

Political Socialization of College-age Individuals in the Age of Social Media

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Abstract

This study used personal reflection, surveys, and interviews to study the political socialization of those that attend college. Previous research has shown that many facets of one's life can affect their political socialization, such as their familial upbringing or religious ties, and that adolescence is a time in which many individuals go through a significant shift in their political and ethical views. However, a new influence—social media—has begun to greatly affect the political views and shifts of college-age individuals. After personal reflection upon the experiences that caused one such shift, a survey and a series of four interviews of those who have attended college were conducted to examine the experiences and influences behind such shifts. Ultimately, findings were inconclusive but created a basis for future studies. Results showed that religious upbringings prior to college experiences are somewhat indicative of a shift during college that is both political and ethical in nature, but also that many other influences are important to the process as well. Social media in particular has played a very significant role in the socialization of youth and its effects are still widely misunderstood. Therefore, more research needs to be done on the political socialization of college individuals and social media's effects upon it.

Keywords: political socialization, agent, ecological systems theory, shift, microsystem, influence

Political Socialization of College-age Individuals in the Age of Social Media

John Stuart Mill, one of the most influential philosophers of the nineteenth century, once said this regarding how democracy is acquired and sustained: “We do not learn to read or write, to ride or swim, by merely being told how to do it, but by doing it, so it is only in practicing popular government on a limited scale, that people will ever learn how to exercise it on a larger [scale]” (McIntosh, 2010, p. 9). Ergo, the acquisition of democratic ideologies and the success of democratic systems is dependent upon the political socialization of younger generations as they replace older generations as the politically active—such as voters and political activists—overtime. Notably, however, younger generations’ values tend to lean more “liberal” compared to the values of older generations as they politically socialize. During high school and college years, young people are especially susceptible to influence from outside sources on subjects like politics. For politics specifically, however, the college-age is an even more important time to understand the political socialization of students, as this is a time in which they can actually participate in the political system through voting. Additionally, they are often outside of parental influences for the first time (Niemi, 1977, p. 222). As a result these individuals often go through a political shift during these years, or a political “awakening,” if they perhaps aren’t very political beforehand.

It often goes beyond just the political aspects, though, as a person’s views on morality can also shift drastically. Many parts of one’s life may be affected as a result of such a shift, like communication and relationships with family and friends, which can often be difficult, frustrating, or even confusing for either side. Therefore, this political/ethical shift can affect people’s lives in drastic ways—especially in terms of close relationships, sometimes ending said relationships entirely as friends begin to no longer “see eye-to-eye.” In my experience, this

seems to be a possibility even if they're "lifelong" friendships that have lasted into early adulthood. This is because politics are a very divisive topic for many people, intertwining lifelong beliefs on morality and often religious bases, so a shift on such a front is capable of taking one away from said beliefs and those that hold them.

This study seeks to do an ethnographic investigation focused on the political/ethical shift, or "awakening," that can often occur in many college-age individuals, like myself, during (or due to) their time at university. As such, and based upon Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory of Development, there will be a focus upon multiple significant political influences, such as religion, education, parents, and social media, among others. After a review of literature, there will be an in-depth discussion of this study's methods—a personal reflection, a survey, and a handful of interviews—followed by a discussion of the results of said methods. The personal reflection comes from the author (myself) which explains how I came to this topic through my own college experiences and political socialization therein.

Literature

Before discussing the methods of the study, literature the background on the field of political socialization will be reviewed for a better understanding of the field of study and what is already known. Additionally, the main theory backing the study will be discussed generally and more specifically in terms of its organization of socialization influences.

Background on the Field of Political Socialization

So what exactly is political socialization? Political socialization is "the process by which citizens learn about political leaders, governmental institutions, and political processes, and

acquire their political beliefs and practices” (Pearson-Merkowitz, 2009, p. 1). According to Greenstein, political socialization can be thought of very narrowly—like civics classes in high school—or broadly—meaning all political learning (Niemi, 1977, p. 209). Within this field of study, scholars attempt to answer many questions, such as: Why do some citizens participate whereas others do not? Why do some have concrete and well-educated political views whereas others have ambivalent or apathetic perspectives? Speaking more generally, they want to know the how and why behind the way that individuals develop attitudes toward politics and government.

A Brief History of the Field

Research related to political socialization has roots tracing back as far as the 1920s in the form of education research, but the field of study itself wasn’t consistently researched and directly labeled until the late 1950s. In Hyman’s *Political Socialization* (1959), much of the pre-existing literature up to this point was compiled and the subdiscipline was given its name: political socialization (Niemi, 1977, p. 209). In the 1960s, the term was popularized and many scholars were attracted to the field by its efforts to discern how the “protest generation” of the 1960s acquired their political attitudes, which heavily contrasted with those of the older, more conservative generations at the time (Pearson-Merkowitz, 2009, p. 3). Another major development came in the form of a mid-60s study of high school seniors, along with their parents, teachers, and school principals, in order to determine the sources of young people’s political ideas (Niemi, 1977, p. 210). In the 1970s, investigators began to examine subgroups of Americans, especially focusing on groups that were likely to have opinions and attitudes different from those of middle-class white Americans (namely, Black and Latino individuals).

Additionally, socialization studies went international and a few studies were undertaken to consider methodological problems within the field of political socialization at the time (Niemi, 1977, p. 210).

Unfortunately, the field of research “died a premature death” in the later 1970s due to its basis upon “exaggerated premises,” as well as “misinterpreted and misunderstood research findings” and a lack thereof (Niemi, 1995, p. 7). Much of the early socialization research up to this time had fallen victim to two specific assumptions: the primacy principle and the structuring principle (Pearson-Merkowitz, 2009, p. 3). The primacy principle holds that “early learning...[has] a significant influence on later life” to such an extent that “all early learning was considered important” because “what is learned earliest” is retained the longest (Niemi, 1995, p. 8). The structuring principle holds that whatever is learned in childhood is not only retained, but it also molds learning later in life, “structuring the acquisition of later attitudes and behavior” and filtering the who and what of an individual’s perceptions of trustworthiness (Pearson-Merkowitz, 2009, p. 3). While both of these assumptions are now outdated due to their rigidity and over-generalization, they helped to establish some of the more foundational ideas for later models within the field.

Subsequently, two other models have emerged from the literature regarding political socialization since then. The first, the persistence model, is consistent with some contentions of the primacy and structuring principles, but to a lesser degree; it posits that traces of pre-adult learning persist throughout a person’s lifetime and possibly become increasingly static as the person ages. The second, the impressionable years model, holds that a person’s political views are “particularly susceptible to influence during the years of late adolescence and early adulthood, and that such attitudes tend to persist thereafter” (Pearson-Merkowitz, 2009, p. 3).

Ultimately, however, there is another, more general model that I feel most effectively applies to the focus of this study: Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory of Development.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory of Development

As one of the more prominent models related to young people's political socialization, Ecological Systems Theory is actually more focused on the broader idea of modeling child development altogether, since political socialization itself is a developmental process, after all. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of child development shows patterns of influence from people's surroundings and the other people they are involved with throughout their upbringing, such as their parents' political and civic engagement or their own use of online media (Warren, 2011, p. 156). These potential influences have been labeled as "socializing agents." Furthermore, these agents were grouped into four major niches: Micro-, Macro-, Meso-, and Exosystem influences. This was based on "the premise that human beings develop within this series of nested ecological niches," which range from individual settings (micro-level) to broad, cultural forces (macro-level) (Warren, 2011, p. 159). Within this ecological context, developmental outcomes like political socialization take place.

