

about what goes wrong in adolescence and why, and a lot less about how to prevent problems and how to get young people back on track, especially in those areas of the world in which young people face the greatest challenges. New knowledge is being driven by the need to develop and test interventions to promote the physical and psychological well-being of young people and counteract the risks associated with this developmental stage. This is especially true in a world in which many adolescents face the same threats—incomplete or poor-quality education, limited prospects for satisfying work, marginalization, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, substance abuse, violence, anxiety and depression—without the same opportunities for help and support.

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PERSPECTIVE

Politics and the Life Cycle

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The study of politics and the life cycle began with a rather single-minded focus on childhood and the family—on the idea, as Tocqueville famously put it, that the entire person could be “seen in the cradle of the child.” Politics does begin in childhood, and parents do influence their offspring, but change takes place over the entire span of life. I take up the early emergence of partisanship and essentialism, the formation of generations, politically consequential transitions in adulthood, and the rising of politics and its final decline.

My assignment is to highlight important findings and promising developments in the study of politics over the life cycle: politics, one could say, from the cradle to the grave. I focus on exemplary cases, confine my attention to the United States, overlook many local skirmishes, and concentrate primarily on tracing the life cycle path of political belief (rather than action). The essay proceeds chronologically, beginning with childhood.

Partisanship and Essentialism in Childhood

What Freud did to assumptions of childhood sexual innocence, Greenstein (*1*) and other pioneers in the field did to assumptions of political innocence. Children may be naïve and poorly informed when it comes to politics, but they are far from innocent. They express strong attach-

ment to the nation. They think of themselves proudly, as partisans of one party or the other. They believe that their country and its way of life are best. They happily subscribe to conventional stereotypes about blacks and whites, men and women, and rich and poor (*2*).

As to the origins of such beliefs, speculation centered initially on the family, on the claim from social learning theory that children would imitate and eventually internalize what their parents said and did (*3*). The best evidence comes from the landmark study carried out by Jennings and Niemi in 1965, based on independent interviews with a national sample of high school seniors and their parents. Jennings and Niemi discovered that adolescent children did indeed seem to copy the party identification of their parents (when they could discern it). On most matters of belief, however, correspondence between parents and offspring was unimpressive: moderate on attitudes toward social groups and

close to negligible on matters of policy. Weak correspondence presumably reflects a failure to communicate: confusion or conflict among parents, the evasion of political subjects in family discussions, and (perhaps especially) indifference to politics among the children (*4*).

An alternative model for parental influence is genetic transmission. Until quite recently, the assumption that political beliefs are acquired through experience has been taken as an article of faith. Rapid developments in human behavioral genetics have made this stance increasingly difficult to maintain. A number of studies have compared the political views expressed by monozygotic twins (who share an identical genetic inheritance) to the views expressed by dizygotic twins (who develop from two separate eggs fertilized by two separate sperm). The comparisons take into account whether twins are reared together or apart, and whether they are raised by their biological parents or adopted into new families. The results suggest that adult political beliefs—on the death penalty, say, or on school prayer—have a sizable genetic component. On matters of politics, parents may influence their biological offspring as much through the “genetic blueprint” they provide at conception as through the modeling and instruction they supply later on (*5–7*).

Children are not only partisans; they are also, according to a recent line of research, essentialists. That is, children seem to believe that certain social categories are “natural kinds”: real (not constructed) and discovered (not invented). More specifically, they believe that race and sex and ethnicity

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belong entirely to the natural world and that differences between, say, blacks and whites are rooted entirely in biology, or blood, or some such underlying essence. Essence “explains” inner qualities—temperament, intellect, character—as well as outward, physical ones. Children come to believe all this, moreover, without instruction. Essentialism is thought to be the product of evolutionary adaptation: The human cognitive system is predisposed to treat social groupings as natural kinds (8, 9). This line of work is relevant here because it suggests a deep foundation for social stereotyping, and social stereotyping is in turn a pervasive feature of adult political belief. Essentialism conceived of in this way clarifies why so much of public opinion is “group-centric”: why views on policy, attachments to party, and votes for candidates depend so decisively on the beliefs and feelings people harbor toward prominent social groupings (10).

