media content did not matter: neither news use, nor entertainment media use, nor a mix between the two investigated in Chapter 5 proved to affect political attitudes. Interestingly, I did find evidence of a relationship between political trust and proximity to a political party and media exposure for older media users in Chapter 2. Similarly, Elenbaas and de Vreese (2008) find that news media use and political cynicism are related among a sample of young Dutch voters age 18-24. To

be specific, they find that exposure to strategic news leads to higher levels of political cynicism and ultimately to a specific voting behavior.

This finding is an addition to the research on the relationship between political cynicism and media use. Much like in the case of political learning the relationship between the two is conceptualized as a mutually self-reinforcing spiral (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Those who are already cynical about politics select media content that reinforces their views on politics leading to increasing levels of cynicism (selective exposure). As I did not find any empirical traces of this spiral among adolescents, I speculate that the spiral of cynicism starts during late adolescence, probably in relation to participation in the first elections. However, as I could not match content analysis data with survey data to investigate the causal mechanism in detail, this conclusion should be interpreted with caution. More research is certainly needed to unveil the specifics of the antecedents of the spiral of cynicism.

Political engagement and participation

The final aspect of political socialization I analyzed in this dissertation is the development of political engagement. As it the key aspect of this dissertation, I investigated the phenomenon from a few different angles in three empirical studies. A common theme in the findings of these studies is that they provide evidence that media use can in fact mobilize the young to participate in the political process even long before they are eligible to vote.

A responsive well-functioning democracy is characterized by ample opportunities for all citizens – young and old – to play an active role during the elective cycle by making their voices heard, using their power as consumers, or directly getting in contact with members of the legislative system. These types of unconventional political participation are not exactly widespread among the young: Yet, 72% of the respondents of the panel indicated to have participated in one way or another during the field period. Even if it was just by posting a short political message on a social network site. According to my analyses, media use, in particular political information media use, did contribute to an increase in these

activities over time. The causal relationship between both factors runs partially through the development of internal efficacy (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007), as pointed out earlier. This mechanism is also relevant when it comes to political participation in the classic sense: participation in the first general elections, which is a very important event in the process of political socialization (Sears & Valentino, 1997).

Weighing the different forms of participation against each other, I find that media use is especially effective when it comes to a positive influence on online participation, like signing petitions or participating in online discussions about politics. Both findings are in line with, and add, to the body of literature with regard to political socialization of the young (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Lee, Shah, & McLeod, 2012; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008). According to the communication mediation model developed by McLeod, Shah and colleagues (McLeod, Shah, Hess, & Lee, 2010) the causal relationship between news media use and political participation is best understood as a mediated process in which *talking* about politics serves as a mediator between both. I suggest extending this notion and use the argument in broader perspective. In order to mobilize the young to develop political engagement, political information needs to be reflected upon, be it through political talk online or offline, or deliberation during attentive news use. It is important to note that this process can be facilitated by adjusting political information content to be more relevant to a young audience.

Reaching the tuned out generation

So far I have argued that there are several ways in which media affect political socialization. In this dissertation I have demonstrated that particularly political information, provided it is relevant enough, can even mobilize those who generally have little interest in politics. However, there is one important condition for this process to work: young people need to decide to *use* political information; otherwise there will not be an effect. This is a point that has raised concerns among many. David Mindich's (2005) book about the tuned out generation is probably the most prominent publication dealing with the subject: Young people do not follow

the news anymore; they do not read newspapers and generally do not care about the political world. Although Mindich's bleak description of the young generation in America does not fit the Dutch case equally well – 4 out of 5 of the respondents in the panel report to watch the evening news at least once a week – there is also an undeniable lack of interest in politics in the Netherlands. Almost half of the participants in the panel report to have low interest in national politics, for international politics this number even increases to 62%. Yet, as I have pointed out earlier, involvement and attention are an important precondition for political information to have an effect on political engagement. This leads to an important puzzle that goes beyond this dissertation. How do we get the young to tune into the political debate in the first place? How can we get young people to care about politics just enough to start following the news? Arguably an important part of the solution to this puzzle has to be located outside the media.

