

4.2 Political Socialization

Explain how cultural factors influence political attitudes and socialization.

Learning to think politically is a process known as political socialization. The transmission of political culture and attitudes is best explained by looking at a number of attenuating factors. According to most political scientists, demographics jumpstart our engagement in the political process. Certain demographic characteristics have a profound influence on our political attitudes. They are gender, age, religion, race, education, occupation, economic status and region. Together, along with parental influences, we have a seemingly inherent political bent. These political dispositions align to certain labels used in our democratic system to simplify and organize the citizenry. Political scientists have traditionally used a political spectrum to simplify and provide clarity to the consequences of our civic opinions.

The left side of the political spectrum is reserved for liberals. The Democratic Party represents liberals in our government. Liberals tend to look forward. Rather than relying upon old ideas, they favor policy experimentation. This attitude affects their values. They oppose government intervention when it comes to private choices. For instance, liberals push the Democratic Party to maintain a women's right to choose an abortion. Liberals do, however, advocate government intervention when it comes to the economy. Often liberal Democrats are characterized as "the tax and spend" party. Democrats favor policies that redistribute wealth across the economic base. On the left side of the political spectrum you find liberals who are supported by the Democratic Party.

The right side of the political spectrum is reserved for conservatives. The Republican Party represents conservatives in our government. Conservatives tend to look back. They are fond of the glory days of the past. Conservatives tend to hold traditional moral values. They approve of government intervention when upholding these values. For instance, conservatives push the Republican Party to advocate against abortion, drug use and sexual promiscuity. They do not, however, welcome government interference in private business affairs. Conservatives speak loudly about market forces and the free flow of capital. Republican policies support small business and lower taxes. On the right side of the political spectrum you find conservatives who are supported by the Republican Party.

Family, more than anything else, influences our politics. Yet political scientists point to certain demographics that impact our political beliefs, values and norms. Here is what political science tells us about the influence of these demographics:

Gender: Men tend to be more conservative and therefore supporters of the Republican Party. Women, on the other hand, are more liberal and side with Democrats.

Age: The rule of thumb here is the older you are the more likely you are to be conservative.

Religion: Few demographic characteristics are as telling as this. Citizens who faithfully practice their religion tend to be more conservative. Protestantism is the most conservative religion. Base Republicans tend to be active Protestants. Often labeled "The Conservative Right," these faithful Republican voters are called evangelicals. Catholics, despite their conservative views on social issues, lean left on the political spectrum. Slim majorities of Catholics still vote for the Democratic Party. Jews historically have overwhelmingly supported liberal Democrats. The irreligious, those with no religious affiliation, can be found on the left side of the spectrum with other Democrats.

Race: Caucasians as a group are most often found on the right side of the political spectrum. African-Americans are the most reliable sub-group on the left. Ninety percent of all African-Americans vote Democratic. Pacific Rim citizens, due to their religious and family traditions, tend to the right and the Republican Party.

Education: The more educated you are the more likely you are to be conservative. The one exception would be those citizens holding graduate degrees. Statistically college graduates narrowly vote Republican. Those with less education narrowly vote Democratic.

Occupation: Education influences this demographic characteristic more than any other. Those occupations requiring more education tend to lean more to the conservative side. White-collar jobs lean Republican while blue-collar jobs tend to be more Democratic. This means labor unions, a smaller and smaller percentage of our total workforce, are reliable voters on the left.

Economic status: The Republican Party and its values tend to appeal to the middle class. The Democratic Party champions lower classes. The wealthy are more split in their political allegiances. Determining the political persuasion of the wealthy depends upon other leading demographic ingredients.

Region: Democrats do better in urban environments while Republicans win more in suburban and rural areas. Liberal Democrats dominate the Northeast. The South is SOLIDLY conservative and Republican. The West coast now leans strongly liberal though the Plains are clearly conservative. Many of the fiercest political battleground states now reside in the Midwest.

But what if certain demographic characteristics contradict each other? For instance, where on the spectrum would I be if my religion pushed me right but my race pushed me left? These demographic tensions are called crosscutting cleavages. There are no easy rules when it comes to reconciling cross cutting cleavages on the political spectrum. Certain demographic characteristics, however, have greater influence. These would be religion, race and education. Crosscutting cleavages remind us that labels can help us understand our politics but they are not absolutely determinative. In the end your political views are a by-product not only of demographic characteristics but life experiences that are truly unique. It has been said that zip code is destiny. Though not completely accurate it is a helpful starting point when trying to understand American government and politics.