Political Generations

Political generations are created out of the conjunction of individual development and political history. The formation of a distinctive generational perspective requires both the openness of late adolescence and early adulthood and the intrusion of events such as war, depression, and social disorder. Under these circumstances, a generation is expected to enter political life with a distinctive and largely permanent commitment to a certain point of view—in possession, Mannheim would say, of its own particular “historical-social consciousness” (11).

But as a raw empirical matter, instances of historical-social consciousness are not that easy to find. This is in large part because comprehensive worldviews are exceedingly uncommon among ordinary citizens, whatever their generation (12, 13). If we look for less majestic empirical outcroppings due to generation, however, there is good evidence to be found. People command more vivid memories and deeper knowledge for events that take place during their late adolescence and early adulthood. The Great Depression, World War II, the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War: these events loom especially large in the memory of those Americans who were just coming of age at the time. People know more about such events. They invest them with greater importance. And perhaps most important, they are predisposed to apply the lessons of their generation’s experience to contemporary matters (14, 15).

Generations are also centrally implicated in partisan change. Under normal circumstances, party identification is a “durable attachment, not readily disturbed by passing events and personalities” [(16), p. 151; (17, 18)]. But periods of serene stability are occasionally interrupted. The exemplary case of party realignment in the United States was set in motion by the economic calamity that overwhelmed the country during the administration of

Herbert Hoover. In 1932, at first opportunity, Hoover was driven out of office; shortly thereafter, the Republican Party lost control of Congress; by the end of the Depression, the Democrats had become the majority party. This transformation was accomplished in large part by Franklin Roosevelt and the Democratic Party capturing, more or less permanently, the loyalty of those Americans who were about to enter political life in the 1930s. Older generations born before 1905 were predominantly Republican and remained so, whereas younger generations born after 1916 became, and by and large stayed, Democrats (16, 19).

Transitions

A generational analysis implies that political development takes place primarily in the impressionable years of late adolescence and early adulthood, and there is some truth to this (18, 20, 21). But if the pace of political development slows in adulthood, it does not halt.

Passage through adulthood can be analyzed as a series of transitions into (and out of) roles: soldier, parent, neighbor, and more. To some degree, these new roles and the social spaces they occupy—partly individually chosen, partly environmentally supplied—serve as “socialization depots.” Faced with new norms and fresh ideas, people change.

An excellent illustration of research along these lines is Huckfeldt and Sprague’s (22) analysis of the “weak ties” that run through neighborhoods (23). In theory, neighborhoods are politically consequential because “they determine proximity and exposure—they serve to structure important elements of involuntary social interaction” [(22), p. 36]. In a detailed

empirical investigation of an election campaign, Huckfeldt and Sprague show how neighborhoods influence individuals’ political beliefs through recurrent processes of social influence.

Another way to conceive of passage through the adult years draws on the idea of self-interest—the seemingly straightforward claim that citizens are predisposed to support parties and policies that advance their own material interests. From this perspective, life cycle transitions become important politically insofar as they generate new incentives and distinctive interests. As people step into new roles—by purchasing a home, enlisting in the armed services, or having children—political beliefs should change accordingly. This seems plausible, but self-interest turns out to be a surprisingly unimportant source of political belief (24). Under just the right circumstances—when the material benefits or harms of a proposed policy are substantial, imminent, and well-advertised—self-interest can make a difference, as in the lavishly financed and hotly contested campaign for property tax reform in California in 1978 (25). But because these circumstances don’t come along very often, self-interest contributes little to an understanding of how political beliefs change over the life cycle.

Aging

Do individuals grow more conservative as they age? No. Aging is generally unaccompanied by movement to the right (or to the left)—not on particular matters of economics or foreign policy and not on partisanship, either (26, 27).

