Political socialization and the youth vote: a study of political engagement during the 2008 election

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Chapter One: Introductions

On a brisk and sunny November day in 1992, I remember riding in the passenger seat of my Dad’s new convertible thinking I would be the coolest kid in kindergarten when we pulled up to school. I also remember the din of news radio in the background, and my father pointedly asking me if I knew what day it was. Not yet proficient with my days of the week, I told him I didn’t know. I distinctly remember his response and the gravity of his voice as he explained that today there would be a new President elected. The President, he said, was a very important man who could change the way our country was run and make sure we were always safe. My father then, as if I was no longer there, slipped into his own monologue about how Clinton had better not be elected because he was not someone we could trust to keep us and our money safe. Bored and ready to get out of the car, I bolted up to the front doors of the Elementary School no longer concerned about how cool the new convertible was, but imbued with—however uninteresting it may have been in the moment—my first memory of politics.

After my Freshman year of college, I had my first political internship in the U.S. Congress. I became aware of how my age group seems to be apathetic towards politics and community engagement, at least compared to me. A large number of my friends engage in community service, most often to boost their resume, but they have no passion about engaging in the political processes that would put purpose behind their actions. Although I have encountered a few other students working for political candidates or on campaigns, it is troubling that the remainder do not care and are not well educated about issues on which they have the right to vote. As a result, I began researching political socialization, or how one becomes aware of and learns about politics. I wanted to
explore the connection between individuals’ histories of socialization and whether or not, and how much, they became involved in politics.

**Voting Matters**

John Stuart Mill wrote, “The rights and interests of every, or any, person are only secure from being disregarded when the person interested is himself able, and habitually disposed, to stand up for them.” (Macedo et. al., 2005) Among democratic nations, American voting percentages are some of the lowest. (Macedo et. al., 2005; see figure 1)

![Figure 1: National Elections Across the Globe (CIRCLE, 2004)](image)

The voting process and its outcomes affect all Americans, and yet participation remains low. In 2004, where over $350 million was spent by interest groups to increase turnout, voting only increased by 5% to an overall turnout of 59%. Voting may be a more passive act as far as political engagement goes, but comparatively low turnout rates in this area indicate that even this level of engagement is problematic in the United States.

**High Participation Rates Matter**

Low levels of political engagement by my peers may have been troubling to me personally, but would a higher rate necessarily be a good thing? Engagement in its most basic form is exercising the ability to vote. If non-voters were to vote and it did not
change the outcome of the election, then perhaps their votes would not of issue. (Macedo et. al., 2005) However, non-voters are more likely to be marginalized citizens—poor, non-white, and without a college or high school education—who are different from the rest of the voting population. (CIRCLE, Turnout, 2009) These differences suggest that if non-voters were to vote, they may have different opinions from the rest of the electorate; and their votes, would indeed, have an effect on the outcome of elections. Although it could be argued that it would be better for elite citizens to make the decisions for others, the very act of participation itself has the ability to increase the political interests and education of a potential non-voting individual. (Macedo et. al., 2005) Higher levels of political participation are associated with higher levels of political engagement. By participating in political life an individual has the ability to express his or her beliefs and can also gain further access to civic knowledge through the other highly engaged people with whom he or she comes into contact.

**Young Voters Matter**

Although the last three elections have shown an increase in youth voting, there has been a general downward trend since 1972. Even in 1972, only 55% of the youth population was voting, a rate significantly lower than other age groups which extend well into the upper 60th percentile. (CIRCLE, Fact, 2008) Not only are the average American voting turnout rates low compared to other nations, the level of engagement among young individuals is low and getting lower as time passes. (Campbell, 2006) The gap between younger voters and voters over thirty has stayed consistent across elections, such that the peeks and valleys of participation that occur across both age groups are attributable to the dynamics of particular elections. (CIRCLE, Youth Voting, 2008) The
gap between young voters and older voters is in part attributable to experience. People who have more invested in their society, such as owning a house, are more inclined to vote on issues that they see directly affecting them. (Milner, 2002) But, getting individuals in the habit of voting at a young age produces individuals who continue to vote throughout their lives. (Macedo et. al., 2005) For politicians these figures offer an opportunity to create a new segment of engaged young voters who will continue to be engaged across elections. For communities, increasing interest in voting at an earlier age promotes civic investment and responsibility that will serve the community for years to come. Engaging young people in the voting process is mutually beneficial for politicians, communities, and the voter.

Youth Engagement Matters

Expressed desires for political engagement, a distinct subset of civic engagement, among young voters has decreased by more than half since the 1970s. (Macedo et. al., 2005) On the other hand, public service volunteerism has increased, (Campbell, 2006) and young voters actually volunteer more frequently than their older counterparts. (Benson, 2006) Furthermore, across all age groups, those who volunteer for public service organizations are likely to be the same individuals who are volunteering politically. (Keeter 2003; Macedo et. al., 2005) Macedo et. al. found that as feelings of civic obligation decline, participation in civic life, whether voting or volunteering, does as well. (2005) As a result, increasing the engagement of young voters could help increase their participation in civic life, and thereby, their inclination to vote.

We suspect that there are few high engagement individuals within the youth voting population. We should worry that the absence of this community affects the
outcome of elections for the same reasons that non voters generally could change the outcome of elections. For these reasons, it only seems natural to inquire as to why and how young individuals attain varying levels of engagement. It is our hypothesis that how a person learns about politics as he or she grows up is directly connected to whether or not that individual decides to become involved in politics. Based on my own experiences, I suggest that the influencing factors in a child’s life include: parents, peers, school, media, and community. To explore the relevance of these factors, we will turn to the relevant psychology and political science literature first to explore the frameworks of child development that are essential to political development. Second, we will turn to a chronological investigation of the factors influencing political learning in children’s formative years.

Investigative Frameworks

As children grow up they develop cognitive skills across time. According to Jean Piaget, (in Brown, 1965) this development occurs in discrete stages such that one stage must be completed in order to move on to the next. Children must first develop their motor skills, or learning through objects, which occurs between the ages of birth and two years old. Then, during the Pre-Operational period, from ages two through seven, and the Concrete Operations period from age seven to eleven, children develop language and fluency in communication, or learning through actions. Finally in the Formal Operations period children acquire problem solving skills. Not all children move to the highest stages; however, the general progression is to move from the concrete to the abstract. For example, a child who can only understand the world in a concrete way would see a little girl who ruined the gift she was making for her mother by over-cutting the fabric as a
“bad girl.” A child who has reached abstract development, though, can recognize that the intention of the little girl was to make a gift for her mother. Although Piaget does not directly mention how these stages relate to political development, his research suggests that not all individuals reach the cognitive level to be able to handle political problems that require seeing issues abstractly or from different angles or perspectives. Piaget’s research also suggests that a lack of political activity may be related to development ending during the second and third—language and fluency—developmental stages, from ages 2-11.

But, what about moral development? Lawrence Kohlberg built on Piaget’s Theory of Cognitive Development by exploring the moral processes of child development which occur during the later stages of maturation. Kohlberg’s structure has three levels, with two stages in each level. First, is the Preconventional level, where the child’s morals focus on good and bad through actions such as punishment and reward or the exchange of favors. Second, the Conventional level is marked by the child’s effort to maintain conformity to personal and social expectations; this level is similar to Piaget’s Concrete Operations period. The third, and final level, is the Postconventional or Autonomous level, where the individual makes a clear effort to define moral values and principles beyond what he or she readily identifies with. Kohlberg notes that it is very rare for an individual to make it through all six stages and fully understand abstract concepts such as justice. Kohlberg’s research suggests that the inability to cross from Conventional to Postconventional understanding, where an individual would gain an understanding of ethical principles, may be related to the low turnout rate among Americans who are unconcerned with the preservation of those principles. (Kohlberg and Hersh, 1977)
Howard Gardner (1995) built on Piaget and Kohlberg’s work by applying it to how children at different ages, or “frames of mind,” develop opinions of or orientations to leaders. Gardner’s work has obvious implications for a child’s political development. Through his “frames of mind” Theory of Multiple Intelligences and his *Leading Minds* study of leadership, Gardner adds emotional development to the frameworks begun by Piaget and Kohlberg. First, Gardner found that individuals have not just one type of intelligence, or IQ, but that they have intelligences that span a variety of categories of talent—from mathematics to music. Important to our analysis though, are the stages of learning that children develop as they grow in these different intelligences. Development in different intelligences occurs at various ages to a varying degree for each individual child, and few individuals reach their full potential in any area of intelligence.

Furthermore, contrary to Piaget, as an individual faces problem solving challenges, even as an adult, he or she may revert to younger “frames of mind” in order to deal with the quandary. Gardner argues that the “five-year-old mind,” which we all have, sees the world in rigid dichotomies of good and bad. The “ten-year-old mind” seeks to be “fair to a fault” by taking the intentions of each side into account when evaluating a problem. Finally, the “fifteen-year-old mind” makes judgments based on relativism and tries to view situations through perspectives outside of his or her own. Essential to the transition between the ten-year-old mind and the fifteen-year-old mind is the adolescent’s ability to move from his or her own perspective to understanding the perspectives of others.

