

## EVENT-DRIVEN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND THE PREADULT SOCIALIZATION OF PARTISANSHIP

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**This study investigates political communication as a mediator of the socializing effects of major political events. We earlier found that presidential campaigns are occasions for increased crystallization of partisan attitudes among adolescents (Sears and Valentino, 1997). But what drives the socialization process during the campaign? Either the campaign saturates the media environment with political information, socializing all adolescents roughly equally, or greater *individual* exposure to political information is necessary for significant socialization gains during the campaign. The analyses utilize a three-wave panel study of preadults and their parents during and after the 1980 presidential campaign. Here we find that adolescents exposed to higher levels of political communication experience the largest socialization gains, that the socializing effects of political communication are limited to the campaign season, and that communication boosts socialization only in attitude domains most relevant to the campaign. We conclude that both a high salience event at the aggregate level and high individual levels of communication about the event are necessary to maximize socialization gains.**

The extensive research on political socialization published in the 1960s and 1970s developed the view that political attitudes were acquired at an early age, persisted into adulthood, and had a major influence over adult behavior. Acquisition of national loyalties, generalized support for governmental authority, and partisan attachments were among the attitudes thought to follow this pattern (Campbell et al., 1960; Easton and Dennis, 1969; Greenstein, 1965; Hess and Torney, 1967; Hyman, 1959; Sears, 1975).

This view was later questioned in two ways. First, it was easy enough to demonstrate that many preadolescent children would express political opin-

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ions. But it was risky to infer that such preadult attitudes were really meaningful, or that they were sufficiently stable and powerful to affect behavior later in life. The lack of convincing direct evidence for these two inferences precipitated a backlash, with some arguing that preadult political opinions merely reflected inconsequential and transitory "nonattitudes" (Vaillancourt, 1973; Marsh, 1971; Searing et al., 1976; see Sears, 1989, for a review). Second, an alternate view emerged from rational choice models of political behavior, challenging the notion that adults were as unresponsive to current political realities as the theory implied. Downs (1957) and Key (1966) contended that individual preferences should continually respond to pressures in the political environment that affect material or psychic utilities throughout adulthood.

However, reasons for renewed attention to the origins of long-term stable political attitudes have come from several quarters in recent years. Several longitudinal studies have revealed impressive stability in basic partisan attitudes over several decades (Alwin et al., 1991; Green and Palmquist, 1994; Jennings and Markus, 1984; Sears and Funk, 1990). Some current approaches to political information processing focus on the assimilation of new information to prior predispositions (Lodge et al., 1989; Zaller, 1992). The dominant models of mass media effects emphasize agenda-setting, priming, and framing effects, all of which assume a potent role for standing predispositions (Iyengar, 1991; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995; Kinder and Sanders, 1990). Theories of partisan "issue ownership" posit longstanding reputations about the major parties' competence for dealing with particular issues (Petrocik, 1996). Finally, worldwide surges in ethnic conflict have refocused attention on longstanding racial and ethnic attitudes, which are usually attributed to preadult socialization (Aboud, 1998; Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Horowitz, 1985; Kinder and Sanders, 1996; Sears et al., 1997).

#### EVENT-DRIVEN COMMUNICATION AND PREADULT SOCIALIZATION

While recent work suggests the persistent effect of longstanding attachments on political behavior, we still lack any detailed theoretical understanding about the process of acquiring these attachments. In particular, socialization research has largely neglected to explore how environmental factors can affect the pace of adolescent attitude crystallization. And we also know little about the individual differences, including exposure to political communication, which may moderate those broader forces. Our goal, therefore, is to develop a theory of the socialization of political predispositions that incorporates real-world events and the kinds of communication they may stimulate.

Basic attitude theory suggests that people acquire well-informed, "real attitudes" through exposure to some substantial information flow, resulting in a

stable affective and cognitive mass with regard to the attitude object (Converse, 1962; Sears, 1983, 1993). Zaller (1992) has convincingly demonstrated that a strong information flow will align attitudes about new political objects with longstanding predispositions.

Such substantial information flow is most often triggered by salient external political events. Such events can potentially have two quite different effects. Most obviously, they can produce significant directional attitude *change*. This has often been demonstrated in children and adolescents, who have been shown to be quite responsive to dramatic political events or eras. For example, Iyengar (1976) found that adolescents from Indian states with recent violent political conflicts exhibited relatively high levels of partisan identification but relied less often on parental attachments, suggesting external agitation had served as an independent socializing agent. Departures from the "normal" socialization outcomes seem to occur most commonly when unusual political events intervene, such as in children's responses to unpopular presidents, wars, or assassinations. Events (or eras) such as the New Deal, the Vietnam War, and the Kennedy assassination seem to have left a powerful mark on the youths of their day (e.g., Centers, 1950; Elder, 1974; Markus, 1979; Wolfenstein and Kliman, 1965; see Sears, 1975).

Highly salient political events can also produce widespread attitude *crystallization* among adults, presumably because of the information flow they stimulate. For example, the Watts rioting of 1965 generated a structured and pervasive "riot ideology" among blacks in Los Angeles during the months thereafter, justifying the action as a racial protest against unfair treatment by government authority (Sears and McConahay, 1973). Similarly, one important effect of exposure to a presidential debate is increased "bonding" of partisan viewers' attitudes toward candidates, parties, and issues (Dennis et al., 1979).

Politics are usually of rather low visibility to preadults, generating low ambient levels of exposure to relevant communication. But if political events increase attitude crystallization in adults through heavier-than-normal information flows, they should be able to trigger large socialization gains among preadults as well. Communication triggered by political events may serve to crystallize preadults' predispositions, quite independent of whether or not it yields directional attitude changes.

In a previous study, we demonstrated that a presidential campaign produced substantial socialization of preadults' orientations toward the candidates and the parties, in terms of attitude crystallization, affective expression, and political knowledge (Sears and Valentino, 1997). These gains occurred only during the period of the campaign itself; there was little change during the politically quieter postcampaign year. The gains also occurred only in attitude domains directly relevant to the campaign, regarding the candidates and parties; there were few socialization gains regarding issues of low visi-

bility during the campaign. In short, a major political event increased the number of preadults with adultlike "true attitudes" toward attitude objects central to that event.

This research suggests that preadults develop meaningful attitudes when political events trigger intense information flows. However, it raises a further question: What drives the socialization gains we observed? One possibility is that the occurrence of the event was enough, by itself, to crystallize adolescent partisan attitudes. Perhaps if the information flow stimulated by a political event reaches some critical mass, all adolescents would be affected. On the other hand, even during such a high-salience event, the level of an adolescent's exposure to information about the event might be a crucial determinant of the extent of his or her socialization gains. In other words, a highly salient political event alone might be insufficient to produce the socialization gains we have previously observed. Maximum socialization may occur only among adolescents who are exposed to the most political communication about the event.