Intensity of partisanship is another matter, however. Identification with a political party tends to strengthen over the life cycle, evidently



Fig. 1. Comstock Images/Corbis

as a consequence of the “sheer temporal accumulation of electoral experience” [(28), p. 150; (18)]. Electoral experience and age are not identical; the former can be affected by changes in laws and procedures governing who is eligible to vote, the creation or suspension of elections (as in the fascist interlude in 20th-century Germany and Italy), and other external intrusions. The strengthening of partisanship with experience may seem a humble result, but it is not. Strong partisan attachments are vital to the preservation of democratic forms of government, and at the dawn of the 21st century, the world is flush with new and fragile democracies.

Political Action over the Life Cycle

Belief captures only part of the story of politics and the life cycle. What can be said (if telegraphically) about change and continuity over the life cycle of political action (29)?

Participation in politics in the contemporary United States is characterized by huge and persistent inequalities. Those with more income, more skills, and especially more education are much more likely to take part in politics across virtually all forms of participation (30). The roots of such inequality are to be found, in part, in the family. Well-educated parents are likely to take part in politics and to create homes in which there is lively political discussion. Children growing up in such environments tend to acquire a set of political predispositions—interest, knowledge, efficacy—that motivate participation in politics later on. Well-educated parents are also likely to have well-educated children, and educational attainment is the single most potent predictor of participation in adulthood. Participation begins in the family, and so too does political inequality (31).

Over the past three decades, as inequality has increased, participation in civic and political life has generally declined. It turns out that much of this disengagement from public life is generational. Americans who came of age at the time of the New Deal or World War II entered political life at moments of immense consequence and great common purpose. This particular conjunction of individual development and extraordinary political history appears to have indelibly marked not just memory and belief, as we saw earlier, but also participation in the collective enterprises of politics (32).

Transitions play a prominent role in political action as well. Several mechanisms seem to be at work here, but all share the same basic premise: Participation in politics is costly, and potential participants count costs. Participation eats up time and sometimes money; it requires a variety of skills; it entails foregoing other opportunities (33).

From this perspective, we would expect that transitions in and out of new roles would depress participation, at least in the short run, and

they do. Being laid off, getting married or divorced, having children, or changing residence all result in diminished participation, as time and energy are directed to more pressing personal matters (30, 34).

In the longer run, adult roles are important for political action insofar as they “teach” skills that reduce the costs of participation. Those who speak and write well, or who command the interpersonal arts required for organizing others, are more likely as a consequence to take an active part in politics, and such skills are often developed and refined through involvement in the institutions that constitute civil society: work, neighborhood associations, and religious organizations (35).

Transitions are also important from this perspective, as they move people into and out of spaces that are sites for political mobilization. To enhance their chances of winning an election or passing a bill, public officials and political organizations often use various mobilization tactics. They sponsor meetings and rallies, circulate petitions, request contributions, supply citizens with arguments (and even text) with which to bombard their representatives, and more. That is, officials and organizations subsidize the costs of participation that people would otherwise have to put up entirely on their own. When people inhabit roles that make them likely targets of mobilization, they are more likely to take part in politics (30).

This framework implies that self-interest might be more important to action than to belief, and this seems to be true as well. When predicting who takes part in politics and who does not, it is useful to know whose interests are directly and immediately at stake (36, 37). Self-interest explains not so much where people stand, but whether they act.

Finally, we know that participation in politics typically begins at a relatively low level in early adulthood, rises steadily through middle age as psychological participation in the wider world broadens, and then declines toward the end of life, as “infirmity defeats experience” [(30), p. 141].

Unfinished Business

The study of politics and the life cycle began with a single-minded focus on childhood and the family. Politics does begin in childhood, and parents do influence their offspring, through instruction and genetic endowment both, but change, we now know, takes place over the entire span of life (38). Such change seems to follow two rather distinct paths: one for political belief and another for political action. One challenge for future research is to attend more systematically to the difference between belief and action, and to offer, in the end, an understanding of politics and the life cycle from the perspective of the whole person.

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PERSPECTIVE

Would You Be Happier If You Were Richer? A Focusing Illusion

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The belief that high income is associated with good mood is widespread but mostly illusory. People with above-average income are relatively satisfied with their lives but are barely happier than others in moment-to-moment experience, tend to be more tense, and do not spend more time in particularly enjoyable activities. Moreover, the effect of income on life satisfaction seems to be transient. We argue that people exaggerate the contribution of income to happiness because they focus, in part, on conventional achievements when evaluating their life or the lives of others.

