

Learning Political Values

We are not born “hard wired” with political values. A political culture is transmitted from one generation to the next through a process called *political socialization*. We learn about politics, government, and public policy through such societal agents as parents, teachers, and coworkers. These people pass on the traditional values that they have cherished, and they try to add to that wisdom from the experiences of their own generation.

The socialization process is predictable, but not static. We learn about civic life in steps appropriate to our chronological age through a process called *life cycle change*. We learn some foundation principles as little children, and we continue to add civic capabilities throughout life. Of course, not everyone learns at the identical pace; but human beings share a great deal of experience across cultures and subcultures. The actual content of the socialization message changes over time. Generations have their own experiences – such as World War II or the Vietnam Conflict – and parents and teachers try to incorporate new lessons into political socialization and civic education. We refer to this phenomenon as *generational change*. Together, the concepts of life cycle change and generational change can teach us a great deal about how the political socialization process passes along a people’s political culture, popular political ideologies, and civic values more generally.

A. Life Cycle Change

Human beings acquire knowledge and beliefs when the messages are age appropriate. For example, we have to learn respect for authority at an early age in order to refine that value into obeying traffic laws at a later age. Our informal and formal civic education proceeds in building block steps. Another way to think of political socialization is as a maturation process. Little children cannot be expected to have the impulse control that we require of adults, and the elderly enjoy the benefit of their life experiences when they exercise mature political judgment. Over the course of a lifetime, we learn the tenets of our civic culture. Some examples follow.

1. Early Childhood (ages 0-5). We are born wholly dependent upon our parents or other caregivers. We trust them implicitly. One of the first lessons that they teach us is to obey them and other adults placed in authority over us, e.g., grandparents, aunts and uncles, baby sitters, day care workers, and church teachers. We learn early on to transfer respect for authority from the parent to other adults approved by the parent (Langton, 1969: 22). As little children, we are wholly dependent upon and uncritical of our parents and what they tell us to believe. Similarly, when the preschool or kindergarten teacher shows us how to play with a police officer doll or a doctor doll, they reinforce the child's belief in obeying adults who have their best interests at heart. Respect for authority is a foundation for political compliance and the sense of legitimacy. Later, we instinctively obey a police officer's order to "move on" and submit to the physician's touch in the emergency room.



2. Primary School Years (ages 6-12). We work more in groups and less in one-on-one interactions with adults once we start school. We are socialized to cooperate with other children, follow rules, work under adult supervision in small groups, and defer gratification (such as play) until the school schedule permits. Most of us want to fit in and gain the approval of our teachers and classmates (Almond and Verba, 1965: 270). Early schooling involves actual *civic education* that capitalizes on the approval need by instilling beliefs in cooperation, compliance with rules, and political loyalty. We learn some of simple citizenship ceremonies such as the pledge of allegiance to the flag and the national anthem. As grammar school age children, we are conformists.

3. Adolescence (ages 13-17). The years between childhood and adulthood bring one a strong sense of peer-orientation. Adolescents are concerned with what their friends believe, think, and do. They become class conscious. They are less interested in pleasing adults or conforming to rules, and in fact teenagers commonly rebel against authority (Coles, 1986: 40). Civic education is a waste; teenagers are too cynical (Langton, 1969: 115). Adolescents do learn bargaining skills, and they come to appreciate the importance of media in public affairs. They also learn that the adult world will not simply fold in the face of rebellious demands.

4. Young Adulthood (ages 18-24). Young adults either train for work or go to work or both. Some are fulltime students with professional ambitions, while others enter the workforce, marry early, and start a family. There is considerable variation by social class. Young adults come to appreciate that they have group interests that have to be advanced or defended in the political system (Carole Pateman in Almond and

Verba, 1980: 72). If they are students, they “see the value of” guaranteed, low interest student loans. If they are young marrieds, they support low interest mortgage loans for first time homeowners. In any case, they come to realize that political decisions allocate benefits to groups of people, and they have a self-interested stake in the political system.

5. Career Establishment Years (ages 25-34). Each of us has to gain a foothold in our chosen occupation. We may be professionals such as attorneys, doctors, teachers, or



engineers; we may be skilled workers such as paralegals, physician’s assistants, teacher aides, or computer technicians. [Pictured are Thai Young Professionals Association members at a dinner meeting.] Regardless of our chosen career path, it

takes a certain amount of time to get established. We have to learn the standards for satisfactory and excellent performance in our occupation, and we become aware of the interplay between organized interests – such as professional associations and unions – and public policy such as licensing and work rules. On the home front, we become acutely aware of the costs of living for housing, transportation, and children’s schooling. Taxes rates and tax breaks become important to us. We make the decision to register and vote when faced with the monetary consequences of public policy.

6. Middle-age (ages 35-54). Once established in a profession or occupation, we have the luxury of time and the maturity of intellect to systematically explore politics. We may become middle-aged party loyalists or even ideologues; we are active in a wide

variety of civic and professional organizations. We may know and support political candidates, or we may run for elective office ourselves. There are many local elected positions such as school board and town council that can allow meaningful public service while providing valuable on-the-job training for any later political ambitions.

7. Senior Citizen Years (ages 55+). As retirement approaches, seniors reflect upon their life experiences and often become politically active. Their voting rates are the highest of all age groups, and they are very well informed about politics, government, and public policy. They volunteer to serve in their communities, staffing the polls and sitting on voluntary boards such those regulating zoning, property tax assessments, and historical preservation. Their interest groups are powerful because seniors vote and are so politically active. Clearly, their influence outweighs their numbers.

