The Experiences that Most Affected the Political Socialization of US Undergraduates

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Young people are often described as, and quite literally are, the future of a country. As they grow up and learn about the world and their place in it, their lives and approaches to life are shaped. These experiences can also shape their political beliefs, which will naturally have profound effects on future activity in the political sphere.

The value of generational labels like "Millennial," "Baby Boomer," and others has been hotly debated. A primary concern is how such terms often fail to properly capture common experiences even within the same generation; for instance, Baby Boomers who came of age before and after the Vietnam War had very different experiences, and so did Millennials who graduated before or after the Great Recession. This all becomes infinitely more complicated once class, race, and other such factors are considered. With these issues in mind, I will still be using labels such as "Gen Z" and "Millennials," since I believe they capture the broad trends I am interested in reasonably well and thus can still help provide some context for my investigation into the politics of young people.

Many scholars have already broadly examined what the youngest generation believes through surveys, and they have observed several notable trends. Gen Z is the most anti-capitalist generation yet, with 54% having a negative reaction to the word "capitalism" compared to only about 40% of Millennials; Gen Z is also the most accepting of "socialism" out of any generation with 52% having positive reactions (Wronski, 2021).[1] On social and policy issues, Gen Z share their largely progressive and pro-government views with Millennials, in some cases to a greater extent; 62% of Gen Z believe that "increasing racial/ethnic diversity is good for society" and 70% believe the "government should do more to solve problems," compared to 64% and 61% of Millennials, respectively (Parker et al., 2019). These patterns even hold true among young right-wingers as "in 2019, 81% of Republicans and GOP leaners age 18-34 had a positive view of capitalism; today, that number has fallen to 66%," an enormous drop in just two years (Wronski, 2021). Similarly, Gen Z Republicans are more likely than previous generations to say that "Blacks are treated less fairly than whites" and that the "government should do more to solve problems," a difference that only grows starker with an increasing age difference (Parker et al., 2019).

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[1] When discussing different generations, I will use the Pew Research Center's definitions: Gen Z are born after 1996 while Millennials are born before them but after 1980 (Parker et al., 2019).
*This article, which was based on a class project rather than a research study, was not reviewed by the PSU IRB.

In conjunction with these trends in generational political views, young people are also becoming increasingly active in politics despite many still being in school or university. The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) conducts an extensive survey on U.S. college freshmen each year, and one of the questions asks about how often respondents have "demonstrated for a cause" by participating in rallies, boycotts, or other similar events. More and more students answer that they "frequently" or "occasionally" do so each year, with the percentage starting at 22.3% in 2016 and steadily rising to over 30% in 2019 (Eagan et al., 2017; Stolzenberg et al., 2019a, 2019b; Stolzenberg et al., 2020). While these surveys only include the oldest of Gen Z, their increased activism is mirrored in younger Gen Z members as well. A 2018 study by the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) "found an increased activism among students at more than half of all secondary schools across the US," especially among "college-bound students and those already enrolled at colleges and universities" (Hudson, 2018). With how active this generation is despite most of them being currently ineligible to vote, it is clear that Gen Z's influence on U.S. politics will only grow as they age and gain both the ability to vote and to organize more easily for what they believe in.

While these surveys and articles illustrate exactly *what* Gen Z believes and how strongly, it is less clear *why* they believe so; babies are not born knowing the ins and outs of capitalism or anarchism. My research seeks to answer how politically interested undergraduates have been politically socialized and why they hold the views they do. More specifically, I will explore what events and experiences in their lives they find most important or influential, as well as how those experiences, and one's conception or memory of them, may have informed students' beliefs.

Literature Review

Political socialization literature in the late 20th century could be described as split between two very broad groups: those who believed people made political choices "'rationally' on the basis of available information," and those who believed there were a variety of psychological factors that cloud that rationality (Sears & Valentino, 1997). These differing views gave rise to debates on multiple questions such as: are children and adolescents politically socialized more by their parents or by the most prominent issues of their time? Sears and Valentino explored this and found that "preadult political socialization is [greatly] influenced by real political events," but that influence is concentrated on the issues that the events in question highlight most (1997). For example, presidential elections like Reagan's in 1980 or Trump's in 2016 are massive socialization events for many young people. However, they alone cannot and will not shape all of a person's views;

instead, their influence is centered on the issues most discussed or those most important to the candidates and their campaigns. In Reagan's case, those issues might be the economy or government spending, while in Trump's case, they may be the travel ban and border wall. Still, as these are only single events or time periods in a young person's life, it is also possible that a later event may highlight new issues or cover old ones in a new light, swaying their previously held beliefs (Sears & Valentino, 1997). I draw on the knowledge of this effect in my research, looking into what events and experiences my participants were most influenced by and why those, specifically, were important to them.