Most people believe that they would be happier if they were richer, but survey evidence on subjective well-being is largely inconsistent with that belief. Subjective well-being is most commonly measured by asking people, “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?” or “Taken all together, would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?” Such questions elicit a global evaluation of one’s life. An alternative method asks people to report their feelings in real time, which yields a measure of experienced affect or happiness. Surveys in many countries conducted over decades indicate that, on average, reported global judgments of life satisfaction or happiness have not changed much over the last four decades, in spite of large increases in real income per capita. Although reported life satisfaction and household income are positively correlated in a cross section of people at a given time, increases in income have been found to have mainly a transitory effect on individuals’ reported life satisfaction (1–3). Moreover, the correlation between income and subjective well-being is weaker when a measure of experienced happiness is used instead of a global measure.

When people consider the impact of any single factor on their well-being—not only income—they are prone to exaggerate its importance. We refer to this tendency as the fo-

cusing illusion. Standard survey questions on life satisfaction by which subjective well-being is measured may induce a form of focusing illusion, by drawing people’s attention to their relative standing in the distribution of material well-being and other circumstances. More importantly, the focusing illusion may be a source of error in significant decisions that people make (4).

Evidence for the focusing illusion comes from diverse lines of research. For example, Strack and colleagues (5) reported an experiment in which students were asked: (i) “How happy are you with your life in general?” and (ii) “How many dates did you have last month?” The correlation between the answers to these

questions was -0.012 (not statistically different from 0) when they were asked in the preceding order, but the correlation rose to 0.66 when the order was reversed with another sample of students. The dating question evidently caused that aspect of life to become salient and its importance to be exaggerated when the respondents encountered the more general question about their happiness. Similar focusing effects were observed when attention was first called to respondents’ marriage (6) or health (7). One conclusion from this research is that people do not know how happy or satisfied they are with their life in the way they know their height or telephone number. The answers to global life satisfaction questions are constructed only when asked (8), and are, therefore, susceptible to the focusing of attention on different aspects of life.

To test the focusing illusion regarding income, we asked a sample of working women to estimate the percentage of time that they had spent in a bad mood in the preceding day. Respondents were also asked to predict the percentage of time that people with pairs of various life circumstances (Table 1), such as high- and low-income, typically spend in a bad mood. Predictions were compared with the actual reports of mood provided by respondents who met the relevant circumstances. The predictions were biased in two respects. First, the prevalence of bad mood was

Table 1. The focusing illusion: Exaggerating the effect of various circumstances on well-being. The question posed was “Now we would like to know overall how you felt and what your mood was like yesterday. Thinking only about yesterday, what percentage of the time were you: in a bad mood____%, a little low or irritable____%, in a mildly pleasant mood____%, in a very good mood____%.” Bad mood reported here is the sum of the first two response categories. A parallel question was then asked about yesterday at work. Bad mood at work was used for the supervision and fringe benefits comparisons. Data are from (14). Reading down the Actual column, sample sizes are 64, 59, 75, 237, 96, 211, 82, 221, respectively; reading down the Predicted column, sample sizes are 83, 83, 84, 84, 83, 85, 85, 87, respectively. Predicted difference was significantly larger than actual difference by a *t* test; see asterisks.

Variable	Group	Percentage of time in a bad mood			
		Actual	Predicted	Actual difference	Predicted difference
Household income	<\$20,000	32.0	57.7	12.2	32.0***
	>\$100,000	19.8	25.7		
Woman over 40 years old	Alone	21.4	41.1	-1.7	13.2***
	Married	23.1	27.9		
Supervision at work	Definitely close	36.5	64.3	17.4	42.1***
	Definitely not close	19.1	22.3		
Fringe benefits	No health insurance	26.6	49.7	4.5	30.5***
	Excellent benefits	22.2	19.2		

****P* < 0.001.

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