

Political socialization as the driving factor for political engagement and political participation

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Paper Abstract

Politicians and academics have pointed to the fact that young people in the western world are increasingly disengaged from conventional politics. On the other hand the level of political interest does not follow the same trend, as young people remain interested in politics.

The paper focuses on political socialization patterns that foster students' political engagement, which could be seen as a starting point for political participation. The conditions under which some people become more involved with politics are a puzzle, since pioneering works on political culture have detected differences among individuals in this respect. Most of these studies pointed to political socialization as a plausible suspect for these differences.

The political socialization of adolescents has been high on the agenda of governments and researchers in the past ten years. This paper focuses on younger students, as the issues around political engagement have gained importance due to the fact that in Austria the vote has been extended to 16 year olds in all elections since 2008. The whole debate has shifted towards the role of schools in educating students to become good citizens, but does the school really matter?

The post-election studies for several elections since 2008 have shown that younger voters are very interested in politics, but are less likely to participate in elections.

This paper aims to test several factors of socialization on civic engagement and political participation for 13 and 14 year old students. Subsequently, the relationship between engagement and the current political participation of young students will be addressed.

Introduction

According to David Held, “Democracy, as an idea and as a political reality, is fundamentally contested” (1996: xi). It is not possible to find a general agreement on the basic elements that are considered necessary for being an active and informed citizen in a democratic system. Additionally, there is no general understanding about the term democracy, which has become synonymous with representative democracy. As “Democracy is the worst possible form of government except – all the others that have been tried” (cit. after Mueller 1995: 160), we need to consider how future citizens could be prepared for living and participating in a democracy as well as to develop their democratic system. It is necessary to practice the “game of democracy”, which means that a citizen does not fall out of the sky.

In Austria the discussion of the civic competencies of adolescents has picked up speed since the Austrian government lowered the voting age for national elections to 16 years. Adolescents have to be introduced to the rules of democracy, the democratic culture, in order to learn a sense of responsibility and the implications of majority decisions. Sometimes this is referred to as a preference for an active rather than a ‘passive’ social citizenship in which citizens passively receive benefits from the state. Active citizens are increasingly regarded as users and consumers who can be seen as creative and reflexive actors who are competent and have the ability to develop personal strategies in relation to public decision making. Under what political socialization conditions do children become engaged with politics?

Evidence confirming attitude formation and change after childhood extended the period under consideration from early adolescence to early adulthood (Dawson and Prewitt 1969, James and James 2004). That still disregarded the possibility that attitudes can change after this stage, as well as the socializing role of colleagues, media, partners, organizations or work life. Currently, several authors are returning to the centrality of childhood adolescence (Hooghe 2004, Sapiro 2004), while at the same time the shift includes the school as a second important agent of socialization. But media use and awareness-raising have also again become regular factors for explaining political socialization and political participation.

What seems to be clear is the necessity to return to the individual factors that account for differences in citizens' propensity to become politically involved. These individual factors stand out thanks to a greater variability and a potential for rapid change, as well as for providing a less static, deterministic and pessimistic picture of citizen political socialization. This entails an understanding of political socialization here as the whole of the dynamics and processes involved in the acquisition of social norms, values and political attitudes during the life span, with an emphasis on the influence of social agencies (Niemi and Hepburn 1995); and not only as "the way society transmits its political culture from generation to generation", mainly among children (Langton and Jennings 1968:4). But there are still many unsolved puzzles arising from this classical literature that could be solved or, at least, addressed using methodological and theoretical innovations.

As is clear, there is a need for an integrated approach to the political socialization process that does not confront different agents as if they were rivals. This will allow us to better explain individual variations with respect to political engagement, considering several factors / agents that may play an important role in the formation and change of attitudes that denote political engagement and political participation. To do so, this paper focuses in the Austrian case, for at least two reasons. Firstly the author is familiar with the Austrian context, and contextual effects are rather important for socialization; and secondly, the author knows the study design and the data of the Austrian sample of the ICC study. Thus, path modeling has been used to estimate the effects of different agents.

Theoretical considerations

The political socialization of adolescents is a specific problem which has been the subject of attention in recent years. This discussion has become important again in the last few years, but still, "We know relatively little about the civic development of adolescents. Specifically, we have a limited understanding on how schools do, or do not, foster political engagement among their adolescent students." (Campbell 2008: 438). Radio, newspapers, internet and most importantly television may also have an impact on the political development of adolescents. The concept of political socialisation describes how individuals find their place in the political community and how they develop their individual norms and attitudes towards political objects, actors, symbols and processes.