Kennedy and her team's article "Early Adolescent Critical Consciousness Development in the Age of Trump" investigates how major political moments affect how young people aged 10 to 15 years develop an understanding of the social and political world they live in, and how they might use that understanding to act against things they find oppressive. As expected due to the participants' young ages, surface-level knowledge and comments abounded, but "[w]hen adults or their peers encouraged deeper levels of analysis, youth discussed potential actions that they could take" as well as the implications of each option (Kennedy et al., 2020). My participants are certainly not as young or new to politics as Kennedy's, but her team's results provide a better understanding of how young adolescents might process and respond to major political events. I build on this by investigating how young adults might do the same and how experiences from earlier in their lives affected the views they currently hold.

As previously stated, parents can play a large role in how their children are politically socialized. Although children often start out with very similar views to their parents', since that is all they know, some do grow up to have different beliefs from their caretakers. Most literature before 2014 researched the strength of those initial beliefs, thinking that those who "swapped sides," so to speak, did not have their parents' beliefs ingrained deeply enough. Dinas decided to investigate the other side of this issue, focusing on how strong the circumstances or events that change a person's views are. His research showed that "[r]ather than boosting intergenerational partisan similarity, parental politicization increases the frequency and potential influence of change-inducing stimuli that individuals encounter in early adulthood" (Dinas, 2014). Children of politically aware parents encounter more events that could change their views, and the effects of those events are often stronger as well. This is likely because "by facilitating political discussions at home, [the parents] make the offspring more attentive to the political messages of their times," and enable the child to more easily notice the political side of everything around them (Dinas, 2014). The more they notice, the more opportunities they get to see something that runs counter to their parents' teachings and change their views. This knowledge provides another lens of

analysis through which to examine the participants' responses, and my study can also suggest whether this holds up for Gen Z and their parents.

Methods

I spoke with 7 U.S. undergraduate students with a strong interest in politics from multiple colleges through semi-structured interviews and a focus group. Those with a strong interest are likely informed or well-versed enough in political discourse to be able to discuss their views and how they arrived at those beliefs in detail, while those who are apolitical may not have much to say, if anything, on the topic. Each participant's interest in politics was determined by whether they were active in a political student group or if we had had frequent or enthusiastic conversations about politics in previous interactions. Although one can have a strong interest in politics while also holding moderate or centrist views, none of the (presumed) moderates I contacted responded, so the ideas, comments, and experiences of moderates and centrists are not discussed here.

Due to receiving no responses early on, I started by interviewing people I already knew who fit the criteria, then getting their recommendations for future contacts. I reached out to the early respondents through social media since I knew them personally, then to later contacts through email. As I reached further beyond my initial circle, I grew more reliant on using membership in student political groups as a measure of the candidates' interest in politics due to not knowing those respondents as well. I conducted one-on-one interviews with one left-winger and three right-wingers, but the focus group was made up entirely of left-leaning students. Having similar ideologies within the focus group was intended to help the participants open up as it was a one-time meeting that would not last very long. It also helps minimize the potential for arguments and antagonism between members while highlighting their similarities and differences and the unique paths they took despite holding similar views. To protect their privacy, each participant decided how they wanted to be referred to in this paper, and some names have been changed.

