

**THE INFLUENCE OF PEER RELATIONSHIPS ON POLITICAL
SOCIALIZATION AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS**

by

Zachary Isaacs

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THE PURDUE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL
STATEMENT OF COMMITTEE APPROVAL

Dr. Diana Zulli, Chair

Department Communication

Dr. Emily Buehler

Department of Communication

Dr. William B. Collins

Department of Communication

Approved by:

Dr. Marifran Mattson

To my family, for getting me interested in this topic in the first place.

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ABSTRACT

Political socialization has been of interest to political science and communication scholars for decades. Focusing primarily on parents, few studies have examined how peer relationships can affect the political socialization process. Additionally, much of the literature does not examine political socialization past the age of 18. Using social penetration theory, this study proposes that the unique features of the college context—independence, new relationships, political organizations—make it a particularly ripe context for political socialization to occur. The study utilized a survey-based to test this assumption and examine if/how college students between the ages of 18 and 24 are communicating with their peers and to what political socialization effect. The findings contribute to political socialization literature, social penetration theory, and our understanding of how young people talk about politics.

INTRODUCTION

Political socialization— “the development processes through which persons acquire political orientations” (Easton & Dennis, 1969, p. 7)—is an increasingly important topic in today’s political landscape (Ekstrom & Ostman, 2013; Gordon & Taft, 2011; Lee et al., 2013). Today, more than ever, children and young adults have become more involved with politics due to climate change (Greta Thunberg; Bakare, 2020), the Flint Water Crisis (Miss Flint; Galluci, 2020), school shootings (David Hogg; Younge, 2018), and the Black Lives Matter movement (Zaveri, 2020), among other noteworthy political issues. Additionally, college campuses are increasingly becoming hotbeds for political activism (Jaschik, 2018; Spencer, 2019).¹ For example, in 2020, graduate students at the University of Michigan went on strike over the university’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and lack of action toward ending systemic racism (Kozlowski, 2020). However, such young and engaged political activists are certainly not the norm (Pew Research Center, 2018). In fact, it is less common for young individuals to actively engage in politics compared to older individuals, let alone receive national and international attention for their political activism. While there are many ways to explain why some youth participate in politics while others do not (e.g., race, gender, geographic location, interest, nature of the campaign/candidates), one possible explanation is how they have been politically socialized. Simply put, youth and young adults may be more or less inclined to participate in politics depending on if they were raised to be interested in politics and have political views.

Political socialization can be traced to ancient Greece. Plato was one of the first advocates for citizenship training (Greenstein, 1965), suggesting that children should be raised to revere civic

¹ Colleges have long been places where political movements flourish (e.g., 1960s during the Vietnam protests; see De Groot, 1998; Klimke, 2010).

engagement. Likewise, Aristotle, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Locke believed that the political education of the youth was essential (Burnet, 1903; Easton & Dennis, 1969; Greenstein, 1965). For these philosophers, participating in democratic processes was foundational for being a proper citizen, and indoctrination along these lines started early in a child's life. Clearly, political socialization has long been considered an important part of a child's educational and personal development, but scholars have only recently dedicated substantial academic attention to this topic.

Academic attention to political socialization began in the 1920s with political scientist Charles Merriam (Merriam, 1925). While Merriam did not directly study the agents or effects of political socialization, he theorized that media, such as the radio, *could* have a large effect on political education. Later, Harold Lasswell, Merriam's student, continued to work with Merriam's ideas about the importance of educating children about politics (Lasswell, 1951). Building on Merriam's research, Lasswell predominately theorized about the effects of socialization, suggesting that people may look up to political figures like the president in ways similar to how they look up to their parents, albeit perhaps unconsciously (Lasswell, 1951). Despite these early theorizations, it was not until Greenstein's foundational research in 1965 that the idea of political socialization really took hold. Looking at nine to thirteen-year-old children, Greenstein (1965) was primarily interested in how children of this age interacted with politics. In particular, Greenstein examined the effects of socialization, taking into consideration thoughts on political authority, class differences, and sex differences. Langston (1969) and Easton and Dennis (1969) expanded on this work, focusing on parents' effect on their children's political orientations. Despite this groundbreaking research on political socialization, the topic received scant academic attention between the 1980s and 2000s. Only recently have scholars once again taken up the topic of political

socialization to better understand how young individuals form their political orientations and behavior (e.g., Gordon & Taft, 2011; Lee et al., 2013; Quintelier, 2015).

The extant research on political socialization has usefully contributed to our understanding of how young individuals develop political predispositions and behaviors. However, there are certain gaps in this literature this current thesis seeks to address. First, political socialization is often studied and understood within a certain age range: 9-18-year-olds (Ekstrom & Ostman, 2013; Gordon & Taft, 2011; Greenstein, 1965). Certainly, a significant amount of socialization will occur during these formative years, but political socialization is not a phenomenon that is time-limited or something that stops at a certain age. Moreover, extant research has primarily examined the socialization effects that parents have on their children (Easton & Dennis, 1969; Greenstein, 1965; Langston, 1969). While parents may be one of the more influential agents of political socialization, especially when children are between the 9-18 age-range, this limited focus on parents overlooks other influences that might contribute to how young individuals perceive politics and their participation.

This thesis seeks to address some of these gaps in political socialization research. In particular, I investigate political socialization among college students aged 18-24 and the effects of *peer relationships* on political participation using a survey method. Only recently has the effect of peers on political socialization become an important topic within this research (see Gordon & Taft, 2011; Lee, Shah, & Mcleod, 2013; York, 2019). However, many of these studies on peer political socialization have been conducted in the European context, not in the United States (e.g., Ekstrom & Ostman, 2013; Quintelier, 2015). The United States has significantly lower rates of political participation in general (Desilver, 2018), so the results from research in the European context may not be generalizable in the United States. Moreover, these studies focused

predominantly on relationships among 14-18-year-old individuals, not college-aged young adults between the ages of 18 and 24. This research on political socialization fails to consider how young individuals perhaps change their political orientations or continue to be politically socialized once they reach early adulthood. Importantly, limiting socialization research to the 14-18-year-old age range also overlooks how the transition from living with parents to independence during college where peer relationships perhaps take on a greater force plays a role in the political socialization process (e.g., how college students adopt political behaviors, have discussions with friends, take civic-oriented classes, become more politically active).

Studying political socialization among peers in college has both academic and practical value. Beyond addressing a research gap, young individuals, specifically 18-29-year-olds, have long been known for their low voting turnout (Gardner, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2018). For example, only 13% of voters in 2016 were 18-29 while 33% of the non-voters were in the same age range (Pew Research Center, 2018). Although young individuals have recently started voting at a much higher rate (see Gardner, 2019), this demographic is still considered one of the less reliable voting blocs. Moreover, in recent years, both Democrats and Republicans have focused on how to get young people to the polls (Stauffer, 2020), noticing how participation from this age range could significantly affect election outcomes moving forward. Thus, this research could further our understanding of how peer relationships perhaps contribute to political participation in meaningful ways.

To begin this thesis, I first discuss political orientation and participation as outcomes of socialization and how the United States falls behind other countries in voter turnout. I then define political socialization and the different agents of socialization, noting several research trends within the extant literature. I then discuss college culture and social penetration theory,

theorizing how this unique context and the peer relationships within this context may uniquely influence young adults' political orientation and participation habits. I then discuss the method used for this study. In particular, I issued a survey to 18 to 24-year-old college students at a large mid-western university, asking about their political discussions with peers and parents, closeness with peers and their parents, political participation, and political orientation. I analyzed the data using a combination of regression and mediation analyses to measure the effects of the different socialization agents. The results suggest that peer relationships do take on a greater socialization force compared to parents in the college context. Closeness with friends and network size also lead to more political discussions, which then influences political participation, lending support to social penetration theory. This study thus illustrates how peer relationships among 18-24-year-old college students affect political socialization, providing needed theoretical insight into the topic of political socialization and some useful prescriptions for improving political participation among American young adults.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To examine if and how college-aged students are socialized by their peers to participate in politics, it is first important to define political orientation and participation as these are the goals of socialization. I then review other important agents of socialization and how the college context can uniquely facilitate political socialization through the lens of social penetration theory.

Political Participation

Political participation is a critical part of democracy. Greek philosophers, such as Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates believed that political participation was synonymous with being a good citizen (see Burnet, 1903; Greenstein, 1965). The current liberal democratic model of governance relies on this assumption as well. Every two to four years, citizens are encouraged to vote for representatives that will advocate for their political interests. However, despite the importance of political participation and the constant messaging that encourages this behavior, the United States still lags behind other democratic societies in terms of participation. In the 2016 national election, for example, the United States had a 55% turnout among the voting-age population, while other democracies such as Belgium, Sweden, and Denmark all had above 80% turnout in their most recent elections (Desilver, 2018). During the 2018 midterm election, only 53.4% of the voting-age population in the U.S voted (Misra, 2019). And, 2018 set a record in terms of midterm voter turnout; before this year, the voter turnout during midterm elections between 1978 and 2018 averaged 47.4% (Misra, 2019). The 2020 US election saw another historic turnout at 62%, most likely due to the polarizing nature of the election (Riccardi, 2020). However, that 62% turnout rate still pales in comparison to other democracies (Desilver, 2018).

Within an already low voter turnout, younger people typically vote less than older people, even during presidential election years (Franklin, 2018). Indeed, in presidential election years, individuals aged 18 to 29 typically participate at a rate from 47-65 percent while those above 60 years old participate at a rate higher than 80% (Franklin, 2018). To elaborate, only 13% of voters in 2016 were 18-29 whereas 33% of the non-voters were in the same age range (Pew Research Center, 2018). That said, 18-29-year-olds are starting to participate more. From 2014 to 2018, college students more than doubled their rate of voting (Gardner, 2019). Such an increase in a previously low-participating group was unprecedented (Harper, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2018). Additionally, the 2020 election saw record-breaking youth voter turnout with an estimated 50%-52% of eligible 18-29-year-olds voting (CIRCLE, 2020). One likely explanation for increased voter turnout among 18 to 29-year-olds was the nature of the 2020 election (e.g., COVID-19, President Trump, the passing of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg). Future elections are needed to determine whether the recent increase of youth voting is indeed a trend, or whether this higher turnout was more conditional based on the nature of the election. Thus, and in the meantime, it is important to better understand why young people—specifically college students who make up a large portion of this age range—are becoming more involved in politics. Doing so could help to inform best practices for informing and motivating this type of behavior among this group in the future. Before we explore the agents of political socialization, it is important to define political orientation and participation as the goals of socialization.

Defining Political Orientation and Participation

The goal of political socialization is to develop people's political orientations that will hopefully lead to political participation (Easton & Dennis, 1969; Greenstein, 1965). Therefore, before we discuss the agents of socialization, it is first important to review these outcomes.

Political orientation, sometimes referred to as political ideology, is “the idea that political opinions and attitudes are linked together in a coherent system” (Carmines & D’Amico, 2015, p. 206). And, these interconnected and stable beliefs contribute to an individual’s general political worldview (Campbell et al., 1960). In the context of American politics, political orientation typically refers to how strongly people consider themselves to be liberal or conservative. Scholarship has long demonstrated that voters think ideologically when making political decisions (e.g., voting, signing petitions, supporting candidates; Jost, 2006; Lupu, 2014; Nie et al., 1976; Westfall et al., 2015). And, Americans have become more ideologically driven in the past two decades, which leads to stronger partisan ties (Lupu, 2014). Typically, before one participates in politics, they must first have some ideological inclination that guides their decision-making (e.g., conservative or liberal therefore people vote for the Democratic or Republican candidate). Because political decisions are ideological in nature, the development of an ideology is an important part of what leads to political participation later in life.

Easton (1953) and Verba and Nie (1972) broadly conceptualized political participation as acts that could influence the decisions of the government. Elaborating on this conceptualization, Verba et al. (1978) stated that political participation includes “those legal acts by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions that they take” (p. 1). This definition of political participation includes activities such as voting, organizing voter drives, calling representatives about a bill, etc. After these early definitions of political participation in the 1970s, scholars broadened their definition of political participation to include “civic engagement” (Flanagan, 2013; Putnam, 2001). Civic engagement includes more than just voting or an activity that directly influences the selection of government officials, and also includes activities such as taking part in community events or bowling in a

league, suggesting that interpersonal relationships or social ties can lead to civic participation (Putnam, 2001). While it is useful to conceive of political participation as more than just voting, as these interpersonal interactions certainly can have political effects, Berger (2009) argued that civic engagement included too many forms of engagement and was therefore not a useful term. Certainly, voting and contacting officials remain two of the most impactful forms of political participation. However, political participation has drastically changed/expanded with the advent of digital technology. In light of the new digital media environment, van Deth (2014) defined political participation as having the following characteristics: 1) an “activity” (something you do) 2) voluntary and not required by law, 3) outside of required job requirements (e.g., volunteering to work at the polls), and 4) concerns the government or politics in some way. Similar to Putnam’s (2001) definition of civic engagement, van Deth’s (2014) definition leaves open many more possibilities for other types of informal participation, such as social media engagement, political club membership, or marching in protests, in which young people are specifically known to take part (Harper, 2019; Honwana, 2019). For example, the Black Lives Matter protests during the summer of 2020 were largely populated and led by younger individuals (Hailu & Sarubbi, 2019; Zaveri, 2020). Additionally, other political movements such as the fight against climate change, regulation for gun control, and the Flint water crisis are led by younger individuals (Bakare, 2020; Galluci, 2020; Younge, 2018). These movements were born from strikes, sit-ins, and social media engagement, all hallmarks of how Gen-Z and Millennials participate in politics (Jensen, 2017; Loader et al., 2014).