Some authors claim that political attitudes are already formed in the pre-adolescent years (Hyman 1959), others agree with the observation of Almond and Verba that the sources of political attitudes are many and can be found from early childhood to adolescence into adulthood. Political socialization is (1) a learning process through which (2) the individual (3) learns political attitudes and behavior from generation to generation, (4) influenced by political socialization agents. Although there are sometimes slight differences in the wording, the definitions refer to the same process of gaining information about the political system, both at the individual (learning) and community (cultural transmission) level (Dawson and Prewitt 1969: 13). Furthermore, most authors assume a causal process: the effect of the socialization agent on the outcome (knowledge, behaviour).

But political socialization primarily stimulates a psychological process. This process combines several aspects of an individual attachment with its social environment. It combines attitudes, behaviours and the intention to participate. Political engagement is a central characteristic of a democratic society. Engagement in any subject matter includes a variety of different processes. It refers not only to an individual's personal involvement in activities in this area, but also comprises their motivation for engagement, their confidence in the effectiveness of participation and the benefits they derive from their own capacity become actively involved.

The social cognitive theory postulates a learning process wherein learners direct their own learning. The extent to which young people develop beliefs about their efficacy relative to politics during adolescence might be partially influenced by whether or not they engage in activities that influence their environment or communities. It is quite clear that willingness, motivation and awareness are prior to political participation as such.

The process itself takes place in early childhood and lasts until adulthood. Political engagement seems to be influenced by at least four dimensions: the family, peers, media and those institutions that provide information on the processes and the concepts of politics, attitudes, norms and abilities. Arguing in terms of political socialisation two different hypothesis should be mentioned, the crystallization hypothesis, which states that early-developed attitudes and competencies are more important than those acquired later, and the hypothesis of persistence, which states that the knowledge, competencies and orientations of children and adolescents are important for their political life as adults.

Neither of these hypotheses is deterministic, as people are able to adapt to a new situation and to resist and change their environment. But both hypotheses reflect the importance of early political socialisation and the need to focus on children and adolescents.

These hypotheses assume that the school is the institution in which the youngest are introduced to the norms and value system of a community and that these norms should be part of their everyday life in school and permeate all the processes within a school. They attribute importance to the daily life and the political and social culture of a school, especially the interaction of teachers and students as expressed in the school's customs and climate. Rather than through frontal teaching students learn about the rules, ideas and institutions of the political and societal system through participating in discussions. Students learn that democratically organized processes deal with different individual interests and that democracy can cope with these kinds of different positions within arguments. Adolescents are often disgusted by these kinds of arguments and try to avoid such situations (Campbell 2008:440). But arguments and discussions are part of the political sphere and could be an emotional barrier to participation in politics. To act in these processes and to deal with arguments is something which is necessary to increased political awareness and to civic engagement. In school students can be influenced to approach politics in a more "systemic" way - as they learn about the democratic system and the related norms and values (Galston 2003, Nie et al. 1996, Niemi and Junn 1998). As has been said, the school could be seen as an institution that plays an important role in altering the primary socialisation (families) of young people (Scherr 2008:49). But the media are also considered as important factors in political engagement. The degree to which an adolescent comprehends the political world also influences political engagement. The media are quite important for providing information on the political system, which in turn has the potential to stimulate or abort political engagement.

Certainly, political socialization is structured in two complementary phases. In the first phase, the child perceives and assumes her position in the world and society, as well as their main features. In the secondary phase, adults internalize institutions, rules, habits and norms from social and political contexts (Berger and Luckmann 1967). The first phase was initially the only one that stimulated the imagination of researchers. The main hypothesis was that, just like personality, political attitudes appear during childhood. Two additional assumptions accompanied that belief: that attitudes were hierarchically organized in such a way that those acquired earliest conditioned those that appeared later (primacy principle); and that they were extremely resistant to change (Markus 1979, Searing et al. 1973). Family (mainly parents) is considered the main socialization agent (e.g. Hyman 1959), fostering civic attitudes by means of promoting self-confidence (Mondak and Halperin 2008), or providing children with some behavioural roles in the public arena. The peer group was also considered a likely cause of civic orientations (Langton 1967, Tedin 1980), and its influence has been proved to be relevant enough to affect people beyond school and childhood.