Political education in schools seems to be an obvious answer. Here programs that require active participation of students like debates or mock elections seem to be especially effective (McLeod et al., 2010). I would like to point to another possible strategy to solve this problem. Given the positive effects of news use in the long run, stimulating media socialization to include more political information is likely to influence the process of political socialization in a positive way. This means political information would have to become an integral part of children's experience with media, even before they reach adolescence.

Political engagement in the new millennium

In the introduction of this dissertation I argued that our knowledge of political socialization needs to be updated as the advent of the Internet has profoundly changed the media landscape as well as the political landscape. In the empirical studies presented in this dissertation it has become apparent that the Internet has indeed become an integral part of political socialization in the past years. Moreover, the Internet has not merely opened up new places to engage in politics; it has also had an impact on the causal mechanisms of political socialization itself.

This is because engaging in politics and talking about politics online is often fundamentally different from talking about politics offline (Oser, Hooghe, & Marien, 2013). First, because communication itself is inherently different online and offline: Online communication can be asynchronous in time, messages can potentially be stored forever, which means they can be read and re-read at a later point in time, and participants of online conversations have more time to create their messages, implying that they have more room to deliberate. Second, online platforms provide the opportunity to extend their social networks and talk to peers and adults one would not normally encounter in everyday life – including representatives of the political class. Finally, talking about politics online is blurring the border between communication and participation. Adolescents can, for example, post a link to an online petition and motivate others to sign on a social networking site.

All of these factors hold the potential to have a positive impact on political socialization (Coleman, 2008). As I have argued earlier, political information is much more likely to lead to a growth in political knowledge or engagement if it is reflected upon. The affordances of online communication naturally lead to deliberation about politics, provided the communication is about politics.

Yet, there also is a downside. When the academic debate about online influence on political participation first started, the main concern of scholars was that using the Internet might take up a lot of time that would otherwise be spent on community activities (Kraut et al., 1998). Moreover, time spent online was seen to be time spent in social isolation and anonymity, which further decreases the feeling of belonging to a society in which one has an active role. Whereas the latter point is no longer in the focus of the academic debate, as social networking sites and other online services have changed the premises of the online experience, the time budget argument is still valid. The Internet is indeed a place offering an abundance of opportunities to engage in politics, but it also offers limitless opportunities to avoid politics altogether. So, in order to have a positive impact on the development of active citizenship the key problem is to get the conversation

about politics started. Once young people become active online, there is a good chance they will develop an active attitude towards their citizenship.

Limitations and implications for future research

The process of political socialization is a complicated process starting at birth and continuing throughout our lives. Naturally, this dissertation cannot explain the role of the media throughout this entire process. This implies that many questions remain unanswered. Moreover, this dissertation is mainly based on one data source, namely a panel survey of four measurements over the course of two and a half years. While this is a rich data set allowing for elaborate testing of hypotheses, it is also constrained in several ways: it is limited to one country at a specific period in time, there is a limited amount of concepts that could be measured, and the time span in between the measurements is relatively long. All of these constraints have implications on the generalizability of my results.

The Netherlands is a mature democracy, also characterized by a relative high level of wealth and a well-functioning social system. All in all, it is an environment that provides plentiful opportunities to adolescents to learn, to join the workforce, and to engage in their private lives. All of these activities are also important steps adolescents need to take at this age that take up time and effort (Sigel & Hoskin, 1981). In other words, there is arguably little reason to go on the streets and call for a better future for themselves. This is just one of the possible system level variables that could affect the media's influence on political socialization. Others are the media system and the availability of "young" political information in the media, the political system and to what it allows citizens to become involved during the electoral cycle, and the educational system (for example Quintelier & Hooghe, 2013). Therefore, in order to be confident that the findings in these studies also apply to other contexts future studies need to expand the geographical scope. It would be especially interesting to investigate difference between democratic and non-democratic countries to find out to what degree the role of the media in political socialization depends upon the political context.