The present paper examines empirically the socializing effects of communication during political events. To do so, we require (1) a criterion for determining when political socialization has been successful; (2) a theory about how events might affect socialization; (3) a salient, temporally discrete political event that could plausibly have a socializing influence, plus a corresponding length of time without such an event. Let us take up these points in turn.

The simplest criterion for successful political socialization would equate it with having crystallized and informed "true attitudes" toward the important political objects of the day, rather than capricious or transitory "nonattitudes." In previous research, attitude crystallization has been indexed by (1) stable responses to a given object over time; (2) consistent responses over different items regarding a single attitude object at one point in time; and (3) consistent responses to related attitude objects at one time (Converse, 1964; Dennis et al., 1979; Sears, 1975; Sears and Valentino, 1997). A further possible stipulation would be that fully socialized individuals should hold the "right" attitudes (i.e., conform to the specific content of the family's views or the local culture's norms). Our main focus here is on the first three criteria, in which the direction of preferences is irrelevant to the question of whether socialization has been successful or not. We use this definition because choosing a standard for the acquisition of the "right" attitudes is often arbitrary in an environment with ever more diverse outlets for exposure to political viewpoints.

When should an event crystallize predispositions? In theory, when it generates a powerful information flow that gets through the preadult's normal wall of indifference to the world of politics, is concentrated in time, is affectively consistent, and is centered around some cognitively simple attitude objects

(Sears, 1983). In general, important political events focus communication on a narrow range of specific attitude objects and thus should socialize predispositions selectively toward those objects and not others. As a result, variation in information flow may be crucial both in the aggregate (high-intensity political events vs. more quiescent periods) and at the individual level (high vs. low levels of exposure to those events).

Many different historical events could serve as occasions for preadult political socialization. However, events that are both periodic and intensive are the best suited for research. Here we treat a presidential campaign as a prototypic case in point. National campaigns are among the most communication-intensive of ordinary political events. The mass media give them much publicity over the long primary and general campaign seasons, and they provoke considerable interpersonal communication as well. Moreover, the political information flow to ordinary citizens usually tends to drop off between campaign seasons.

Widespread exposure to presidential campaigns is typical; indeed, it would be difficult for any adolescent in America to avoid exposure to at least some information about the major candidates running for president. But preadults are likely to vary considerably in the amount of information received through opportunities to rehearse and defend political attitudes, in such settings as peer group discussions, dinner table conversations, civics lessons at school, and exposure to the mass media. We suggest that such variation will be significantly related to differences in attitude crystallization and knowledge. This reasoning leads to three specific hypotheses:

1. Socialization gains during the campaign should be greatest among those preadults who receive the most political communication.
2. The combination of an intensive external event and exposure to communication about it is the strongest stimulus to socialization. Therefore, communication should be more crucial during the period of the campaign than in the year thereafter.
3. Communication should produce socialization gains in the attitude domains most relevant to the campaign but not in domains that are peripheral to the campaign.

What kind of campaign-related communication is likely to be most effective in stimulating attitude crystallization? Most research suggests that interpersonal communication is the key funnel transmitting political information to adolescents during a campaign (Silbiger, 1977; Kraus and Davis, 1976). Like the notion of a two-step flow of political communication (Katz, 1957), the "interactional model" of socialization proposes that the news media provide raw political information, which fuels interpersonal discussions and in

turn stimulates attitude formation (Kuo, 1985; Atkin, 1972). Chaffee et al. (1995) also have indicated that interpersonal communication, including classroom discussions, in fact stimulates other types of political information seeking and therefore leads to still further exposure. The opportunity for crystallizing partisan attitudes may peak during times when salient political events occur, but without the presence of interpersonal communication the socialization process will be stunted.

We also explore a further question. Early work on political socialization supposed that partisanship was acquired mainly within the family. External events might therefore stimulate communication within the home and provide unique occasions for parental socialization of adolescents. On the other hand, partisanship may be responsive to a broader network of communication with, and appraisal of, the external political world. So here we explore the socializing influence of the family as well as the precursors of interpersonal communication more generally.

### SAMPLE

The study used in this analysis provided interviews with adolescents on three separate occasions over a two-year time span. Its key feature is the timing of the interviews. The first wave was completed in February 1980, before the local presidential primary. The second wave was completed immediately prior to the general election, in October of that same year. The third wave was completed a year later. This design allows a fairly precise test of the notion that political events can drive political socialization among adolescents, because any changes occurring during the campaign can be compared to those occurring during the quieter period thereafter.<sup>1</sup>

The data were collected via telephone survey with interviews in February of 1980, in October of that year, and one year later, in November of 1981.<sup>2</sup> At wave 1, random digit dialing was used to contact a random sample of about 100 Wisconsin preadults at each age level from 10 to 17. Interviews were conducted with one preadult, and then one parent was randomly selected in each household for a paired interview. As a result, the wave 1 interviews were conducted with a probability sample of 718 families, with a response rate of approximately 70%. Attrition brought the sample size down to 501 pairs in wave 2, and to 366 pairs in wave 3. The present analyses use the 366 adult-child pairs who were interviewed in all three waves.

Since the sampling universe for this panel study was restricted to Wisconsin families, the resulting sample cannot be considered representative of the national population. However, the final sample interviewed in all three waves does not differ dramatically from those in national surveys taken at a comparable time, except for the overrepresentation of females (57% were women,

presumably because they are more likely to be the head of single-family households) and the college educated (42% attended at least some college). For comparison, 54% had at least some college in the 1984 National Election Studies telephone survey (the rolling cross section), while 36% had some college in the standard 1980 NES pre-election face-to-face survey.<sup>3</sup>

## MEASUREMENT

Our criteria for successful political socialization include the crystallization of relevant attitudes and the acquisition of political knowledge. Campaign-induced socialization, therefore, should be seen in increased attitude crystallization and knowledge in relevant attitude domains from wave 1 to wave 2, and not from wave 2 to wave 3 or in more peripheral attitude domains. If communication is responsible for campaign-related socialization, communication and wave should interact: Adolescents high in communication should gain more during the campaign than those low in communication, but neither should increase much in the postcampaign period.

We indexed attitude crystallization in terms of the stability of responses to a given item over time, the consistency of responses over items regarding a given attitude object at one point in time, and the consistency of attitudes toward pairs of related, but conceptually distinct, attitude objects.