However, is everybody equally likely to take part in or to be influenced by these kinds of discussions or active dynamics in their adult life? Probably, those accustomed to discussing political matters since childhood will be more prone to be involved in and to be receptive to

such conversations in later stages of life. Political engagement arises early in life, but does it remain immutable?

We can assume that the reception of political stimuli and political discussion are the main mechanisms of socialization with regard to attitude development. According to the cognitive mobilization theory, discussion entails a process of attitude learning (Dalton 2006, Dalton 2008) which differs from the attitude transmission defended by early studies of socialization. By means of arguments, exposure and rational discussion, new information and opinions come into contact with the individual, so attitudes are generated or re-evaluated in the light of these new political stimuli. Political discussion also improves an individual's perception of herself as a political actor, since someone has concluded the citizen is intelligent enough to understand political arguments, which would lead to the development of new attitudes towards the issue discussed (EUYOUPART 2005, Galston 2003, Torney-Purta 2002a).

So far, political socialization studies have not compared the effect of different agents of socialization. When assessing the improvements suggested in the field, we must address the subject of the agents that play a role in the political socialization process vis à vis each other and not strictly separately. Future research needs to integrate the effect of the full range of agents.

If an individual is exposed early to political arguments, if her critical sense is stimulated during her childhood, she will be more likely to repeat this behavior later than those who have yet to acquire this prior basis. In a similar way, citizens accustomed to politicized relationships since they were children will be more likely to choose politicized friends later. The argument with regard to the family background is that the more people know about politics, the greater faith they express in the system and the more social capital they will have. But the family background is also important to the motivation and ability to learn about politics, political behaviour and the democratic rules in school.

To evaluate the role of the several agents of political socialisation, the relation between them and political engagement as well as political participation will be discussed in relation to the following hypotheses:

I) Both phases of political socialization are useful to explain individual differences in subjective political engagement. However, the first phase of socialization will show a greater predictive power.

II) According to the hypotheses of persistence and crystallization, the effect of variables relating to primary socialization should be stronger than that of variables measuring secondary socialization.

III) Active political socialization fosters political engagement and therefore also affects political participation as such.

IV) But as the psychological process of political engagement only constitutes an evolutionary process, political socialization will also affect political participation. .

Data and operationalization¹

The data are taken from the Austrian sample in the ICC study on civic and citizenship education. The ICCS is a multi-country study which was conducted in 32 countries (mainly European and southern American countries, but also some Asian countries).²

¹ The description of the data is based on documents regarding the ICC study. These documents will be published early 2011.

² More information on the research framework could be found here:
<http://iccs.acer.edu.au/uploads/ICCS%20Assessment%20Framework/ICCS%202008%20Full.pdf>

The data set contains enough questions to build indicators on the effect of the main socialization agencies. Most of the indicators are already present in the data set in a form of a scale. Others will be built during the course of the analysis by building latent structures using the Mplus program.³

Political engagement, which combines a set of psychological orientations, has been defined in the literature by using political interest and internal political efficacy as minimal common denominators (Verba et al. 1995). Both concepts are present in the data set.

The survey included a list of specific items covering students' interest in a broad range of different political and social issues⁴:

- Political issues within student's local community;
- Political issues in student's country;
- Social issues in student's country;
- Politics in other countries;
- International politics.

Furthermore, to become politically involved people have to believe that they have the capacity to do so. The general construct of political efficacy thus reflects whether an individual believes that political and social change is possible. In the ICCS several items were used to measure internal political efficacy⁵:

- I know more about politics than most people my age;
- When political issues or problems are being discussed, I usually have something to say;
- I am able to understand most political issues easily;
- I have political opinions worth listening to;
- As an adult I will be able to take part in politics; and
- I have a good understanding of the political issues facing this country.

In the ICCS, which was conducted in a school environment, the notion focused on students' self-reported confidence to undertake specific tasks in the area of (more general) civic participation. The seven items used to measure citizenship self-efficacy were⁶:

- Discuss a newspaper article about a conflict between countries;
- Argue your point of view about a controversial political or social issue;
- Stand as a candidate in a school election;
- Organize a group of students in order to achieve changes at school;
- Follow a television debate about a controversial issue;
- Write a letter to a newspaper giving your view on a current issue;
- Speak in front of your class about a social or political issue.