Second, the length of the questionnaire used in the panel survey had to be limited to ensure that respondents would participate in the subsequent waves of the panel survey. That means that a number of key concepts could only be measured in a rather crude way. Parental influence, for example, is reduced to questions regarding the SES, educational and occupational background of the parents, their party preference, and whether or not they are subscribed to a newspaper. Variables that have proven to be of influence in the past, like the discussion culture at home (Chaffee, McLeod, & Atkin, 1971) could not be taken into account. However, these variables are found to be of less relevance in recent studies in the field (Lee, Shah, McLeod, 2012). Moreover, although the questionnaire covered a considerable amount of questions regarding media use, our measures of exposure to media cannot fully do justice to the phenomenon. In the ever-changing world of online news media (Trilling, 2013), we could only select a limited amount of news sources in the questionnaire, implying that the use of many blogs or websites relevant to the subject are not accounted for. Additionally, as it becomes apparent from our data, social networking sites (SNS) are likely to cover political information from time to time which could also influence the process of political socialization through messages of peers. This is an especially interesting phenomenon, which certainly should be studied in depth in future research.

The third constraint of my data is that it is limited in time and the number of measurements. As it became quite clear from the second empirical study presented in Chapters 2 and 3, media use already plays a role in the process of political socialization before the age of 15, and socialization does not stop once we turn out to vote for the first time. In this dissertation I could therefore only analyze a short, yet important, period of a continuous process. Developments I find might become stronger or weaker over time. The first empirical study of this dissertation certainly points in the direction that the media become even more important agents of socialization during young adulthood. More research is needed to unravel the effect of age on the process. For example, there is relatively little

research regarding the effect of seniority on media effects on political attitudes or participation.

Collecting panel data among adolescents is challenging. On the one hand, developments take place really quickly and in order to get a good grasp of causal relationships it would be useful to have weekly data. However, young respondents are easily bored and sensitized by questions in panel surveys. Having four measurements in two and a half years was a compromise between aiming to realize a large enough sample size at the end of the survey and having enough information about them in the meantime, but obviously it is not optimal. Therefore future research should do both, focus on short-term effects of causal mechanisms, preferably in the form of experiments, but also expand the longitudinal scope of two years.

Finally, my data is constrained by being *quantitative survey data*, which means there are questions I could answer and research questions that have to be left for other types of research. Qualitative interviews, for example, could provide insight in what motivates adolescents to participate or alienates them from politics. Observation of media use, especially in participatory online media, would help us to get a better picture of how adolescents use political information media today without having to rely on self-reports. Finally, this study on media effects relies solely on survey data thereby more or less neglecting the specifics of the content that is supposed to have an impact on political socialization. That means that I could ultimately only investigate half the picture. Adding *content analysis* data that describes in detail the characteristics of content adolescents have used, would allow matching cause and effect in a far more precise way, improve the modeling, and understand what drives the effects. This type of combined analysis of content and effects would allow us to address relevant questions like: Are specific subjects more likely to raise adolescent's knowledge about politics than others? Do certain frames mobilize or demobilize participation among the young? What is the effect of infotainment on the development of political knowledge and internal efficacy? Therefore, future research should combine content analysis, media use, and

variables of political socialization to arrive at integrated models of political socialization.

Concluding remarks

If there is one lesson to be learned from this dissertation, it is that media cannot do wonders to turn a disengaged youth around and to create a young citizenry that participates in democracy. Neither should the media be blamed for adolescent's apparent alienation from politics. It is not the fault of the media that young people feel disconnected or simply do not care about politics. If anything, the influence of media on political mobilization tends to be positive. The role of the media in the process of political socialization is to strengthen the foundation laid by parents and teachers and to build forth on the attitudes and norms young people are picking up around them, ultimately taking adolescents into an upward spiral of political learning and engagement.

The conclusion of a dissertation is meant to highlight the essence of the research presented, boiling it all down to a grand take home message. In this chapter I identified the key findings, discussed my results in the light of the societal and academic debate and suggested implications for policy, education and future research. Yet, to be honest, I actually do not know the essence of everything, because my research on these matters has only just started. Moreover, any essence or final conclusion could only be a snap shot as the next generation of adolescents is already growing up. Younger children today have never known a world without *Twitter* or *Facebook* and will use it even more naturally than the adolescents in the sample I analyzed for this dissertation. As they learn, buy, communicate, even live online, these children will engage in politics online as well – which will lead to a paradigm change in political socialization research. And I am curious to follow this development as a scientist and a citizen.

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