The most campaign-relevant attitude domains involved the candidates and major parties. Respondents reported how much they liked or disliked each of four leading presidential candidates (Carter, Reagan, Kennedy, and Bush), yielding an additive scale, with high scores corresponding to liking Democrats and disliking Republicans. An additive party identification scale combined the standard NES party identification item with a variant developed by Dennis (1986). To conserve space here, we analyze only one of the several available campaign-peripheral domains: racial attitudes.<sup>4</sup> Although race is a central political cleavage in the United States, racial issues were not strongly emphasized during the 1980 presidential campaign. Six items were added to form a racial attitude scale.

Political knowledge was operationalized using three scales: matching presidential candidates to their party affiliations, counting the number of partisan symbols correctly associated with one or the other party, and assigning parties to issue positions.<sup>5</sup>

Exposure to campaign-relevant communication was measured with four different scales: (1) a general measure of interpersonal discussion that captures exposure to the campaign via family, friends, schoolmates, and others ( $\alpha = .77$ ); (2) exposure to the campaign via family discussions about politics ( $\alpha = .68$ ); (3) exposure to politics via television news ( $\alpha = .60$ ); and (4) exposure to politics via newspapers ( $\alpha = .63$ ).<sup>6</sup> In each case,

a median split was used to divide the adolescents into high- and low-communication groups.

Campaign effects on attitude crystallization were assessed in two ways. We measured changes at the aggregate level. Attitude stability was indexed with test-retest correlations across waves: If the campaign crystallized partisan attitudes, wave 2 attitudes should be more stable than wave 1 attitudes had been, so wave 2 to wave 3 bivariate correlations should be higher than wave 1 to wave 2 correlations. Attitude consistency over items with similar political content was indexed within each wave with Cronbach alpha. Adolescents' increases in attitude stability and consistency should be greatest during the campaign and among those with higher levels of campaign-related communication.

Aggregate methods like these cannot be used to test the significance of individual gains in crystallization, especially the hypothesized interaction of wave and communication. Therefore, we calculated stability and consistency scores for each respondent. For attitude stability, the absolute differences of individual item responses across waves were summed across items (e.g., Did the child give the same response in waves 1 and 2 to Kennedy? To Carter? etc.).<sup>7</sup> For attitude consistency, we summed the absolute deviations of responses on each item from the individual's overall scale score (e.g., Did the child generally like Democratic candidates while disliking Republican candidates?). Analysis of variance models were used to test the statistical significance of socialization gains, with the key terms for testing our hypotheses being the interaction of wave of the study and level of communication. Note that the aggregate and individual analyses are statistically distinct methods of measuring attitude crystallization, so their results provide conceptual replications of our hypothesis tests.

## RESULTS

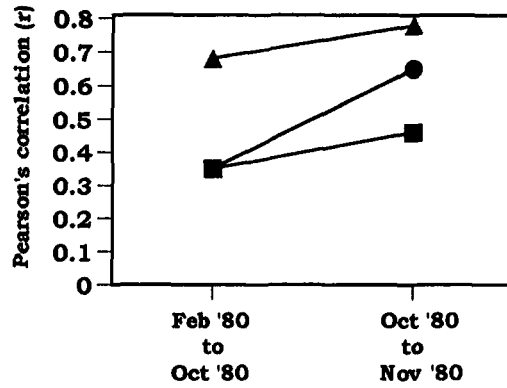
### Candidate Evaluations

The stability of preadults' candidate evaluations increased as a result of the campaign, as shown in Fig. 1A. As expected, interpersonal communication moderated these campaign gains. The stability coefficient for the high-communication group increased from .35 (wave 1 to wave 2) to .65 (wave 2 to wave 3). Those low in communication increased only from .35 to .46. Table 1 shows that this wave  $\times$  communication interaction is statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ).

The consistency of adolescents' candidate evaluations also increased more during the campaign than it did after the election. These socialization gains are shown in Fig. 1B. The wave 1 to wave 2 increases for adolescents were

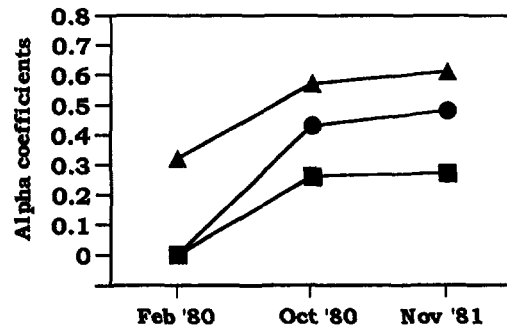


**A) Stability of partisanship  
in candidate evaluations**



▲ Adults  
● Adolescents: High interpersonal communication  
■ Adolescents: Low interpersonal communication

**B) Consistency of partisanship  
in candidate evaluations**



**FIG 1.** Interpersonal communication during the campaign crystallizes candidate evaluations.

**TABLE 1. Interpersonal Communication During the Campaign Moderates the Crystallization of Partisan Attitudes But Not the Acquisition of Partisan Knowledge**

Domains	Dependent Variables	Communication Main Effect	Wave 1 vs. Wave 2	Wave 2 vs. Wave 3	Communication X Wave 1 vs. Wave 2	Communication X Wave 2 vs. Wave 3
<i>Attitude Crystallization</i>						
Candidate Evaluations	Stability	.83	10.48***	NA	9.68**	NA
	Consistency	.31	11.37***	.53	3.52°	.35
Party Identification	Stability	.22	6.80**	NA	4.80**	NA
	Consistency	1.08	1.28	6.07**	2.08	1.50
Racial Attitudes	Party X Candidate Consistency	2.54	12.72***	4.54**	4.96**	.32
	Stability Consistency	5.87**	1.09	NA	.07	NA
Political Knowledge Candidates	Stability Consistency	.15	2.81°	(15.67)**	.39	1.88
	Candidate Knowledge	27.32***	127.41***	1.03	.01	.65
Parties	Issue Knowledge	7.60***	29.73***	40.46***	2.17	.94
	Symbols Knowledge	10.29***	19.05***	25.38***	3.54°	1.58

\* $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Note: All entries are  $F$  values for analyses of variance on individual difference scores for preadults. In the case of consistency scores, the first column contains  $F$  statistics for the communication main effect in the wave 1 vs. wave 2 comparison. As in the figures, the interpersonal communication scale was split at the median. Only the results in parentheses are in the direction opposite to prediction. All  $p$ -values were two-tailed tests computed on  $1/ >100$  degrees of freedom, because each panel interval was tested separately.

significant, whereas the wave 2 to wave 3 changes were not, as shown in Table 1, which presents the *F* statistics for each of the socialization indicators for adolescents. Communication also promoted larger gains in crystallization. Attitude consistency (the alpha coefficient) in the high-communication group increased from .00 to .43 during the campaign, while in the low-communication group it increased only from .00 to .26. The wave 1–wave 2  $\times$  communication interaction is marginally significant ( $p < .10$ ; see Table 1). These gains were specific to the campaign itself; during the year after the election little further gain occurred for either communication group. Neither the main effect of wave nor the interaction between wave and communication is statistically significant.