Political socialization

The different aspects of political socialization are distinguished into parental influences, school influences, media influences and more objective measures of the background of a student. First of all, the major source of socialization is the family. The literature identifies home orientations as an important variable potentially influencing civic learning outcome, particularly with respect to students' interest in political and social issues.

The family domain is directly and indirectly influenced by parents. The direct influences evolve through discussions about politics, which are regarded as a key element in democratic society. In general, participation in political discussions with peers and parents proved to be a more influential predictor than civic knowledge. The role of political discussion is seen as a predictor of both feelings of efficacy and expected participation. Furthermore, the behaviour of parents also seems to be important, as activities in the political domain influence other people to follow the same track. On the other hand, political interest and activities are in some way

³ In order to use the correct weighting for the data, Mplus rather than Amos or Lisrel was used to estimate the effects. Mplus is able to handle cluster and replicate weights.

⁴ The scale measuring students' interest in political and social issues had a high reliability of 0.86. The scale is calibrated for equally weighted national samples.

⁵ The set of six items a highly reliable scale, with consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of 0.84.

⁶ The scale derived from this set of seven items was highly reliable, with an average internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of 0.82 for the combined database

related to each other, even if this is not a causal relationship and the direction of the relationship remains unclear. Students were asked how often they discussed political and social issues with parents and with friends and how often they discussed events in other countries with parents and friends. Discussion with parents can be seen as part of the family context, because this context includes parental disposition to talk to their children about these issues (parents). The students were also asked, whether their parents are interested in politics (parent).

As stated above, the media are recognized as important source of secondary socialization. Research on the effects of media on participation in a democratic society is inconclusive. However, research also (usually) shows positive associations between media use (in particular for seeking information) and political participation. Norris (2000), for example, concludes from an extensive literature review as well as findings from a large-scale study that there is no conclusive evidence for a negative relationship between media use and political participation. The ICCS survey included questions about the frequency of watching television and reading the newspaper to find information about national and international news (media). We must also be aware that the consumption of TV and newspapers is itself influenced by parents, as normally the parents decide which programmes and newspapers are available to children in a household.

The role of school cannot be limited to providing information on political institutions, systems and other aspects of a society. Schools are smaller units of a society and should establish the values which dominate the wider society. Therefore the role of schools is to establish an environment which helps to foster learning of political principles in general. The concept "independence of opinion" was used to measure the influence of schools in establishing a positive atmosphere and in providing students with opportunities to discuss issues in school. Discussions in schools are different from discussions with parents, especially as the context differs considerably.

In the ICCS the following questions regarding the frequency of discussions were asked:

- Teachers encourage students to make up their own minds;
- Teachers encourage students to express their own opinions;
- Students bring up current political events for discussion in class;
- Students express opinions in class even when their opinions are different from those of most of the other students;
- Teachers encourage students to discuss the issues with people who have different opinions;
- Teachers present several sides of the issue when explaining them in class.

Political participation

For an adolescent the opportunities for active participation are rather limited. However, some studies (Verba et al. 1995) emphasize the links between adolescent participation and later involvement as adult citizens. On the other hand, rather large numbers of students participated in voluntary activities such as collecting money or volunteering within an organization dedicated to helping people in the community (Torney-Purta 2002a, Torney-Purta 2002b). As adolescents are generally not able to participate in formal activities in the same ways adult citizens can (e.g., through voting or standing for election), they are restricted to their environment. But they also may experiment to determine what power they have to influence how their schools are run, and in doing so may develop a sense of efficacy (Bandura 1997). Democratic practices in schools can provide students with a means of ascertaining the usefulness of political action. The opportunity to value participation in the school environment has the potential to influence students' beliefs about the value of engaging in the democratic system in later adult life. *Participation in civic activities in and out of school* reflects student involvement in collective civic engagement that is either not part of the formal learning context or only weakly related to education.

We find two measurements of current participation in the ICCS data set, one related to participation in the wider community and one restricted to opportunities within the school. Participation in the wider community was measured by using the following items:

- Youth organization affiliated with a political party or union;
- Environmental organizations;
- Human rights organizations;

- A voluntary group doing something to help the community;
- An organization collecting money for a social cause;
- A cultural organization based on ethnicity;
- A group of young people campaigning for an issue.