8. Conclusions About Life Cycle Change. Human beings learn their civic culture in several age-appropriate steps. Simple concepts like respect for authority mature into law abiding behavioral habits. Civic education may work in elementary school but is unlikely to influence adolescents. Professionals learn to protect their interests, and many seniors are political activists. Socialization is a life-long process.

B. Generational Change

Our understanding of life cycle change addresses the mechanics of how civic culture is passed from generation to generation, but it does not address the content of the message. Indeed, if we did not know better, we might assume that the civic

concepts never change as they are passed from parents to children. But we do know better. Evidence for generational differences can be found in survey research that compares generational attitudes across generations and across national cultures (Paul, 2002). Depending on the country, there can be dramatic gaps.

Table 3.1 Worldwide Cohort Study
[Boomers born 1946-54 / Echo Boomers born 1975-94]

Question	UK	Neth.	France	Mexico	USA	Canada	Australia	Hong Kong
Too much work emphasis today (2001)	56/73	50/94	50/82	100/28	54/57	43/65	50/81	50/50
Want simplicity, not wealth and fame	44/32	38/22	50/64	33/38	49/40	29/35	25/19	50/50
Life now more stressful than 1950s	89/44	75/61	100/55	100/79	74/52	71/48	75/65	100/65
Youth morality lower over my lifetime	70/78	61/67	62/36	67/72	65/80	70/65	38/74	50/80
Most my age grew up in loving family	89/37	63/39	100/27	67/45	52/32	86/44	63/52	100/60

Legend: Not shaded=LE15 point difference; Lightly shaded= GE15 points; Darkly shaded=anomalous.
Source: Survey by InsightExpress Corp. for Euro RSCG Worldwide advertising agency. Conducted in July-August, 2002 reported in Paul (2002): 19. Sample size=2,300.

Note for example, that roughly half of the mature adults in the Worldwide Cohort study disagreed with the statement that we work too much these days and need to slow down and enjoy life. However, the mature respondents in Mexico were really strong in their responses relative to the other countries and relative their own young people. In five of the eight countries, young people opined about work more than did their elders. There appears to be a generation gap on this issue in these countries; there were no generational differences in the U.S. and Hong Kong. Note other generation gaps regarding simplicity versus wealth and fame (the Netherlands) and the possible decline

of morality among youth (France's elders and young people in the U.S., Australia, and Hong Kong). There is virtually across-the-board agreement among older respondents that life is more stressful these days, a view shared by relatively fewer young people. And young people often feel that their generation was less nurtured in the home than were their elders. Moreover, there is plenty of recent evidence for difference in generational outlook on various issues and around the world.

Each generation has its unique experiences: economic depressions or world wars or ecological disasters or new threats to public health. And so the socialization message is modified as it reflects *generational change* in beliefs, attitudes, and opinions. Some samples of the instruments of generational change follow.

1. Indoctrination. One generation may try to influence the thinking of subsequent generations through patriotic instruction. The generation that sacrificed so many of its members in World War II understandably wants to warn us about the danger of extreme right wing ideologies. They recount their firsthand experiences with authoritarianism in the hope that future generations may be inoculated from its seductions. Their speeches, books, lesson plans, dinner table conversation, and fireside advices are replete with stories of how costly inattention to the rise of tyrants can be.

2. Propaganda. An older generation tries to influence the opinions of subsequent generations through appeals to primal needs and fears. Psychology provides insights into the human psyche, including hints about how we can be manipulated. Powerful media carrying subtle political messages try to teach us who to hate, who to blame, or who to trust. Propaganda is the tool that an ambitious clique within a generation uses

to try to capture and hold political power: witness the Nazi rise to power in Germany. John Kennedy noted, "The great enemy of truth is very often not the lie - deliberate, contrived, and dishonest - but the myth, persistent, persuasive, and realistic" (Washington Post, August 19, 1990).

3. Revisionism. Spokespersons for a generation may try to rewrite history in order to justify their actions or inactions. They want to explain away failed wars, deny ethnic atrocities, and reinterpret lost causes. Concern over generational legacy can nurture myths about the past and can try to reinvent the present. Otherwise, how is it that we are asked to believe that most whites in the 1950s South were secretly supportive of civil rights, that the United States has really always been Mexico's good neighbor to the north, and that domestic turmoil caused by the Vietnam War was just a big misunderstanding? John Adams wrote to Benjamin Rush in 1790 noting, "The history of our Revolution will be one continuous lie from end to end." History is the winners' story of what happened in the past.

4. Post Modernism. A generation may attempt to skirt the responsibility for guiding its successors. One vein of modern romanticism suspends all judgment about any event that is external to its act. Everything must be understood in its own terms if we are to be liberated from our own preconceptions. Here are echoes of the libertine spirit of Paris in the 1920s and the sweet escapism of Weimar Germany on the eve of Hitler's takeover. As one contemporary author has noted, "With the spread of postmodern consciousness, we see the demise of personal definition reason, authority,

commitment, trust, the sense of authenticity, sincerity, belief in leadership, depth of feeling, and faith in progress” (Gergen, 1991: 228). If anything goes, everything will.

5. Conclusions about Generational Change. Rebellion likely saves us from the foolishness of our elders. A healthy skepticism about intergenerational messages is probably in order. One virtue of publicly naming generations – e.g., the Baby Boomers and Generation X – is that we note some striking difference that distinguishes an age cohort from those that have gone before. The new generation is not just a carbon copy of its parents. Something in the environment – women entering the post World War II workplace or worldwide computer access – stimulates changes. Of course, the new thinking will also calcify in time. Change is endemic in human society.□