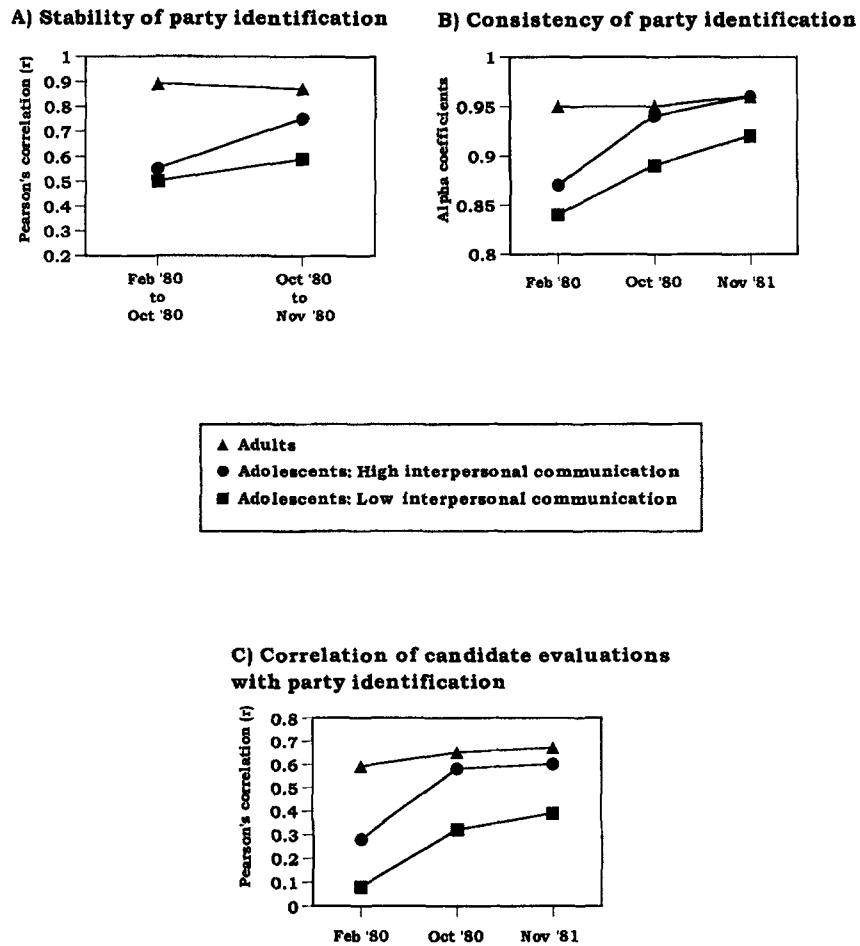
To summarize, the campaign produced significant gains in both the stability and consistency of adolescents' candidate evaluations. The postcampaign increases were smaller and nonsignificant. Interpersonal communication exhibits a clear moderating role on these campaign effects: Adolescents who more frequently discussed politics experienced significantly larger gains, even though they did not have any more crystallized attitudes at the beginning of the campaign (as indicated by the absence of any significant communication main effects).

### Party Identification

The campaign also helped to crystallize party identification, as shown in Fig. 2. The campaign generated large increases in the stability of adolescents' party identification and in its correlation with candidate evaluations. These wave 1 to wave 2 increases are all significant, as shown in Table 1. Adolescents' changes after the campaign were smaller, and adults showed few gains in either period.

Campaign-related communication was at least partly responsible for this campaign-based socialization of party identification, as hypothesized. The stability of party identification is the most appropriate test of our hypothesis and yields convincing support for it. The data in Figure 2A show that more communication clearly led to greater socialization. The correlation across waves increased from .55 to .75 for adolescents in the high-communication group, compared to an increase from .50 to .59 points in the low-communication group. The predicted wave  $\times$  communication interaction is statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ).

Adolescents with high levels of communication also experienced the largest gains in the internal consistency of their party identifications. Indeed, by the end of the campaign the high-communication youths had reached adult levels, as can be seen in Figure 2B. The postcampaign changes are smaller than those during the campaign for both communication groups. Though



**FIG. 2.** Interpersonal communication during the campaign crystallizes party identification.

these results support our hypothesis, the changes are small, and even the low-communication adolescents began the study with a very high level of party consistency. Indeed, the wave main effect during the campaign is not significant, and neither is the interaction between wave and communication, as shown in Table 1. Simply put, almost all respondents were able to answer two questions on party identification questions quite consistently during a half-hour interview, even before the campaign began. Not surprisingly, their ability to do so improved only slightly during the campaign.

There is a significant increase among the preadults during the campaign in

the consistency of candidate evaluations with party identification, as shown in Table 1 (in a significant wave 1—wave 2 main effect). And, in Figure we observe that those high in communication during the campaign aligned their candidate evaluations more closely with their party identification. The correlation between party identification and candidate evaluations increased from .28 to .58 for the high-communication group, virtually reaching adult levels just before the election. The increase was from .08 to .32 for the low-communication group during the campaign. The wave 1—wave 2 interaction with communication is again statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ). And, as expected, adolescents gain much less in the year following the campaign, and there is no wave 2—wave 3 interaction with communication.

The evidence presented thus far strongly supports Hypothesis 1, that socialization gains in attitude crystallization should be largest among adolescents with the most frequent exposure to the campaign via interpersonal communication. Hypothesis 2 is also supported: Communication increased attitude crystallization during, but not after, the campaign period.

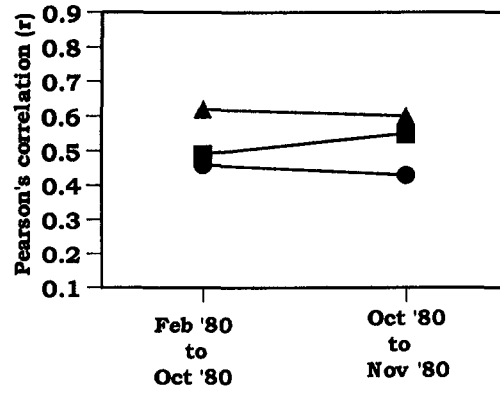
### Racial Attitudes

Hypothesis 3 is that the campaign's socializing effects should be limited to attitude domains that are highly salient during its course. Given the low salience of racial issues during the 1980 presidential campaign, we expect to find *no significant gains in the crystallization for racial attitudes*, regardless of communication levels. As expected, there is no sizable increase in stability, as displayed in Fig. 3A. There is a small but significant overall increase during the campaign in the case of consistency, but it actually declines just as much afterward, as shown in Fig. 3B. The results regarding communication do not follow any simple pattern either. Table 1 indicates that neither the wave main effect nor the wave  $\times$  communication interactions are significant. The data support Hypothesis 3, as well, then.