Throughout these stages of development, Gardner notes, the search and discovery of an individual’s personal values takes place within the context of the larger community. These “frames of mind” and Gardner’s idea of value discovery within the community
context will be used as the framework for investigating studies of political knowledge and development at various ages throughout the rest of this chapter.

With similar processes of child development in mind, Herbert Hyman established the field of political socialization, or the study of how children learn and develop political knowledge. Hyman believed that childhood learning and development was the foundation for the development of political knowledge and actions that would extend into adult life. Like Kohlberg, Hyman found that political orientation develops at different rates for different children. However, all children begin in the phase of “parent-orientation,” where parents and the family form the foundation for the child’s political knowledge. As children age, they are more likely to become “peer-oriented,” where they obtain their political values through conversations with and influence from their peers. Additionally with age and as they perhaps move from place to place in their young adulthood, individuals are more likely to become “peer-oriented” than remain “parent-oriented.” Not all children necessarily reach full “peer-orientation,” but Hyman found some evidence of “peer-orientation” in all children to be common across his studies. (Hyman, 1959)

Now, we will turn to the political socialization literature to examine how political development occurs as a part of child development. Howard Gardner’s “frames of mind” and Herbert Hyman’s suggested socializing influences will help to frame our discussion.

**Political Socialization**

According to Hyman, (1959) the earliest age at which children are socialized towards politics is around age five; however, we will first examine the various factors influencing children beginning with birth.
Birth to Age Five

Children are born into a world that has certain features. These characteristics—such as the economy, the absence of a parent, a family history of mental illnesses or disease, and the president in office at the time—can all play a role in a child’s political socialization. Historically, poor and marginalized individuals have difficulty accessing political knowledge and may not have a stable environment where they can interact with parents and friends to undergo the processes of political socialization. The type of family that a child lives in can have an effect on from whom and how the child receives political knowledge from. A child, for example, who grows up in an authoritarian household where the father is in charge is more likely to receive those values from his or her father and not from the mother or siblings in the household. However, in a more relaxed family style, the child may also receive political information from other influencers such as siblings. (Davies, 1977) As we examine political socialization and future engagement we will keep these environmental factors of a child’s development in mind as they may account for differences in child development, occurring, or not, at a specific age.

The Five-Year-Old Mind

As Howard Gardner notes, the five-year-old mind is defined by its evaluation of the world in terms of “good and bad” or “right and wrong.” (1995) In a study of this “frame of mind;” Moore, Lare, and Wagner, in 1974, embarked on a longitudinal study, published in 1985, on children’s political knowledge and development beginning when the children were in kindergarten, at roughly five years of age. Through explicitly asking the children, they found that most children do not know who runs the country but were likely to give answers with positive associations such as “God” or “George Washington.”
Similarly the children were able to pick the American flag out of a selection of flags, but they were not able to recognize that the flag belonged to the United States, only that it was “ours.” The children also did not understand what the words “voting” or “to vote” meant, but those children who did attempt to explain the process mentioned their mothers over their fathers in a ratio of three to one. The frequency of mentioning the mother suggests that children may associate the act of voting with their mothers or that their mothers were more likely to talk about voting. Moore, et. al., also found that there was already a gender difference among high knowledge children. Of the children who did know who the president was and who were knowledgeable about current events, there were significantly more boys than girls. The gender differences noted in this study may have been the result of more gendered upbringings that were more likely to have occurred in the 1970s, when the children being studied were raised, than now.

Another study considers second graders, at age seven. Hess and Torney (1967) found that seven year olds still emphasized knowledge about “political objects,” such as the flag. They found that children even knew more about these “political objects” than they did about people, including the current President or famous past Presidents. They suggest that this may be because children need to become less “parent-oriented” before they can become aware of, or attached to, public political figures. Gimpel, Lay, and Schuknecht (2003) found that parents are the most important source of influence in a child’s life at this stage for communicating moral and religious values, including political responsibility. Parents directly transfer these values through the informal teaching they provide to their child on a day-to-day basis. Since children are likely to receive these values from their parents instead of in the schools, Dean Jaros (1973) asserts that any
gaps in a child’s development may be due to shortcomings in parent teaching as opposed to formal education provided in the schools. Jaros’s claim may account for the failure among the children in Moore et. al.’s study to know information about the people in politics in addition to “political objects.”

*The Ten Year Old Mind*

Through the political socialization literature we also get a sense of Gardner’s ten-year-old frame of mind, where the child is “fair to a fault.” (1995) One of the earliest studies of political socialization was completed by Fred Greenstein (1965) who studied fourth grade, nine and ten year old, students. Greenstein found that fourth graders knew who the President was, thought that the President is the most important person in society, and described him as a positive and benevolent figure. Greenstein found that 63% of fourth graders knew the difference between parties. However, Moore, et. al. (1985), found something quite different during their research twenty years later. Moore, et. al., found that only 6-7% of fourth graders know the difference between parties, and those who do are likely to qualify their statements, perhaps indicating uncertainty. The discrepancy between Greenstein and Moore, et. al.’s findings are partially resolved by research conducted by Hess and Torney (1967). They found that while ten-year-old fifth graders may not know explicit differences between parties, they had acquired political attitudes or beliefs. Hess and Torney’s findings are in line with Gardner’s framework that the ten year old mind seeks to evaluate the merits of both sides of the argument to reach a conclusion.

The order in which children at this age begin to understand different levels of their communities is also in line with Gardner’s developmental framework because
children begin to understand their communities in stages based on the complexity of the issues with which it presents them. Greenstein found that children first understand their national and local governments and do not understand their state government until much later. Children move from understanding the candidate then, as they age, they are more interested in the issues. (Greenstein, 1965) The developing interest in issues may be attributable to development of the ten-year-old mind that seeks to understand both sides of a conflict. For example, a ten year old can understand the public function of a local judge or the President and they are aware that there are reasons an individual would want to elect one candidate and not another, but they do not understand and are not interested in the issues involved in the election. A desire to understand the issues and the adolescent’s ability to see him or herself relative to those issues comes as he or she moves from the concrete understanding of the ten-year-old mind to the abstract levels of understanding in the fifteen-year-old frame of mind.

*The Fifteen Year Old Mind*

According to Gardner the fifteen-year-old mind can understand abstractions, particularly the perspectives of others relative to himself or herself. (1995) By eighth grade, children are just beginning children to enter the era of the fifteen year old mind. At this age Jaros (1973) found that children can distinguish between candidates based on their platform issues. Hess and Torney (1967) also found that by eighth grade the children had an ability to understand abstract qualities such as a “network of nations” and how they might work together to solve a problem. This may be related to the child’s growth towards a more “peer-oriented” network since Jaros found that by eighth grade peers are the communication network through which children will continue to be
socialized. Jaros further supports the idea of a peer network through his finding that schools become the new structure through which cognitive and value-based learning is stimulated, particularly through bodies such as the Student Council. (1973) Additionally, Hess and Torney found that by the eighth grade students had the same level of political knowledge as their teachers, which seems to indicate either that teachers are not politically well informed or that the children in this study had reached full political development by this stage. (1967)

Consistent with Piaget’s work, Sigel and Hoskin (1977) also found that by the end of adolescence individuals can easily understand abstract reasoning. Those who appear to be “fully socialized towards politics” are those who are willing to process political stimuli in their environments. In contrast, those individuals who do not have the same skills in political reasoning withdraw from engaging in the political world. Although there are certainly young voters who choose to be engaged in politics, Sigel and Hoskin also found that those in the eighteen to twenty-five age group are less interested in voting than older populations. This lack of interest maybe associated with the willingness of individuals in that age group to process political stimuli. Eighteen to twenty-five year olds may be more concerned with other activities, such as completing their formal education or finding a job, than in choosing to process political information. The individuals who do choose to process political information, Sigel and Hoskin suggest, must often take any additional political learning upon themselves and seek out information on their own. This may be, as Kohlberg suggests, because not all individuals make it to the final stages of development. Sigel and Hoskin found that these young voters who do engage in politics are also more likely to have unorthodox or extreme
views. Holding unorthodox or extreme views is a finding consistent with information that individuals would have to seek out for themselves as opposed to more mainstream information and viewpoints that may not have been made accessible or appealing to the 18-25 year-old age cohort.

As a result, it is clear that by the time a child reaches the age of a young voter he or she might have processed the world through each of Gardner's stages. Through the eyes of the five year old mind where the child is focused purely on associations of "good" and "bad" in their world of discovering political objects. Through the eyes of the ten year old mind where different opinions can be justified and an understanding of the President begins to develop. Through the eyes of the fifteen year old mind where the adolescent can see the world and different candidates or issues through a variety of perspectives. At this age political learning may be equivalent to that of adults, if the child makes it to Kohlberg's final stage, and seeking more knowledge or voting becomes a choice the young voter makes based on the moral world he or she has developed.

Community

As Gardner points out, development occurs within a larger specific context—the community. Gimpel, Lay, and Schuknecht (2003) found that growing up in a particular place affects an individual's political values regardless of whether that individual moves later in life. The political values of a community are likely to have a large effect on the parents as they raise the child in any community. Of specific importance is the dynamic between the individual's political preferences and the preferred political party of the community. Rural areas tend to be associated with the Republican Party and voter registration occurs more consistently across those areas, while urban areas are largely
associated with the Democratic Party. Gimpel et. al. found that the best places to raise children who are more likely to be engaged in politics are in communities that have high voter turnout or Republican-leaning locales where political discussion occurs frequently. Democrats living around a majority of Republicans are more likely to feel comfortable talking about politics than vice versa. This suggests that the localized context of more consistent Republican involvement facilitates conversations about politics. However, when Republicans live in environments where they are the minorities, they move toward become significantly less likely to talk about politics, less knowledgeable about politics, and a lower level of felt self-efficacy.