Many today write about the influence of globalization, Thomas Friedman and Joseph Stiglitz are but two patron saints in this growing field of study. Though many varying and differing conclusions can be drawn from these studies, one thing is clearly evident. American political, social and cultural values have spread globally with both positive and negative results.

Thomas Friedman has best described the roots of this globalization:

Today's era of globalization, which replaced the Cold War, is a similar international system, with its own unique attributes.

To begin with, the globalization system, unlike the Cold War system, is not static, but a dynamic ongoing process: globalization involves the inexorable integration of markets, nation-states and technologies to a degree never witnessed before—in a way that is enabling individuals, corporations and nation-states to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper and cheaper than ever before, and in a

way that is also producing a powerful backlash from those brutalized or left behind by this new system.

The driving idea behind globalization is free-market capitalism—the more you let market forces rule and the more you open your economy to free trade and competition, the more efficient and flourishing your economy will be.

Globalization means the spread of free-market capitalism to virtually every country in the world. Globalization also has its own set of economic rules—rules that revolve around opening, deregulating and privatizing your economy.

Unlike the Cold War system, globalization has its own dominant culture, which is why it tends to be homogenizing. In previous eras this sort of cultural homogenization happened on a regional scale—the Hellenization of the Near East and the Mediterranean world under the Greeks, the Turkification of Central Asia, North Africa, Europe and the Middle East by the Ottomans, or the Russification of Eastern and Central Europe and parts of Eurasia under the Soviets. Culturally speaking, globalization is largely, though not entirely, the spread of Americanization—from Big Macs to iMacs to Mickey Mouse—on a global scale.

Globalization has its own defining technologies: computerization, miniaturization, digitization, satellite communications, fiber optics and the Internet. And these technologies helped to create the defining perspective of globalization. If the defining perspective of the Cold War world was "division," the defining perspective of globalization is "integration." The symbol of the Cold War system was a wall, which divided everyone. The symbol of the globalization system is a World Wide Web, which unites everyone. The defining document of the Cold War system was "The Treaty." The defining document of the globalization system is "The Deal."

This globalization has transformed our world in ways we are still trying to figure out. Forces have been unleashed that carry far reaching consequences. Positively the world has grown smaller. Democratic ideals have spread. Equal justice for all is not merely a novelty of the West anymore. Religious toleration is challenging age-old authority structures across the planet. Gender issues are being raised far and wide. Environmental concerns now unite us. Millions are being raised out of poverty and joining the largest middle-class ever to be seen. Communication, collaboration and innovation are being shared with unprecedented speed. Conformity to pop culture is now available to the 1 in 5 in the world holding a smart phone. You can now super-size your fries in virtually every city of the world. Globalization, or Americanization as some prefer, has changed the relationship of all 21st century people groups. Yet for some this has not been all positive. Indeed, it is not.

Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher nicknamed globalization TINA, "There Is No Alternative." That may be but the forces of globalization have also unleashed new and perilous tensions that pose insoluble questions both at home and abroad. Certain authoritarian regimes have chosen to fight back. Regional wars now litter the planet. Potent acts of terrorism paralyze freedom of thought and movement. Immigrants, refugees and other displaced people carry with them new beliefs, values and norms. Assimilating internationals have challenged regional governments in ways never before seen. American hegemony, although advanced by globalization, has also been challenged in new ways.

So too has globalization brought challenge here at home. The civil religion of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants that characterized much of American history is being challenged by new ethnic and generational attitudes brought about by globalization. American broad shoulders now feel the weight of new and diverse value systems. Immigration has become an issue that perplexes the better angels of our nature. American political, social and cultural values have been extended due to 21st century globalization. At both home and abroad this has seen positive and negative results.

Political socialization is our civic classroom. The way we think politically is kin to making that morning smoothie. Our core political beliefs, values and norms are a combination of a number of ingredients. Certain attitudes appear to be inherent to us all. Yet our unique demographics, life experiences and generational attitudes combine to flavor our political sentiments. Globalization as well has both influenced and been influenced by our political ideals. Political socialization helps us not only explain where we fall on the political spectrum but also whom we side with in that next upcoming election.