### Political Knowledge

If the campaign increased preadults' political knowledge, their mean information scores should have increased between wave 1 and wave 2 but not between wave 2 and wave 3. As shown in Fig. 4, the campaign did successfully increase preadults' knowledge on all three indicators, consistent with our hypothesis. These effects were statistically significant, as shown by the wave 1—wave 2 main effects in Table 1. However, adolescents showed further improvement during the year after the campaign. In both issue and party symbols knowledge, even larger increases continued into the post-campaign period, perhaps as a result of the major policy changes that followed Reagan's victory. Adults, on the other hand, began the campaign

**A) Stability of racial attitudes**



▲ Adults  
 ● Adolescents: High interpersonal communication  
 ■ Adolescents: Low interpersonal communication

**B) Consistency of racial attitudes**

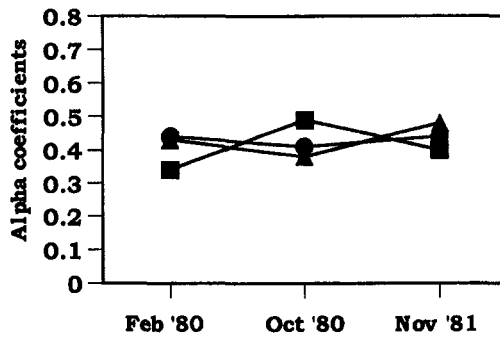


FIG. 3. No communication effects in campaign-irrelevant domains.

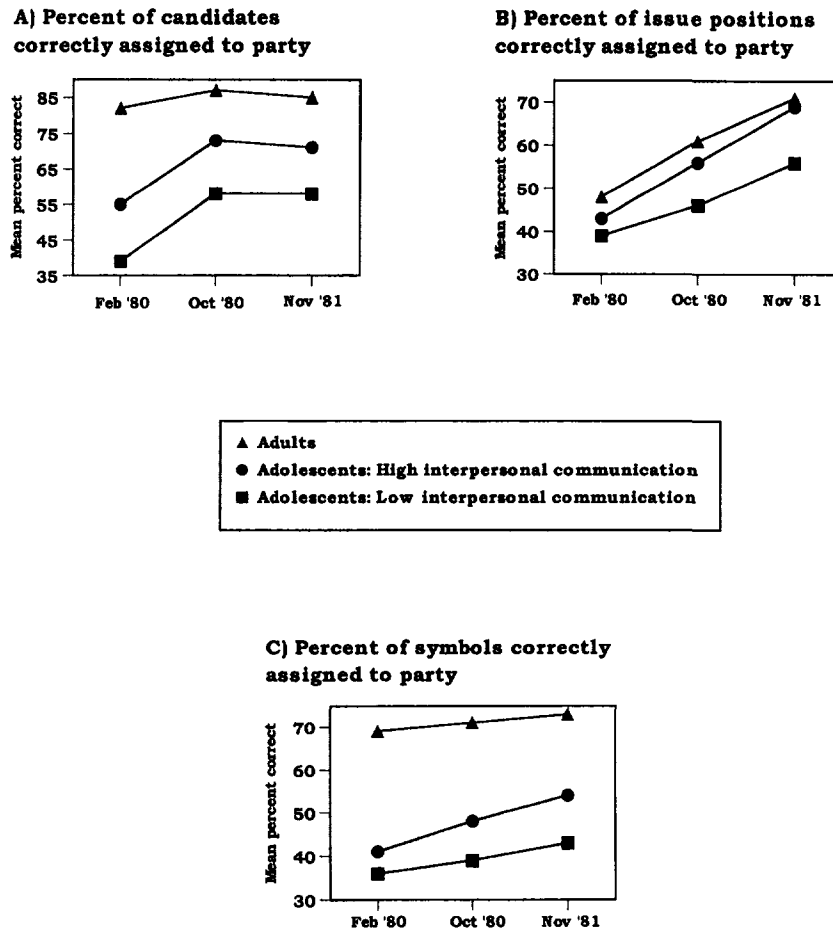


FIG. 4. Interpersonal communication and overall differences in partisan knowledge.

season with high levels of candidate and symbols knowledge and remained quite accurate over the 18 months of the study. These results are displayed in Fig. 4A.

Fig. 4 also displays the results separately for low versus high general interpersonal communication groups. The high-communication adolescents began with significantly more information than did their low-communication counterparts, and that difference continued throughout, as shown by the significant communication main effects on all three indicators in the first column of Table 1.

However, the wave  $\times$  communication interaction during the campaign, indicating greater gains for the high communication preadults, is marginally significant only for knowledge of political symbols. There was no interaction of wave  $\times$  communication during the postcampaign period for any of the three knowledge indices, indicating interpersonal discussion about politics no longer played a role after the campaign. Thus there is mixed support for the notion that political information is transmitted primarily during the campaign and that interpersonal communication is most important at that time.

### Other Communication Indicators

We repeated the analyses of both crystallization and knowledge using two measures of media communication instead of interpersonal communication. National television news viewing was moderate, with the median case falling at three days. Newspaper exposure was slightly less prevalent, with slightly more than 50% of adolescents claiming to read two times or less per week. In general, socialization gains did not vary much as a function of either television news viewing or newspaper readership.<sup>8</sup> In the case of television news, the communication  $\times$  wave 1–wave 2 interaction was nonsignificant for all of the measures of socialization presented in Table 1. For newspaper readership that interaction was significant only for consistency of party issue knowledge, but it was the low-communication group that gained more information during the campaign. After the campaign, the interaction for party issue knowledge was again significant, but in that period the high-communication group experienced the largest gains. Though it would be interesting to speculate about this unique finding, the overall pattern suggests minimal socialization effects as a direct result of either television viewing or newspaper readership.

These null findings with regard to the media consumption measures do not prove avenues for receiving information other than interpersonal communication are completely ineffective. They do, however, provide a stark contrast with the findings for interpersonal communication. If taken at face value, they suggest that interpersonal communication under a variety of circumstances and in a variety of environments, rather than passive media consumption, best facilitates attitude crystallization. The reliabilities of the media scales (.60 for television viewing and .63 for newspaper readership) are below that for the interpersonal communication scale (.77), but this difference is too small to suggest that relative advantage of interpersonal communication is simply an artifact of differential reliability.