Gimpel et. al. (2003), also found that civic minded children are more likely to grow up in environments where their peers identify with a party regardless of whether that identification is as a Republican, Democrat, or as an Independent. This finding suggests that a piece of civic development for children is that they need to live in communities where adults and their friends identify with some sort of political value based norms. As we discuss the party identification of individuals in the coming chapters, it is important to note that people of different party associations tend to have different feelings about political engagement. According to Barber (1992) and Campbell (2006), for example, Democrats are more likely to be worried that individuals are engaged in seeking social and political changes through non-governmental means, because they would rather that engagement occur through government established agencies, whereas Conservatives report being less concerned about this fact.
Media

Since the media often acts as a source for political knowledge we feel that it is necessary to examine it in the context of the community. Since, the news transferred to local communities is filtered by the media, it is necessary to investigate how communities access the media during elections. A survey by the Pew Research Center (2008) found that only 33% of individuals under thirty were concerned with keeping up with the daily news, which stands in stark contrast to 68% of seniors who reported doing so. Milner (2002) attributes this to the young voter’s need for constant stimulation and resulting inability to be attentive to things that they find mundane, such as the news. The use of news media, though, is to a certain extent based on the context. Macedo et. al. reports that in recent years networks have been spending less time covering campaigns elections. From 1992 to 2000 there was a decrease in coverage from 500 minutes to 268 minutes. (Macedo et. al., 2005) If media coverage is still declining, but youth participation is rising, it may be that the reduced quantity of possible, but higher quality, coverage may be appealing to this group. This is a possible suggestion for future research.

The 2008 Election

The research conducted for this paper comes at an opportune time, just after the 2008 Presidential Elections. The timing of the elections and this paper will allow us to investigate the political engagement of the current youth voting age cohort in the context of this election.

At the time of this paper final data are not available about the 2008 election; however National Exit Poll data, which is historically quite similar to final data, are available. Based on these data CIRCLE estimates that 23 million Americans under the age of 30 voted in 2008, an increase of 3.4 million over the 2004 election. These numbers
would bring the engagement percent up to 52-53% for this under thirty age group, which is as close to the 1972 55% engagement level for individuals under thirty as has been seen since. (CIRCLE, Turnout, 2009) However, we do not know whether the 2008 increase is a one time occurrence, or a long-term trend. Although these voting levels are close to the highest they have been, they are part of the comparatively low overall voting rates in the United States.

In studying the engagement of young voters, it is possible that their decisions were influenced by the dynamics of this particular election as well as their socialization towards politics. This situational effect could be due to the “open” election, the first since 1952 and second since 1928 without an incumbent President or Vice President on the ticket; the new youth norm of engagement created by others; or by the candidates themselves. Additionally, it is possible that the engagement of youth voters during this particular election was due to an alternate third factor completely outside of socialization and the election. All of these factors, or a combination of them, could provide a possible explanation for youth engagement during the 2008 election. An analysis of how and why young people choose to be engaged in politics will aid in making suggestions about the strength of socialization and the election as factors.

Conclusion

From the political socialization literature outlined above, it seems that the process of political socialization fits in with Howard Gardner’s discussion of “frames of mind.” As children age, they not only gain more political knowledge but that they understand politics in different ways. The desire to conduct this study came from an observation of apparent apathy among young voters, and the political socialization literature suggests
that low levels of engagement may be the result of failings in the political learning processes of these individuals.

In the chapters that follow, we will first examine in a survey, the voting behaviors of the senior class at the University of Richmond, this will produce a portrait of what the youth voting cohort looks like today. The results will also allow us to identify groups, varying in their political engagement, and enable us to better understand the patterns of political socialization in each of these groups. Because the socialization literature leads us to believe that there is something unique about high engagement individuals, following the survey we will conduct interviews to obtain more detailed information about the political socialization histories of these individuals. Although our decision about what type of study to engage in was informed by the socialization literature, we will still consider the possibility of all three possible explanations—socialization, the election, and alternate factors—for this year’s youth engagement.
Introduction

Hypotheses

This study was guided by five hypotheses. First, because this election was an “open” election, we hypothesize that youth voters will be more likely to seek change over the previous President, George Bush, by voting for the Democratic Party and its candidate Barack Obama. Second, we hypothesize that earlier ages of political socialization, particularly the age at which an individual first recalls knowledge about politics or political figures, correlates directly with higher levels of political engagement. Third, individuals who are not highly engaged in politics will be more likely to use more convenient and/or less sophisticated media sources for political information such as online information or comedy shows. Fourth, since the literature referenced above produced claims that parents play an essential role in their child’s political education, we hypothesize that participants whose parents are highly engaged in politics will be more likely to be highly engaged in politics themselves. Similarly, our fifth hypothesis is that highly engaged individuals will have more friends who volunteer politically.

Methods

Participants

Seven hundred and four University of Richmond seniors were contacted by email to participate in a survey. One hundred and ninety three students, a response rate of 27.4%, voluntarily responded to the email which was sent to their campus email addresses and included a link to the survey. Individuals in the senior class range between
and referred to as “Other Groups” (OG). The High Engagement (HE) group was formed by individuals who responded that they had volunteered during the 2008 election. It included 20 members. The Medium Engagement (ME) group was defined by individuals who attended political rallies or campaign events, but did not volunteer. It included 62 individuals. The Low Engagement (LE) group contained individuals who did not volunteer or attend events but did still vote. It contained 89 individuals. Finally, the NV group was defined by individuals who did not volunteer, did not attend any events, and did not vote. It contained 22 participants.

High Engagement individuals volunteered a mean of 17.6 days with 5 days being the median number. The difference between these numbers is the result of very high amounts of volunteering among some participants, such as an entire summer, in contrast to some participants who volunteered for only a day. Although this indicates a wide range of HE volunteerism, the more important factor is that they took the time to volunteer. The types of volunteerism contributed by HE individuals was largely at campaign offices (50%), knocking on doors (40%), assisting in voter registration (35%), or handing out pamphlets or stickers (35%). High Engagement individuals were significantly more likely to answer that civic duty contributed “not very much” to their decision to vote (30%) than were members of other groups (13.3%). This may be because HE individuals were identified on the basis of their volunteerism which is a facet of engagement that extends beyond the level of civic duty.

**Hypothesis 1: Situational Effects**

The self-identification of respondent’s political parties produced statistically significant differences across all groups. More NV individuals, 31.8%, identified
21 and 22 years old. The respondents included 66 males and 127 females. 168 of the participants were Caucasian, 9 were African American, 8 were Asian, 4 were Hispanic, and 4 selected the option ‘Other’. No direct compensation was offered to the participants; however participants could enter their name on a separate page to be entered to win a drawing for a 2G Apple Shuffle or a $75 gift certificate to The Tobacco Company, a local Richmond restaurant.

**Materials**

Participants completed a questionnaire asking about how they learned about politics, or their “socialization to politics,” and their involvement during the 2008 Presidential Election. The questionnaire was constructed for the purposes of this study based on the political socialization literature and the main factors of political influence identified in that literature.

The first question on the survey asked participants how much they believed others voted because it was a civic duty. The survey asked three questions about the participant’s involvement during the 2008 election, including how many days he or she volunteered, the types of volunteering, if any, that they completed; and the number of rallies or campaign events they attended. A further question asked about the types of media used by participants to obtain information about politics. Two questions asked about whether the participant voted, and if so, who he or she voted for. The survey also included seven questions about socialization. One asked directly about the participant’s recall of how old they were when they first knew who the president was. Three questions asked about how frequently the participant’s parents talked about politics before they came to college, how early in their life they recall their parents talking about
politics, and whether or not their parents had volunteered politically. Three questions asked about how frequently the participant’s friends talked about politics before they came to college, how early in their life they recall their friends talking about politics, and how many of their friends had volunteered politically. Finally, two questions provided information about the race and gender of the participant.

Procedure

Participants were selected through the University of Richmond Office of the Registrar based on their status as a student who will be graduating in May 2009. The Office of the Registrar provided the email addresses of these students, and each received an email with a hyperlink to the actual survey which was posted on the website, Survey Monkey. The first page of the survey included all 19 questions and the second page of the survey left a blank for individuals to enter their name for a chance to win one of the two prizes. All participants entered their names, and, as they were notified in the email, their names were kept separate from their entry data in order to protect their confidentiality. None of the participants left blank any of the required items on the survey.

Results and Discussion

In the following discussion, results noted as significant reached an alpha level of 0.05 or smaller.

