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EDITED AND REVIEWED BY
Andrea De Angelis,
University of Zurich, Switzerland

*CORRESPONDENCE
Anne-Marie Jeannet
✉ anne-marie.jeannet@unimi.it

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Editorial: Agents of political socialization in the 21st century

Anne-Marie Jeannet^{1*}, Lenka Dražanová² and Alina Vrânceanu³

¹Department of Social and Political Science, University of Milan, Milan, Italy, ²Migration Policy Centre, European University Institute (EUI), Fiesole, Italy, ³Department of Political and Social Sciences, Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona, Spain

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Editorial on the Research Topic Agents of political socialization in the 21st century

The Research Topic Agents of Political Socialization in the 21st Century aims to better understand changes in the processes of political socialization in the past few decades. While much of the theoretical understanding of these processes is strongly rooted in scholarship that emphasizes the importance of parental influence, social and political developments in recent years call for renewed efforts to gauge potentially new agents of political socialization.

The agents of socialization that emerge from this Research Topic reaffirm traditional agents such as the family through a new lens. [Van Ditmars and Bernardi](#) contribute to scholarship on the intergenerational transmission of political attitudes. The article focuses on parental separation as a particular type of formative experience. The authors present two potential mechanisms, economic deprivation and single-mother socialization, arguing that children from separated families should hold more leftist ideological orientations later in life. This expectation is generally confirmed by their empirical analyses. While the causal chain of influences might be harder to pin down with the available data, the long-term political implications of growing up in norm-breaking environments should be unpacked in future research.

In a similar vein, the study by [Weiss](#) investigates the intergenerational transmission of left-right ideology in 11 European countries due to same-gender dynamics and parenting styles. Despite the supposed declining importance of the family in the political socialization process due to increasing individualization and political volatility, their study demonstrates its withstanding importance. The intergenerational transmission of left-right ideology plays an important role in the political self-identification of individuals. The gender differences in the intergenerational reproduction of political ideology show that children are not passive recipients in the political socialization process. At the same time, the parenting behavior of mothers and fathers proves to be important, thus the relationship between parent and child plays an important role not only in everyday life but also in the political sphere.

Beyond the family, the Research Topic highlights more diffuse agents of socialization like the broader political climate or the macro-economic context. Unlike primary socializing agents like the family or school, the macro formative climate is an impersonal socializing agent that delivers mass messages about societal norms and principles. As such, the formative political climate can impress norms and values on younger people who come of age around the same time, regardless of their family socialization.

For instance, [Jeannet and Dražanová](#) address the question of why cohorts differ in their attitudes toward gays and lesbians by investigating the role of contextual values during formative years. This is tested by integrating historical political data with contemporary micro-data on attitudes toward sexual orientation across 13 cohorts in 13 European countries. Their findings suggest that cohorts adopt distinct patterns of attitudes toward different sexual orientations as a result of a collective process of political socialization during their impressionable years. Individuals who came of age during a period when political values of equality were more dominant are more tolerant of other sexual orientations later in life.

Elections themselves can be socializing events. [Eckstein et al.](#) investigate the activating effect of national elections in Germany, the Czech Republic and Sweden amongst young voters. The results reveal significant increases in political engagement during the election period, followed by significant declines after the election. This underscores the socializing value of major political events. As such, periods of national elections can promote youth's political development by drawing attention to political issues, providing opportunities for commitment, and facilitating opportunities for engagement. This is likely to have long-term consequences, since late adolescence and young adulthood are formative periods for political attitudes and behaviors that persist later in life.

Work can also bring an important climate of disadvantage which can interfere with political socialization according to [Azzolini and Macmillan](#). The authors argue that uncertainty and disadvantage in the occupational realm hamper political socialization and the formation of a clear identity, therefore leading to political marginality. Their analysis of 32 European countries indicates that precarious work heightens socioeconomic stratification in electoral participation. Moreover, the detrimental effects of precarious work on the likelihood of voting are independent of sociodemographic factors that have been the spine of traditional research on the topic.

Yet economic events, such as the 2009 economic crisis, show less potent effects as socializing agents. [Valgaðsson](#) explores the impact of the 2009 economic crisis on political trust in six countries which were severely affected by it: Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, and Spain. Although the results suggest that there may be a recession generation effect in some of these countries, it is too early to conclude confidently one way or the other.

We conclude that major societal changes, such as divorce or value shifts, have an indelible imprint on the political socialization of Europeans. Rather than operating as quick shocks, many of these are long-term climates which influence development over years of a young person's life. Some of these, however, occur in more nuanced ways than is commonly understood. As a socialization agent, the role of the family is less about passively receiving the political inclinations of the parents but more about a micro-climate of values and world views which impinge on the way that young

people come to view the world around them. Likewise, the macro-climate has a similar function. It would merit future exploration to better understand how conflicting socializations from the micro-climate of the family and the macro-climate of society are resolved within an individual's socialization process. The studies here have focused on socialization occurring in the formative years. Looking ahead, we would encourage scholars of political socialization to go beyond this and consider exploring later-in-life socialization in other periods of adult life.

While our Research Topic has had a cross-national focus, it has remained primarily focused on European countries. At the same time, European countries offer a natural "laboratory" for exploring various political and cultural contexts, including relatively new democracies. However, it remains a very limited geographic scope and further studies should be done to explore socialization agents in other cultural contexts and in lower income countries.

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