Some scholars have recently challenged the field to develop better conceptualizations and operational measures of various communication channels in order to compare their relative strength in learning, persuasion, and socialization processes (Chaffee, 1982; Chaffee and Mutz, 1988). We make no claim to have adequately addressed this particular question: The mixed interval and



ordinal nature of our communication measures precludes such an exact comparison. However, the results of the most precise comparison to date (Kinsey and Chaffee, 1996) are quite consistent with our finding that interpersonal discussion is a critical channel for political socialization.

## THE FAMILY AND CAMPAIGN-RELEVANT COMMUNICATION

Much prior writing has emphasized the role of the family in preadult partisan socialization. We believe that portrait needs to be broadened to include a wider range of social interactions, which is why we have emphasized interpersonal communication up to this point. But a more intensive look at the family is warranted, given the emphasis placed upon it in the past.

### Familial Socialization

Previous research suggests that most partisan socialization occurs within the home as a result of parent-child interaction. Does the campaign simply facilitate a direct transfer of politically relevant attitudes from parent to child? If the campaign triggers socialization specifically by and within children's families, family communication should crystallize attitudes, and parent-child agreement should therefore increase. Alternatively, campaign-induced attitude crystallization may have important sources outside the family circle, such as among peers, in school, or through direct media influence, and therefore may not be solely responsive to family communication or even enhance family agreement very much. If so, this suggests a more broadly based socialization process, with the family simply being one of several venues for political socialization.

First, we tested whether communication within the family is more effective in producing socialization gains than interpersonal discussion more broadly conceived. To do so, we repeated the analyses above, replacing the interpersonal communication scale with the family communication scale mentioned previously. Family discussions about politics were fairly common, with 46% of children claiming to talk to their parents at least sometimes, and only 15% claiming never to talk about politics at home. The reliability of each scale was similar (.77 and .68, respectively), so different results are unlikely to reflect mere statistical artifacts.

Recall that general interpersonal communication produced significant interactions with the campaign period in five out of eight possible cases. However, the intrafamily communication scale failed to produce a significant communication  $\times$  wave 1-wave 2 interaction on any index of attitude crystallization or political knowledge. From this preliminary analysis, then, it seems that the communication vehicle for effective socialization about the campaign went beyond just the family.

Second, if parents are the key agents for partisan socialization, parent-child agreement should have increased with more intrafamilial communication during the campaign. To assess parent-child agreement, we correlated the adolescents' responses with those of their parents. Consistent with the family-centered, campaign-driven socialization hypothesis, the largest gain in this correlation for candidate evaluations occurred between wave 1 and wave 2. However, the correlation among the low interpersonal communication group increased just as much as it did for the high-communication group, rendering the interaction statistically insignificant. Moreover, the child-parent correlation of party identification neither increased much during the campaign period nor did it increase more in the high-communication group than in the low-communication group.

On balance, these findings do not yield much support for a family-centered interpretation of campaign-based socialization effects. The campaign is not merely an opportunity for parents to indoctrinate their children with their own preferences; the socialization process seems to occur more broadly than just in the family. Finally, though we found no strong evidence of it here, one must consider the possibility that communication in the family does not simply result in top-down socialization from parent to child. Parents might also be exposed to new information through discussions with their children, given the kinds of external influences that we have identified.

### Antecedents of Interpersonal Communication

How much interpersonal communication goes on between adolescents? According to this sample, a significant amount of political discussion takes place. At the time of the election, 57% of adolescents claim to discuss national politics at least sometimes. But if interpersonal communication is critical for producing campaign-based socialization, what are its determinants among adolescents? Again, the conventional wisdom is that discussions in the family setting are most central to the transmission of partisanship from parents to children (Campbell et al., 1960). Therefore a starting point in explaining the adolescent's level of interpersonal communication should be indicators of that intrafamily process, such as the parents' intrafamily political communication, parents' political knowledge, and parents' political activity. Table 2 displays the results of such a regression analysis.

Interpersonal political communication increases with age (coded raw, 10–17) during adolescence, as might be expected. But how important are the parents? Adolescents whose parents report high levels of family political communication are themselves more involved in interpersonal communication (beta = .24,  $p < .001$ ). Parents' political knowledge also has a significant effect (beta = .12,  $p < .01$ ).<sup>9</sup> Parents' political activity (including wearing a button for a candidate, attending a rally, or trying to convince someone to

**TABLE 2. Antecedents of Interpersonal Political Communication Among Adolescents: Regression Analysis**

Variable	<i>b</i>	SE <i>b</i>	Beta	<i>p</i> ≤
Child's age	.09	.02	.25	.01
Parents' family communication	.32	.06	.24	.01
Parents' political knowledge	.48	.20	.12	.01
Parents' political activity	.03	.03	.06	.25
Constant	-.45	.26		.09

$R^2 = .18$ ;  $N = 365$ ;  $F = 19.79$

vote for a certain candidate) also has a positive, though insignificant, impact on adolescent communication levels ( $p = .25$ ). Thus, parents have an important role in promoting the expression of political ideas both inside and outside the home. Political discussions within the home are important for stimulating adolescents' discussions with peers and teachers outside the home, and all these contacts facilitate socialization.

In short, the socializing communication about the campaign that is crucial for crystallizing attitudes does not occur exclusively within the family; it takes place during interpersonal interactions more broadly defined. And the campaign proves not to be merely an occasion for the direct transmission of parental attitudes; it is an occasion for the strengthening and crystallization of whatever partisan preferences toward which the preadult is evolving. Yet parents are important in stimulating a climate of interest in and attentiveness to the campaign, and the motivation for discussing it. The measure of interpersonal communication used in this analysis is clearly related to parental awareness and interaction. But it would be a mistake to overdraw the parental role; much of the variance in adolescent political communication is left unexplained by the characteristics of the parents, as indicated by the  $R^2$  of .18 in Table 2.

## DISCUSSION

This study began with the phenomenon documented in an earlier paper, that presidential campaigns have a unique socializing effect on adolescents' partisan attitudes. Socialization gains were demonstrated for attitude crystallization and political knowledge in the attitude domains most central to the campaign. We used five indicators of increased attitude crystallization, and three of knowledge gains, to measure partisan socialization. Preadults improved significantly from before the campaign to the end of the campaign on seven of eight relevant indicators. For attitude crystallization in particular, adolescents gained more during the campaign than in the following year.

No systematic or lasting campaign-driven increases were observed for our

indicators of crystallization of racial attitudes, an issue area that played only a minor role in this campaign. This finding, though a null result, is critical to the theoretical and methodological rigor of the analysis. The campaign crystallizes attitudes on high-information-flow dimensions such as those involving candidates and parties but not on low-information-flow dimensions such as race in 1980. Thus maximizing attitude crystallization requires a high-visibility event, focusing on specific attitude dimensions, and accompanied by high individual-level interpersonal communication. In addition, this finding helps to rule out the possibility that the reinterview itself, and not interpersonal communication, "crystallized" attitudes on all dimensions.