Descriptive Statistics: Engagement Groupings

Based on the survey the participants were divided into four groups: High Engagement (HE), Medium Engagement (ME), Low Engagement (LE), and Non Voters (NV). In most of the analyses that follow, the latter three of these groups are combined
themselves as Republicans than as any other group (HE= 10%, ME= 21.0%, LE= 21.3%). There were more NV individuals who considered themselves “something else” (13.6%), than occurred in any of the other group (HE= 0%, ME= 6.5%, LE= 4.5%). The prevalence of NVs not identifying as a member of one of the major parties suggests that there may have been individuals who felt disenfranchised by the available political options. Across the four groups, the political preferences follow a linear pattern that indicates increased preference for Obama-Biden as engagement levels increased. Differences were statistically significant. (Figure 3) 90% of HE participants voted for Obama, in contrast to ME at 74.2% and LE at 67.4%. Likewise a linear trend of decreased preference for McCain-Palin was produced as levels of engagement increased.
only 10% of HE individuals voted for McCain compared to 24.2% of ME and 30.3% of LE individuals.

By investigating how High Engagement individuals are a part of the total distribution of students, we are able to measure the situational effect—how much engagement is related to Obama. Of the individuals who voted for Obama, 14.5% of them became part of the group we define as high engagement. By contrast only 2.3% of individuals who voted for McCain could be defined as part of the HE group. This difference is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. This difference suggests that either Obama supporters are more likely to be highly engaged, or that highly engaged individuals were more likely to vote for Obama.

The results of the survey indicate that even among HE individuals there were more people (90%) who voted for Obama than who self-identified as being a Democrat (80%). More significantly, among the ME and LE groups only 40.3% and 41.6% respectively identified as Democrats, but they voted for Obama at 74.2% and 67.4% respectively. By measuring the place of HE as part of the total number of students surveyed, we are again able to see that this is a statistically significant situational effect. 19.3% of individuals who self identified as Democrats could be classified as members of the HE group, while only 4.9% of the Republicans were members of the HE group. This Democratic leaning of party identification among the respondents is significant at the 95% confidence level. Again, this suggests that either Democrats were more involved in 2008; or High Engagement, from socialization, leads people to become Democrats.

It is not clear, however, if these voting trends a result of the circumstances of this particular election or the start of a new youth trend. The movement of close to 30% of
individuals in each of the ME and LE categories, who were not Democrats, towards voting for Obama could be a result of his campaign platform of “change,” or the youth voter’s personal identification with him as a younger candidate. On the other hand, the movement could be a result of McCain’s less successful mobilization of the youth voting cohort. These voting trends may be related to the concept of “political realignment,” or a distinct shift in voting trends towards one party over time, which has occurred in the past with similar effects on youth voting populations during elections such as the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan.

Hypothesis 2: Early Socialization and Frequent Conversations

The first hypothesis, that higher levels of engagement are correlated with earlier ages of political socialization was generally supported. Although the age at which all participant groups, “first remember knowing who the president was,” was 7 years of age when rounded to the nearest whole number, the level of school at which the participants first recall their parents and friends talking about politics differs greatly across groups. Across all 193 individuals the participants remembered their parents talking about politics in Elementary School more than their friends (Parents= 52.3%, Friends= 10.4%). HE individuals were more likely to remember their parents talking about politics in Elementary School (60%) than OG (51.4%). This difference, though, is not statistically significant. However, 25% of HE reported political conversation with their friends in elementary school compared to 8.7% of other groups. The difference is not statistically significant across all groups, but the HE group’s more frequent response of “elementary school,” suggests that they are different from other groups. These numbers suggest that while early political conversations among both parents and friends are important, HE
individuals are more distinct in their early political conversations with friends. Although it may be that people who talk more with their friends are more engaged in politics, this finding may suggest that encouraging earlier political conversations among young children may assist in the development of High Engagement individuals.

Frequency of conversations with parents and friends, though, seems to be a more statistically suggestive characteristic of High Engagement individuals. The importance of parents is further supported by the data about how frequently the participants’ parents talked about politics before they came to college. This finding was statistically significant across all groups at the 95% confidence level. HE individuals reported more than other groups that their parents “very frequently” talked about politics before they came to college (HE= 30%, OG=22.0%). HE were also less likely, compared to other groups (40.5%) to report that their parents “not very frequently” spoke about politics before they came to college (15%). NV by contrast were the least likely to report “very frequent” conversations (13.6%) and the most likely to report “not very frequent” conversations (59.1%). For each group, if the percent of, “very frequently” and “not very frequently” answers are compared the differences between the results we obtained intensifies. In order to see this difference the percentage of not very frequently answers are subtracted from the very frequently answers. The results show that High Engagement individuals were the only group to answer parent conversation occurs “very frequently” more than “not very frequently” (HE= 15%, ME= -4.8%, LE= -21.3%, NV= -45.5%).
Additionally, when we consider what portion of each answer choice is composed of High Engagement individuals, we find that they form 13.6% and 14.5% of the total for the responses “very frequently” and “somewhat frequently” respectively. By contrast, they form only 4.1% of the total respondents who answered “not very frequently.” Non-voters form only 6.8% and 6.6% of the total for the responses “very frequently” and “somewhat frequently” respectively; while, they constitute 17.8% of the “not very frequently” response group.

In addition to finding that frequent parent conversation is more common amongst High Engagement individuals, the same is true of the HE group and their friends. 25% of HE individuals reported speaking with their friends very frequently before they came to college, while none of the NV group reported this. HE individuals form 18.5% of the people who answered “very frequently,” while NV forms 0% of that group. Respondents
who answered “very frequently” or “somewhat frequently” were more likely to be in the LE, ME, or HE categories. (Very Frequently: LE= 11.2%, ME= 19.4%, HE= 25%. Somewhat Frequently: LE= 49.4%, ME= 51.6%, HE= 65%). Likewise, 63.6% of NV individuals reported speaking with their friends “not very frequently” about politics before college, while only 10% of HE individuals reported this. NV form 18.8% of the total number of individuals who responded “not very frequently,” while HE individuals form 2.9% of the total. The difference across all groups for this finding was statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. Based on this finding, it seems that not only are frequent conversations about politics with parents before college important, but so too are those same conversations with friends.

Although the age at which parents or friends talk to their children was not statistically significant, we did find that the frequency of those conversations is statistically significant with very frequent conversations being an attribute of the High Engagement group. The literature shows that if individuals are socialized they will be socialized before they are engaged in volunteering. As a result, early conversations before the individual’s engagement occurs must be part of the socialization process. This finding suggests that frequent conversations with parents and friends about politics may encourage an individual to be highly engaged.

**Hypothesis 3: Media Use**

The third hypothesis, that individuals of lower engagement levels would be more likely to use convenient and less sophisticated media sources such as the internet or television, particularly comedic, news sources was largely supported. (Figure 4)
Use of online media sources was reported at a high level, between 68.5% and 75%, across all groups. This is likely a generational effect since computers came into widespread use during the Elementary School years of the participants surveyed. The use of different types of television media, though, does support our hypothesis. Comedy Central, perhaps the least sophisticated of pre-designated choices on the survey, use was higher at 38.7% among other groups (OG) versus HE individuals at a much lower rate of 15%. Fox, which has a reputation for being one of the more partisan media sources, was used the least by HE individuals (15%) compared to the average of other groups (26.6%). Notable among these other groups were non voters whose use of Fox was at 36.4%.

Since Fox's partisan affiliation is with the Republican Party, the increased use of Fox among NV, a moderate percentage of whom self-identified as Republicans, and its
decreased use among HE individuals, very few of whom self-identified as Republicans. CNN, considered by conservatives to have a liberal bias, was one of the most used sources by HE individuals (75%) and was lowest among NV (54.5%). Again the disparity between numbers across this variable could be related to the Republican leaning of the NV group and the Democratic leaning of the HE group. However, when network news is considered, HE individuals uses was lower at 15% than other groups (31.2%), with the greatest use among these groups being Low Engagement (LE) individuals at 34.8%. It is interesting that LE individuals are the group with the most frequent network news use because network news has a reputation for being biased. Although LE individuals did not volunteer, they still did manage to vote, so use of network news use may be their attempt to be aware of important information despite the fact that network news does not have the time to do higher level analysis of information.

High Engagement individuals are particularly distinctive when more traditional types of media are considered. HE individuals read local newspapers at a lower rate (15%) than other groups (28.3%). Although this fact may seem detrimental to their engagement, because some theories suggest that engagement flows outward from engagement in the local community first, it may be an indicator instead that HE individuals of this generation are more interested in considering the broader picture of issues. This suggestion is supported by the fact that HE individuals read national newspapers at a notably higher rate (85%) than other groups (65.9%), with NV being lowest among these other groups (50.0%). HE's increased use of print media indicates that they are willing to make the effort to obtain information that may not necessarily be the most recent, compared to online sources, but they are richer in content and analysis
than stories that are quickly posted online. Consistent with this, the use of NPR was significantly increased among HE individuals (45%) compared to other groups (12.1%), with NV representing the lowest level of usage among these groups (4.5%). Unless an individual spends significant amounts of time in the car, it is not necessarily convenient, or something that a youth voter would think of, to turn on the radio. Particularly when iTunes and Pandora make listening to your own music preferences very easy, young voters do not seek out the radio and perhaps less likely to listen to talk radio of any sort. The increased use of NPR among HE individuals again probably indicates that they are seeking out a source of political information that they think contains something different or a greater depth of analysis.