This study will employ van Deth’s (2014) definition of political participation as it is broad enough to encompass popular types of participation amongst young people and specific enough to avoid the broad category of “civic engagement.” With van Deth’s (2014) definition, political

participation can be considered *functional*, in that this participation involves concrete behaviors by individuals. This is opposed to *reflective* political participation, which is about whether people think about and have an interest in politics, but not necessarily act on that interest. Both of these types of political participation will be assessed in this study.

There are many ways that younger individuals can participate in politics. How this younger demographic becomes acclimated to politics and begins to participate can perhaps be explained through the political socialization process. Thus, in this next section, I will define political socialization and discuss the concept's historical roots, the agents of socialization, and the trends in the research.

Political Socialization

Definition

Political socialization is centrally understood through Greenstein's (1970) foundational definition and includes the study of 1) "children's political orientations," 2) "acquisition of prevailing norms," 3) "any political learning whatsoever, whether of conformity or deviance, and at any stage of the life cycle," and 4) "actual observations of socialization processes, in any of the above senses, taking into account both the socialized and the agents of socialization" (p. 971-972). Easton and Dennis (1969) provided a narrower definition, suggesting that political socialization includes "those development processes through which persons acquire political orientations" (p. 7). Despite subtle differences, these definitions of socialization lead to the basic premise of how people develop their political orientations, both what they believe and how they feel about participating in political processes. For this study, I follow Greenstein's (1970) definition of socialization as it is the broadest and most all-encompassing definition. In the next section, I will

explore the historical roots of political socialization and how this concept has evolved over the years.

Historical Roots of Political Socialization

Early evidence of political socialization began with Plato in the 4th century when he authored *Republic*. Plato advocated for the training of children to be good stewards of Athens and made it clear that the training was in service of protecting the city-state, not for the purpose of tyranny (see Greenstein, 1965). Essentially, Plato encouraged people to be educated in order to defend the state. Plato also argued that increasing literacy was the most important part of the political socialization process. If citizens are not literate, how could they ever participate in politics? Following this logic, aristocracies and dictatorships have often attempted to keep their citizens either semi-literate or illiterate to control the political participation of the people (German, 2014). The importance of literacy persists today as election interference and a culture of misinformation now requires citizens to be even more careful when filtering and consuming information (see Helfand, 2016; Kahne & Bowyer, 2017; O'Connor & Weatherall, 2019).

Similar to Plato, Aristotle made it clear that “the legislator should make the education of the young his [sic] chief and foremost concern” (quoted in Greenstein, 1965, p. 3). Aristotle believed that citizens must be educated in order to have a functioning government. Later, scholars such as John Locke and Thomas Hobbes considered the family to be of the utmost importance and authority in relation to political education and socialization. This was the first time the family was introduced as a critical source of political socialization. Now, scholars have identified several agents that affect political socialization beyond just the family, including the media, children’s literature, schools, and peers.

Agents of Political Socialization

The extant literature on political socialization has identified five main agents of political socialization: family/parents, media, children's literature, schools, and peers (Easton & Dennis, 1969; Gordon & Taft, 2011; Greenstein, 1965; Hyman, 1959; Shulman & DeAndrea, 2014). Each of these agents are important for socialization, however, some are considered to be more important than others. I turn to those agents now.

Family/Parents

Families, particularly parents, are the most important and earliest agents of political socialization (Greenstein, 1965; Hyman, 1959). Greenstein (1965) argued that children begin to absorb politics as early as five or six years old. If so, then familial conversations would presumably be the first interaction that children have with politics. Hyman (1959) theorized how political information flows from the parent to the child, known widely as the transmission model, which was later supported by other scholars (e.g., Beck & Jennings, 1991). In Beck and Jennings' (1991) foundational study, children were examined over three time periods—1965, 1973, and 1981—to assess if and how political orientations shifted (or did not shift) throughout their adolescence and young adult lives. The results of this study indicated that parents have the most influence earlier in children's lives. However, their impact becomes less significant as children age. Essentially, parents do indeed have a significant impact on their children's political orientations, but children become much more likely to challenge their parents or those initial beliefs as they become older. Although other scholars theorized that children would form *opposite* orientations of their parents (e.g., Duffy, 1941), several studies have proven that to not be the case (Easton & Dennis, 1969; Hyman, 1959). Rather, the evidence suggests that parents do indeed *transmit* political attitudes to their children (Hyman, 1959; Langston, 1969).

In addition to the idea that parents as a *unit* can influence their children, scholars have also found that mothers have a greater influence on their children's political attitudes than their fathers, regardless of the time spent having these conversations (Shulman & DeAndrea, 2014). This finding is due to *how* mothers often have these political discussions with their children. Generally speaking, mothers are more likely to want to have *conversations* with their child, whereas fathers are more persuasion-oriented, simply trying to change a child's mind or convince them to support a particular ideology or candidate. Shulman and DeAndrea (2014) also found that political socialization can go both ways with upward and downward influence, which means that children can also influence their parents. Once again, mothers were found to be more receptive to upward influence than fathers. Ultimately this study challenged the transmission model that posits that socialization typically happens from parents to the children. Other researchers have also begun to challenge the transmission model and the idea that parents are the dominant socialization agent (e.g., Ekstrom & Ostman, 2013; Quintelier, 2015).

Media

The media are another important agent of political socialization. Langston (1969) and Greenstein (1965) theorized that the media would have some effect on political socialization, but they did not know or test the exact magnitude of the effect. Chaffee et al. (1970) expanded on this research and found that mass media is a principal source of political information and news for children, which could have a socializing effect. Indeed, it is common for children's shows to include some political components. For example, Sesame Street has expressed its support for the Black Lives Matter movement multiple times. This show has also included educational programming related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Aquillina, 2020).

Recent research by German (2014) and Thorson et al. (2018) also argued that mass media are where children get most of their political information. German (2014) theorized that the media are a strong socializing agent because mediated content is becoming so easy for children to consume. More specifically, German (2014) argued that with internet access continuing to spread throughout the world, the media will become an even greater political socialization agent in the future. Similarly, in a panel study conducted on parent-child dyads in the United States, Thorson et al. (2018) found that social media platforms have a large impact on young people's political opinions. Importantly, these scholars found that familial conversations about politics led to more active political engagement by children on social media. This study not only showed how the media can be an important factor in the socialization process, but also that agents of socialization can affect each other.

Children's Literature

In addition to families and the media as socializing agents (see Greenstein, 1965; Langston, 1969; Shulman & DeAndrea, 2014), other researchers have started to highlight less obvious, but still important forces, such as children's literature. Children's literature in general has been shown to be an important source of learning (Flack et al., 2018), so it logically follows that books could also function as a source of political socialization. In an examination of all the *New York Times* bestselling children's picture books from 2012 to 2017, Patterson (2018) found that half of those books contained some type of political content, such as images of leaders, which exposes children to political content. Importantly, more children's books are being written by politicians themselves. For example, Hillary Clinton recently released a picture book for children in 2017 called *It Takes a Village* (Krug, 2017). The book was about how progress takes everyone's effort and was full of political messages, such as the need for diversity in the American political system. Another

example of a children's book with political content is *Joey: The Story of Joe Biden* written by Jill Biden, President Joe Biden's wife (McMahon, 2020). The book is a biography of Joe Biden intended for kids, telling the story of how Biden became Vice President. Such books as *It Takes a Village* and *Joey: The Story of Joe Biden* are full of idealistic views of the American democracy that could inspire children to be involved in political processes (Patterson, 2018; Pollack, 2015).

Beyond being exposed to political content, the framing of the political messages within books can influence perceptions of political leaders and issues. For example, Patterson (2018) found that democratic white men were the most frequent political leaders depicted in the *New York Times'* bestselling children's books. Such homogeneity can have significant implications regarding whom children perceive to be political leaders. Moreover, Pollack (2015) found that the vast majority of children's books that have political messages contain liberal messages, which suggests that children are being exposed to partisan messages at an early age that can lead to political predispositions later in life. It is important to note that parents are often responsible for choosing the books that their children read. Thus, it is likely the case that children's literature works in tandem with parental forces in the political socialization process.

School

Schooling is a fourth agent of political socialization (Langston, 1969). Patrick (1977) argued that any time schools teach anything about politics in the classroom, either explicitly or implicitly, they are taking part in political socialization. Educating about politics and civic engagement increases familiarity with politics and can incidentally indoctrinate students to be more politically minded. Because many schools offer entire classes focused on political education (e.g., government, civics, economics classes), schools can become an important agent in the political socialization process (Langston & Jennings, 1968; cf Jennings et al., 1974). That said,

these early studies simply theorized schools as a socialization agent, suggesting that education *could* have a significant effect on political predispositions and participation. Recent studies have begun to show that schools are perhaps less influential than they were initially theorized to be.

Recent research is starting to steer away from the proposition that schools are a strong socializing agent, at least during grade school. In a study conducted in Quebec, Canada, Dostie-Goulet (2009) found that family and friends were the strongest predictors of political interest, while school was the least influential. In a similar study, Koskimaa and Rapeli (2015) examined the role of schools in political socialization among 16 to 18-year-old Finnish students. This context was particularly unique as Scandinavian countries have high literacy and voting rates. Through this survey-based study, Koskimaa and Rapeli found that family and peers played a much more significant role in the development of political interest than did schools. That said, it is perhaps the case that grade school education is the least influential socialization agent because children are with their families, the most influential socialization agent, during this time. As young adults enter college, education perhaps becomes a great socialization force. This gap in the research, among others, will be discussed in the next section.

Trends in Political Socialization Research

The review of extant literature reveals several trends in political socialization research. Perhaps the biggest trend, and ultimately limitation, is the lack of current research on political socialization. Arguably, the most notable research on political socialization occurred from 1959 to 1980. Research on political socialization stalled in the 1980s, with interest increasing again only in the 2000s. Moreover, most of the early political socialization research was theoretical (e.g. Greenstein, 1965; Lasswell, 1951). Only recently has more work been done to empirically study political socialization, the effect size of the theorized agents (see Kudrnac, 2015), and how

socialization processes in other countries differ from those in the United States (Ekstrom & Ostman, 2013).

Another trend within political socialization literature is that studies are primarily focused on children between the ages of 9 and 18 (e.g., Ekstrom & Ostman, 2013; Gordon & Taft, 2011; Greenstein, 1965). Certainly, much socialization occurs during this age range as children presumably live with their parents and are just learning about politics and political processes. In fact, Jennings and Niemi (1968) assumed that parental influence would end as high school seniors left the house. This trend of focusing just on children is limiting for a few reasons. First, it should not be assumed that the socialization process simply stops at the age of 18; indeed, people change their beliefs, interests, and behaviors throughout their lives (Allen & Reynolds, 1993). Second, while parents perhaps take on less of a socializing role after the age of 18, these young adults encounter another possibly influential socializing agent if and when they go to college: peers. This phenomenon will be discussed further later in this thesis but limiting socialization research to 9-18-year-old children is certainly a research gap this thesis seeks to address.

The third trend in political socialization research is the methods employed to study this construct. The extant research revealed that there have only been a few methodological approaches used to study political socialization. Researchers have relied primarily on closed-question surveys (see Easton & Dennis, 1969; Koskimaa and Rapeli, 2015; Shulman & DeAndrea, 2014), and some of those survey techniques were deemed questionable (see Renshon, 1977). For example, in Easton and Dennis' (1969) foundational work on political socialization, children were asked to rate the President based on whether they simply liked him or not. In addition to such a broad question, the question was also framed very positively, leaving only one option for a negative response and five response options for a positive response. Furthermore, children saying that they like a politician

does not indicate if they are actually interested in politics and want to get involved, which is the crux of the political socialization process as we currently understand the construct. Clearly, there are gaps in political socialization research that warrant empirical study. One of those gaps is the influence of peer relationships on political participation. I turn to peer relationships next.

Peer Socialization

Peer relationships have been discussed as an agent of political socialization. In 1959, Hyman brought up the possibility that peers could function as socialization agents, but they were ultimately deemed insignificant. Langston (1969) was one of the first scholars to examine peer influences; however, he seemed to focus mostly on orientation development (e.g., support for a party) and not on other markers of socialization, such as political participation. Nonetheless, Langston found that students formed similar attitudes on issues when they were in homogeneous friend groups (i.e., the same social class). Interestingly, when students were in heterogeneous friend groups (i.e., a mix of different social classes) they “re-socialized in the direction of higher-class political norms” (Langston, 1969, p. 129). Essentially, children with lower socio-economic statuses adopted the political norms of their higher-class friends. Langston also found that students who were in homogenous friend groups were less likely to vote. Conversely, those in heterogeneous groups were more likely to vote, presumably because lower-class children wanted to adopt the behaviors of their higher-class friends. Through this research, it became clear that peers could play a vital role in socialization at the high school level.

More recent studies have provided a clearer understanding of why peers are an important political socialization agent. Ekstrom and Ostman (2013) found that talking with peers about politics uniquely leads to the development of political knowledge, democratic values, and other civic practices, such as voting. Quintelier (2015) also found support for peers being an important

agent of socialization. In this study, data was collected on the socialization processes of Belgian children at three different points in their life: at the ages of 16, 18, and 21. The results showed that peers and group membership had the largest effects on political participation, which goes beyond just political orientations. And, in an argument against the traditional transmission model of political socialization where parents transmit information to their children, York (2019) found that news consumption and political discussions with peers actually drive younger individuals to seek political conversations with their parents. If this is the case, then peer relationships during college, which is typically the first-time young individuals are outside of their parental homes, could have a significant impact on whether these individuals participate in politics through discussion or more tangible acts (e.g., voting).