The primary focus of the present study was on the moderating role of communication in this event-driven socialization process. Our central hypothesis was that exposure to campaign-relevant communication is responsible for socialization gains. We predicted that adolescents reporting high levels of political communication would show greater attitude crystallization during the campaign than would those with low communication levels. In concrete terms, this predicted *interpersonal communication*  $\times$  *wave 1–wave 2* interactions. On four of our five indicators of attitude crystallization, these interactions were significant in the predicted direction. No significant interactions (*communication*  $\times$  *wave 2–wave 3*) emerged in the year following the election.

We also anticipated that preadults' political knowledge would increase most if they were exposed to high levels of communication during the campaign. The interaction between campaign period and communication is significant for knowledge of political symbols but not for knowledge about candidates or issues. Thus the findings for knowledge are weaker than for attitude crystallization. The acquisition of knowledge may not require the event-stimulated interpersonal communication necessary for lasting attitude crystallization. Apparently, the volume of the campaign attention to the candidates was loud enough to elevate the entire sample's knowledge levels.

The findings also suggest that politicized parents may instigate more political discussions in the family during the campaign, thus rendering the campaign a useful occasion for adolescent socialization. The data indicate that parents contribute to the socialization process in two distinct ways. First, they convey information about candidates to their children directly, encouraging them to evaluate the politicians consistent with their preexisting partisan orientations. Second, they encourage their children to discuss politics with others, thereby facilitating exposure to a variety of partisan viewpoints. This in turn leads to more consistent and stable attitudes. Thus we have found the parental imprint at various stages of the process. But the results suggest that adolescents receive political information from a variety of sources during the campaign. The socialization process, therefore, cannot be viewed simply as an apolitical, intergenerational transfer of attitudes within the family unit.

Although the data make a strong case for event-driven socialization, with the presidential campaign as the key event, socialization is not restricted to the campaign period. In our data, issue and symbols knowledge seem to have growth patterns somewhat independent of the electoral cycle. Presumably so do campaign-peripheral attitudes such as those toward racial issues, which may be responsive to events that are more closely linked to race relations than to electoral politics.

Presidential election campaigns seem to provide a surge of partisan information in a concentrated period, then, producing strong socialization gains in adolescents. This suggests that political events have discontinuous effects over time on political socialization, given their "on and off" pattern of information flow.

In our judgment the results are convincing in demonstrating that interpersonal communication moderates the effects of political campaigns. Those adolescents most exposed to interpersonal communication experienced the largest socialization gains. We speculate that active interpersonal communication is more crucial for producing lasting effects of event-triggered political socialization than is passive exposure to the mass media. To build up a strong, consistent, stable affective mass should require active give and take, not merely passive learning. Firm attitudes develop when preadults are challenged to consider inconsistencies over time and across different attitudes, rather than merely to absorb facts.

However, the results do not warrant a dismissal of the media as a socializing agent. High-stimulus events may have unique advantages in triggering interpersonal communication (Atkin, 1972; Kuo, 1985). This has direct application to the current investigation, since campaigns are accompanied by intense media coverage about a relatively small set of attitude objects.

Would alternative hypotheses predict this same pattern of results? Though we do not include a set of multivariate controls in the analysis of variance models presented in Table 1, the pattern of results we observe, with larger increases during the campaign than afterward, and larger increases in campaign-relevant domains, helps to rule out several alternatives. Two categories of variables might rival our hypotheses involving the role of interpersonal communication in the socialization process: predispositional factors specific to the adolescent, such as political interest, and parental influences, such as political sophistication.

Perhaps more interested adolescents are both more talkative about politics and have more crystallized attitudes, but the former is only spuriously related to the latter. But if political interest, and not exposure to political communication, were responsible for the gains we observe, those gains would continue throughout the year following the election. Instead, we observe both high- and low-communication groups leveling off after the election. Also we would expect that domains unrelated to the campaign would show a similar pattern

of results if communication were really just a proxy for interest in politics. But racial attitudes do not experience much change.

Another set of rival explanations involves parental characteristics such as education or political involvement. These variables might lead to higher levels of attitude crystallization among adolescents regardless of interpersonal communication. While these factors certainly contribute to mean differences in political knowledge and attitude crystallization between adolescents, they do not explain the *larger gains* experienced by high-communication adolescents during, but not after, the campaign. Furthermore, we did not find either of these factors to be significantly related to interpersonal communication among adolescents (See Table 2), so they cannot account for the relationship between interpersonal communication and attitude crystallization.

These results are based on a single election campaign. But there is no reason to think the 1980 campaign was especially atypical. Assuming it was not, the implications of these findings for the revisionist perspective on partisanship are relatively clear. Adolescents acquire attitudes relevant to the central content of presidential campaigns beginning, for some, before they reach age 10. By their late teens, most individuals are able to answer survey questions about partisan preference as consistently at any one time as their parents are. Also, adolescents' attitudes about the candidates are strongly conditioned by partisanship. Political communication during the campaign further enhances the consistency and stability of these attitudes, and in most cases leads directly to socialization gains.

In conclusion, we believe these findings significantly improve our understanding about the pattern of political socialization in adolescence. We have identified at least one major opportunity for such socialization to occur: presidential campaigns. Presumably such campaigns represent just one of a broader class of events that trigger surges in preadult socialization. Still, we see these high-intensity events as necessary but insufficient conditions for maximum socialization gains to occur. They need to stimulate political communication by and to the individual preadult. Children living in apolitical social environments, where even high-intensity events do not stimulate much discussion, are unlikely to profit from them. Thus we would argue that socialization proceeds intermittently during adolescence as a function of exposure to communication during high-intensity political events. Future research might focus on other events, or other types of communication, which might lead to similar effects.

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## APPENDIX

### Individual Score Calculation

We devised individual scores to measure changes in attitude consistency and stability. For a full explanation of this procedure, see Sears and Valentino (1997). These measures borrowed techniques used earlier by Barton and Parsons (1977), Sears and Citrin (1985), and Wycoff (1980). The stability measures consisted of the absolute difference in an individual's responses to a given item across two waves, summed across all items in that attitude domain (with a low score reflecting greater stability). For example, the stability of an individual's party identification from wave 1 to wave 2 would be indexed by the absolute difference between each party identification item in wave 1 and that item in wave 2, summed over items. Note also that this provides somewhat more precise information about the stability of individual attitudes than that given in the correlational analysis, since it reflects the stability of each attitude (item by item) rather than of a hypothetical underlying construct (using a composite scale). This is particularly important when the scale contained items with quite different manifest content.