Hypotheses 4 and 5: Parent and Friend Volunteerism

The fourth hypothesis, that children whose parents have volunteered are more likely to volunteer themselves, was supported by the survey. 40% of HE individuals reported that their parents had volunteered. This figure is much greater than the volunteerism (19.7%) reported by other groups. The high frequency of HE individuals who have parents who have volunteered suggests that their children may be following the example set by their parents. By examining HE individuals as part of the total, we find that the result is near statistical significance, just shy of the 90% confidence level. 19% of individuals who reported that their parents had volunteered could be classified as High Engagement, while only 8.3% of individuals who reported their parents did not volunteer were part of the HE group.

The fifth hypothesis, that high engagement individuals would have more friends who had volunteered was supported. The frequency of reporting that 0 friends had
volunteered increased linearly as engagement levels decreased, (HE= 0%, ME=4.8%, LE=5.6%, NV=13.6%) and the frequency of reporting that 3 or more friends had volunteered decreased as engagement levels decreased, with a large drop between ME and LE voters (HE=58.3%, ME=58.1%, LE= 41.6%, NV=45.5%). The differences across engagement level groups of the amount of friends they had volunteering was not statistically significant. The differential across groups, from HE to NV, of friend volunteerism was at its largest only 13.6%, and was reported for having 0 friends who had volunteered. Thus, while early conversations with friends are more important for influencing high engagement, the role model of parents may be more important than are pre-college friend role models.

A closer look at the difference between the two parents of a High Engagement individual also produced interesting, although not statistically significant, results. HE individuals were more likely to have mothers that they identified as being Democrats (65%) compared to other groups (37.6%), particularly NV (22.7%). Likewise, HE individuals were least likely to identify their mothers as Republicans (15%) compared to other groups (34.1%), particularly NV (40.9%). The reversal of party identification of mothers between HE and NV indicates that these individuals are likely to have mothers that belong to the same party as they do.
This perhaps suggests that the involvement of the mother in the child’s political socialization is particularly important. While HE individuals reported their fathers as being from an almost even distribution of party preferences (Democrat 35%, Independent 25%, Republican 35%), by contrast NV largely identified their fathers as being Republicans (59.1%). This may indicate that participants with a Republican mother is likely to have both parents be Republicans. The consistency of transfer of party values from parents to children suggests that children are not voting for the opposite party as a reactionary rebellion against the political views of their parents.

Comparison of Results

By using the statistical variable measure, Cramer’s V, we can measure the relative association between variables; the greater the value of Cramer’s V, the stronger the relationship between the independent and dependent variables being measured. By comparing the strength of Cramer’s V for our strongest measures of socialization and the
strongest campaign effects, we can see which one of these factors was more significant among the individuals surveyed.

### Table 1: Cramér's V Values for Variables of Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socialization Measures</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>P**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency R* talked with friends before college</td>
<td>.210</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency R talked with parents before college</td>
<td>.194</td>
<td>.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or more of R's parents volunteered</td>
<td>.191</td>
<td>.114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situational/Campaign Effects</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R's party identification</td>
<td>.209</td>
<td>.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who R voted for</td>
<td>.216</td>
<td>.049</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*R is for Respondent  
** P is the numeric significance value as has been the basis of reported confidence levels throughout this chapter

In the above table, we can see overall, relatively equal support for both the situational effects of the campaign and the effects of socialization. Among both categories we found evidence of statistical significance and interesting trends. Most significant among these was the frequency with which the respondent spoke with his or her friends before coming to college. Second most significant was the respondent’s party identification. Causation though is not entirely clear. The question about frequency of friend and parent talk was asked specifically about the respondent’s experiences before college, which suggests that these conversations occurred before the individuals High Engagement began. However,
High Engagement could cause parent volunteerism or vice versa; and party identification could cause High Engagement, or again, vice versa. As we continue with our research of high engagement individuals, it is clear that the situational effects of this election were strong and may provide a realm of equally effective suggestions about ways to increase engagement among young people.

**Conclusions**

From this survey it is evident that there is something particular about High Engagement individuals that makes them distinct from other groups. High Engagement individuals voted for Obama more than other individuals, were more likely to believe that civic duty did not contribute to their decision to vote, talk with their parents frequently about politics before they came to college, use national newspapers and NPR, have parents and more friends who had volunteered politically, and to talk with their friends frequently about politics before they came to College. Although we found several meaningful results, it is not clear whether all of these can be contributed to the process of political socialization. In order to know more about the roles of political socialization and the particular circumstances of the 2008 election in mobilizing high engagement people for the 2008 election, we will conduct interviews of high engagement individuals. The next chapter will discuss these interviews and provide a more vivid snapshot of what it is like to be an individual who is highly engaged in politics.
Chapter III: Interviews on High Engagement

Introduction

After surveying the senior class at the University of Richmond, it was clear that High Engagement individuals were unique from all of the other groups. Not only did they have higher rates of participation through volunteering and campaign or rally event attendance, they were more likely to have had parents who volunteered as well as parents and friends who spoke with them frequently about politics. These findings support the suggestion from the socialization literature that High Engagement individuals have a strong knowledge base about politics through their parents, friends, community, and media. Because the questions on the survey were not open-ended, interviews were conducted in order to obtain more in depth information about High Engagement individuals. Our goals were to learn about the socialization histories of these individuals, their relationships with their parents and friends, and the types of media they used in school and use currently.

Hypotheses

First, we hypothesize that the results of the interviews will be consistent with the findings about High Engagement individuals who responded to the survey. We will investigate to what extent the interviewees participation was the result of their socialization or the dynamics of the 2008 election in particular. Specifically, because High Engagement individuals in the survey had a high frequency of conversations with their parents about politics we hypothesize that this will hold true for interviewees and that they will receive the most encouragement to pursue their political engagement from
their parents. Since, young children spend a lot of their time in school, and are likely to receive most of their formal education there, we can know how much and what types of instruction they received. We wanted to know more about the types of activities the interviewees participated in when they were younger. We suggest that the use of non-textbook media would be helpful in keeping children engaged in learning political information. Concurrent with our findings about the use of print media among High Engagement individuals in the survey, we also wanted to ask the interviewees what types of media they were currently using. Since the survey found High Engagement individuals to be unique from other groups, we will also ask the interviewees if they saw themselves as more engaged than their peers, and how they believed their peers’ engagement and media use to be different from their own.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Fifteen students at the University of Richmond were asked to participate in an interview on their involvement in the 2008 election and how they learned about politics earlier in life. Students who were known to have received course credit in the Political Science department for their volunteerism were contacted first by email. Interviews with these students sometimes produced names of others who were involved in volunteering with them and these additional students were subsequently contacted. A “SpiderByte,” an electronic posting sent to all students in the campus community, was issued for two days advertising our search for participants. 13 of the participants were interviewed in person and 2 of the interviews were conducted via telephone. Because the number of people who qualify as High Engagement is relatively small, the individuals interviewed
ranged from being members of the freshman through senior classes and were between 19 and 22 years of age. The respondents included 4 females and 11 males. Fourteen of the participants were Caucasian and 1 was of Middle Eastern origin. Ten of the respondents, 6 men and 4 women, were Democrats, and 5, all men, were Republicans. No compensation was offered to the participants. In the survey, voting for Obama was a statistically significant response for all voting categories. High Engagement individuals were more likely than members of other engagement types to have voted for Obama.

*Interview Protocol*

Participants were interviewed individually about their involvement during the 2008 Presidential Election, how they learned about or were “socialized to” politics,” and the ways in which they use various forms of media to obtain information about politics. The questions were selected for the purposes of this study based on the political socialization literature and the results of the survey conducted of the senior class at the University of Richmond.

Participants were first asked eight questions about their involvement. The first four questions asked for a description of their involvement in the 2008 election and how they selected that candidate, when and how they first became interested in the 2008 election, if anyone encouraged them to pursue their involvement, and a description of their history of involvement in politics. Three questions asked the participants to quantify their level of political involvement and knowledge in comparison to their peers and whether they could have done more to volunteer or wish they had access to more information about politics. The final two questions in this section asked the participants
about the political involvement of their parents and if religion, or lack of religion, plays a role in their political views or involvement.

The second section, composed of five multi-part questions, asked participants about their political socialization. The first question asked participants to recall their very first political memory, the first election that they remember—including the first time that they stayed up late to watch the returns—and the first time they remember watching election speeches. Second, participants were asked about the role of their parents in their political development: how frequently they talked about politics before and after the participant came to college and if they are associated with the same or different political parties. Third, participants were asked about the formal political education they received in the school system: whether there was specific curriculum at specific ages, what types of non-textbook media they recall being used, and if the school was a private or public school. Participants were then asked about the frequency with which their friends before and during college talked about politics. Last, in order to gauge when participants reached a sophisticated level of socialization they were asked when they first became interested in elections and when they first recall believing that the results of an election could affect them.

The third section of questions asked participants about their current engagement with media sources: what sources they use, what they believe to be the most informative of these sources, the types of sources popular among their peers, whether certain types of media were problematic or unreliable. This section also asked participants if they watched election events on television as they occurred or if they used an alternative
source, such as the internet, to watch the event at a later time. Lastly, participants were asked if they watched these election events with anyone else, such as a class or friends.

The final section of questions asked participants about their community backgrounds: what city and state they are from, the number of residents in their hometown, and if the people in their town are primarily associated with a particular party. If the participant grew up in more than one community, the questions were asked about both of these communities.

