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

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English Summary

European adolescents have become more and more distant from traditional politics. Turnout rates among young voters are dwindling and many young citizens turn away from news about their national parliament, parties or recent political developments. This is problematic, because it is of vital importance for any democratic system to stimulate future generations to become active citizens. This dissertation sheds a light on the role of the media in this process of political socialization. Are the media part of the reason why adolescents show so little interest in politics? And if so, can the media also be part of the solution to overcome the gap between the young and politics?

Based on political socialization theory this dissertation focuses on three main areas that are important in the process of becoming a democratic citizen: a) the development of political knowledge; b) the development of political attitudes; and c) the development of political engagement. For each of these areas the mechanisms of media influence are studied from several different angles in the empirical chapters of this dissertation. It is important to note here, that media effects are generally understood as a reciprocal process of media use and political development. Media use and political knowledge, attitudes, and engagement are mutually interdependent. If one changes, the other is likely to change as well.

Chapter 2, the first empirical chapter, mainly serves the purpose to place the subsequent studies into context. In this chapter, media influence on the political attitudes and engagement of Dutch adolescents are contrasted against media effects on other European adolescents and older media users. Drawing on data of the European Social Survey, I find that media effects on political attitudes and political engagement do not vary gravely across Europe, although mature democracies like the Netherlands generally bring about more engaged citizens. With regard to the second comparative perspective – age – , I find that media effects on political attitudes and political participation become stronger with age. To be specific, my findings indicate that the use of entertainment media content leads to less trust in the political system among older recipients. At the same time I

find a stronger mobilizing effect of news media use among older recipients. This implies that adolescence is probably the period in which media effects on political socialization first occur. Therefore, I focus on studying the beginning of this process remainder of this dissertation. All of the subsequent empirical chapters are based on an originally collected four wave panel data set among Dutch adolescents.

Chapter 3 is an in-depth analysis of media effects on political socialization over time. In this case I am studying the process of political learning (the acquisition of political knowledge) as a mutually reinforcing spiral of news use and political knowledge. My analysis suggests that we can indeed speak of a mutually reinforcing spiral. However, the spiral has one dominant side, which is pre-existing political knowledge. I also found that political learning through news media is independent of background characteristics like age and education. This means that if news media reach adolescents, they are likely to teach them about politics, independent of for example, the type of school they are enrolled to.

This is an important finding, because feeling well informed about politics (internal efficacy) is an important prerequisite for participating in politics, as I demonstrate in *Chapter 4*. In this chapter I investigate the causes and effects of internal efficacy. By differentiating between use of different news sources (TV, newspaper, online news, participatory online news media), I find that watching news on Television has no effect on the feeling of being informed. Newspaper use and use of online news sources contribute significantly to internal efficacy. The strongest effect, however, was found for participatory online media. In a second step of the analysis, I demonstrate that adolescents with high levels of internal efficacy are far more likely to turn out at their first elections, compared to those who feel like they do not understand what is going on in politics.

In the final empirical study presented in *Chapter 5*, I am interested in finding out if media content targeted at adolescents can be strategically used to stimulate political participation among the young in a real-world scenario. My results indicate that such a program is indeed a useful tool to mobilize the young.

This mobilization effect is independent and additional to the already positive effects of news use in general.

Coming back to the question if and how media can contribute to the political socialization of democratic citizens and bridge the gap between adolescents and politics, this dissertation offers three main lessons.

Teach them: Knowledge about politics, acquired through family or school, motivates young citizens to tune in to the news. Once they have become interested in politics, they are likely to learn more and more from the news media. And by the time they turn eighteen they feel competent enough to participate in the elections.

Reach them: News media can only have a positive effect on political knowledge and engagement of the youngest generation if it reaches the young. This can be achieved by designing news media to be relevant for the young: in content as well as in style.

Include them: Of all different news sources, participatory online media like online fora or chat rooms show by far the strongest effects on political socialization. This means that if adolescents take part in the political communication process themselves, they actually learn the most about politics.