Peer influences on political socialization are clearly supported in the literature. However, much like socialization research investigating parents, media, schools, and children's literature, most of the research on peer socialization was conducted on children under the age of 18 (e.g., Ekstrom & Ostman, 2013; Langston, 1969; York, 2019). Additionally, most of the recent research on peer political socialization has taken place in the European context, not in the United States where participation is much lower (e.g., Ekstrom & Ostman, 2013; Quintelier, 2015). For these reasons, it is clear that more work investigating the influence of peers on political socialization is needed. To this end, I now theorize college relationships as a particularly fruitful context for political socialization to occur using social penetration theory.

SOCIAL PENETRATION THEORY IN THE COLLEGE CONTEXT

Political socialization research has primarily focused on children under 18 years old, and mostly on the effects of parents, media, children's literature, and schools on the political socialization process. There is a substantial gap in the literature regarding how the transition to college, and in turn, the proxemic transition away from previous familial relationships and toward new friend relationships, may affect the political socialization process. To that end, I now discuss how the college context is significantly different from the family, media, and primary/high school contexts and why peer relationships during this stage in life could have a significant impact on how young individuals view and participate in politics.

The College Context

The college context is vastly different from the other contexts in which political socialization has been studied. In particular, college provides learning opportunities both inside and out of the classroom and is the first time where young individuals gain independence, exposing students to a vast array of different people and belief systems.

First, college provides a multitude of learning opportunities for young people. Some of these learning opportunities come from inside the classroom; college students are often required to take civics, government, political science, and history classes that expose them to political content and presumably contribute to socialization processes similar to those that occur during grade school (see Langston, 1969; Patrick, 1997). Importantly, learning opportunities during college also exist because students are being socialized with new people from different walks of life, compared perhaps to grade school where children often attend classes with the same students throughout their kindergarten-12th grade education. In fact, there are many blogs and articles

written on life lessons you learn in college that do not relate to the classroom, including how to navigate difficult conversations and the value of civic engagement, both of which are socialization-oriented (see Brooks, 2017; Pankow, 2014). Moreover, scholars have found that taking part in service in college (e.g., volunteering at a soup kitchen), a common activity for college students (especially for those in organizations), leads to greater personal development and more interest in leadership later in life (Woelk & Weeks, 2010). And, another important part of the college context, and how it differs from primary/high school, is that students can *voluntarily* participate in as many or as few social groups/clubs as they want. At Purdue University, for instance, there are hundreds of clubs and organizations, many of which are politically oriented (Purdue University Organizations, 2020). Such voluntary participation in extracurricular activities of this nature benefits students' social and academic wellbeing (Baker, 2008; Wittrup & Hurd, 2019). Being able and encouraged to participate in so many different organizations with diverse groups of people in college can lead to making many new relationships, which can activate the political socialization process if conversations turn political.

Another important part of going to college is building new relationships. Research shows that the early 20s is the time where most people meet their best friend, and college provides a rich context for that to occur (McCabe, 2016). Indeed, many people recognize the connection between college and friendships as there are thousands of blogs and articles written specifically about how to find friends in college (e.g., Goldman, 2012; Gordon, 2019). Research also shows that these friends can have a dramatic impact on the lives of these students (McCabe, 2016). For example, there is evidence to suggest that roommates can affect weight gain or loss, mood swings, and grades (Moore, 2010). Friends can also have an extraordinary effect on what people perceive as truth. Research shows that people are more likely to trust a news story that is shared by a trusted

friend but is from an unknown media source than a news story shared by someone they did not know but from a reputable news source (Singal, 2017). Additionally, because college students are away from their parents for the first time, they have to rely more on their friends for their academic and social well-being (McCabe, 2016). Because relationships develop through self-disclosure of beliefs and ideas (further discussed below), this creates a unique opportunity for peer political socialization to occur if the disclosure turns political.

Finally, college is a unique context in which to study political socialization because it is the first time that many young people experience independence. Scholars suggest that when people go away to college, especially first-generation college students, they are often surprised by how much independence they suddenly have (Stephens et al., 2012). Covarrubias and colleagues (2018) discussed how personal freedom was significantly different in college than in high school. This freedom can take many forms such as students having no curfew or making financial decisions on their own. College independence also includes learning life skills without the help of a parent (e.g., scheduling health appointments, filling out tax forms) and holding jobs for the first time, all of which have political implications (e.g., paying taxes, learning about health care systems). Importantly, many people turn 18 during their freshman year of college, making them eligible to vote for the first time and likely motivating conversations about politics decoupled from direct parental influence. This new independence could prove crucial in the political socialization process of college students.

The above factors of learning, peer relationships, and independence suggest that college could be an influential context in which political socialization occurs. Beyond these contextual factors, social penetration theory provides a theoretical justification for why peer relationships during the college context might serve as an important political socialization agent.

Social Penetration Theory

Social penetration theory was developed by psychologists Irwin Altman and Dalmis Taylor in 1973 and suggests that as relationships develop, interpersonal communication and disclosure become deeper and more intimate (Altman & Taylor, 1973). As communication and disclosure between two people deepens, their *real selves* are revealed, such as one's personally held beliefs and values. Altman and Taylor liken this relational process to peeling an onion. Social penetration theory suggests that there are four stages to this process (five stages if you include the stage for relational dissolution) or four different layers to the proverbial relational onion. The first layer is the orientation phase when people first meet. In this stage, people typically discuss perfunctory or non-threatening topics such as hobbies and general likes and dislikes. The next layer is the exploratory affective phase where people start to share personal attitudes about topics such as politics and sports. Intimate personal information is still withheld at the exploratory affective phase and most relationships stay in this stage. The third phase is the affective phase where individuals start to share inside jokes with each other, which requires shared experiences and more disclosure of experiences that might serve as the joke. People in the affective phase also feel comfortable enough to start criticizing or arguing with one another. The final phase of social penetration theory is the stable stage. This stage is where personal thoughts, beliefs, and values are shared. People who have this level of social penetration often know exactly how to react to anything that the other says due to familiarity. This stage is where most close friends and significant others exist. Social penetration theory lays the groundwork for how relationships develop, indicating that political conversations can serve as a means for establishing relationships.

Social penetration theory has vast utility and has been widely applied in contexts such as social relationships (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Won-Doornink, 1985), healthcare relationships (Beach et al., 2004), and workplace settings (Hwang et al., 2015; Mangus et al., 2020). The theory

was originally applied to social relationships such as friendships and dating, so most of the research is in that context. In an experimental study involving both Korean and United States university students, Won-Doornink (1985) analyzed how disclosure and general discussions about topics could differ depending on the depth of the relationship (e.g. acquaintance, friend, best friend). The results from this study indicated that acquaintances would talk about non-intimate and medium-intimate matters (e.g., school or education), friends would talk about intimate matters (e.g., sex or family morals), and best friends would talk about medium-intimate matters (e.g., social and political issues).² These findings were consistent with Altman and Taylor's (1973) original hypothesis that there would be a curvilinear relationship between relationship level and the amount of disclosure that occurs within the relationship. Essentially, those who are friends with someone, but not best friends, would have the most intimate conversations. These intimate conversations could involve political beliefs and opinions, which supports the contention that the college context, where students are meeting and developing new relationships, may be a critical source of political socialization.

Social penetration theory has also been applied to the healthcare context (Beach et al., 2004). After analyzing taped office visits where patients interacted with their physicians, Beach et al. (2004) found that physician self-disclosure occurred in only 15.4% of office visits. Additionally, they found that the reason for this disclosure was mainly to reassure the patient, counsel the patient, and build rapport. The scholars suggested that the physicians were disclosing information simply to get to know their patients better and further their relational bond. This study provides evidence that social penetration theory is not just applicable to friends and loved ones, it can also be appropriate for analysis in a more formal setting. Additionally, this study affirms the original

² It is important to note that what is classified as an intimate or non-intimate subject is dependent on the person, so political issues could be discussed in a number of situations.

theorization of social penetration theory that suggests disclosure is essential to *building* rapport. Following this research, it is perhaps the case that disclosure about politics during college is perceived as a way to build relationships, especially if many organizations and classes are geared around those topics.

The workplace setting is another context in which social penetration theory has been applied (Hwang et al., 2015; Mangus et al., 2020). In a study examining the effects of disclosure on customer loyalty, Hwang et al. (2015) found that when servers would engage in self-disclosure with a customer, customers would often reciprocate. They also found that this mutual disclosure led to enhanced customer loyalty and commitment. In a similar study, Mangus et al. (2020) analyzed matched survey responses from salesperson-customer dyads to see how disclosure could affect the relationship. They found that both business and personal disclosure from the salesperson encouraged disclosure from the customer. In turn, this had positive effects on relationship outcomes such as increased empathy, trust, and sales performance. This once again demonstrates how disclosure could help build relationships in multiple different contexts.

Because the extant literature makes it clear that disclosure can help build relationships in many different contexts, and that levels of disclosure evolve with relational levels, social penetration theory can help to explain if and how political socialization unfolds in the college context. An important part to recognize about social penetration theory is that politics are typically not discussed until people are at least in the second or exploratory affective phase (Altman & Taylor, 1973). This means that people typically must have some sort of relationship and feelings of closeness before they begin to discuss politics. We know that college is a time in life where people are likely to meet the most new people that they will ever meet (Ansberry, 2019), which can lead to many new relationships being formed as part of the relational developmental process. Politics

will thus likely be discussed as students start to disclose the information needed for relationships to form. And, because people are inclined to believe their friends and even mimic their behaviors (Bond et al., 2012; Cohen, 2016; Moore, 2010; Singal, 2017), political socialization will likely occur because of these political discussions (e.g., college students voting if their friends say that they're voting). If so, then the peer relationships during the college context could have a significant impact on political participation.

Hypotheses

Political socialization is needed for young individuals to develop political orientations and participate in politics. Extant research illustrates how parents, media, and children's literature are important socialization agents. Despite this wealth of research, scholarship on peer socialization in the United States context is underdeveloped (see Ekstrom & Ostman, 2013; Quintelier, 2015). Additionally, there has been scant research on political socialization on young adults over the age of 18 (e.g., Ekstrom & Ostman, 2013; Langston, 1969; York, 2019). I seek to address this gap by studying socialization in the college context. College is a ripe context to study peer political socialization because of all of the new friendships that can be built during this period of people's lives (McCabe, 2016). Social penetration theory helps explain why this might be the case by suggesting that relationships deepen as more disclosure occurs during the relationship development process (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Altman and Taylor (1973) suggested in their original theorizing that this disclosure often contains discussions of political ideologies and beliefs. Because college-aged students are expanding their networks, more so than perhaps during their primary and secondary years, it stands to reason that they are having more of these political conversations that lead to socialization. Therefore, based on the extant literature on peer political socialization (see Ekstrom & Ostman, 2013; Langston, 1969; York, 2019) within the college

context (see Covarrubias et al., 2018; McCabe, 2016; Stephens et al., 2012), this study tests the following four research hypotheses:

H₁: The effect of closeness with friends on reflective political participation will be mediated by political discussions with friends and strength of political orientation.

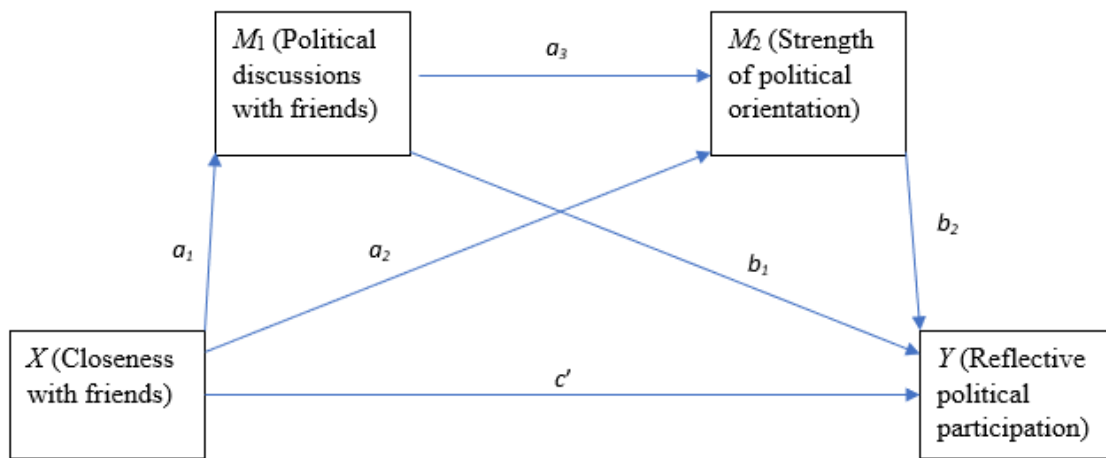


Figure 1. Illustration of Hypothesis 1

H₂: The effect of closeness with friends on functional political participation will be mediated by political discussions with friends and strength of political orientation.