**Results and Discussion**

All responses given by participants were recorded. The percentage of specific reoccurring responses were coded and counted. The results and discussion that follow examine the frequency of these responses and are compared to the results within the High Engagement group from the survey where appropriate. Unique responses and stories will be recounted where helpful in giving a flavor of the range of answers provided by participants.

**Candidate selection**

Interview participants indicated three main reasons why they would select a candidate: message, policy, or cult of leadership. “Message” was used to describe key platform words such as “change” for the Obama campaign. “Policy” referred to particular segments of the candidate’s plan or outlook for the future, such as changes to health care or the War in Iraq. “Cult of leadership” describes the aura surrounding the candidate: he or she was inspirational, had a history of strong leadership, or as one interviewee put it “he was the right man for the job.” Four individuals cited “message” as the primary reason for selecting the candidate they worked for and three individuals cited
the “cult of leadership.” However, the most popular among the choices was the candidate’s “policy,” which was selected by seven individuals: six who worked for Democratic candidates, primarily Obama, and one who worked for a Republican candidate, McCain. This choice by interviewees is consistent with the political socialization literature that individuals with high levels of political knowledge will be more concerned with particular issues as opposed to being swayed by less concrete information such as the broader message or history of past experiences. By not selecting the “cult of leadership,” the interviewees suggest that they were more interested in the prospects for the future as opposed to a history of leadership. This is particularly interesting given that Obama was the more unusual of the candidates, and was the candidate offering a different style of leadership, and the high engagement individuals in this study working for Obama primarily selected “policy” as their answer instead. The three individuals who did select the “cult of leadership,” as their reason for working for their candidate were Republicans who had worked for John McCain. The division across parties for this answer may be the result of this particular election since Obama and McCain had very different lengths of political involvement and leadership backgrounds.

Involvement

One of the greatest benefits of conducting interviews was the insightful depth into the interviewee’s history of involvement. Participants gave their age of their first political involvement and the median age was 17. This indicates that the majority of individuals have been involved in political volunteerism since before they came to college. Knowing that High Engagement individuals are not just all volunteering for the
first time adds more weight to the process of political socialization as opposed to the period effect of this particular election.

In addition to their history of involvement, individuals also provided detailed information about the types of jobs they completed while working for their candidate during the 2008 election cycle. Some interview participants completed more than one of the jobs we inquired about. The most common job among all interviewees was working at a call center or phone bank, eight of the participants volunteered in this way: three Republicans and five Democrats. Canvassing, or knocking on doors across a neighborhood, was the second most frequent volunteer job, with six of the participants, all of whom were Democrats. Recent literature indicates, particularly for the voting block under thirty years of age, that asking an individual to vote, especially when the “ask” occurs in person, is the most persuasive and financially effective way for campaigns to mobilize voters. It is noteworthy that all of the individuals who participated in canvassing were Democrats. The lack of Republicans doing this volunteer work suggests that it may have been a failing of the McCain campaign to not do so. Personal face-to-face contact is still a persuasive strategy for voter mobilization, and it was a failure of the McCain campaign not to have used it.

Participants were also asked whether or not they felt they could have been more involved in their election work. Eleven of the fifteen individuals interviewed felt that they could have been more involved. All of the individuals who answered that they did not feel that they, “could have done more” came from Democrats; their answers may be a result of the successful election of Obama or the result of their very high levels of involvement in the election in senior campus positions. Even individuals, some of whom
held titles such as the “Canvassing Coordinator” or who worked three to four days per week, such as interviewees Amanda (D) and Nate (R) respectively, felt that they could have done more—whether by volunteering more time or volunteering across a longer span of time—to help with the success of the election.

When respondents were questioned about which, if either, of their parents had volunteered for a political campaign, seven of the interviewees responded that their mothers had volunteered while none of them responded that their father had ever volunteered. Seven of fifteen respondents is a response rate of 46.7% which is close to the 40% of High Engagement individuals who responded on the survey that one of their parents had volunteered. The parallel between these figures suggests that the parent who is actually volunteering is the mother. The consistency between the rate of volunteerism reported in the survey and through the interviews provides continued support for the suggestion that the parent’s past engagement in volunteerism, particularly the mother, may reinforce these values for their children. The suggestion that extending regular parent conversation coupled with high parent engagement will result in high levels of participant engagement was supported by these findings.

*Socialization Memories*

During the interview, participants were asked to describe their first “political memory,” even if they did not fully understand this memory. Participants were told that it could be the first thing that they could recall hearing or seeing about politics. Eleven of the interviewees’ early memories were about national politics. The fact that these memories were based largely in national politics suggests that individuals first memories about politics and knowledge of who the president was were either the same experience
or occurred around the same point in time as their first political socialization experience. For example, one of the interviewee’s first memories was not a national memory, but he later had a memory of national politics at the same age. His first memory was of Rudy Giuliani’s election as Mayor of New York City in 1994 when he was seven years old. This memory was not of a national election, but he does remember talking about national politics and the midterm elections in school at the same age. Since the question on the survey “how old were you when you first knew who the President was,” did not show differences across engagement groups, the question for interviewees asked them to reach as far back as they possibly could in their minds for their earliest memory. However, the results of this question were identical to the findings on the survey, the mean age responded by participants was 7.2 years of age and the median age was 7. The consistency of memory ages across groups suggests that high engagement children are not socialized towards politics earlier than their less engaged counterparts. These findings are consistent with Moore, Lare, and Wagner (1985) who found that children learn first about national political figures and then look inwards towards their own communities with understanding of state-level politics as the final stage of development.

Individuals were asked to recall the most influential media used in their schools that either engaged them in learning about the political process or that they enjoyed the most. Participants mentioned a wide range of responses; however, three types of activities reoccurred frequently and elicited lengthy responses about the positive experiences of these events from the participants. The most frequent response across participant groups was that they watched movies of a political nature or videos of current or previous election debates in their history or government classes. The types of movies
that individuals recalled watching and being effective were varied—from *Legally Blonde II* to *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*—this may be an area where future research could be conducted on how and why these types of movies are effective as part of an individual's socialization. The second most frequent response was tied, at four individuals each, between participating in mock activities such as elections or reenactments and participating in class debates. The fact that participants recall enjoying and being influenced by activities that actively called for their own engagement is noteworthy as it suggests that individuals need to be physically or dynamically involved in their own socialization for it to be maximally effective. One interviewee, for example, recalled his first memory and strongest experience to be a reenactment of Bill Clinton’s inauguration, which had occurred a year earlier. He was selected to play the role of Bill Clinton, he was very pleased with since both of his parents were Democrats.

**Political Knowledge and Media Use**

How participants choose to seek out political knowledge is, in a sense, an extension of their formal political socialization that, as college students, they take upon themselves since they may not be receiving political information in their college coursework. Ten of the fifteen participants reported using print media sources to inform their political knowledge. Five of these respondents selected a print media source as one of the most informative sources that they used. Although all of these individuals supplemented that reading with online sources, several of them reported feeling as though print media has more time to verify facts and provide more in depth reflections on issues than do online sources. The most popular source for print media use was *The New York Times* which had six print readers and one reader who used the online version in addition
to other print newspapers. Four of The New York Times readers were Democrats and three were Republicans. Thirteen of the fifteen respondents reported using online sources as one of the ways that they obtain their information about politics, which is at a rate slightly higher (86.7%) than was reported by High Engagement individuals in the survey (75%).

Despite using sources they found to be more informative than what their peers used, only four of the individuals reported wishing they had access to more factual knowledge; in addition, two others did report wishing that they had more time to read the sources that they were already using. Nine of the individuals felt confident that they knew more factual information about politics than their peer group. Twelve of the respondents reported that they thought their peers used online sources and three reported that their peers used television sources to obtain their news and political information. Although these rates are in proportion to the rates at which the interviewees reported using these sources themselves, none of the respondents thought that their peers were using print newspapers as a media source. The lack of perceived print media use among peers suggests that the interviewees do see themselves as accessing a different type of media that may give them access to more information than their peers.

Parents and Involvement

Outside of formal education, which provides access to political knowledge, the results of the survey found that parents had an important impact on their children's political socialization. As a result, we decided to affirm these results in our interviews and investigate the different ways in which parents may continue to be influencing their children. Thirteen of the participants reported their mother as belonging to or voting for
the same party as they did in the 2008 election. Slightly fewer, ten individuals reported this same information about their fathers. Four of the five Republicans reported that both their parents were both Republicans, the fifth Republican reported that both of his parents were Democrats. Nine of the ten Democrats reported that their mother had voted for the Democratic candidate while only six of the Democrats reported this same information about their fathers. The consistency of party from parent to child suggests that children are not rebelling against their parents by voting for a different party, but instead that their parents are imparting political values to them as they become socialized towards politics. This suggestion is further supported by the fact that eight of the participants report talking about politics with their parents daily when they were living at home.