Participation in school is measured by using the following items:

- Voluntary participation in school-based music or drama activities outside of regular lessons
- Active participation in a debate
- Voting for class representatives or school representatives
- Taking part in decision-making about how the school is run
- Taking part in decisions at a student assembly
- Becoming a candidate for class representative or school parliament.

The following table shows the variables and scales used.

Table 1 Operationalisation

| PHASE | AGENCY | Scale | Measurement QUESTION |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|---|---|
| <i>Political engagement</i> | Individual | <i>Intpols</i> <i>Scpol</i> <i>Citeff</i> | Interest in politics Self-concept in politics Citizenship self-efficacy |
| <i>Primary socialization</i> | Family | <i>Parents</i> <i>Parint</i> | Political interest of parents Political discussions with parents Possibility of political discussions |
| <i>Secondary socialization</i> | School Media | <i>School</i> <i>Media</i> | Political discussions in school Students' media use |
| <i>Political Participation</i> | Individual | <i>Community</i> <i>School</i> | Participation in the community Participation in school |

Modeling and results

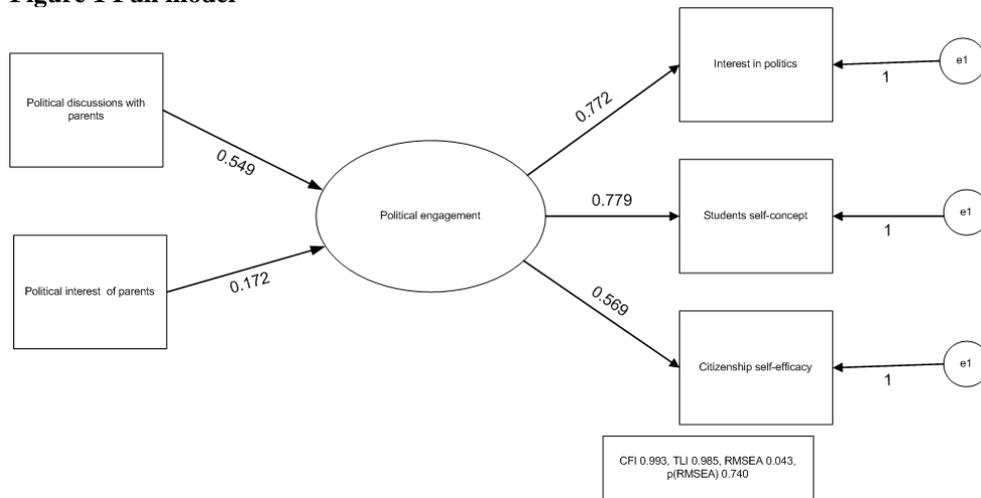
To start with we test the theoretical model of explaining political engagement by factors considered as primary socialization. Political engagement is constructed as a latent variable based on the three concepts of political interest, the student's self-concept and the student's citizenship self-efficacy.⁷

The first figure represents a model that tests the mechanism for childhood-based socialization, while the second includes only processes which take place afterwards. The first phase of socialization is defined by the influence of the family. In order to assess the role of the family we will use the frequency of discussions about political issues between students and their parents and the political interest of the parents. The first model indicates that

⁷ The following models are elaborated based on the Austrian ICCS data set. The data set contains different weighting corrections, as the students were selected in classrooms and classrooms within schools. The schools have been sampled according to the educational characteristics, the size of schools and regional characteristics. For the moment those data are not available for a wider public.

“discussions with parents” have a much stronger effect on the level of civic engagement than the political interest of parents does.