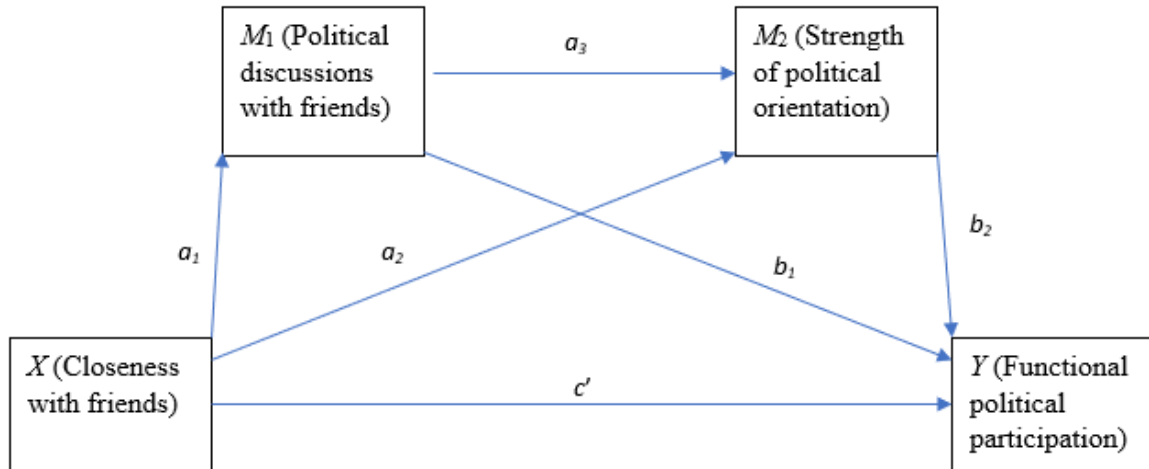


Figure 2. Illustration of Hypothesis 2

H3: The effect of social network size on reflective political participation will be mediated by political discussions with friends and strength of political orientation.

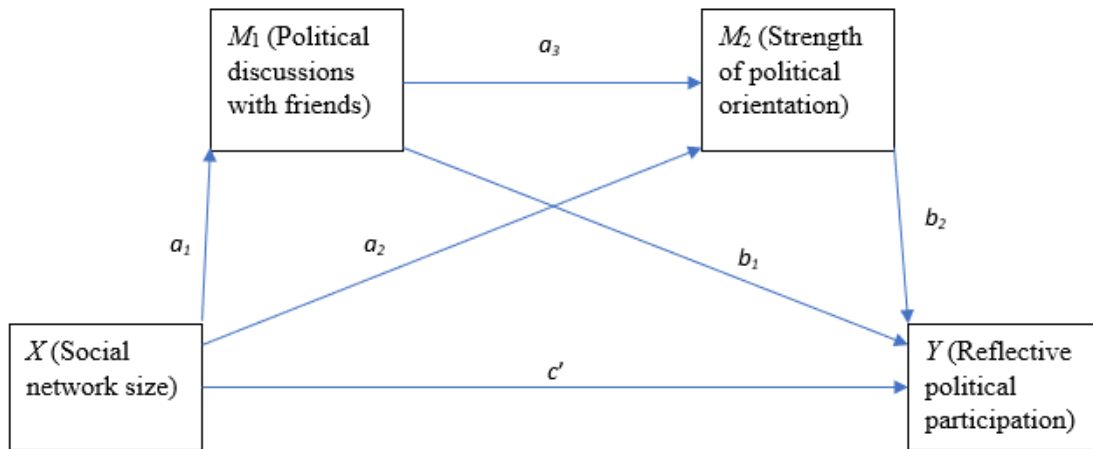


Figure 3. Illustration of Hypothesis 3

H4: The effect of social network size on functional political participation will be mediated by political discussions with friends and strength of political orientation.

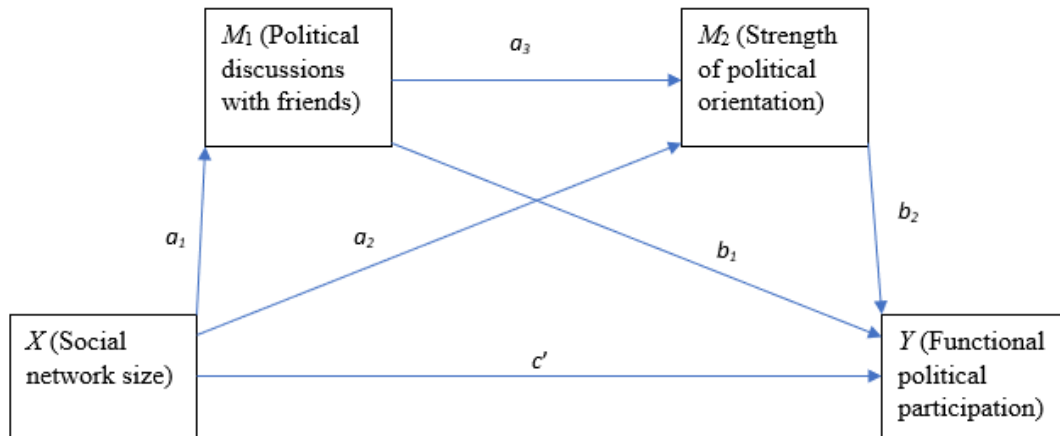


Figure 4. Illustration of Hypothesis 4

Furthermore, being in college leads to more social and political independence, which could lead to peers having more influence in the political socialization process than parents (Stephens et al., 2012). Given the lack of research that would support a clear expectation on which agent is more influential during college, I propose two research questions:

RQ1: Do political discussions (with friends or parents) and strength of political orientation better mediate the relationship between closeness with friends and reflective political orientation or the relationship between closeness with parents and reflective political participation?

RQ2: Do political discussions (with friends or parents) and strength of political orientation better mediate the relationship between closeness with friends and functional political orientation or the relationship between closeness with parents and functional political participation?

METHOD

This study was conducted using a quantitative methodological approach. Quantitative research uses objective measurements and the statistical analysis of data collected through polls and surveys, or by analyzing pre-existing data using statistical analysis (Babbie, 2010). Quantitative research is grounded in the positivist tradition, which emphasizes (T)ruth and the generalizability of data to a larger population (Daymon & Holloway, 2010). Developed through a priori research designs, quantitative studies strive for objectivity with the goal of proving or testing theories with empirical data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Accordingly, sample sizes in quantitative studies are much larger than in qualitative studies so that results can be generalizable (Daymon & Holloway, 2010).

A quantitative approach to studying political socialization is both appropriate and consistent with research in this area (see Ekstrom & Ostman, 2013; Langston, 1969; Quintelier, 2015; York, 2019). Nearly every political socialization study referenced in this thesis used survey and self-report data to assess political socialization (e.g., Easton & Dennis, 1969; Koskimaa and Rapeli, 2015; Quintelier, 2015; Shulman & DeAndrea, 2014; York, 2019). Moreover, a quantitative research approach is appropriate as my goal was to generalize the findings to college students at large, which necessitates a large sample (Daymon & Holloway, 2010).

Participants

Prior to administering the survey, the study was approved by the institutional review board. After providing informed consent, 18-24-year-old college students ($n = 155$) at a large mid-western university completed an online survey through the Qualtrics platform. Participants for this study were recruited through undergraduate communication courses where participants were given extra

credit for classes if they completed the survey. The mean age of the sample was 19.76 years ($SD = 1.42$). There were 98 women (63.2%) and 56 (36.1%) men who participated in the study. The sample was approximately 80% white, 15.5% Asian, 3.2% black, and 2% other races.

Survey Design and Measures

This study employed a survey method to assess the effects of peer relationships and the college context on political socialization. The survey was built using Qualtrics and took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Questions on the survey were related to six broad themes: reflective political participation, functional political participation, political discussions with peers and parents, closeness with peers and parents, social network size, and political orientation/ideology.

Reflective political participation ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 0.92$) was measured using original questions to assess participants' interest in politics. These questions suggest that there are range of political behaviors/interests and not all people are motivated to act. Examples of these questions include asking people how interested they are in politics and whether they like reading the news. These questions were assessed on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all true, 3 = neutral, 5 = very true). Scores on each item were averaged to create a composite variable in which scores reflected a greater degree of reflective political participation. The reflective political participation scale showed high reliability (4 items; $\alpha = .91$).

Functional political participation ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 0.64$) was measured using questions derived from Ekstrom and Ostman's (2013) and Quintelier's (2015) research on the influence of peers on the political socialization process among European youths. This scale is consistent with how communication scholars have theorized political participation (see van Deth, 2014; Verba & Nie, 1972). Examples of these questions include asking how often people vote and how often they

sign petitions. These questions were assessed on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = never, 3 = neutral, 5 = very often). Scores on each item were averaged to create a composite variable in which scores reflected a greater degree of functional political participation. The functional political participation scale was also highly reliable (14 items; $\alpha = .87$).

Political discussions with peers ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 1.34$) was measured using a question derived from Ekstrom and Ostman's (2013) and Quintelier's (2015) research. The question was "How often do you talk to your college friends about politics?" The question was assessed on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = not often, 3 = neutral, 5 = very often).

Political discussions with parents ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.29$) was measured in the same way as *political discussions with peers* except the words "college friends" was substituted with "parents" in the question. The question was assessed on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = not often, 3 = neutral, 5 = very often).

Closeness with peers ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.30$) was measured using the Unidimensional Relationship Closeness Scale (URCS) (Dibble et al., 2012). The scale consists of 12 questions asking about the closeness of relationships between friends. The questions were measured using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = neutral, 7 = strongly agree). Scores on each item were averaged to create a composite variable in which scores reflected a greater degree of closeness with peers. Consistent with prior research (Dibble et al., 2012), the closeness with peers scale was highly reliable (12 items; $\alpha = .97$).

Closeness with parents ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.11$) was measured in the same way as *closeness with peers* except the words "college friends" was substituted with "parents" in all questions. The closeness with parents scale was also highly reliable (12 items; $\alpha = .96$).

Social network size ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 1.69$) was measured using questions adapted from the Social Network Index developed by Cohen et al. (1997). Examples of questions include asking people about the size of their friend group in college and how many friends they talk to on a regular basis. These questions were assessed using a 5-point Likert-type scale asking about general social network size (1 = not large, 5 = very large) and a scale asking about their number of friends (0= 0 friends, 7= 7 or more friends). Scores on each item were averaged (and then weighted to account for the varying scales) to create a composite variable in which scores reflected participants. As anticipated, the social network size scale was reliable (3 items; $\alpha = .88$).

Finally, *political orientation* was measured using an 11-point scale (1= very liberal, 6 = neutral, 11 = very conservative), as this is the most valid measurement for political orientation (Kroh, 2007). Strength of political orientation ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.63$) was then calculated by using absolute values so that 1 & 11 = 6, 2 & 10 = 5, 3 & 9 = 4, 4 & 8 = 3, 5 & 7 = 2, and 6 = 1. This showed how partisan the participants were in the study.

Analytical Plan

Before addressing the hypotheses in this study, correlations were conducted on all variables and indexes in the hypotheses to ensure that the mediation analyses were warranted. The correlation tables for both peers and parents can be found in Appendix A (Tables 1 and 2). These correlations confirmed that performing the serial mediations was warranted. A serial mediation (model 6) using Hayes' process extension for SPSS 26 was then conducted for each hypothesis (Hayes, 2013). The analyses used 95% confidence intervals and 5,000 bootstrap samples. Additionally, the two research questions were analyzed by performing serial mediations, then comparing the effect sizes of the parent models to the friends models.

RESULTS

This study was aimed at better understanding peer socialization in the college context. The results of the mediation analyses are reported in Tables 1 and 2, including all direct and indirect effects. Both unstandardized and standardized coefficients are reported in Tables 1 and 2, however, only unstandardized coefficients are referenced in-text and in all figures. Table 1 shows the results of the mediation analyses for friends while table 2 shows the results for the parent models. In Tables 1 and 2, a_1 and a_2 show the direct effect of the X variable on M_1 and M_2 . Additionally, a_3 shows the effect of M_1 on M_2 . Furthermore, b_1 and b_2 show the effects of M_1 on M_2 on the Y variable. Finally, c' shows the direct effect of X on Y . Tables 1 and 2 also show the indirect effects of X on Y such that the M_1 row signifies the indirect effect that X has on Y through M_1 . The M_2 row shows the indirect effect of X on Y through M_2 . Finally, the M_1M_2 row shows the indirect effect that X has on Y through both M_1 on M_2 . Figures 1 through 6 illustrate the mediation analyses.