In the interviews, participants were asked to identify who had encouraged them as they pursued their political volunteerism. Six respondents indicated that the encouragement came from a friend who volunteered with them or had volunteered for the candidate previously. Eight respondents said that they were supported by their mother, which stands in contrast to three individuals who said they were encouraged by their father. All of the individuals who said that their fathers had provided encouragement also answered that their mother had provided encouragement as well. The most frequent response was that the mother had provided support for the participant’s engagement in politics. Since one would expect a child to receive support from both parents, the frequency of mother’s supporting the participants must be attributable to something special about her role as a mother, not just simply that she is a parent of the participant.
Perceptions of One's Own and Others' Involvement

As was previously reported, six of the respondents received support from their friends. Specifically, these friends providing support had either volunteered previously themselves or were volunteering with the individual who was interviewed. Interviewees were asked whether or not they believed they were more politically involved than their friends. Ten respondents believed that they were more involved, suggesting that the majority of individuals thought that they were “lone rangers” among their peer group. Since the individuals who had reported they were supported by a friend who volunteered with them, the individuals who were not “lone rangers” may be explained through their reported joint volunteerism. These findings suggest that individuals either volunteer with a friend or they seem themselves as alone in their peer group as the only one who volunteers politically.

We wanted to further clarify the role of friends in High Engagement student’s lives before they came to college, so respondents were also asked how frequently they talked with their friends about politics during this time period. While four individuals responded “frequently,” five of the interviewees responded “occasionally,” and the remainder of the group responded that they “never” talked with their pre-college friends about politics. These responses indicate that the level of conversations with peers were much lower than the frequency of conversations with parents during their period of socialization.

Conclusion

The interviews supported our hypothesis that the interviews would be consistent with the survey findings. The age of the individual’s involvement was found to have the
same mean in the interviews as was found in the surveys. The rate at which parents volunteered politically was at a very similar rate in the interviews as was found in the surveys. The frequency of parent conversations before the respondent came to college was at a very similar rate in the interviews as was found in the survey. Interviewees reported slightly higher internet usage than the members of the high engagement group in the survey, but this was only an 11.7% difference which is not significant given the small number of respondents in both groups.

Our inquiry into the activities interviewees participated during pre-college years and the use of print media was illuminated by the interviews. All of the participants recalled some use of non-textbook media in their classrooms in school, with participation in or observation of debates and simulations being among the most frequent answers. This finding suggests that the use of non-textbook media may be related to high levels of political engagement. Consistent with the survey, the interviewees indicated that they currently use print media at the same frequency as the High Engagement group in the survey. Through the interviews we were able to discover that The New York Times was the most popular print media source. This finding suggests that a sponsorship of young readership programs, particularly with The New York Times, may be successful in encouraging the development of High Engagement among pre-college students.

The interviews found that individuals did, in fact, see themselves as different from other peers who were not involved in political volunteerism. This finding provides further support for the differences between High Engagement groups and other individuals that was found in the survey. Since High Engagement individuals are distinctive, the following chapter will explore how to provide more experiences
associated with High Engagement to children and young adults including how they can be incorporated into education and the field of leadership.
Chapter Four: Conclusions

Introduction

Although voting is only one type of civic duty, or one way to exercise political engagement, using it as the basis for our study at the University of Richmond has produced findings and suggestions that are both interesting and meaningful. Since the new voters in this election are individuals who are more technologically savvy than their predecessors they and those who come after them will pose new mobilization challenges for politicians and community educators. However, because this age cohort has more in common educationally, as a result of No Child Left Behind legislation, than did earlier age cohorts, comprehensive strategies for change in this area may be possible.

It is impossible for us to make suggestions about increasing the effect of particular elections other than to say that “open” elections may increase voter engagement and more research in this is necessary. As a result, we will focus particularly on the suggestions for increasing engagement through traditional sources and not through the election itself. In this chapter we will summarize our findings and investigate suggestions for parents in helping their children to become more civic minded. Since school hours form most of a child’s day we will also investigate education projects that assist in increasing the political knowledge of children, how the use of media can be incorporated to enhance children’s engagement and ways that children can feel that they are an effective part of their communities.

The Role of Parents

Through the survey of University of Richmond seniors we found that high engagement individuals spoke with their parents more frequently about politics than other
individuals. High engagement individuals were also more likely to have parents who had volunteered politically. Both of these findings were supported through the interviews. The interviews further suggested that it was more likely that a high engagement individual had a mother who had volunteered politically as opposed to a father. None of the interviewees reported that their father had volunteered. Interviewees also reported being supported in their political volunteerism by their mother more frequently than any other group. Therefore, we generally suggest that parents—mothers in particular—play an active role in initiating family conversations about politics and set an example through politically volunteering themselves. Perhaps if fathers had volunteered in the same capacity as the mothers, their volunteerism could have the same effect. Since parents had a greater effect on their children than did the children’s peers, these recommendations are particularly important for enhancing political engagement among youths.

According to Macedo et. al., (2005) though, parents are equally, if not more, responsible for transmitting political orientations, rather than political interest, to their children. As a result, we suggest that the discussions both parents have with their children focus on bi-partisan and multi-dimensional political topics. Furthering the adolescent’s development toward a fifteen-year-old mind, which focuses on seeing issues from a variety of perspectives, will help the child to reach full moral and political knowledge development. Additionally, by heightening political discussion within the family the child is able to participate and develop his or her own views. If only one parent is present in the child’s life, it is equally important that this parent participate in their child’s political development, because the absence of a parent can be equally influential in a child’s development as the presence of both parents. (Jaros, 1973)
We also suggest that parents do more than simply serve as an example for their children through discussion. Since the parents of high engagement children were more likely to have volunteered politically, we suggest that parents become more involved in volunteering themselves. Ideally parents should volunteer politically, though, since there are links between public service engagement generally and political activism, parents should at least volunteer in the general sense to demonstrate to their child that they are invested in their community. Additionally, by talking about voting, and demonstrating to their children that voting is important through their actions, parents can serve as a role model to their children. Once a child knows that one of their parents votes and volunteers, that child is more likely to listen positively to conversations about politics and voting from his or her parents. (Jennings and Neimi, 1981)

The Role of Education

Since children spend large portions of their day at school, regardless of the level of influence that it may have or have had, it is a prime arena for giving children access to political knowledge. None of the questions on the survey explicitly asked about education, but the role of formal education became a central focus during many of the interviews. The interviews revealed that most of the participants' first political memories were about national politics and occurred at school around age seven. Additionally, when interviewees were asked to recall their strongest memories in learning about politics, most of them spoke about an activity in school where they became personally engaged—whether in a debate, a simulation, or a reenactment—in learning about politics. In this section we will investigate how civic education is addressed generally in schools,
ways in which children can be involved in traditional school structures and recent successful programs which have been instituted in American schools.

In the world of education today, children are being educated more consistently across locations as a result of national legislation such as No Child Left Behind. However, that legislation places a priority on more traditional subjects such as reading and mathematics which leaves less room in curriculum for subjects such as civics, where children could learn about political processes and structures. (Galston, 2007) Since a large part of education for which parents are responsible is informal, Galston decided to study the presence of informal learning in schools. He found that the use of civics in non-civics courses can actually be more effective than a course strictly on civics. This effect may be the result of increased class discussion on these topics in non-civics courses. For example, the Civic Mission of Schools report found that courses which allow for class discussion on civics and which involve simulations have a larger reported impact on students. (Comber, 2007) As with our recommendation for parents, we suggest that schools focus on facilitating cross-curriculum discussions about politics. By doing so students will be able to express their opinions and further develop the fifteen year old, multiple perspective oriented, “frame of mind”.

Even if a school does not have a civics course or provide civics instruction as a unit in each grade, schools should ensure that students understand how to vote. As simple as it seems, students have frequently expressed in studies that they do not understand voting procedure. (Macedo et. al., 2005) Twenty percent of High School students surveyed in 1999 mentioned, without being asked, that they would not know what to do if they showed up to vote in an election. (Macedo et. al., 2005) 2000, the year
after this survey was conducted, was the first year which saw an increase in voter turnout among young voters. It is alarming that only one year before a portion of that new youth voting cohort did not know what their voting experience would be like. Based on this study, voter education has a long way to go. Students, particularly those who are eligible to vote during their High School years, need to be well informed about how to vote, what information they need to bring with them, how to obtain information about the candidates, and if it is a national election how the electoral process works. With this information, turnout would be likely to increase. (Macedo et. al., 2005)

The traditional way that students can exercise civic engagement is on a localized scale within their own school—through the student government. As early as the 1970s, Elizabeth Leoni Simpson (1977) found that students who participated in the student government were more likely to take into account principles such as equality and freedom. This finding suggests that more students will reach Kohlberg’s final stage of moral development, “the universal-ethical-principle orientation,” through such participation. Galston (2007), in his more recent study of participation in student organizations, including student councils, found that such participation promotes a sense of civic efficacy where students are more concerned about their student community. We suggest, first that all schools have some sort of student government and other student organizations. All students should have an opportunity to have a voice within that student government if they so choose. Open forums to increase student awareness of concerns within their own school community should be held. The more that student government and organizations can function together like the real local community
government and associations, the easier it will be for students to apply these experiences to their real world environments.