Looking more deeply into each niche, microsystem influences are those systems closest to the child, meaning they directly interact with them. Structures within this niche include the home, schools, and churches, populated by the agents themselves within these settings, like parents and family, teachers, and clergy. Additionally, things like volunteer work are seen as belonging to the civic microsystem. Some argue that the media are also a primary socializing agent, meaning social media can also be considered a microsystem (Warren, 2011, p. 159). Interactions with microsystemic agents can thus greatly influence youth involvement in their

community and its politics, and they are believed to have the most direct influence on development. As such, later sections of this paper will dive more deeply into each of the most prominent structures of microsystems.

Connecting microsystems are the next level of niches, known as mesosystems, which refer to the relations between microsystems that mediate child experiences. Another way to think of them is as “the enacted overlap between two microsystems” (Warren, 2011, p. 160). For example, a parent’s inclusion of their child in volunteer activities links the family microsystem with the civic microsystem. Beyond micro- and mesosystems, exosystems are the niches that have influence upon a child’s development without the child’s direct participation or interaction (Warren, 2011, p.160). These can be found in settings like a parents’ workplace, school board meetings, or even within governmental agencies, as these are often the groups that make decisions that influence microsystems. As examples, a parent’s workplace may require a family to relocate their housing, or a school board could decide upon required community service activities for students.

Macrosystems are the cultural settings within which a child lives. As such, many variations within macrosystems come about through differences in education, race, religion, ability, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, among others (Warren, 2011, p. 161). These contexts’ influence can also affect interactions at the other levels. As an example, if a culture regards raising children as solely the responsibility of the parent(s), then that culture will provide few resources to aid parental child rearing. In turn, this affects the structures in which parents function as well as the parents’ ability or inability to carry out their responsibilities toward their child(ren) (Ryan, 2001, p. 2).

Finally—while not necessarily recognized as substantial as the others—the chronosystem describes the dimension of time as it relates to a child’s environment. Elements within can be external, like the timing of a relative’s death, or internal, like the physiological changes a child goes through as their body matures. As children age, their reactions to environmental changes differentiate, sometimes increasingly determining how changes influence them altogether (Ryan, 2001, p. 2).

Family and Friends as Socialization Agents

According to Warren and Wicks (2011), parent-child communication may be one of the most important socialization influences, since it is viewed as “the transmitter of values and beliefs that are adopted and act as stabilizing principles across generations” (p. 159). As such, studies have shown a clear correlation between the political views of parent and child in areas such as party identification and voting preferences (Banks, 1994, p. 3). Additionally, just seeing their parents being actively involved in politics results in a higher likelihood of a child’s own engagement in politics themselves at a later age (Quintelier, 2015, p. 53). Therefore, a parent’s political activity is quite pivotal in their child’s political socialization at a young age.

Interestingly, however, there are also a significant number of cases in which children *do not* adhere to the same political beliefs of their parents, especially once a child begins to reach adolescence and early adulthood and begins to “think for themselves.” These sorts of transitions are often fueled by influence from individuals close to the child that aren’t parents, namely peers. “Indisputably a part of young people’s life,” peers are “omnipresent and constantly interacting with each other” (Quintelier, 2015, p. 54). It is through discussion among peers that adolescents further develop their own opinions and political skills, and these discussions also function as

mechanisms for recruitment into political ideologies that children may not be exposed to when witnessing their parents' own political activities.

There are other factors associated with family that affect youth citizenship, though, such as socioeconomic background and its involvement in "placement" within society. Recent studies have taken to defining socioeconomic status as "parental academic attainment and family income," although many are quick to point out that "the link among the academic attainment, occupation, and income is often disrupted" in non-white society, making it difficult to simply conclude that parents with high levels of academic attainment automatically translate to a family's privilege (Kim, 2020, p. 3). Regardless of the difficulty in studying it, the socioeconomic status of the family is certainly an important factor, as it can often be a determinant for a child's position in society among other channels of socialization, such as school, media, peer groups, youth organizations, and religion. In particular, schools can function as "an equalizing factor in preparing youths from vulnerable families toward civil society by supplementing their citizenship development" (Kim, 2020, p. 3). As such, the next important influence to discuss is the school, or educational experiences as a whole.

Education as a Socialization Agent

From the beginning, school experiences begin to socialize students, politically and otherwise. Political systems can only persist with a planned program for inducting "succeeding generations into appropriate roles and ideological orientations;" in this way, elementary, middle, and high schools' social studies classes serve a central function of preparing students for intelligent political participation (Palonsky, 1987, p. 492). In fact, school influences political socialization in both formal and informal ways: formally through factors like curriculum content,

teacher style, and school values, and informally through others like social composition and school ethos (Banks, 1994, p. 4). This supports what was previously mentioned in the idea that discussions with peers are a powerful part of the political socialization of youth, and school is certainly a prominent place in which they can interact with their peers. Because of these factors, some researchers claim that school experiences may be *more* influential than families in the process of socialization of youth, although this is certainly a disputed idea (Banks, 1994, p. 4). Regardless of past differing opinions, the modern view certainly sees school as a significant setting for the socialization of young minds. As such, we expect that schools can influence the political views and participation of their pupils through both *how* they teach and *what* they teach (Quintelier, 2015, p. 54). Recent studies have suggested that “classrooms that foster discussion, encourage community projects, and utilize the Internet increase levels of knowledge, affiliation, and engagement with politics” (Warren, 2011, p. 160). In this way, the teaching styles of school staff can have a significant impact on the overall political socialization and attitudes of students toward civic engagement.

All of this being said, researchers have found that it is difficult to get young children to actually understand the meanings behind “political institutions, principles such as free speech, and certain elements of the economic system” (Niemi, 1977, p. 220). In this way, most young children likely just emulate their parents’ political opinions, regardless of what they learn in school. While elementary school years may impart low-level political knowledge to children, great strides in learning will not come until an age when cognitive development allows for it. Early-to-mid teenage years (high school years), however, are a crucial time for the development of political attitudes since young people should, around this time, develop the cognitive capacity to deal with political ideas (Niemi, 1977, p. 221). However, there is a lack of agreement among

many earlier studies of high school students' political socialization; some studies have concluded that high school experiences have little real impact upon political attitudes and participation, while others have found positive results saying the exact opposite. This may be due to the variety of research approaches to the influence of schools; though it also may be dampened by the idea that during adolescent, high school years, students still live at home, and are not given a truly active role in the political process until the end of high school or beginning of college (Niemi, 1977, p. 221). Therefore, college years appear to be much more indicative of or influential in the political socialization of those in their adolescence.