Table 1. Friend Models Mediation Results

	Model 1 X: Closeness with friends M1: Political discussions with friends M2: Strength of political orientation Y: Reflective political participation	Model 2 X: Closeness with friends M1: Political discussions with friends M2: Strength of political orientation Y: Functional political participation	Model 3 X: Social network size M1: Political discussions with friends M2: Strength of political orientation Y: Reflective political participation	Model 4 X: Social network size M1: Political discussions with friends M2: Strength of political orientation Y: Functional political participation
Model path estimates	B (β) SE	B (β) SE	B (β) SE	B (β) SE
a1	.039*** (.003) .006	.042*** (.500) .006	.077*** (.294) .021	.084*** (.317) .021
a2	.000 (.003) .010	-.003 (-.025) .010	-.041 (-.127) .027	-.050 (-.153) .028
a3	.217 (.175) .116	.269* (.216) .119	.294** (.237) .104	.341** (.274) .105
b1	1.689*** (.612) .193	3.242*** (.494) .488	1.498*** (.541) .183	3.030*** (.445) .456
b2	.727*** (.327) .138	2.104** (.400) .340	.698*** (.312) .142	2.268*** (.415) .348
c	.029 (.127) .019	.096* (.176) .045	.055 (.076) .059	.216 (.120) .147
c'	-.044** (-.190) .016	-.057 (-.104) .040	-.047 (-.065) .047	.012 (.007) .118
Indirect effects	B (β) CI	B (β) CI	B (β) CI	B (β) CI
Total	.073* (.317) (.048,.101)	.153* (.280) (.085,.232)	.102* (.141) (.013,.196)	.204 (.114) (-.016,.446)
M1	.067* (.289) (.046,.090)	.135* (.247) (.086,.190)	.115* (.159) (.045,.195)	.253* (.141) (.103,.422)
M2	.000 (.001) (-.015,.016)	-.006 (-.010) (-.053,.042)	-.029 (-.040) (-.073,.006)	-.114 (-.063) (-.247,.004)
M1 & M2	.006 (.027) (.000,.016)	.024* (.043) (.002,.054)	.016* (.022) (.003,.036)	.065* (.036) (.018,.135)
*significant at the .05 level **significant at the .01 level ***significant at the .001 level				

Table 2. Parent Models Mediation Results						
	Model 5			Model 6		
	X: Closeness with parents			X: Closeness with parents		
	M1: Political discussions with parents			M1: Political discussions with parents		
	M2: Strength of political orientation			M2: Strength of political orientation		
	Y: Reflective political participation			Y: Functional political participation		
Model path estimates	B	(β)	SE	B	(β)	SE
a1	.026***	(.271)	.008	.027***	(.278)	.008
a2	-.013	(-.103)	.010	-.013	(-.103)	.010
a3	.321	(.251)	.107	.356**	(.280)	.106
b1	1.249***	(.439)	.206	2.686***	(.387)	.493
b2	.695***	(.312)	.156	2.237***	(.409)	.373
c	-.009	(-.032)	.023	.008	(.011)	.057
c'	-.039*	(-.141)	.020	-.059	(-.086)	.047
Indirect effects	Effect	CI		Effect	CI	
Total	.030*	(.108)	(.004,.065)	.066	(.098)	(-.001,.157)
M1	.033*	(.119)	(.015,.058)	.073*	(.108)	(.034,.128)
M2	-.009	(-.032)	(-.026,.007)	-.028	(-.042)	(-.079,.025)
M1 & M2	.006*	(.021)	(.001,.014)	.022*	(.032)	(.006,.048)
*significant at the .05 level **significant at the .01 level ***significant at the .001 level						

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis predicted that closeness with friends would indirectly increase reflective political participation through political discussion with friends and strength of political orientation. This hypothesis follows social penetration theory that suggests political discussion often occur through the relational development process; as peers become close, or to become close, they are likely to have political discussions, which could lead to political socialization. Thus, this first serial mediation was conducted using closeness with friends (X), political discussion with friends (M₁), strength of political orientation (M₂), and reflective political participation (Y).

As seen in Table 1 and Figure 5, closeness with friends had a significant positive effect on political discussions with friends ($B = .039, p < .001$), but had no significant effect on strength of political orientation. Political discussions with friends had a significant positive effect on reflective political participation ($B = 1.689, p < .001$), but surprisingly did not have a significant effect on strength of political orientation. This means that talking about politics with friends in the college context does have a direct effect on reflective political participation and the extent to which these individuals *think* about politics, but not on the strength of their political orientation or how strongly one identifies with a political party. That said, strength of political orientation did have a significant positive effect on reflective participation as well ($B = .727, p < .001$). Although it was not expected for closeness with friends to have a positive effect on reflective political participation, it was not expected to have a negative effect as it does in this mediation analysis ($B = -.044, p < .01$). Additionally, the total effect of closeness with friends on reflective political participation was insignificant. Thus, from this mediation model, we learn that closeness with friends leads to political discussions with friends, which then leads to reflective political participation.

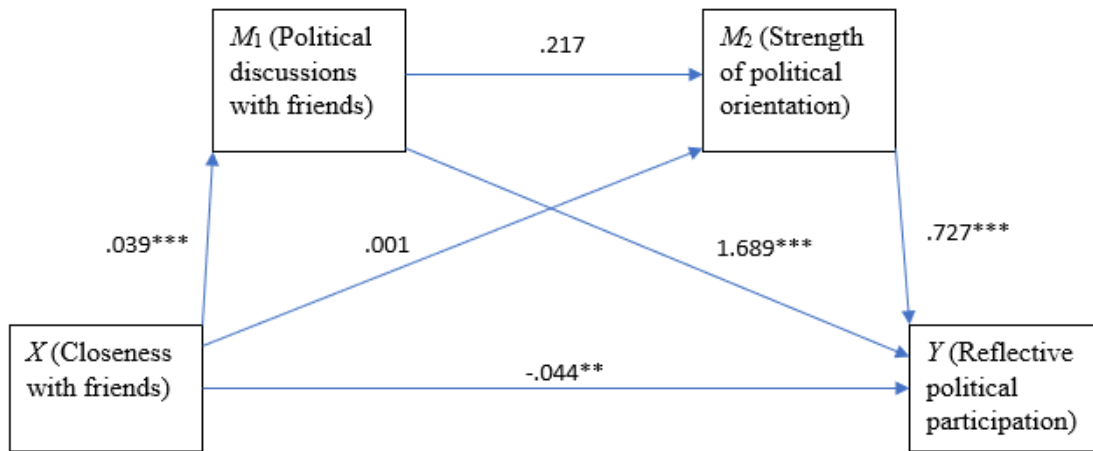


Figure 5. Hypothesis 1 Direct Effects

Along with the direct effects already examined, there are numerous indirect effects of closeness with friends on reflective political participation in this analysis. First, the total indirect effects of closeness with friends on reflective political participation were significant ($B = .073$, $p < .05$). This means that there was indeed mediation occurring in the model. However, the only significant individual indirect effect of closeness with friends on reflective political participation was through political discussions with friends ($B = .067$, $p < .05$); all other individual indirect effects were insignificant. Therefore, although there is some evidence to support that closeness with friends has an indirect effect on reflective political participation, the hypothesized indirect effect through both political discussions with friends and strength of political orientation is not present. Thus, hypothesis 1 was partially supported.

Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis predicted that closeness with friends would indirectly increase functional political participation through political discussion with friends and strength of political orientation. Accordingly, this serial mediation was conducted using closeness with friends (X),

political discussion with friends (M_1), strength of political orientation (M_2), and functional political participation (Y).

As seen in Table 1 and Figure 6, closeness with friends did have a significant positive effect on political discussions with friends ($B = .042, p < .001$), but had no significant effect on strength of political orientation. Political discussions with friends had a significant positive effect on functional political participation ($B = 3.242, p < .001$), and on strength of political orientation ($B = .269, p < .05$). Strength of political orientation had a significant positive effect on functional political participation as well ($B = 2.104, p < .001$). These results are similar to the first mediation analysis where closeness with friends also had a direct effect on political discussions with friends. However, in contrast to the first mediation, the effect of political discussions with friends on strength of political orientation, in this case, was significant.

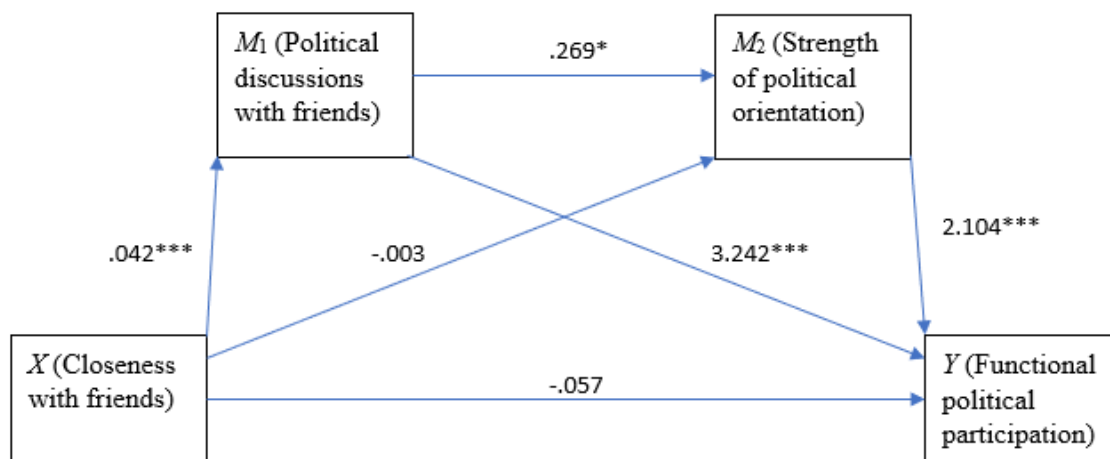


Figure 6. Hypothesis 2 Direct Effects

Beyond the direct effects, the total indirect effects of closeness with friends on functional political participation were significant and positive ($B = .153, p < .05$). Additionally, closeness with friends had a positive indirect effect on functional political participation through political discussions with friends ($B = .135, p < .05$). Finally, closeness with friends also had a positive indirect effect through both political discussions with friends and strength of political orientation ($B = .024, p < .05$). It is clear that political discussions with friends and strength of political orientation mediate the relationship between closeness with friends and functional political participation. That is, as college students develop relationships, they are more likely to have political conversations that can affect their political beliefs and actions. Furthermore, this model was the strongest out of the six conducted in the study. For example, in contrast to the other mediation analyses, the total effect of closeness with friends on functional political participation was significant and positive ($B = .096, p < .05$). As such, hypothesis 2 was supported.

Hypothesis 3

The third hypothesis posited that social network size would indirectly increase reflective political participation through political discussions with friends and strength of political orientation. The college context provides ample opportunities to meet new people, which could affect the number of political conversations that are happening as part of the relational development process. Accordingly, the third serial mediation was conducted using social network size (X), political discussion with friends (M_1), strength of political orientation (M_2), and reflective political participation (Y).

Table 1 and Figure 7 show that social network size had a significant positive effect on political discussions with friends ($B = .077, p < .001$), but had no significant effect on strength of political orientation. Similar to the first two mediations, this means that having a larger social

network does influence how many political discussions college students are having with their friends, even if these conversations are not influencing how strongly these students identify with a particular party or ideology. Political discussions with friends had a significant positive effect on reflective political participation ($B = 1.498, p < .001$), and on strength of political orientation ($B = .294, p < .01$). Additionally, strength of political orientation had a significant positive effect on reflective political participation ($B = .698, p < .001$). Similar to mediation 2, there was no significant direct effect of social network size on reflective political participation in mediation 3. Additionally, the total effect of social network size on reflective political participation was insignificant. Collectively, these results indicate that social network size does influence reflective political participation, but only through political discussions with friends and strength of political orientation.

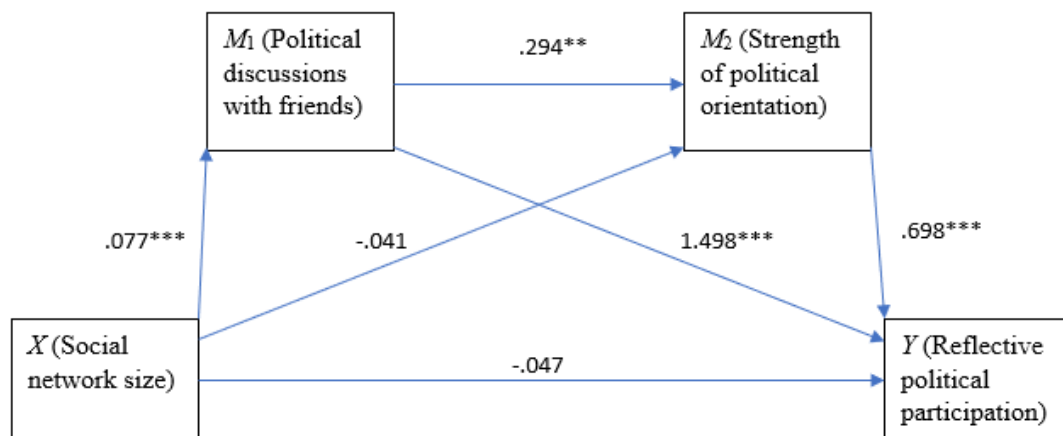


Figure 7. Hypothesis 3 Direct Effects

There were also numerous significant indirect effects in the model. The total indirect effects of social network size on reflective political participation were significant and positive ($B = .153, p < .05$). Additionally, social network size had a positive indirect effect on reflective political participation through political discussions with friends ($B = .115, p < .05$). Finally, social

network size had a positive indirect effect through both political discussions with friends and strength of political orientation ($B = .016, p < .05$). It is clear from the model that having a larger social network leads to more political discussions with friends and, in turn, having a stronger political orientation and more interest in politics. Thus, hypothesis 3 was supported.

Hypothesis 4

The fourth hypothesis predicted that social network size would indirectly increase functional political participation through political discussion with friends and strength of political orientation. Therefore, the fourth serial mediation was conducted using social network size (X), political discussion with friends (M_1), strength of political orientation (M_2), and functional political participation (Y).

Table 1 and Figure 8 show that social network size had a significant positive effect on political discussions with friends ($B = .084, p < .001$), but had no significant effect on strength of political orientation. Once again, having more friends leads directly to talking about politics with friends but does not directly lead to having a stronger political ideology. Political discussions with friends had a significant positive effect on functional political participation ($B = 3.030, p < .001$), and on strength of political orientation ($B = .341, p < .01$). Strength of political orientation also had a significant positive effect on functional political participation ($B = 2.268, p < .001$). In the same way as mediations 2 and 3, mediation 4 showed no significant direct effect of social network size on functional political participation. Additionally, the total effect of social network size on functional political participation was insignificant. These results suggest that social network size does influence functional political participation or the tendency to get involved with politics, but only through political discussions with friends and strength of political orientation.