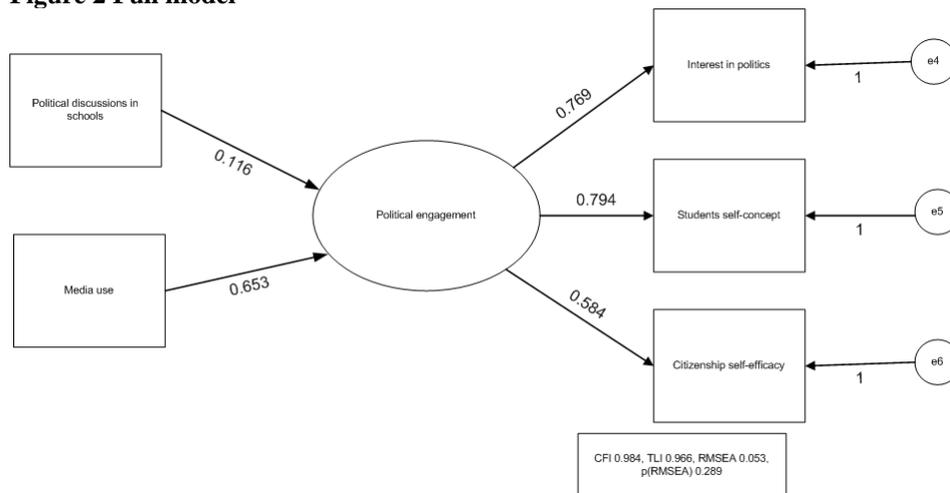
Figure 1 Full model⁸



Secondly, we will construct the same structure by using concepts measuring the second phase of socialization.

In this second model, media use has a rather strong effect on political engagement, whereas the political discussions in schools have a rather limited effect.

Figure 2 Full model⁹



In general the model does not show the same good fit statistics as the previous one, but indicates a quite significant effect of media use on political engagement.

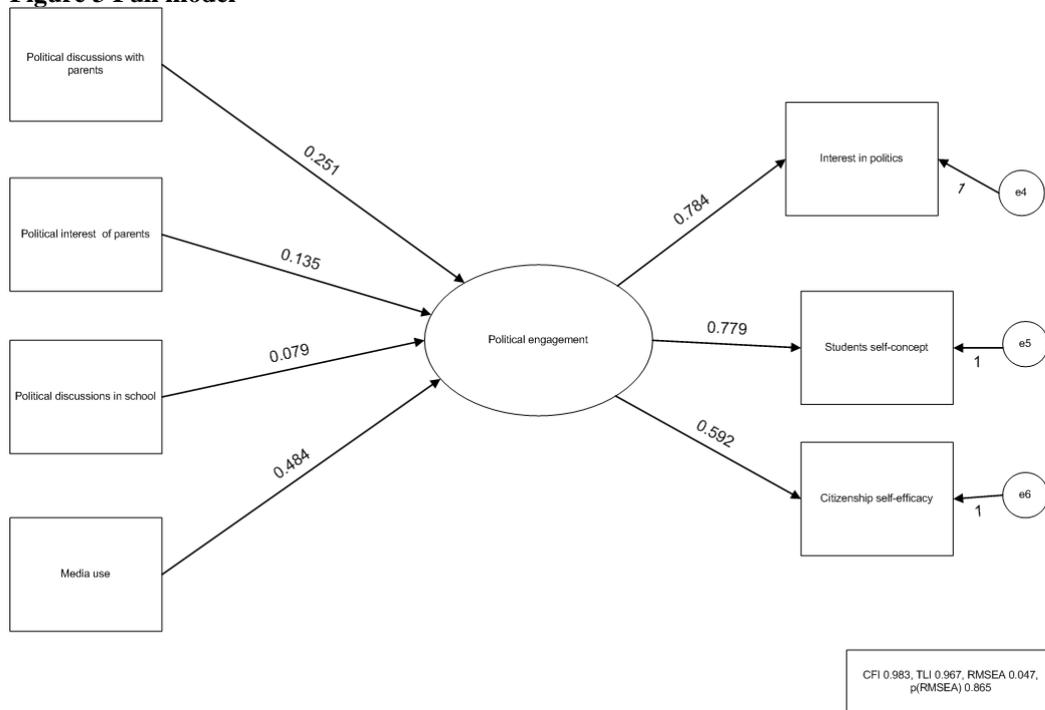
The third figure represents the mixing of both models. It is not intended to combine their explicative power, but to demonstrate that both phases coexist in an explanatory integrated model of political engagement, and that both hold a dependency relation so that attitudes acquired early in life do constitute a sort of “constant” or a stable starting point for political orientations. The effects of the socialization variables become smaller, but the previously dominant factors remain important. Political discussions with parents as well as media use show rather strong effects on political engagement. While the political interest of parents records almost the same effect as in the primary socialization model, the school variable declines to a minimal effect on political engagement.

⁸ The model is not based on the weighting to correct for the nested sampling design.

⁹ The model is not based on the weighting to correct for the nested sampling design.