There are two important differences between elementary/high school socialization and college socialization. First, by this time, young people have actually attained adulthood at a level that they can actively apply what they have learned about politics (this applies to those actually attending college as well as those who are not, who are perhaps entering the workforce instead and therefore receiving different influences from those of their counterparts in college, which may be somewhat isolated from the surrounding community at-large). Second, many (if not most) college students live away from home and the communities they were raised in and nurtured by; ergo, they are nearly completely removed from direct and constant parental influence, meaning that college studies should be expected to show a larger influence on students' political beliefs and viewpoints (Niemi, 1977, p. 222). Significant enough to mention, many college professors are 'liberal' in beliefs so, as mentioned above regarding younger levels of education, their teaching styles and content can often shift students in liberal directions. This is likely a large reason why college studies' results often indicate "declining authoritarianism, dogmatism, and prejudice, together with decreasingly conservative attitudes toward public issues," something which occurs with considerable uniformity in most American colleges and

universities (Niemi, 1977, p. 222). At the same time, however, these teaching styles may further entrench students in their conservative beliefs if they actively deny the beliefs and teachings they are newly exposed to, sometimes even finding peers that feel the same way and agreeing with them (which can form a sort of social ‘echo chamber’). Ultimately, college experiences likely have more of an influence on young people’s political attitudes than those of high schools, despite the idea that cognitive development theories tend to suggest that early adolescent years (typically associated with high school) are those that position students as most susceptible to influence, since high school courses actually tend to show a relatively small overall impact on developing political attitudes (Niemi, 1977, p. 223). There is much more influencing high school and college students in the modern world, however, as social media has certainly become a key influence in youth development of political and ethical views.

Social Media as a Socialization Agent

Perhaps the most widely discussed agent of political socialization in recent times, social media messages, make up a very prominent microsystem of their own with regards to the political socialization of youth (as well as other age groups). This is the means by which teens and adolescents interact directly with their peers and many others, constructing meaning from the messages they receive from (often online) sources. Research has shown that teens are “far less prone to consume traditional news sources such as network TV,” instead favoring online news sources (Warren, 2011, p. 160). As such, many young people turn to social media for their political engagement; in fact, some research suggests that mass media may even replace the role of parents as a major source of political learning for youth (Niemi, 1977, p. 223). Quite different from older forms of mass media such as TV, modern social networking platforms have played an

increasingly important role in socializing youth over the 25+ years since the widespread adoption of the internet. These websites are believed to increase young people's intentions to engage in politics, but research has shown that they only stimulate other forms of *online* political engagement, rather than effectively increasing offline political activity, such as in-person voting and volunteerism (Quintelier, 2015, p. 55). Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, and TikTok have certainly become massively politicized over the years, with some platforms' administrators censoring certain political opinions that they may deem as 'misinformed' or dangerous for viewers. As a specific example, former President Donald Trump had his accounts suspended on both Twitter and Facebook near the end of his presidency due to the platform administrators' determinations about the quality, reliability, and influence of the content and opinions he was presenting to his many followers.

While these media platforms began as a way to simply communicate with one's social circle, celebrities and "influencers" have certainly taken it to a whole new level as they have begun to spread their thoughts and opinions with thousands, if not millions, of young minds every day. On top of this increasing accessibility to popular opinions, the number of citizens who receive political information through online networks is consistently increasing worldwide. In 2020, researchers found that as much as 45% of the population of the U.S. gets their political information regularly through social media networks, and the global COVID-19 pandemic most likely caused these numbers to grow (Ohme, 2020, p. 3). The algorithmic, "personalized" news feeds that are shown to users are often ideas published by individuals that are like-minded to the users themselves, but higher use of social media also increases the likelihood of encountering different and opposing ideas and opinions. Regardless of being able to engage with other people's political postings on social media, one study of high school students showed that the

majority of students do *not* share their own political opinions or interact with others' online; this is often due to the fear of negative responses from others, resulting in many young people creating secret accounts (sometimes called 'spam' or 'finsta' accounts) in order to feel more comfortable posting and sharing personal content like political ideas (Anderson, 2020, p. 173).

Regardless of the consistently growing conversation about the microsystem that is social media, there is currently far too little research to draw conclusions about its overall effects on the political socialization of youth. Once more time has passed and further research has been completed, the field of study will be readily able to do so (ideally).

Religion as a Socialization Agent

While not quite as prominent as the other agents, religion is certainly worth mentioning as its own microsystem (and cultural macrosystem) within which young people can become politically socialized. Famously, the Establishment Clause within the Bill of Rights has always proclaimed "separation of church and state," but that doesn't necessarily mean that religion has ever been kept out of politics or public life in the United States. Religion—most specifically, Christianity—is still considered by many to be a backbone of Western culture, despite the ideas of older generations that argue for the growing dangers of the "increasing secularization of youth." Today, in quite the contrast to these ideas, 85 percent of youth claim a denominational affiliation; more than half claim to be Protestant, and another quarter claim Roman Catholic affiliation (Pearson-Merkowitz, 2009, p. 8). Clearly, American culture is still heavily religious (mostly Christian), even among youth. As such, many young people receive socialization into conservative beliefs through their religious affiliation, as most Christian denominations tend to lean traditionally conservative in religious beliefs and teachings (such as pro-life and opposition

to LGBTQ+ rights). Additionally, youth that are actively religious are more likely than nonreligious youth to “express moral compassion and commitment to justice” and “volunteer, be civically engaged, and render service to their communities” (Pearson-Merkowitz, 2009, p. 9). Clearly, religion does play a large role in the political socialization and civic engagement of young people.

That being said, young people can often stray from or “dial back” their commitment to their religious/conservative upbringings when they begin to receive larger amounts of influence from those that aren’t their parents and direct family (such as professors and peers), as mentioned above. This is usually around the time frames of adolescence and early adulthood, often coinciding with high school and college years. Research has shown that “rates of religious practice decline precipitously in college.” A study of over 30,000 college seniors (fourth-year and beyond) reported that they “discussed religion less often, attended services less frequently, and considered themselves less religious relative to their peers than they did at the beginning of their freshman year” (Mayrl, 2009, p. 264). Just as college experiences tend to lead many students toward liberal beliefs, it can go hand-in-hand with pulling them away from their conservative religion. As an example, if one is taught in their religious upbringing that abortion is wrong (pro-life), but they re-evaluate their personal ideas regarding this when in college courses learning about reproductive rights and the debate surrounding these topics, they just may shift their views to be more liberal toward the matter (pro-choice). In this way, they may also drift away from their religion altogether due to the conflict between their own beliefs and what they’ve been taught or may associate with their religion. In this way (and many others), microsystem influences—such as education—can certainly affect the past (and future) influences of other systems—like religion.

Research Question

As mentioned above, there is still much research to be done on the political socialization of individuals throughout their lives, especially in settings like higher education. Regardless of whether a person attends college or not, there are numerous aspects of a person's life that contribute to the political socialization that they experience throughout their time at a college-age. That being said, it is not known to researchers exactly which agent(s) of socialization are most prominent in affecting the often rapidly changing political views of college students. As such, this study aims to begin an exploration into the political socialization of those who currently attend or have attended college in their life. The following research question guides this investigation: *which agent of political socialization is most salient in the political shifts of college students?* My hypothesis is that in the digital age, wherein the internet is always at one's fingertips, social media's growing influence on young people's ideas has brought it to the forefront of socialization agents for college students.

Method

Overview

In order to examine the political socialization of college students, I conducted a three-part ethnographic study of the experiences of college students and the effects of these experiences upon on their political opinions. First, I reflected on my own experiences and wrote about my own political socialization over the past 5 years of my life (the years of my college attendance) and the socialization agents that have most affected me throughout my life. Second, I conducted a survey of people that either attended college in the past or currently attend college, asking them

questions about their experiences and how these experiences affected their political socialization both during and after their attendance. Third, I conducted supplementary interviews of specifically-selected students that myself and my advisor believed would be helpful in such a study, as their experiences during their time in college were quite powerful in respect to their political socialization and the shifts they've gone through as a result.