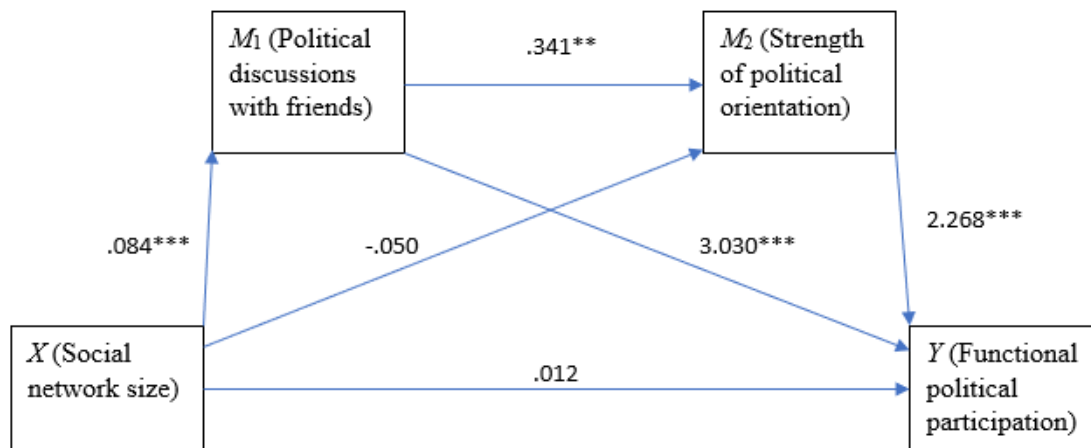


Figure 8. Hypothesis 4 Direct Effects

Indirect effects were also prevalent in this model. The total indirect effects of social network size on functional political participation were insignificant. In contrast to the first three mediation models, which all had significant total indirect effects, this model does not have complete mediation occurring between social network size and functional political participation. However, social network size did have a positive indirect effect on functional political participation through political discussions with friends ($B = .253, p < .05$). Additionally, social network size had a positive indirect effect on functional political participation through both political discussions with friends and strength of political orientation ($B = .065, p < .05$). Although the total indirect effects of the model were insignificant, it is still clear that mediation is occurring in the model. That is, as network size expands, college students are having more political conversations, which is also affecting what they think about politics and how they act on those beliefs. As such, hypothesis 4 was supported.

Research Question 1

In addition to analyzing the effect of closeness with friends and social network size on reflective and functional political participation, this study also assessed how closeness with parents affected both types of political participation. Specifically, I was interested in any differences between closeness with parents and friends and political socialization. Thus, I first conducted a fifth serial mediation using closeness with parents (X), political discussion with parents (M_1), strength of political orientation (M_2), and reflective political participation (Y). I then compared the peer and parent relationship models to provide an initial assessment about whether peers or parents appeared to be more influential in the political socialization process.

Table 2 and Figure 9 illustrate that closeness with parents did have a significant positive effect on political discussions with parents ($B = .026, p < .001$). However, like the previous four mediations conducted on peer relationships, closeness with parents had no significant effect on strength of political orientation. Political discussions with parents did have a significant positive effect on reflective political participation ($B = 1.249, p < .001$), and on strength of political orientation ($B = .321, p < .01$). Strength of political orientation had a significant positive effect on reflective political participation as well ($B = .695, p < .001$). Similar to mediation 1, mediation 5 showed a significant negative direct effect of closeness with parents on reflective political participation ($B = -.039, p < .05$). Additionally, the total effect of closeness with parents on reflective political participation was insignificant. This means that closeness with parents does have an indirect effect on reflective political participation through political discussions with parents and strength of political orientation.

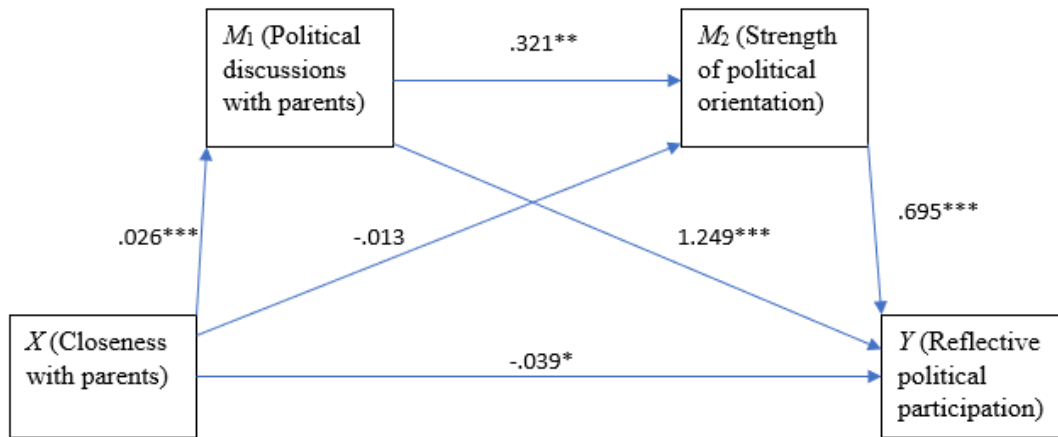


Figure 9. Direct Effects of Closeness with Parents on Reflective Political Participation

There were also numerous significant indirect effects in the model. The total indirect effects of closeness with parents on reflective political participation were significant and positive ($B = .030$, $p < .05$). Additionally, closeness with parents had a positive indirect effect on reflective political participation through political discussions with parents ($B = .033$, $p < .05$). Lastly, closeness with parents also had a positive indirect effect through both political discussions with parents and strength of political orientation ($B = .006$, $p < .05$).

It is clear that closeness with parents does influence how much political discussion occurs, the strength of political orientation, and, as a by-product, how much college students think about politics (i.e., reflective political participation). Moreover, when comparing this mediation model to the first mediation model looking at peer relationships, the data reveal that both closeness with friends and parents has an indirect effect on this reflective political participation. However, the majority of the effects appeared to be larger within the first mediation analysis. For example, the first mediation model shows that the total indirect effect of closeness with friends on reflective participation is .073 while the total indirect effect of closeness with parents is .030. Additionally,

the effect of closeness with friends on reflective political participation through political discussions with friends was .067. In contrast, the same effect in the parent model was the much smaller .033. This initial assessment shows that peer relationships in the college context could perhaps have a greater influence than parents on reflective political participation.³

Research Question 2

The final research question questioned the differences between closeness with friends and parents on functional political participation. Once again, I first conducted a serial mediation using closeness with parents (X), political discussion with parents (M₁), strength of political orientation (M₂), and functional political participation (Y). I then assessed the differences between the sixth mediation and the one conducted on peer relationships (mediation 2).

Table 2 and Figure 10 display that closeness with parents had a significant positive effect on political discussions with parents ($B = .027, p < .001$). Like all of the previous mediation models, closeness with parents had no significant effect on strength of political orientation. Political discussions with parents had a significant positive effect on functional political participation ($B = 2.686, p < .001$), and on strength of political orientation ($B = .356, p < .01$). Strength of political orientation also had a significant positive effect on functional political participation ($B = 2.237, p < .001$). Similar to mediation models 2, 3, and 4, mediation 6 showed no significant direct effect of closeness with parents on functional political participation. Additionally, the total effect of closeness with parents on functional political participation was insignificant. This analysis thus

³ While this analysis did illuminate differences between the effects of parents and friends on reflective political participation, to directly compare the peer and parent models, other statistical tests, such as a t-test, and research designs are needed.

reveals that closeness with parents does indeed effect functional political participation, but only through political discussions with parents and strength of political orientation.

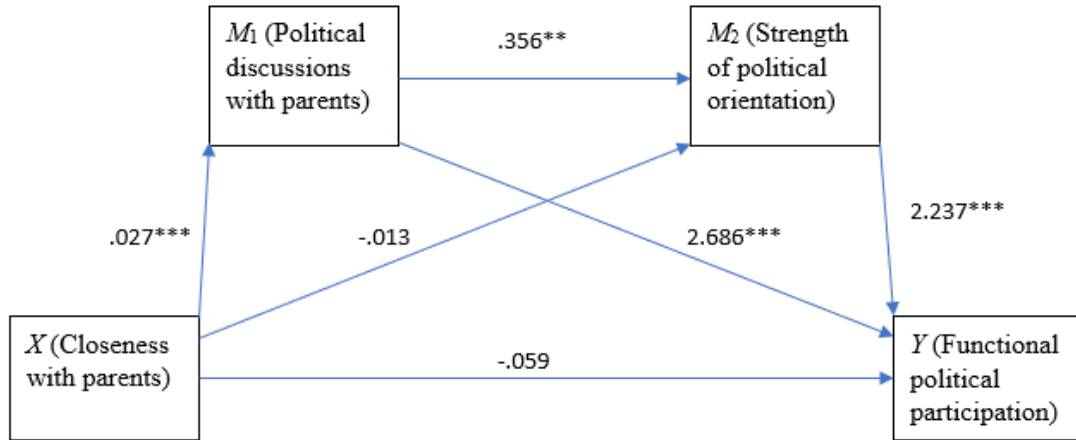


Figure 10. Direct Effects of Closeness with Parents on Functional Political Participation

Indirect effects also played a role in the model. Like mediation 4, the total indirect effects of closeness with parents on functional political participation were insignificant. However, closeness with parents had a positive indirect effect on functional political participation through political discussions with parents ($B = .073, p < .05$). Finally, closeness with parents also had a positive indirect effect on functional political participation through both political discussions with parents and strength of political orientation ($B = .022, p < .05$).

When comparing this mediation to mediation 2 conducted on peer relationships, the clearest difference between the two is that the total effect of closeness with friends on functional political participation was significant while the total effect of closeness with parents was not. Additionally, the indirect effects in both mediations show that, in general, closeness with friends is a perhaps a stronger predictor of functional political participation than closeness with parents

(i.e., the total indirect effect in the friends model was .153 while the total indirect effects in the parents model was the insignificant .066).⁴

⁴ While this analysis did illuminate differences between the effects of parents and friends on functional political participation, to directly compare the peer and parent models, other statistical tests, such as a t-test, and research designs are needed.

DISCUSSION

This thesis sought to address if and how peer relationships influence the political socialization process among college students. Early scholarship on political socialization focused more on the influence of other socialization agents (e.g., parents, media, schools, literature) and largely neglected to study the influence of peer relationships (Greenstein, 1965; Easton & Dennis, 1969; Jennings & Niemi, 1968). This study begins to address this gap by showing the importance of peer relationships on the political socialization process in the college context. In this final section, I first discuss the main findings of the study. Next, I discuss the implications of these findings. Finally, I discuss the limitations of the study and future directions the literature can take.

Summary of Findings

To analyze the role of peers in the political socialization process in the college context, I performed six mediation analyses through Hayes' process in SPSS (Hayes, 2013). I examined how closeness with friends and social network size influenced both reflective and functional political participation through political discussions (with friends and parents) and strength of political orientation, providing a preliminary assessment on the differences between peer influence and parent influence. The main findings and potential explanations are summarized below.

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 predicted that political discussions with friends and strength of political orientation would mediate the relationship between closeness with friends and reflective political participation. The results indicate that this relationship does exist, however, political discussions with friends is the mediator that makes the model significant. Strength of political orientation alone

was not a mediator, but rather needed to be coupled with political discussions with friends to be significant. Although this finding does not fully support the hypothesis, the finding that closeness with friends does not increase strength of political orientation directly perhaps makes sense in light of social penetration theory. Just because people are close with their friends does not mean that they would have a strong political orientation or develop a stronger orientation purely due to that closeness. In this situation, closeness is more of a state of being rather than a process, which likely affected the outcome of this study. However, it is reasonable that college students will have a stronger political orientation if they talk to their friends regularly about politics. Presumably, bringing up a political conversation indicates some level of interest that is likely guided by a belief system or opinion. Through these discussions, beliefs could become reinforced and solidified. Simply put, it is the *process* of talking about politics that affects political orientation, not the inherent state of being close with another person.

Another interesting finding from the first model is that the direct effect of closeness with friends on reflective political participation was negative. While it was not expected that this relationship would be positive, it was also not expected that the relationship would be negative, suggesting that closeness with friends, in fact, decreases thinking about politics. Consequently, this is a noteworthy result. Once again, this finding can potentially be explained through social penetration theory that shows a curvilinear relationship between closeness and disclosure. Altman and Taylor (1973) suggested that people disclose more in the earlier stages of relational development. This amount of discussion decreases after the friends get to know each other and move to the later stages of the social penetration process. Therefore, when friends are close, this means they already gone through the stages of increased disclosure. It is thus reasonable to assume that those friends considered “close” have already discussed politics earlier in the relationship, and

therefore, already know about each other's political leanings. These friends may not have as high of reflective political participation because they were already made aware of their friends' political thoughts and ideology earlier in the relationship. This finding thus shows that the relationship between closeness with friends and reflective political participation is indeed mediated. Ultimately, when college students are close to their friends, they will have more political discussions. These discussions, in turn, increases their interest in politics. More research is needed to fully explore this result. However, this finding helps support the notion that social penetration theory is a useful theoretical explanation for how the political socialization process unfolds in the college context.

Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 predicted that political discussions with friends and strength of political orientation would mediate the relationship between closeness with friends and functional political participation. This hypothesis was supported and, importantly, was the strongest model in this analysis. No other model had a significant total effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable. This means that the total effect of closeness with friends on functional political participation was significant, not just the individual direct effects, which was the case with the other models. This result can be explained through social influence literature that indicates social interactions can have a direct effect on behavior (see Cohen, 2016; Hamari & Koivisto, 2015; Moore, 2010; Sherif, 1935; Singal, 2017; Spears, 2021). For example, Hamari and Koivisto (2015) found that individuals are more likely to continue exercising if they get likes on their social media posts about the exercise. This is similar for political behavior (Bond et al., 2012; Tang & Lee, 2013). Indeed, in an experiment looking at how Facebook friends can influence each other to vote, Bond et al. (2012) found that close friends have the most impact on getting their friends to vote, while ordinary friends do not have a significant effect. Following this research, it was expected

that close friendships during college would affect functional political participation, and indeed it did. If college students see their friends participating in politics and have conversations about this participation (functional participation), then they will likely participate in similar ways.