*Consistency* was indexed with the mean absolute deviations between individual items and the overall scale score for that domain. For example, the correspondence between party identification and candidate evaluation consisted of the absolute difference between the individual's party identification scale score and the partisan candidate evaluation scale score. A low score reflected a higher consistency.

### Question Wording and Scale Construction

*Candidate evaluations:* Like-dislike on a 5-point scale of (1) Jimmy Carter, (2) Ronald Reagan, (3) George Bush, and (4) Edward Kennedy: "Now I am going to ask you which candidates you like or dislike in the upcoming presidential election. For each candidate I name, tell me if you like him a lot, like him a little, dislike him a little, or dislike him a lot. If you don't know anything about him, just say so. First: how much do you like or dislike . . ." Respondents were given an option for like and dislike, as well as don't know.

*Party identification items:* (1) the standard NES item reads: "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or what?" (2) the Dennis (1986) revision: "Do you ever think of yourself as a Republican or as a Democrat?" (If yes) "Which political party—the Republican or the Democratic—do you favor?" and "In your own mind, are you a very strong, fairly strong, or not a strong supporter of this party?" (If no) "Are you closer to the Republican party or to the Democratic party?" Lastly, the scale incorporates the extent to which an individual thinks of himself as an 'Independent'; "Do you ever think of yourself as an Independent in politics?"

*Racial items:* (1) "Black people should be given special treatment in getting jobs."

(2) "Over the past few years, blacks have gotten more than they deserve." (Both with 5-point agree-disagree scales.) (3) "How about members of racist groups, like the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazi Party . . . do you have no particular feelings about them, do you somewhat dislike them, or do you dislike them a lot?" (4) "Should a member of a racist group be allowed to make a speech in your community attacking other people's beliefs?" (5) "Should a member of a racist group be allowed to teach in a high school in your area?" (6) "Do you think a member of a racist group should be allowed to run for president?" (These last three all have yes-no-don't know response alternatives.)

*Candidate knowledge:* The mean number of five candidates correctly assigned to their party. "I'm going to read each candidate's name again. This time please tell me if you now think of him as a Republican or as a Democrat." (Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, Ted Kennedy, George Bush, and Walter Mondale.)

*Issue knowledge items:* The mean number of four issues on which the respondent correctly identified the party most closely associated with a particular position: (1) "Which party wants to do more to protect the environment?" (2) "Which party do you think is more for cutting down government spending and services?" (3) "Which of the parties do you think is more for giving women and minorities special treatment in getting jobs?" (4) "Which of the parties do you think is more for giving women and minorities special treatment in getting jobs?" (Republicans, Democrats, both, neither, don't know).

*Party symbols knowledge items:* The mean of 14 party symbols correctly assigned to each party: "When I read each of these names or things, which party comes most to your mind . . . the Republicans, or the Democrats?" (Elephant, right of center, rich people, Abraham Lincoln, Richard Nixon, conservative, business, donkey, Franklin D. Roosevelt, liberal, labor union, poor people, Lyndon B. Johnson, left of center.)

*Interpersonal communication scale:* Three survey items, each with four levels, were additively scaled: "How often do you talk with other people about national politics?" (a lot, sometimes, rarely, never); "How often do you talk with people whose ideas are different than yours?" (a lot, sometimes, rarely, never); "Is national politics something you like to talk about, or is it something other people bring up?" (like to talk about it, both, others bring it up, neither). Higher scores mean more communication.

*Television news viewing:* An additive scale of three items was used: (1) "On how many days in the past seven days did you watch the national news on television?" (None through seven, don't know.) (2) How much attention did you pay to news on TV about national politics and government? (None, a lot, quite a bit, some, very little, don't know.) (3) "About how often do you watch each type of TV shows I'll read . . . Local evening news." (A lot, sometimes, rarely, never, don't know.)

*Newspaper reading:* Two items were used in an additive scale: (1) "How many days in the last seven did you read a newspaper?" (None through seven, don't know.) (2) "How much attention did you pay to articles in the newspaper about national politics and government?" (None, a lot, quite a bit, some, very little, don't know.)

*Family communication:* An additive scale of three items: (1) Parents, "How much do you care what your child thinks about politics?" Children, "How much do you think your parent cares about you think about politics?" (A lot, some, a little, or not at all.)



(2) Parents, "How much do you encourage your child to question other people's opinions about politics?" Children, "How much does (selected parent) encourage you to question other people's opinions about politics?" (A lot, some, a little, or not at all.) (3) "How often do you talk to your parent/child about politics?" (A lot, sometimes, rarely, never.)

*Parents' political knowledge:* Parents' political knowledge is a composite of items identical to those in the three knowledge scales presented for adolescent groups.

*Parents' political activity:* A composite scale including questions about wearing campaign buttons, convincing others how to vote, or handing out campaign materials for a candidate.

## NOTES

1. Previous research utilizing this panel study has provided some evidence consistent with these hypotheses, though not testing them directly. Kenamer and Chaffee (1982) found that the level of preadults' media exposure during the early stages of a presidential primary campaign was associated with their degree of familiarity with the candidates and candidate issue positions. Similarly, Chaffee and Schleuder (1986) found that attention to the mass media, rather than simple exposure, predicted preadults' political knowledge gains. Kenamer and Chaffee (1982) and Chaffee and Miyo (1983) found that exposure to the campaign was associated with increasingly partisan candidate evaluations. Dennis (1986) also used these data to document the effect of mass media use and family communication on levels of political independence among adolescents. However, in these cases the authors did not compare the periods during and after the campaign.
2. These data are archived at the Social Sciences Data Archive, Institute for Social Science Research, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA 90095 (Elizabeth Stephenson, Data Archivist).
3. For detailed descriptions of this study, see Chaffee and Schleuder (1986), Chaffee and Tims (1982), Kenamer and Chaffee (1982), Owen and Dennis (1992), and Sears and Valentino (1997).
4. For data on the other peripheral domains, see Sears and Valentino (1997).
5. Party issue positions are often somewhat vague. The issues we selected were those traditionally associated with one or the other party: aid to minorities and environmental protection (for the Democrats), and cutting government spending (for the Republicans). For a list of the actual items and question wordings, see the Appendix.
6. For question wording for the items included in these scales, please see the Appendix.
7. For a more detailed description of the procedure used for calculating individual scores, see the appendix and Sears and Valentino (1997).
8. The items used in these scales were additive, combining measures of exposure as well as attention paid to each type of news medium. Chaffee and Schleuder (1986) and others suggest that both attention and exposure are important components of effective television and newspaper communication. For the wording of these measures, see the Appendix.
9. Parental education was also included in the original model, but was dropped because it was not significantly related to interpersonal communication.

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