Self-Reflection

My name is Spencer Lowe (he/him), and I was born in San Diego, California, in 1998. I was the youngest of four siblings with loving parents that were very hardworking in order to provide a comfortable life for us and show us how to live our own lives. We were raised Catholic and attended private, Catholic school from Kindergarten to 12th grade. My older brother and I both attended an all-boys, college preparatory high school. My sisters attended a similar school, although theirs was co-ed. For college, we each attended a California State University of our own, which were our first real taste of 'public education.' Whenever we've lived at home (prior to and after college), our parents have required that we attend weekly Sunday Mass at a Catholic Church. I believe our private school experiences and actively Catholic lifestyle/upbringing certainly guided most of my early political life. As such, I was most influenced by the microsystemic socialization agents of education, family, and religion throughout my youth.

Throughout my upbringing and into adolescence, my political views were simple. They followed whatever I knew of politics at the time, which was the small amounts I would get directly from my parents' Fox News TV reports in the living room. I distinctly remember presidential elections (when applicable) being on 24/7 in the house, but most other political news coverage went on to be forgotten. In my childhood I had little care for politics, as many do at

young ages. I gleaned a few ethical things here and there from Church teachings and school religion classes, like loving thy neighbor, the Ten Commandments, and instructions to not judge other people...the typically undisputed, wholesome parts of Christian teaching. Over time, however, I also understood that the Catholic church taught me some rather contentious things as well, such as pro-life (anti-abortion) beliefs and anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments.

Given these influences, I went into high school with rather conservative, Christian viewpoints guiding my political opinions entirely. Again, though, I had little interest in politics, even during my high school experiences. I was, however, quite religiously active during my high school years. I entered my local youth group as I went into high school and was Confirmed in the Catholic Church (a sacrament received in adolescence in order to reaffirm their beliefs in God that one originally professed at their Baptism) during my 10th grade year. After this, I was in a youth leadership position in said youth group and spent a lot of my time participating in activities like retreats and local events, as well as planning for them. By the end of my 11th grade year, I was also getting more involved in campus ministry at my high school, planning and leading school-related religious retreats as well. At this point in time, I was still most strongly influenced by the microsystemic agents of religion, education, and family, although peer and social media influences were certainly becoming more prominent by the end of high school. In fact, social media was my only connection to any sort of liberal ideological influence prior to college, both through close friends' online presence as well as wider, generational trends.

I graduated high school as a proud supporter of the Republican party and president Trump's 2016 campaign/presidency. That being said, I started at California Polytechnic State University as an English major, almost immediately receiving the most direct liberal influence I had ever received. This was, in part, due to all my prior school experiences being at private,

Catholic schools, but also partially due to my choice to be an English major (positioning me within the College of Liberal Arts and in classes where the main source material was countless literary discussions of social issues throughout history). As such, I immediately began questioning my political beliefs, both religiously-guided and otherwise. For the first time, I was regularly exposed to ideas that I had always considered excessively radical from my strictly conservative point of view, like anti-American sentiment and absolute pro-choice beliefs towards reproductive rights, as well as movements like Black Lives Matter, which I had been outspoken *against* in the past.

At this point, I quickly found myself struggling to figure out who I was and what I truly believed in versus who I was simply taught to be. Did I disagree with all of my prior beliefs? No, certainly not. Christian ideals were at the core of what led me to be the “kind person” I believed I was. Did I struggle to find a middle ground and figure things out for myself? Immensely so, yes. I couldn’t mentally separate my religious/ethical upbringing that I relied on from my evolving political views, so I ran away from my faith in confusion. I definitely felt highly uncomfortable with it all, so for a long time I avoided even having to think about it. As such, I hardly participated in my classes that actually made me think about myself and my own opinions. I struggled my way through each of my English classes, avoiding doing the vast majority of the work because it caused me to think about my political and ethical struggle.

At the beginning of my third year of college, I found myself unhappy from school burnout and a lack of interest or knowledge in my classes. Knowing I wouldn’t be able to complete my remaining college curriculum like this, I switched majors to Communication Studies (COMS) in hopes of a fresh start and a more broad learning environment. I experienced the major in-person for less than a single quarter before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, but

I already knew I was a much better fit there. With less school stress from just trying to stay afloat, I got better grades and felt more validation from my studies, but I was also able to revisit my personal struggle from years prior. Yet just as I began to open up to liberal influences more than I ever had before, coronavirus shook the globe.

It goes without saying that the global pandemic changed a lot of things for everyone, most often not for the better. For many college students (including myself), it shifted us from social, on-campus, in-person learning environments to staring at our computer screens in our bedrooms for 80+ hours a week. It doesn't take research to understand that is detrimental for the mental well-being of students. On top of this, our 'leisure activities' outside of school mostly consisted of spending even more time staring at digital screens, either streaming media or trying to stay in-touch with others over social media. Obviously, this was reality for many more people than just college students, but I only experienced it from my own point of view as a student. It's no surprise that this was an incredibly divisive time for our nation. Division came from countless debates on immigration, movements that some saw as anti-police and others saw as simply pro-justice, a change in presidency, constant COVID-related conversation about masks, treatments, vaccines and their opposition to them... the list goes on. Moreover, in all this turmoil, I was also living back home again for the first time in over a year, receiving consistent input from influences I hadn't in years. I'd never felt more confused in my life, and prior to college I had always clung to my faith in times like this. Now I was feeling more disconnected from my religious beliefs than ever. As a result, I poured myself into my education full-force. It became one of the only things I could focus on during all the chaos, but I still struggled to feel like I was actually *in* college when I was living back in my childhood bedroom of my parents' house.

Regardless of the less-than-preferred learning conditions, I finally loved college when I was in COMS. I learned so much about the modern world, human interactions, and cultures around me and afar that I had never been exposed to before. I made friends within the major—which I rarely did in English—who, in turn, each had an effect on my political/ethical beliefs through class activities and discussions. When I wasn't doing schoolwork, I was on social media virtually experiencing the chaos of the pandemic from other peoples' points of view. Within the year and a half I spent in the major prior to returning to campus, I took on a vastly different view of the world around me. My views shifted from conservative across the board to somewhere much more liberal, yet I still don't know exactly where I stand on everything. Although I do know that I'm still figuring it all out and that's okay.

I started college thinking I knew myself only to completely lose that 'self' very early along the way. In trying to run away from who I was, I lost sight of what it was I was trying to find, just looking for ways to avoid life rather than figure it out. Leaving college, I am thankful for my opportunity to be exposed to the influences I have been exposed to in the past five years. It wasn't always easy to figure things out, and feeling lost was certainly terrible at times, but trying to find myself and realizing it's okay not to feel like everything is "going according to plan" through all of that has brought me a peace that I didn't know I could find.

In summary, my early life had its greatest socialization influences coming from my conservative parents, private school, and Catholic religion. As I began to get politically active, I had yet to question these influences much at all, therefore aligning myself directly with all I knew at that time: Christian conservatism in modern America. Starting college, I lost sight of the plan I had been following all along; it confused me and left me scared of the world at-large. But in learning to deal with this fear and uncomfortability with not knowing what's coming next,

I found that I wasn't alone. I was able to sympathize (and sometimes empathize) with those who have lived experiences both similar to and vastly different from my own. In learning this, I found a comfort in knowing that essentially everyone is just trying to figure things out, no matter how much we (attempt to) convince ourselves of the opposite.