One contextual explanation for the finding that political discussions mediate the relationships between closeness with peers and functional participation is the prevalence of student organizations (i.e., student clubs) on college campuses. Universities often have a plethora of organizations that students can join, ranging from Greek organizations to more topical, less involved ones. As students join, they will likely meet people and start attending events with their peers. Some organizations might even have event or activity requirements for their members. Consequently, some members might only attend an event or participate in an activity because other members are doing so and it is mandated by the organization. In this case, peer pressure would be a compelling reason for participation, lending insight into why the second mediation was the strongest in this analysis. Peer pressure literature suggests that being part of a group is important for young people as they have a strong urge to fit in (see Arnett, 2000; Santor et al., 2000). This might be even more the case during the early stages of college when students are on their own for the first time and no longer have the social safety net of their families. And, people do face social pressure to conform to group norms. For example, if a college student is part of a club that prioritizes participating in politics, they will likely take part in any political activities due to the pressure to conform to the organization's norms. As Cormack (2019) found in a study about local election turnout, peer-to-peer voter outreach was the best way to get people to vote. Therefore, the social influence of the college context likely plays a large role in getting these students to participate in politics.

Hypothesis 3

This study was also aimed at better understanding how social network size could impact reflective and functional political participation. One defining element of college is that students are meeting many new people through their classes, participation in student organizations, and the various activities that occur on a college campus (e.g., dormitory events, study abroad, sporting events). Hypothesis 3 predicted that political discussions with friends and strength of political orientation would mediate the relationship between social network size and reflective political participation. This relationship was indeed found in this analysis. This model was significant in the same ways as the previous model, suggesting that network size does affect reflective participation. Importantly, the direct effect of political discussions with friends on strength of political orientation in this model was greater than the same effect in Models 1 and 2. This means that having *more* political discussions with friends had a greater impact on political ideology in the social network size model as opposed to the closeness with friends' models. Furthermore, this means that those with more friends are more likely to develop stronger political ideologies as a result of their political discussions with friends. This finding is potentially explained by the variety of ideologies students likely encounter when they have a larger social network size. Presumably, if political discussions are occurring with more and more people, individuals will not only hear more perspectives, but they may have to defend their own positions more often. Even if there is agreement on political issues, having conversations with multiple people likely provides new ways of thinking about those issues. This finding is particularly important because it shows that social network size can have affect not just how often people discuss politics, but also their ideologies.

Hypothesis 4

Hypothesis 4 predicted that political discussions with friends and strength of political orientation would mediate the relationship between social network size and functional political participation. The analysis indicated that mediation was indeed occurring. This model was also very similar to Model 3, which tested the effect of social network size on reflective political participation through political discussions with friends and strength of political orientation. While the first three models had significant total indirect effects, model 4 did not have a significant total indirect effect of social network size on functional political participation. This means that talking about politics with friends and strength of political ideology are not completely mediating the relationship between social network size and functional political participation. This result is surprising for several reasons. First, the first three mediation models that were analyzed all had significant total indirect effects, so it is curious that this one did not. Second, the other models that used functional political participation as the outcome variable were generally stronger than the models that used reflective political participation. This finding can be potentially explained through analyzing the difference between reflective and functional political participation. Having more friends does not necessarily mean that those friends participate in politics. However, having more friends most likely does lead to more political discussions. As such, it is logical that social network size would have a greater effect on reflective political participation than functional political participation because having more friends would not necessarily make someone participate more in politics (functional political participation), but it may prompt them to think about politics more often (reflective political participation). Finally, these results also indicate that closeness with friends is a better predictor of functional political participation than social network size.

Research Question 1

An important component of this study was providing an initial assessment of the differences between peer and parent socialization. Due to the influence of the college context—being away from parents, meeting new friends, independently navigating life for the first time—it was theorized that peers might have greater influence on socialization than parents for this age-group. After examining Models 1 and 5, there appeared to be a difference in the influence between peers and parents, although I am careful not to overstate these findings.

An interesting finding from both Model 1 and Model 5, however, is that both models showed a negative direct effect of closeness with parents/friends on reflective political participation. As previously discussed, this was an unexpected result. However, similar to Model 1, this negative effect can likely be explained with social penetration theory. Social penetration theory posits that disclosure in relationships is curvilinear, meaning that most disclosure happens in the middle stages of social penetration, not in the first or last stages (Altman & Taylor, 1973). More specifically, politics are most likely to be discussed in the second stage (the exploratory affective phase) and in the third stage (the affective phase). Therefore, being very close to someone presumably means that an individual has already gone through the process of disclosure. Political conversations would likely have already occurred. Therefore, unless controlling for how often they actually talk about politics, it may seem that closeness has a negative effect on reflective political participation. This shows that it is indeed because of political discussions with friends and family that causes the interest in politics, not the closeness itself.

Research Question 2

The second research question explored if there were any differences in how parents and peers influence functional political participation. After comparing Models 2 and 6, there is

preliminary evidence to suggest that friends may have greater influence on functional political participation than parents in the college context. As previously mentioned, Model 2 (the friend model) was the only model in the analyses that had a significant total effect. This means that the overall model was the strongest out of the mediation analyses. Moreover, Model 2 also had a significant total indirect effect while Model 6 had an insignificant total indirect effect. Based on the characteristics of the college context (e.g., independence, making new friends, etc.) this finding is unsurprising. College students interact with their friends more than their parents on a day-to-day basis, making it more likely that their friends would influence their political participation or just encourage more political participation. This comparison is critical to the study as it provides preliminary evidence that friends are crucial in the political socialization process, countering previous literature in this area (Hyman, 1959; Langston, 1969).

Implications of Results

Given the results of this study, there are several important implications. The first implication is that it is important to talk about politics with family, but especially friends. There is a colloquial saying in the United States that goes “We don’t talk about politics or religion at the dinner table” (Leeper, 2012). Many families hold the belief that politics should not be talked about with their children because they want to avoid conflict (De Landsheer et al., 2016). This belief could be getting stronger considering how polarizing politics in the United States has recently become (Kerr et al., 2021; Lupu, 2014; Westfall et al., 2015). However, the results of this study show that talking about politics does significantly affect young people’s propensity for getting involved with politics. Conversely, *not* talking about politics could have detrimental consequences.

Therefore, this study should be prescriptive for families questioning whether or not to broach the topic of politics: political discussions should be normalized from an early age. Then,

instead of feeling like politics are inappropriate for discussion, children will hopefully come to see politics and political engagement as normal parts of life. In addition to families needing to talk about politics more, it is also important for friends to have more political discussions. As this study indicates, it is critically important for friends to talk about politics with each other because friends can have a significant influence on political behavior. When college students get to campus, they should look for opportunities to discuss politics with others or get involved with organizations that have a political focus. Even if a student is already politically interested, these discussions could help those who are perhaps less interested develop political beliefs and a desire to get involved.

The second implication of the study follows from the first, which is that the college context can be particularly conducive to political discourse and participation. Due to all of the unique aspects of college—independence, involvement with clubs, new friends, political classes—the college context is ripe for political socialization. This is useful information for numerous reasons. First, there has been a push from political campaigns and grassroots organizations to mobilize young voters (Harper, 2019; Stauffer, 2020). Instead of mobilizing students directly, political campaigns should perhaps focus their efforts on encouraging those who are already politically active to get their friends involved in politics, thereby leveraging college relationships to increase political participation. This study suggests that college students are uniquely positioned to encourage their friends to get involved in politics as they develop new relationships. As such, future political campaigns should focus more on getting politically interested college students to mobilize their friends.

Another thing that this study tells us about the college context is that politics should also be discussed in the classroom more often. Patrick (1977) argued that anytime politics are discussed in the classroom, political socialization is taking place. So, the classroom should be a safe space

for peers to have discussions about an array of topics, including politics. Condon (2008) argued that instructors from different disciplines should be prepared to have political discussions in the classroom but should try to be as objective as possible. They also argued that political discussions will become even more commonplace in the classroom because of increasing diversity and polarization. Moreover, Clark and Jones (2017) found that when politics are discussed more in journalism curriculum, students are more likely to engage in political discussion, recall political information, and become politically active (i.e., traveling to Parliament when previously only politics students made such as trip). Therefore, having a class instructor lead a discussion about politics and mediate discussions or arguments, when it is relevant to the class, could be extremely helpful in modeling how students can and should have these conversations. Beginning a conversation in a classroom environment could also motivate students to continue those conversations outside of the classroom with their peers. Given the results reported in this study, college instructors should facilitate these discussions and model how peers can engage political topics because that may lead students to becoming more politically active.

Importantly, some universities are beginning to understand the need for more civic literacy, presumably as a precursor to political engagement. For example, Purdue University recently announced that all incoming students starting fall 2021 will need to pass a civic literacy requirement in order to graduate (Weliever, 2021). This requirement will require students to either attend a certain number of civic events, listen to podcasts about civic literacy, or take a class related to the topic. Universities see the benefit of encouraging more civic learning and engagement, and this step by Purdue University is a clear way in which universities can become an even greater part in the political socialization process, which is consistent with the recommendations in this study.

Another implication of the study is that political socialization may occur throughout an individual's life, not just until the age of 18. This study helped uncover that peer relationships in the college context can be an important agent of political socialization. This study thus provides a warrant for examining political socialization throughout one's entire life, not just during the younger years. To date, political socialization researchers have been very agent focused, examining who or what influences political predispositions the most (Easton & Dennis, 1969; Ekstrom & Ostman, 2013; Greenstein, 1965; Jennings & Niemi, 1968). In addition to focusing on which agents are the most influential, it would be useful to examine which agents are most important at different times of one's life. For example, parents may be most influential when people are under the age of 18, but then maybe friends maybe become a stronger socialization force (see Quintelier, 2015). It is perhaps the case that as younger individuals marry and have kids, they revert to having more conversations with their parents and thus those relationships, once again, become more influential. Additionally, with the rise of social media, it is likely that the media will begin to play a larger role in the political socialization process (see German, 2014; Thorson et al., 2018). Studying political socialization in a longitudinal manner might be able to provide more context for how the *process* works throughout people's lives.

As a final note, the results of this study lend important insight into social penetration theory. Social penetration theory has been studied in many different contexts, including social relationships (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Won-Doornink, 1985), healthcare relationships (Beach et al., 2004), and workplace settings (Hwang et al., 2015; Mangus et al., 2020). To my knowledge, this theory had curiously not been applied in the political context. This study shows that social penetration theory could be useful for explaining why college students talk about politics with friends and family. This study found that closeness in relationships fostered more political

discussions, which in turn led to political participation. This finding shows that social penetration theory can be applied to the political context more in the future. Furthermore, this study provides evidence that interpersonal theories, in general, can be used to help explain political phenomenon. Following this work, it might be useful to consider other interpersonal theories beyond social penetration theory could be applied to the political context to help explore why people talk (or do not talk) about politics (e.g., relational turbulence theory, communication apprehension, communication privacy management theory).

Limitations

This study was not without limitations. The first limitation of the study is that political discussions with friends and family and political orientation were only measured using one question. Although a one-question measure for political orientation has been effectively used in previous research (see Kroh, 2007), it may be beneficial to use a multi-question index for political discussions with friends and political orientation. Another limitation of the study was the small sample size. Only 155 participants completed the survey for this project, which undoubtedly affected the statistical power in this analysis. Although the study had strong results, a larger sample size in the future would help to validate the trends that emerged. Another limitation was that the study was only conducted at one university, and, as such, did not have a diverse sample. For example, 80% of participants were white. Different races and cultures likely have different ways that they are socialized to politics that should be accounted for in future research. Furthermore, the majority of participants were women (63%), which could have affected the results. Shulman and DeAndrea, (2014) found that mothers have more of an influence on the political socialization process than fathers. This is attributed to the fact that mothers have more influence over their children than men earlier in children's lives so there is evidence that gender can affect the political

socialization process. It is possible that female and male friends discuss politics differently, which could be useful to research more in the future.

Another limitation of the study is that closeness and social network size were difficult to measure properly. Certainly, “closeness” is a subjective assessment and is challenging to quantify. The Unidimensional Relationship Closeness Scale was also originally intended to be used for measuring closeness between two people, not between multiple people like it was used in this study (Dibble et al., 2012). Additionally, closeness with individual parents was not asked, as it was assumed that individuals would have somewhat equal closeness with each parent. Along the same lines, it was also assumed that individuals would have some form of relationship with their parents, which may not be the case. Social network size was difficult to measure due to the inconsistency of the scales. Two of the questions used a 5-point scale while the other questions used an 8-point scale. Using a more standard scale for all of the questions in the social network size variable would have been preferable as it would make the variable more reliable.

Another limitation is that the design of the study did not fully account for the directionality of closeness with friends/parents, social network size, and political discussions with friends/parents. For example, in Models 3 and 4, political discussions with friends was positively related to strength of political orientation, indicating perhaps that political discussions with friends led to greater strength of political orientation. However, it is potentially the case that strength of political orientation, in fact, leads to political discussions with friends. Therefore, while the current analyses do point to these variables being related, I am unable to make any definitive causal claim. In the future, experimental methods should be used for this type of study to be able to assert that network size and closeness do indeed lead to greater political socialization.