School Projects

Recently, two high school projects have been found to be unusually successful at increasing discussion among students and fostering a sense of political efficacy among the participants. “We the People: The Citizens and the Constitution,” is a program that has been instituted across the United States by the Center for Civic Education. The program serves students of all ages and is focused specifically on increasing civic knowledge. The program uses videos, mock elections, and simulations to allow all students to actively participate in the process of gaining knowledge about voting and elections. The program has received some government funding, but is not yet sponsored in all schools. Studies of the program indicate that young children develop an understanding of democratic principles while older children become more interested in politics and know how they could play an effective role in their own communities. (Galston, 2007)

Project 540, also a national program, was founded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and started out at over 250 schools in its first year. This program uses a less traditional approach to civic education than does “We the People.” Project 540 goes further than using simulations and mock elections, and instead seeks to empower students to make decisions within their own schools and communities. Similar to our suggestion about student governments and organizations within schools, Project 540 encourages schools to use structures parallel to the local communities and service learning within the community. The first step for Project 540, though, is to empower the students with
knowledge, both political and practical, such as how to speak effectively in public, so that they feel comfortable participating in these environments. Students who participated in the project reported feeling more comfortable speaking up for their opinions and were more willing to listen to a variety of opinions. Again this indicates that the students are progressing online with the fifteen-year-old frame of mind suggested by Howard Gardner. While such a comprehensive plan would be something ideal for all schools to incorporate, it could require taking time away from other required subjects. Perhaps the project could be funded on a smaller scale as an afternoon program in localities that have less funding. (Bixby and Pace, 2008)

Community

Unfortunately, getting communities or states to recognize that civic education is missing from their educational programs is difficult. For example, almost all states have educational assessment systems which focus on reform, but of these only twenty-two recognize civics as a necessary component of a child’s education. (Benson, 2006) Since states largely govern education policies, it is difficult to consistently institute streamlined projects like “We the People” or Project 540. One of the simplest ways for youth to participate in the community is to follow the model of Hampton, Virginia. In Hampton children are selected to serve on advisory boards for different divisions of the government including the arts, parks and recreation, and schools. (Benson, 2006) It would not cost a locale implementing this plan any money, and the child still feels as though he or she can participate in the community decision-making process. Benson found that once a child can recognize that he or she actually has viable opinions that are
being taken into account by the local government that child is more likely to participate on all levels of civic society and to feel as though he or she can voice opinions to adults.

In the interviews of highly engaged University of Richmond students, we found that students who had volunteered before the 2008 election cycle had volunteered on a local or state level first. These students had found their first experiences to be rewarding and were encouraged to participate again in the future because they felt as though they were personally making a difference in the community. It stands to reason, then, that if children can be encouraged to participate in their communities outside of the school at an earlier age that they may, perhaps, be more highly engaged individuals by the time that they reach college. Even if these individuals do not continue to volunteer, a firsthand understanding of civic knowledge through experience is likely to encourage their participation as young voters in future elections. (Benson, 2006)

Media

The different uses of media across groups, which varied in engagement level, were striking both in the survey and in the interviews. High engagement individuals in the survey were more likely to use print media sources and NPR than other individuals and this finding was supported by information obtained in the interviews. The interviews suggested that high engagement individuals are more likely to read *The New York Times* as their print media source and that they believed other students primarily used online resources to obtain their information. All interviewees who used print media sources also used online sources. This new group of young voters may be somewhat different from those who entered the electorate in the previous 2000 and 2004 elections because it is quite likely that they are the first age cohort to enter the electorate which grew up with
easy access to computers. (Mossberger et. al., 2008) As a result, these new voters are more accustomed to obtaining their news from online sources.

All online sources are not alike, but that does not necessarily mean using online sources is detrimental to one’s development of political knowledge, because the source could both help and hurt one’s political development. In the survey we found internet use to be consistently high across all participants, regardless of level of involvement. During the 2000 and 2004 elections Mossberger et. al. found that using internet news was positively related to increased political sophistication. However, our findings show consistent use of the internet across all levels of political engagement. We suggest that the difference between these findings is the result of the increased accessibility and more common usage of the internet among this new youth cohort. As early as 2004, Mossberger et. al. found that email had a greater influence on increased participation than did online news. Although we did not specifically examine the use of emails in the 2008 election cycle, Obama’s successful use of email networking for volunteers and interested citizens alike suggests that this finding still holds true today.

We suggest that bi-partisan information sites increase their use of email to personally distribute information to individuals who sign up on their lists. For younger students, as classrooms become more wired in the future, we suggest schools use posting sites like Blackboard at the University of Richmond so that students can have online forums through which they comfortably talk about politics with one another. Even before schools have full access to computers on site, many teachers require online work outside of the classroom. Adding blog posting or directed research as homework elements during
a civics unit would allow students to build skills for independently obtaining political knowledge through a medium they feel comfortable with.

The media, though, plays a dual role: as both a provider of information and a reflection of stereotypes. As has been documented above, its role as a provider is essential to the process of obtaining information, not just about politics, but about all subjects. As a distributor of opinion the media also has an influential role in promoting early and effective political socialization. Unfortunately, often the media will reinforce negative stereotypes of young adults, particularly those of a certain race, ethnicity, income level, or regional background. For example, the media may reflect negative stereotypes about Hispanic individuals in Virginia and positive one’s about the same group of individuals in New Mexico. Although the information may reflect certain experiences, they do not necessarily provide factual information about the individuals in question. Perpetuating these stereotypes prevents these potential young voters from feeling as though they belong in the community, and if they do not feel they belong they will not feel responsibility for or any motivation to volunteer for that community. (Benson) It is the job of the media to at least present a balanced picture of youths so that each has a potential to be feel equally involved and connected to the community.

Likewise, campaigns which are positive can stimulate people to vote. (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 2000) The increase in voters during the 2008 election cycle may be the result of Barack Obama’s positive “change” message. Regardless of party we encourage politicians to continue campaigns with positive messages in order to continue the increase in voter turnout that was seen in 2008.
Suggestions for Future Research

However energizing this election cycle may have been, we have still not attained levels of youth participation equivalent to the 1972 rate, and even that rate is well below the turnout of the over thirty population. It is evident that whatever strides have been made are important, but that the mobilization of educated young voters still has a long way to go. The goal of the research documented here is not to find ways to engage individuals simply for the point of engagement, or to encourage individuals to vote without knowing what they are voting for. Instead, the preceding research has sought to consider how youth voting is shaped by various sources of influence, and to consider how those sources can play more substantive roles in earlier and more complete political education.

Survey participants were unlikely to respond to a questionnaire that exceeded twenty questions. As a result, we were limited to explicitly investigating the socializing influences we expected to be the most effective based on the political socialization literature. In the future we suggest that the role of education—including the differences between teachers and experiences—be investigated. The significance of education as a socializing influence was not apparent until the interviews were conducted, but further information about the strength of different activities and the power of teachers to transmit knowledge would be helpful in supporting the claims made by interviewees in this study.

Researching the change in media use over time across the lives of participants would also be helpful given the evidence that the types of media used in today’s world has changed. Understanding the differences between how media was used in the past and is currently being used by the current group of young voters will allow researchers to
compare the socialization processes of the current young voters with children still in school. Such a comparison would subsequently allow researchers to make suggestions about changes that might be necessary to current educational programs and requirements. Additionally, this information could also provide further suggestions about how internet use could be tailored to better educate young children.

Lastly, further information from the individuals surveyed about the changes over time in their relationships between themselves and their parents and between themselves and their peers would have been helpful in investigating the power of each of these groups in political socialization. In the survey, the relationships were treated as unchanging across the participants pre-college life, and we suggest future research examine the gradations of change over time in the relationships. The political socialization literature documents a change from “parent-orientation” to “peer-orientation” across time. Generalizations about when and how this occurs would be useful for understanding what periods are crucial to a child’s development within these two influencing groups. With this information, hopefully parents and educators would know how best to guide individual children at specific times during their lives, so that they can become highly engaged citizens.

**Conclusions**

I began my research on political socialization struck about the political apathy I was observing among my friends. Through studying those very same peers here at the University of Richmond in both a survey and interviews, I am even more determined to find ways to encourage high levels of knowledgeable engagement and volunteerism among college aged students. The United States will have to continue to compete in a
global market in the future and citizens of other democracies understand and care enough to vote about the changes in that government—what is the problem here?

The results of the survey and interviews indicate that parental involvement, particularly through the mother, throughout the child’s life and in volunteering to set an example for the child is more common among high engagement individuals than any of the other groups. Furthermore, increased active use of media in the classroom creates memorable experiences that encourage individuals to continue their interest and involvement in politics throughout the rest of their lives.

While the suggestions in this chapter may not be revolutionary, an apathetic response to changing our low rates of engagement is not just detrimental to some, but all in a community. Take Robert Putnam’s example: (2003)

“A child born in a state whose residents volunteer, vote, and spend time with friends is less likely to be born underweight, less likely to drop out of school, and less likely to kill or be killed than the same child—no richer or poorer—born in another state whose residents do not.”

The responsibility then falls on all of us to continue research in this field. Age cohorts are constantly changing and as each day passes American society becomes more technologically and politically sophisticated. Increasing youth involvement may change the results of one election, or it may not, but their educated involvement does not last for just one election—it lasts a lifetime.

In 1790, George Washington addressed Congress about the importance of civic education, arguing that its purpose should be, “teaching the people themselves to know and value their own rights.” If each child in the United States could know the value of
their own rights and how the Government is charged with protecting and defending those rights, participation becomes not simply about the number of voters, but the number of individuals who can be included going forward in sustaining this American ideal.