College is a difficult time for many people. It's the first time many of us are hit with a pressure to figure it all out, when we really need to realize that *no one* has it all figured out. Because college students come from everywhere—vastly different backgrounds and upbringings, stories and triumphs, struggles and tragedies—we all go through very different experiences just trying to figure ourselves out in this crazy world. Additionally, the unique situation of the covid quarantine certainly had an effect that is difficult to account for. My story is different from each and every other person's, and I believe each difference therein can change people, their ideas, and the ways they are influenced by the world around them vastly. In an age where we have never been more connected and yet never been more divided, it's important to try to build a larger understanding of the times in our lives that we are so susceptible to socialization influences. It can be a time that we are overwhelmed with stresses and at our lowest in terms of mental health and self-image, or a time that we see nothing but opportunity before us and feel that the only way is up. Regardless, I want to know more about political socialization and how it effects all of us, especially during these times. There is a relative lack of research on high school and college political socialization, when I believe it should be an area of the greatest interest, as this is when people truly begin to figure things out for themselves rather than being told how to live their lives. If we are to support each other during times when many are lost and in need of greater understanding of how to find their way, then the field itself needs to establish a greater understanding of political socialization for those who need it.

Survey

Building off inspiration from my self-reflection, I created a framework of survey questions regarding the political socialization of respondents leading up to their college experience, as well as how these experiences affect the process and their political activity over time. I also knew I wanted to have a certain amount of focus on social media and its direct influence on college students' political socialization, since I believe this is growing to be the most influential microsystem for young people altogether. The survey kept the personal information of all respondents completely anonymous. My target audience was anyone who had attended (or was currently attending) college, since my main focus was studying the effects of college on a student's political socialization. That being said, participation was fully reliant on voluntary response for sampling and no coercion to participate was ever utilized. A consent form was also attached to the beginning of the online questionnaire (this form can be found below in Appendix C).

My survey consisted of 18 questions. They were an assortment of multiple choice, Likert-scale, checkbox, and open-ended questions (see Appendix A for list of questions). The first set of questions asked about demographic information (age, gender, hometown, college/degree/major and years of attendance). The rest of the questions asked about specific agents of socialization (educational history, religious background, family political views, social media use, etc.) from throughout the respondent's life without asking for specific descriptors. These questions were directed towards microsystemic socialization agents (per Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory), as well as college experience and its individualized effects upon the respondents'

political activity. My survey was published and received responses from November 16, through November 30, 2021.

Interviews

Given the complexity of studying individuals' political socialization over their lifetimes, interviews were an essential part of the study. After writing my self-reflection, I created a framework for interviewing current and former college students about their political socialization prior to, during, and after their time as college students. I had a total of five questions prepared for my interviews as a guide, but I generally wanted them to function smoothly as part of a conversation. My first question asked for interviewees to give themselves a general introduction (name, age, hometown, college, major, years attended) for organization purposes; as stated earlier, the data from these interviews will not be shared to any extent that allows for any interviewee's identifying personal information to be known. My next few questions were mainly aimed at discussing their college experience and any political or ethical shifts they may have gone through during their time in college, as well as how these shifts may have affected them. Finally, I asked interviewees if they felt any/which facets of their life had a major effect upon said political shift, like their religious background (or lack thereof), hometown, educational background, sexuality, ethnicity, etcetera (exact question wording/script can be found below in Appendix B).

Interview participants were personally recommended by my advisor, Dr. Jnan Blau, as former students of his at California Polytechnic State University. Upon some light conversation with them, I confirmed both their consent to participate as well as their suitability for further discussing their own process of political socialization over their early life and adolescence, as

well as how they felt their college experiences affected this process both during and after their time as students ended. Participation was voluntary but consent was documented prior to each interview (a blank version of the consent form for the interviews can be found below in Appendix D).

Findings

After conducting the self-reflection, survey, and interviews, I looked through the results from all three procedures for commonalities, themes, and patterns. Altogether I received a total of 87 full responses on my survey and I conducted four in-depth interviews.

My survey responses were certainly enlightening in many ways. Starting from the top with demographic information, the average age of my respondents was 21 years, with a median age of 21 as well. The majority of respondents reported gender as female (63), with males responses being one-third as common (21), and two respondents reporting 'non-binary.' Almost all respondents reported coming from a hometown somewhere in California, save ten total responses from non-California native students (the majority of these [6] came from west coast states or nearby surroundings); the skew towards Californian origin is likely due to this study being carried out at a California State University. Colleges attended by respondents were much more diverse: while the majority attended Cal Poly SLO at the time of their graduation, a good amount of responses reported attending a community college or junior college of some sort before they attended any university; the skew towards Cal Poly can be explained by the fact that the study was conducted at the university. Respondents stated their degree level as well, but the vast majority were either bachelor's degree level or working towards this (80); five others reported associate degree level, and one reported master's degree (no doctoral). Respondents'

years of college attendance were, for the most part, either in progress or completed within the past 10-15 years; the earliest reported college attendance was from 1996 to 2000, an outlier in this dataset.

Moving on from demographic questions, the remainder of the survey focused on respondents' political socialization and influences upon this prior to, during, and after college attendance. In terms of educational experiences prior to and during college, the majority of respondents (59) stated they had attended public education their entire life, while one respondent stated they had attended private education their entire life, and 26 others reported some sort of blended education (although even these responses widely reported public college with some mixture of private elementary, junior high, and/or high school experience). Reported parental political views were somewhat diverse, though most (70) leaned toward one of the two major parties of Democrats and Republicans (Democrat – 32, Republican – 38, Libertarian – 2, Socialist – 0, Apolitical – 3, Independent – 4, Moderate – 2, one parent Dem./one parent Rep. – 2). Respondents' reported personal political views prior to college were diverse as well, with the majority still leaning toward one of the two major parties (Democrat – 42, Republican – 27, Libertarian – 1, Socialist – 1, Apolitical – 3, Independent – 10, Other – 2). Regarding religious involvement throughout their life (scale of 1-6), the average of responses was a value of 3.38, suggesting the majority of respondents had a decent amount of religious significance within their life (nine responses claimed essentially no religious involvement, while five responses claimed extremely high religious involvement; the rest were somewhere between values of 2 and 5 [66]).

Regarding respondents' experiences in college and how they affected their political views and activities, when questioned about their political awareness prior to, during, and after college attendance, responses were interesting: averages steadily rose from before college (3.48) to

during college (4.57), and slightly higher after college (4.77). For clarity, the label for the response value of 3 was ‘somewhat not [politically aware],’ while response values of 4 and 5 were labeled ‘somewhat politically aware’ and ‘quite politically aware’ (respectively); ergo, the average reported awareness prior to college was significantly lower than the average reported awareness during and after college. Also worth noting, no respondents reported a score of less than three during their college experience, showing that students in college are in a naturally more politicized environment (both socially and educationally). When asked if they attended college in their hometown, ‘yes’ responses were in the minority (8), as opposed to the 65 responses stating that they attended college outside of their hometown but within their home state and the 13 responses stating they attended college outside of their home state altogether. Again, this skew is surely due to the survey’s being conducted at a California State University. Few respondents reported having participated in politically-active clubs or groups on-campus during their college experiences (yes – 8, no – 77).