The two separate models indicate that primary as well as secondary socialization has an effect on political engagement as such. The political engagement of students seem to be influenced by several sources of socialization, in particular from discussions with parents and media consumption, which is also to some extent related to the family background, as adolescents consume those media which are available at home.

Figure 3 Full model¹⁰



The degree of variance in civic engagement explained by measurements of primary socialization should be larger than the percentage explained by measurements representing the second phase of socialization, if the second hypothesis is correct. But the model clearly indicates that agents from the second phases of socialization also explain a certain degree of variance in civic engagement.

Last but not least we will assess the influence of civic engagement on political participation. The full model will include civic engagement, but also the different measurements of socialization. We include the variables on socialization to answer the third and fourth hypotheses, that we find a strong effect of political engagement on political participation, but also direct and indirect effects between political socialization and participation.

To test the third and fourth hypotheses, the influence of political socialization and political engagement on political participation, the overall model 3 is used to explain the political participation of students in the community and a separate model to explain their political participation in schools. The results, displayed in figures 4 and 5, show quite significant differences for the two aspects of political participation.

First, in both models we can find the assumed relationship between political engagement and political participation. But whereas the relationship appears quite strong in the school participation model, it can only explain a smaller amount of the variance for participating in the community. Furthermore, in both cases the direct effect of political engagement on political participation is stronger than the direct effects from political socialization. It's also interesting that the coefficients for the relation of the measurements of political engagement (pol. interest, self-concept, self-efficacy) are not related to the dependent variable participation.

¹⁰ Weighted according to the complex sampling design.

Figure 4 Full model¹¹

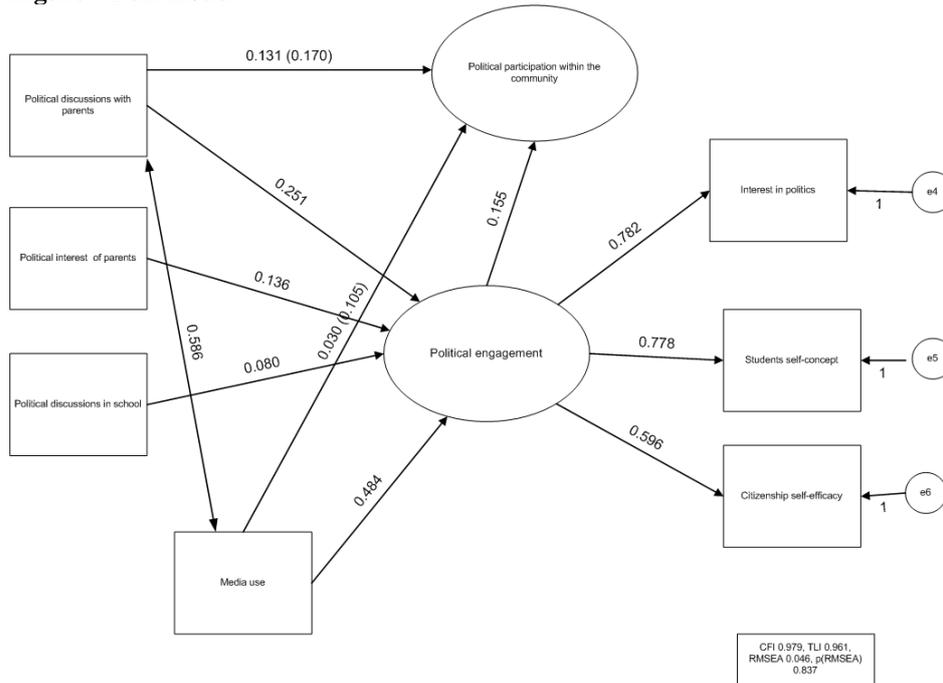
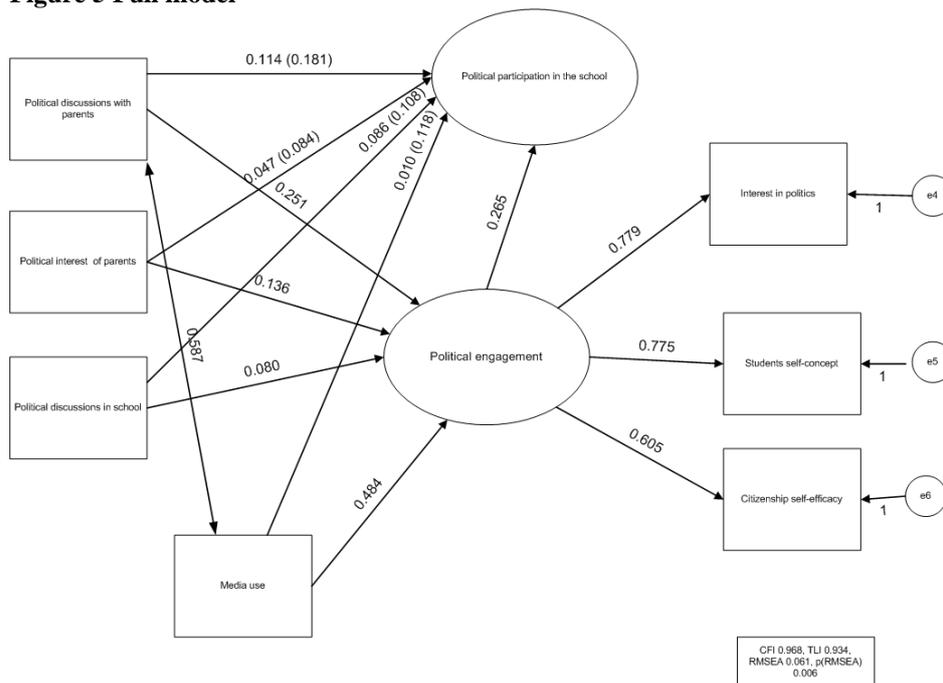