Similarly, another limitation of the study is that the design was not equipped to fully examine the differences between how parents and peers impact the political socialization process. Mediation analyses were necessary to determine if parent and peer closeness had an effect on political discussion and strength of political orientation, which then leads to reflective and functional political participation. The results suggest that both peers and parents contribute to political socialization. However, to directly compare the peer and parent models, other statistical tests, such as a t-test, and research designs are needed. Future research should thus start from the assumption that both parents and peers do contribute to political socialization and conduct analyses that directly compare the effects of these agents.

The final limitation of the study is that strength of political orientation was only assessed at the time respondents participated in the survey, rather than at the time they entered college. This limited the ability to observe if their political orientation actually changed since entering college. This limitation should be addressed in future studies with longitudinal analyses or a time-series analysis.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study usefully contributed to research interested in political socialization. This study, in addition to other research in this area (Ekstrom & Ostman, 2013; Quintelier, 2015), provides compelling evidence for the occurrence of political socialization at specific and discrete moments in a person's life. The first recommendation for future research, then, is for scholars to perform both longitudinal analyses, using a similar technique to this study to chart political socialization over time, and experimental analyses, to investigate the causal relationships of the variables tested in this study. While studies have used longitudinal analysis before (e.g., Beck & Jennings, 1991; Quintelier, 2015), few studies have sought to examine anyone over the age of 21. Having a longer

time period for the study would be interesting for several reasons. First, it would be helpful to compare data between different ages for the same individual. A longitudinal approach could also help uncover at what age specifically the political socialization process really takes place. Additionally, an over-time analysis could help uncover at what points in life friends and parents have the most impact on political socialization. As mentioned above, experimental research could address a limitation of this project: although mediation analyses indicate that variables are related, these analyses are incapable of determining the directionality of these variables.

Another methodological recommendation for future research would be to conduct interviews and focus groups to get more context on how politics are discussed in friend groups. Holding focus groups or interviews could further identify what types of issues and elements friends talk about when they discuss politics. It could also be illuminating to discover if certain friends control the conversations more than others and what those interactions look like. Interviews could be useful to get more context from individuals as to how their political discussions are different between their friends and family. Studying political socialization in a qualitative manner could help provide more context as to why individuals may or may not discuss politics with their friends and family.

Another recommendation for future research would be to study political socialization on people over the age of 24. This study found that political socialization does occur between the ages of 18 and 24 and that friends can have a vast impact on the political socialization process in college. There is no compelling evidence to suggest that the trends found in this study would not continue over time. In fact, friends might have an even greater impact as people get older and lessen the amount they speak or directly interact with their parents. Or, it could be the case that parents take on a greater role when children become the parents themselves (e.g., seeking help from parents as

people begin to have children). As such, future research on political socialization should be more centered on how people are socialized with politics later in life.

Finally, future research should compare friends to the other agents of political socialization not explored in this study. This study focused on identifying if friends or parents have a greater effect on political socialization in the college context. The natural next step would be to examine the effect of friends compared to the media or literature. Social media in particular dominates all aspects of modern life, making it a likely source of political socialization (Thorson et al., 2018). For now, this research took an important step in identifying that the college is a ripe context for the political socialization process to occur, and that friends play a critical role in how college students are politically mobilized.

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APPENDIX A. CORRELATION TABLES

Table 3. Pearson Correlations for Friends						
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Closeness with Friends	-					
2. Strength of Political Orientation	.090	-				
3. Functional Political Participation	.176*	.514**	-			
4. Reflective Political Participation	.127	.424**	.584**	-		
5. Social Network Size	.613**	-.043	.120	.076	-	
6. Political Discussions with Friends	.457**	.225**	.540**	.584**	.291**	-

*Correlation is significant at the .05 level

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level

Table 4. Pearson Correlations for Parents					
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Closeness with Parents	-				
2. Strength of Political Orientation	-.037	-			
3. Functional Political Participation	.011	.514**	-		
4. Reflective Political Participation	-.032	.424**	.584**	-	
5. Political Discussions with Parents	.289**	.244**	.471**	.476**	-

*Correlation is significant at the .05 level

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level

APPENDIX B. INFORMED CONSENT FORM AND SURVEY

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

The Influence of Peers Relationships on Political Socialization Among College Students

Dr. Diana Zulli & Zachary Isaacs

Lamb School of Communication

Purdue University

Key Information

Please take time to review this information carefully. This is a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary which means that you may choose not to participate at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may ask questions to the researchers about the study whenever you would like. If you decide to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this form. Be sure you understand what you will do and any possible risks or benefits. The survey should take no more than 30 minutes to complete.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to examine how relationships with peers can influence the political socialization process in the college context. The findings will be published as part of a Master's Thesis.

What will I do if I choose to be in this study?

If you agree to participate, you will be asked a series of online questions through Qualtrics about your political participation and your communication with friends and family. The survey should

take no more than 30 minutes to complete.

How long will I be in the study?

The survey should take no more than 30 minutes to complete.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?

There are no anticipated risks involved in taking part in this study. As in all human subject research, there is a small, but quite minimal, risk of a confidentiality breach. We minimize this risk with strict procedures on collection, transferring and storing of data.

In addition, this survey has a number of questions embedded in it as validity checks to insure that you are not a robot and are in fact fully reading and answering each question. A unique combination of answers to those questions may result in your survey being rejected.

Are there any potential benefits?

Participation in the study may warrant extra credit in certain communication classes. Please ask your instructor if your class offers extra credit for participation in research studies.

Will I receive payment or other incentive?

Participation in the study may warrant extra credit in certain communication classes. Please ask your instructor if your class offers extra credit for participation in research studies.

Are there costs to me for participation?

There are no anticipated costs associated with this research.

Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?

Your surveys and answers will be kept anonymous. There will be no way for the research team to associate your identity with your survey because your email will not be collected. Your consent form information will be kept confidential as we will store the personal data (such as

your signature) in a secure folder.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

You do not have to participate in this research project. If you agree to participate, you may withdraw your participation at any time without penalty. If you wish to have your data removed from the study, contact the PI immediately (see contact information listed below).

Who can I contact if I have questions about the study?

If you have questions, comments or concerns about this research project, you can talk to one of the researchers. Please contact Dr. Diana Zulli (dzulli@purdue.edu) first with any questions. You may also contact Zachary Isaacs (zisaacs@purdue.edu) if Dr. Zulli is unavailable.

To report anonymously via Purdue's Hotline see www.purdue.edu/hotline If you have questions about your rights while taking part in the study or have concerns about the treatment of research participants, please call the Human Research Protection Program at (765) 494-5942, email (irb@purdue.edu) or write to:

Human Research Protection Program - Purdue University
Ernest C. Young Hall, Room 1032155
S. Grant St. West Lafayette, IN 47907-2114

Documentation of Informed Consent I have had the opportunity to read this consent form and have the research study explained. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research study, and my questions have been answered. I am prepared to participate in the research study described above. I will be offered a copy of this consent form after I agree to participate.

☐ I AGREE

What is your age?

☐ 18

☐ 19

☐ 20

☐ 21

☐ 22

☐ 23

☐ 24

Are you Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino or none of these?

☐ Yes

☐ None of these

Are you Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino?

☐ Spanish

☐ Hispanic

☐ Latino

Choose one or more races that you consider yourself to be:

☐

White

☐

Black or African American

☐

American Indian or Alaska Native

☐

Asian

☐

Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

☐

Other _____

Are you an international student?

☐

Yes

☐

No

What is your gender?

☐

Male

☐

Female

☐

Other (Please specify) _____

☐

Prefer not to say

Do you consider yourself to be transgender?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation?

- ☐ Heterosexual (straight)
- ☐ Homosexual (gay)
- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Other (Please specify) _____
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Please indicate the answer that includes your entire household income in 2020 before taxes (not including your parents' income).

- ☐ Less than \$10,000
- ☐ \$10,000 to \$19,999
- ☐ \$20,000 to \$29,999
- ☐ \$30,000 to \$39,999
- ☐ \$40,000 to \$49,999
- ☐ \$50,000 to \$59,999
- ☐ \$60,000 to \$69,999
- ☐ \$70,000 to \$79,999
- ☐ \$80,000 to \$89,999
- ☐ \$90,000 to \$99,999
- ☐ \$100,000 to \$149,999
- ☐ \$150,000 or more

What, if any, is your religious preference?

- ☐ Protestant
- ☐ Catholic
- ☐ LDS/Mormon
- ☐ Jewish
- ☐ Muslim
- ☐ Other
- ☐ No preference / No religious affiliation

Are you presently

- ☐ Married
- ☐ Divorced
- ☐ Separated
- ☐ Widowed
- ☐ Single
- ☐ Living with a partner

I am interested in politics.

☐ Not At All True

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ Very True

I consider myself politically active.

☐ Not At All True

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ Very True

I enjoy learning about political issues.

☐ Not At All True

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ Very True

I often read/watch the news to learn more about politics.

☐ Not At All True

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ Very True

In the past, how often have you voted (before 2020)?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ Very Often

Did you vote in the most recent (2020) election?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer Not To Say
- ☐ Yes

In the future, how often do you plan on voting?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ Very Often

This is an attention check question. For this question, please select "Never".

☐ Never

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ Very Often

How often do you sign petitions?

☐ Never

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ Very Often

Do you consider yourself to be part of or aligned with a political party (e.g. Democratic, Republican)?

☐ Not At All

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ Very Much

How often do you contact your elected officials via letter, email, or social media?

☐ Never

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ Very Often

Do you think you will run for public office in the future?

☐ I Definitely Will Not

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ I Definitely Will

How often do you post about politics on social media?

☐ Never

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ Very Often

How often do you take part in physical demonstrations or protests (e.g. physically attending a Black Lives Matter protest or a Pro-Life march)?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ Very Often

How often do you take part in online demonstrations or protests (e.g. tweeting #BlackLivesMatter or #ProLife)?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ Very Often

How often do you boycott products/companies for political purposes?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ Very Often

How often do you participate in **campus** events/activities?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ Very Often

How involved are you in **campus** organizations?

- ☐ Not Involved
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ Very Involved

How often do you participate in **campus** events/activities that are political in nature?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ Very Often

How involved are you in **campus** organizations that are political in nature?

- ☐ Not Involved
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ Very Involved

This is an attention check question. For this question, please select "Very Involved".

- ☐ Not Involved
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ Very Involved

How often do you participate in **off-campus, community** events/activities (not affiliated with the University)?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ Very Often

How involved are you in **off-campus, community** organizations (not affiliated with the University)?

- ☐ Not Involved
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ Very Involved

How often do you participate in **off-campus, community** events/activities (not affiliated with the University) that are political in nature?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ Very Often

How involved are you in **off-campus, community** organizations (not affiliated with the University) that are political in nature?

- ☐ Not Involved
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ Very Involved

What year are you in college? (Number of years spent, NOT by credit hours).

- ☐ First year
- ☐ Second year
- ☐ Third year
- ☐ Fourth year
- ☐ Fifth year
- ☐ Sixth year or more

What is the size of your friend group in college? (excluding friends from high school).

- ☐ Not Large
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ Very Large

How many college friends do you have? (people that you feel at ease with, can talk to about private matters, and can call on for help).

☐ 0

☐ 1

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ 7 Or More

How many of these college friends do you see or talk to at least once every 2 weeks?

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5
- ☐ 6
- ☐ 7 Or More

How often do you talk to your college friends about politics?

- ☐ Not Often
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ Very Often

This is an attention check question. For this question, please select "Not Often".

☐ Not Often

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ Very Often

How ideologically diverse are your college friends' political opinions (e.g. Is there a mix of Democratic and Republican opinions)?

☐ No One Agrees

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ Everyone Agrees

Generally, what is the political orientation of your friends?

Very Conservative	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Very Liberal
----------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----	----	-----------------

My relationship with my college friends is close.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

When we are apart, I miss my college friends a great deal.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

My college friends and I disclose important personal things to each other.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

My college friends and I have a strong connection.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

My college friends and I want to spend time together.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

I'm sure of my relationship with my college friends.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

My college friends are a priority in my life.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

My college friends and I do a lot of things together.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

When I have free time I choose to spend it with my college friends.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

I think about my college friends a lot.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

My relationship with my college friends is important in my life.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

I consider my college friends when making important decisions.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

How often do you talk to your parents about politics?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ Very Often

How many of your parents do you see or talk to at least once every 2 weeks (this includes step-parents)?

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5
- ☐ 6

How ideologically diverse are your family's political opinions (e.g. Is there a mix of Democratic and Republican opinions)?

- ☐ No One Agrees
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ Everyone Agrees

Generally, what is the political orientation of your parents?

Very Conservative	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Very Liberal
----------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----	----	-----------------

My relationship with my parents is close.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5
- ☐ 6
- ☐ Strongly Agree

When we are apart, I miss my parents a great deal.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

My parents and I disclose important things to each other.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

My parents and I have a strong connection.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

My parents and I want to spend time together.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

I'm sure of my relationship with my parents.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

My parents are a priority in my life.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

My parents and I do a lot of things together.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

When I have free time I choose to spend it with my parents.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

I think my parents a lot.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

My relationship with my parents is important in my life.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

I consider my parents when making important decisions.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

☐ 5

☐ 6

☐ Strongly Agree

What was your political orientation **when you began college?**

Very Conservative	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Very Liberal
----------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----	----	-----------------

What is your political orientation now?

Very Conservative	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Very Liberal
----------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----	----	-----------------