Interestingly, the results regarding respondents having undergone a “political awakening” during college were mixed, as 39 respondents stated ‘yes’ they had undergone an awakening during college, and 38 stated they hadn’t; meanwhile, nine other respondents stated that they *had* undergone a political awakening, but it was prior to college (either during junior high or high school). Expanding upon these shifts/awakenings, among those that *did* experience an awakening during college (39 respondents), 15 reported aligning with democrats prior to college, meanwhile 14 reported aligning republicans prior to college (only five reported being an independent, two reported being apolitical, and one reported socialist alignment). Beyond this, of those that *did not* experience an awakening during college (38), 19 reported alignment with democrats prior to college and 13 reported alignment with republicans prior to college (four reported being an

independent, one reported alignment with libertarianism, and one reported being apolitical). Of those that experienced an awakening at another point (not during college), all eight reported aligning with democrats prior to college.

Finally, my survey asked respondents about their political outspokenness on social media now, after their college experiences (or during them). On a scale of one to six—one being ‘I’m essentially apolitical on social media’ and six being ‘I’m on social media *for* politics’—the average was 3.15, showing that college age individuals are somewhat politically active on social media, but not heavily. Interestingly, no responses reported a score of 6. In the next question, respondents were asked if they believed their answer to the last question would be any different if they hadn’t attended college at all; surprisingly, the majority of responses (47) stated that they didn’t think their political activity on social media would be any different, meanwhile 35 responses stated that they would be *less* politically outspoken, and only four stated they would be *more* politically outspoken.

Last but certainly not least, there was one optional question asking if respondents felt they had anything else to share about their ‘political views, shifts, college experiences, or social media activity.’ While responding here wasn’t very popular (less than 20 constructive responses), some interesting ideas were shared. One respondent stated that they think of themselves as “pretty outspoken politically” in their daily life, but that they are “almost apolitical on social media.” They said this was due to a desire to avoid receiving unwarranted criticisms and starting “endless debates,” whereas they think that having an in-person discussion is more constructive because it “reminds people they aren’t disagreeing with a nameless face” but another person that has had different experiences and sees through a different outlook. This idea is profoundly similar to the ideas presented by Anderson (2020) in his discussion of junior high

and high school students feeling hesitant to post personal ideas online because of a fear of negative responses. Another few respondents noted that current college students (and recent graduates) have had a vastly different college experience from many others who have graduated college in the past due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some also noted that their political awareness has largely grown due to the pandemic, since there was a “sharp shift to political attention” at the start of the pandemic and it was “practically impossible to escape” the political sphere at that time. Another small group of responses noted that the political movement of BLM and the George Floyd protests caused a significant shift for them during recent years. Altogether, many responses to this open-ended question reflected a strong socializing influence from social media and their interactions that have affected their political views and caused shifts in recent years, especially as college students that weren’t able to experience school in a regular manner during the overlapping recent events of the pandemic and political protesting that were occurring all across the nation. Without social media connecting us as young people, the influence of these events surely would have been lessened.

Interviews yielded very different data that was more in-depth and quite descriptive. The four individuals interviewed were each college graduates (or within a couple months of graduation for one), and their ages were 22, 25, 26, and 30 years of age. They each reported having undergone a political shift or “awakening”—two during late high school, two during college years—that lasted into adulthood to various life-changing effects. Only five questions were prepared for discussion with interviewees (4, not including demographic information), although it was expected that there would be further investigation through normal conversation during the actual interviews (based upon responses and elaboration). Each interviewee generously shared countless details about their personal life in order to give as much constructive

information as they were comfortable sharing. Altogether, though, their stories shared striking similarity to one another in a few ways. As such, there were three main themes presented across interview data.

The first common theme was the presence of a shift away from views they had in their upbringing, each with their own form of conservative/religious ties. All four of the interviewees expressed this to their own unique degree. The following are quotes from the interviewees:

- *My family is super religious. Um, my dad was a pastor or preacher when I was growing up...I shifted and I definitely view myself as a lot more progressive than I was.*
- *Growing up, living in the house that I did...it was very conservative Christian, like to an extreme, I would say. And I don't know that I ever really quite felt that it was my own, it was just kind of something that I went along with because it's what I knew.*
- *My dad is—er—was, a minister. And so I was just kind of constantly surrounded by it. And I knew, you know, like, a spectrum of Christians, but as I matured and have distanced myself, I'd say that the political spectrum of that community is narrower than I had realized at the time...and just the culture there, um, was something that I don't participate in at all now and I don't miss at all.*
- *Both sides of my family were very conservative Christian. I retained those fairly conservative views until probably the last couple months of my high school career. Um, at which point there was uncertainty for me...I was in Ag [Agriculture] dorms—very conservative—so that like kind of reinforced childhood beliefs. But I think, for me, the big change came with my roommate and one of my best friends who lived across the hall, were both on the left side of things...I feel like that kind of separated me from everyone*

else in my dorms which kind of caused me to separate myself from my conservative family as well.

The second theme was damage to relationships with friends/family due to the reported political and/or ethical shift. All four of the interviewees expressed this to their own unique degree:

- *I definitely had like a lot of, um, friend changes. I decided I didn't really want to go to church anymore...I kind of just left it all behind. I don't really associate myself now with people that I had heavily associated with because of religion...it was easier for me to feel like I was on the same page as other people.*
- *Yeah, so actually my mom and I don't speak anymore. Now we're going on like year two that we haven't spoken...I feel like things got better with my siblings though. I had this idea that my brother and sister had the same beliefs as my mom, which was totally wrong. I don't even know how I'd get through the day without them now.*
- *Even more of a challenge, at the time, was with my immediate family and my dad being a member of the clergy, I lived like in the parsonage at the church...It was never like retaliatory or aggressive or anything. A lot of people I'd never even verbalized that I had no longer agreed with their beliefs, their lifestyle, and [we] just kind of naturally grew apart.*
- *...there's definitely been a shift in my relationship with my family...fortunately my mom is somebody I've always been close to ...what's different between us is there's just certain things that don't get talked about now because we know we're going to disagree...it's made certain things very off limits to talk about...[and] my dad has never been somebody I've really been close to, but that's put even more strain on our*

relationship...it's definitely put a strain on most of my other familial relationships, like my extended family on my mom's side—especially with the pandemic.

Finally, the third theme was a level of disillusionment with modern Christian religion due to the heavy political influence that is present and unfortunately often associated with religious people, even if unfairly just by the media. Three of the four interviewees expressed these feelings to their own unique degree:

- *When I was trying to affiliate with those people, I'd find myself having like, um, kind of like moral things where I felt like they were doing things or saying things or acting certain ways that didn't align with things that I fundamentally thought was okay. And...I separated myself from that and started hanging out with other people.*
- *I kind of see all organized religions as the same...you have to have this very narrow-minded view on the world...but I don't want to do that...and I kind of started forming my own opinions and just really diving into what, who I wanted to be...one of the first things was just to be kind to people—regardless of who they are or what they want or what they believe—the least you can do is just be nice to them...I don't want to get mad at people for not believing in what I do.*
- *Long story short, what caused kind of a political 'awakening' for me was just seeing through the lens of these friends. Like some of the really harmful racist, sexist, all that kind of activity among that major on-campus—and homophobic...for a very long time in my head, conservatism and Christianity were like just inherently bound together...I felt like that attitude that conservative 'Christians' had towards [homelessness] was not really aligned with Christianity's beliefs...like self-proclaimed 'religious' people worship the religious structures...*

Discussion

The goal of this study has been to examine the political socialization and shifts of college students in order to begin to determine which agent(s) of socialization are most salient in contributing to these significant shifts in personal political (and often ethical) views. This study used a survey of current and past college students and a small series of interviews of current and past (recently graduated) college students. In this discussion, I will comment on themes expressed across both survey and interview responses, as well as how they relate to my own experiences and research.