Figure 5 Full model¹²



But, when we take a second look at indirect effects, we can see that discussions with parents show quite strong effects in both models. In the model for political participation in the community the total effect is even the strongest on participation.

Even if the model for political participation in schools is not perfectly fitted to the data, we can see quite important indirect effects from all sources of socialisation on political participation. For participating in the wider community, only the media is indirect related to participation.

¹¹ Weighted according to the complex sampling design.

¹² Weighted according to the complex sampling design.

The second important observation is related to frequent media use. There is a strong relation between parental discussions with students and media use. But whereas media use does not show a direct or indirect effect in the model for community participation, it appears indirectly influential on participation in school decision-making.

Discussion

This analysis seeks to evaluate the roles of different agents of political socialization in political engagement on the one hand and political participation on the other. The whole analysis is based on the theoretical assumption that socialization effects associated with families and friends are quite important for political engagement and political participation. Furthermore, the theoretical discussions indicate that agents such as media and schools should be considered as a second important source of political participation, as adolescents spend more time in schools than they actually spend with their families. Additionally, political engagement should to a certain extent function as a mediation variable for political socialisation on political participation.

It appears that all the agents of political socialization considered are important in the development of the political engagement of students. A third merged model indicates that the primary socialization model is more influential the second phase of socialization by media and schools, as the influence of parents appears rather dominant.

The coherence of the parameters and the goodness of fit statistics indicate that we must not ignore what happens in the second phase, but that it needs to be complemented with previous experiences. Furthermore, and given the fact the respondents are quite young, it should not be suggested that early habits of political engagement may not change during life. An early tendency to become politically engaged appears, while someone showing a total lack of political stimuli during her childhood can, eventually, become involved in politics. After all, the argument of primary socialization appears quite clearly to be the most important explanatory factor of political engagement.

The dependency relation between political participation on the one hand and political engagement on the other has turned out to be significant too, confirming the third hypothesis. We can also find direct and indirect effects from political socialization on political participation, as assumed in hypothesis four. This finding suggests a plausible interaction effect between political context and socialization. The extent of the influence (family and mass media) might depend on the political contexts in which they are embedded. The indirect effects of the different socialisation agents can also be understood in a way of support of the argument, that political socialisation has an effect on political participation but foremost by a filter of a already developed political motives, present awareness and probably positive experiences with decision making processes. There is a strong interdependence of political engagement and political socialisation. Especially the role of the primary socialisation becomes even more important, if an individual establishes a certain level of engagement.

Of course, further analyses are needed to extend these findings, while digging deeper in the data; probably, political knowledge should be included in the model. Furthermore, more emphasis should be given to social contexts (different schools, social status of the family etc), to confirm that the detailed individual socialization processes always lead to political engagement. The ICCS data set offers huge opportunities for testing socializing effects across countries and in different contexts. This will help us to evaluate the parallel effects of the traditional socialization agencies (family, school, peers).

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