Survey responses showed some notable results that resonated with themes across all data. First, in response to the question regarding involvement with religion, more than 80% of respondents reported some level of religious significance within their life. These results agree with the reports of interviewees, each of which reported Christian/conservatism being a large part of their early lives, especially prior to their political shifts at the end of high school and throughout college. This was true for my personal experiences as well, being brought up strongly Catholic. Mayrl (2009) also reported findings suggesting that college students often shift away from the religious practices of their upbringings, so this appears to be a trend among young people attending university and leaving their parents' households. Interviewees, in particular, argued that it was both political *and* religious practices that pushed them away from the values of their upbringings.

Second, survey responses showed that respondents' political awareness grew from before to after college by a significant amount: the reported average before college was at only 3.48 out of 6, and average after college it was 4.77 out of 6, showing nearly a 35% increase. Additionally, no response showed a score of lower than 3 during college. This is also despite the vast majority

of survey responses reporting a lack of participation in politically-active clubs and groups during college, altogether showing that even with just college classes and the culture surrounding it, a highly politicized environment is created, one which young people likely haven't experienced prior to their attendance. This is also shown in another survey question's results: that nearly 60% of respondents had gone through some sort of political awakening prior to or during college. Interviewees reported the same, typically stating that their political awareness spiked and resulted in a shift during late high school and early college years.

Third, survey responses also showed that college students aren't extremely political on social media. With an average score of only 3.15, respondents reported varying levels of social media political activity, although the majority of responses also stated that this wasn't something they attributed to having been affected by their college attendance. According to these results, college students aren't excessively politically active on social media, but not due to college attendance—perhaps social media activities are more highly affected by another aspect of young people's experiences. Responding to the open-ended question at the end of the survey, one respondent stated that they are more outspoken in real life than they are on social media because it feels more personal and allows for more understanding from each side, rather than conflict as a result of detaching each other's opinions from their person. Perhaps this is similar to the reasoning of adolescent students creating secret social media accounts to protect their more personal opinions from unwarranted or unwelcome criticisms, as Anderson (2020) reported. And yet, other respondents reported a heightened level of political awareness and shifting in views due to social media. These respondents stated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, politics were completely unavoidable on social media, so they went through a shift in their political views just from their heightened political interactions on social media. And yet others reported that it was

the highly politicized events occurring during the pandemic that caused their shifts in recent years. Clearly, social media has a powerful effect upon young people and their political socialization, but since it is still a relatively young and growing influence, more research in this area definitely needs to be done for a greater understanding of its effects.

Ultimately, no single agent of political socialization can be concluded as being more influential or significant than any other. Rather, it is clear that there are many unique aspects of an individual's life that affect the ways in which one is affected by each individual agent and experiences they go through. However, the strongest political and ethical shifts appear to result from strong religious upbringings prior to college education and the subsequent exposure to many new ideas.

Conclusion

In summary, this study sought to analyze the heavily-shifting nature of the political socialization of college students. While this study is largely lacking in the evidence required to draw general conclusions about the complicated process of the political socialization of college students, it does establish a basis for future research. Thus, this research ultimately shows that college is a time in which many students are going through complicated shifts that can be affected by many different aspects of one's life, from their upbringing, to their religion, to their social media usage, and beyond.

Communication—as a whole and within specific subsets—plays a massive role in political socialization. It is ever-present and involved in every action and interaction people carry out. Interpersonal communication can be seen through the microsystems of family, peers, and education, as verbal communication is directly influential upon how one is raised and socialized

by those around them. As such, one's surroundings, or culture, play a large role as well; intercultural communication is key in religious and mass media microsystems, and within chronosystems that are present in every cultural context, both monochronic and polychronic. And as my personal reflection and interview data show, *intrapersonal* communication, or communication with oneself, is an essential part of an individual determining their own beliefs and values for themselves and by their own discernment.

My personal reflection also shows how important my studies were to my own political socialization and development over my years as a college student. Prior to becoming a communication studies major (or beginning college at all), my exposure to beliefs other than my own was incredibly lacking; I couldn't even begin to understand other perspectives and beliefs because I never discussed them or considered them myself. It was in classes like Intercultural Communication, Interpersonal Communication, and Intergroup Communication that I really began to see other perspectives and even try to understand them. Through this exposure, I was able to take part in the intrapersonal communication, or self-reflection, that I mention above. As such, it is my conclusion that college experiences and exposure to ideas other than one's own can be invaluable to each and every individual's personal development, regardless of their upbringing or current personal views. Such experiences do not only allow the person to understand others better, but they also allow one to better understand themselves, which is *always* beneficial, even if the personal reflection doesn't result in a political or ethical shift.

Implications for Future Research

This study took the form of a pilot study, or a study that seeks to establish a base model to be followed up by more of its kind on larger scales to make further developments in the field.

Later models could use a good amount of refining for both surveys and interviews. Admittedly, my questions show flaws. I over-specified response options and that surely affected the results to an extent. Another specific area I meant to address that I mistakenly didn't was in regard to political affiliation prior to and after college; while my survey did ask what affiliation respondents remember possessing prior to college, it didn't ask what affiliation they possessed *after* college. Because of this, I wasn't able to fully see the trends of which direction respondents shifted due to their respective political awakenings, if at all. Future researchers should certainly ensure that they ask for data for both prior to *and* after college experiences.

It was a difficult task to study such a largely influenced, unique part of a person, especially on a wide scale. Future researchers should consider studying smaller amounts of people with more detail rather than attempting to solely study large groups of people in order to draw conclusions. That being said, larger sample sizes could prove quite beneficial for any future surveys and interviews. Additionally, it is my recommendation for future studies to focus more specifically on singular socialization agents, unless attempting to compare their respective influences. With greater resources, like a team of researchers or access to a much larger sample size, comparing influences would be much more viable.

Other ways for improvement would include focusing on diversity of respondents. My results could certainly show bias since this study was conducted on such a small-scale. Spreading responses across state borders and through more ethnically diverse communities would certainly offer more generally accurate results.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

Demographic information

- Age, in years (target: 18-30 y/o)
- Gender (M/F/Non-binary/Prefer not to say)
- Hometown
- Did you attend college/receive an education above high school level?
 - o Degree
 - o College
 - o Years attended? (i.e. 2017-2021)

Variables in Political Socialization

- *Many of the following items use the verbiage “did you” as they are targeted at recent college graduates; if you are still attending college classes, please answer in reference to your current level of experience at the college level.
- Did you experience a political “awakening” during your college years (around the age of 18-23 years)? In other words, did your political knowledge and investment grow rapidly during your college years? Before? After? No change?
 - o How politically aware would you label yourself having been prior to your college experience? (1-not at all, 2-mostly not, 3-somewhat not, 4- somewhat political, 5- quite political, 6-very political)
 - o During college? (1-6)
 - o After college? (1-6)
- What kind of education have you received throughout your life prior to college (private, public, blended, etc.)?

- How significant of a role has religion played in your life? (1-6)
- What political affiliation would most closely depict your parents' views as you were growing up? (i.e. Liberal, Conservative, Libertarian, Socialist, N/A etc.)
- What political affiliation do you remember yourself having prior to college?
- Did your political views change during your time in college?
 - o Did you stay the same?
 - o Did your political investment first begin?
- Do you/did you attend college in your hometown?
- Do you/did you participate in any political clubs or groups on-campus?
- How politically outspoken are you on social media?
 - o 1 – I'm essentially apolitical on social media
 - o 2 – I am not apolitical, but don't generally interact with anything political
 - o 3 – I don't follow any outspoken political accounts, but often interact with political posts that enter my feed
 - o 4 – I follow a few accounts that are often politically outspoken, and typically interact with their tweets
 - o 5 – A lot of my time spent on social media is either reading political
 - o 6 – politics is the reason I use social media
- Do you think your answer to the last question would be any different if you hadn't gone to college at all?

Appendix B

Interview Questions/Script

A note before we begin: if any questions make you feel uncomfortable or inquire into something you wish not to discuss, feel free to let me know and we can move past it, no questions asked. Additionally, you may share as much or as little as you wish in your response to each question you choose to answer.

Questions:

- For starters, can you provide some basic personal information?
 - o Name
 - o Age
 - o College
 - o Major
 - o Years attended
 - o Hometown
- Did you experience a political “awakening” or drastic shift in political [and/or moral] views during your college experience?
 - o If yes, please expand on it (What political affiliation did you shift from/to?)
 - o Did this shift pull you away from or push you towards anyone in particular? Were any of your personal relationships affected by this shift? Negatively, or positively?
- Our lives are full of intricacies and unique qualities that often affect who we choose to be over our lifetimes. Of the many facets of your identity and personal life, do you feel that any had a particular effect on your political affiliation prior to and after this shift? (i.e. religion, education, hometown, ethnicity, sexuality, languages spoken, etc.)
 - o Following that up by flipping the situation, do you feel any facets of your personal life were affected by this shift?

Appendix C

Survey Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT:

“Political Socialization of College-Age Individuals in the Age of Social Media”

INTRODUCTION

This form asks for your agreement to participate in a research project on political socialization. Your participation involves taking a short survey about yourself and your political views throughout your life. The entire process will be kept anonymous, and your name will never be asked of you. It is expected that your participation will take approximately 15-20 minutes. There are minimal risks anticipated with your participation. If you are interested in participating, please review the following information.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND PROPOSED BENEFITS

- The purpose of the study is to research into the political shift, or political “awakening,” that occurs in many college-age individuals.
- The main potential benefit associated with the study is contributing to a deeper understanding of the factors that seem to affect these political shifts. It is also considerably beneficial to an individual to reflect on and better understand one’s own evolution of their identity personally, socially, and politically.

YOUR PARTICIPATION

- If you agree to participate, you will be asked to answer questions about yourself, your past political views and how your college experience affected those views, your current political views, and the ways you think of yourself politically.
- Your participation will take approximately 15-20 minutes. There are minimal risks anticipated with your participation.

PROTECTIONS AND POTENTIAL RISKS

- Please be aware that you are not required to participate in this research, and you may omit responses to any questions you choose not to answer.
- This data will be kept confidential and will be stored on password-protected computers indefinitely. Names, IP addresses, and personal information will never be used in any analysis of the results. Any identifying information will be removed upon completion of the study.
- Your responses will be provided **anonymously** to protect your privacy and personal information.

RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

- This research is being conducted by Spencer Lowe, an undergraduate student in the Department of Communication Studies at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. If you have questions regarding this study or would like to be informed of the results when the study is completed, please contact the researcher at sglowe@calpoly.edu or his faculty advisor, Jnan Blau, at jablau@calpoly.edu.
- If you have concerns regarding the manner in which the study is conducted, you may contact Dr. Michael Black, Chair of the Cal Poly Institutional Review Board, at (805) 756-2894, mblack@calpoly.edu, or Ms. Trish Brock, Director of Research Compliance, at (805) 756-1450, pbrock@calpoly.edu.

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

If you are 18 or older and agree to voluntarily participate in this research project as described, please indicate your agreement by completing the attached survey. You may retain a copy of this form for your reference, and I thank you for your participation in this research.

Spencer G. Lowe

10/29/2021

E-Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix D

Interview Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT:

“Political Socialization of College-Age Individuals in the Age of Social Media”

INTRODUCTION

This form asks for your agreement to participate in a research project on political socialization. Your participation involves being asked a few simple interview questions about yourself and your political views throughout your life. It is expected that your participation will take approximately 20-30 minutes. There are minimal risks associated with your participation. If you are interested in participating, please review the following information.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND PROPOSED BENEFITS

- The purpose of the study is to research into the political shift, or political “awakening,” that occurs in many college-age individuals.
- The main potential benefit associated with the study is contributing to a deeper understanding of the factors that seem to affect these political shifts. Additionally, it is considerably beneficial to an individual to reflect on and better understand one’s own evolution of their identity personally, socially, and politically.

YOUR PARTICIPATION

- If you agree to participate, you will be asked to answer questions about yourself, your past political views and how your college experience affected those views, your current political views, and the ways you think of yourself politically.
- Your participation will take approximately 20-30 minutes. There are minimal risks associated with your participation.

PROTECTIONS AND POTENTIAL RISKS

- Please be aware that you are not required to participate in this research, and you may omit responses to any questions that you choose not to answer.
- The possible risks or discomforts associated with participation in this study are minimal.
- The interviews will be carried out over Zoom and recorded for later review. After the interviews’ completion, I will transcribe them myself.
- Your name and any other personally identifiable information that you may choose to share will **not** be shared with anyone other than the researcher; this data and the transcripts from the interviews will be kept confidential and will be stored on password-protected computers indefinitely. Names, IP addresses, and personal information will never be used in any analysis of the results. Any identifying information will be removed upon completion of the study.

RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

- This research is being conducted by Spencer Lowe, an undergraduate student in the Department of Communication Studies at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. If you have questions regarding this

study or would like to be informed of the results when the study is completed, please contact the researcher at sglowe@calpoly.edu or his faculty advisor, Jnan Blau, at jablau@calpoly.edu.

- If you have concerns regarding the manner in which the study is conducted, you may contact Dr. Michael Black, Chair of the Cal Poly Institutional Review Board, at (805) 756-2894, mblack@calpoly.edu, or Ms. Trish Brock, Director of Research Compliance, at (805) 756-1450, pbrock@calpoly.edu.

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

If you are 18 or older and agree to voluntarily participate in this research project as described, please indicate your agreement by choosing an option and signing below. Please retain a copy of this form for your reference, and thank you for your participation in this research.

Yes, I agree to participate and have my interview be recorded.

Yes, I agree to participate and have my interview be recorded, but would like to review the recording transcript before it is used in the analysis.

Yes, I agree to participate but do not allow my interview to be recorded.

E-Signature of Volunteer

Date

Spencer G. Lowe

10/29/2021

E-Signature of Researcher

Date