Being a fellow undergraduate student and living through many of the same national events as them likely helped with building immediate rapport, but it also led to some details being left unsaid due to sharing a collective memory of the event in question. Despite my best efforts, I know there were still moments in every conversation where further clarification could have opened more avenues of questioning. Naturally, given my research topic, I often faced the choice of whether to reveal my own political leanings to the participants. I could not hide it from those I was familiar with since I had—at least—briefly discussed politics with all of them before. With those whom I agreed with, I reiterated my views in the recorded sessions to help make them more comfortable with sharing their views and stories. Conversely, especially with those I disagreed with, I did not

explicitly state my beliefs prior to or during the interview to both prevent antagonism and maximize interviewee comfort. One of the interviewees I disagreed with did (correctly) guess my views during our conversation, but I did not get a chance to confirm or deny it before he continued telling the story he was in the middle of. The others made no such comments nor asked such questions. With this knowledge imbalance between participants in mind, I also made a conscious effort to find points of agreement in every meeting to further build rapport and drive the conversation forward. Interestingly, although I began by speaking with people I already knew, they often brought up topics and stories we had rarely discussed before, if ever; despite being an "insider" in their lives, the subject matter made me more like an "outsider" in those meetings, and they still often had to explain at least some context for me to understand their stories.

Findings

Personal Impacts

One of the most immediately evident themes was how the most influential events, issues, and experiences often had very personal consequences or effects, which seems like a logical extension of Sears' and Valentino's findings. If an event directly affects you or if you have a stake in the result, you will naturally be more invested, and it will have a stronger influence on you. One example that came up repeatedly was familial or community rejection of queer people. The effects of this experience are exemplified in Makenna's story about reconciling what her parents and hometown said with what she saw and experienced every day:

> I was always told—especially from tying religion with it—that "being anything but straight isn't right, it's not how God intended," and in middle school, I had a lot of very openly LGBTQ friends. […] [I]t's not like [my parents] ever said anything explicit, it's just "oh that's not right," but it still rubbed me the wrong way because they're talking about my friends like this. It made me realize that I didn't feel the same as them, and I didn't want to turn out like that just because I feel like it's just further dividing people and spreading a very hateful message, and I didn't want to give in to that.

The effects of this rejection also became much more personal later in her life as she realized she may be part of that "not right" group as well:

> I personally do not know about my sexual identity, but I feel like being in a house like this where you're raised on very strong

> Christian principles, it's very hard for you to tell that to your family and have them accept you because you're just worried about how they might feel about you, because for all your life, you've been told that something's wrong, and now you may feel that way.

Makenna was pushed toward views opposite of her family's due in part to their queerphobic views that applied directly to her friends.

On a more national scale, the 2016 election was also a common answer for an influential event, sparking many arguments like the ones Churchill and Ish had with their classmates. Ish specifically elaborated a lot on what happened after he revealed his support for Trump. The teachers at his high school often got involved in his debates with other students, telling him "We shouldn't be talking about such sensitive subjects in school; you could hurt someone's feelings or offend somebody," which confused Ish. Using what he said to that teacher as a spring-board, he argued that:

> "[Yes], we shouldn't be trying to offend people, but it's not my fault if somebody gets offended by my way of thinking." I do not have to censor myself to spare someone else's feelings. […] [W]hat if your beliefs offend me? […] It doesn't matter if that offends me; that's what you believe in, and you're free to express that.

Being one of the only right-leaning people at his school, he was often singled out and asked to keep quiet about his views because his classmates all leaned the other way and the teachers made it clear they disapproved of his views so strongly that they gave him "dirty [looks] whenever [he] walked into the classroom."[2] The isolating and frankly unkind treatment Ish described only served to push him further to the right. This idea of personal consequences would turn out to be a common thread throughout the stories of every participant.

Being Misrepresented

One specific personal effect that was particularly common was having one's views or character misrepresented. One example that Greg was especially passionate about since it was a fairly recent memory involving the College Republicans student group that he serves as secretary for:

> [W]e had [a constitutional lawyer] come to speak about [his job]. [...] [T]hen bunch of members of [a left-leaning student group] [...]

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[2] These experiences also play into a theme of hypocrisy coming from the left-leaning people in Ish's stories, which will be elaborated on in a later section.

> hijacked the meeting towards the second half and asked him a bunch of political questions that he was not there to talk about. And then they took [his answers] and decided that meant he was anti-Semitic [...] and transphobic and eventually it turned into him being a Nazi and racist despite never talking about race at the thing. It ended with the club being disaffiliated without going through any of the proper procedures on campus.

Although it has since been reinstated, Greg's group was forcefully disbanded over a dishonest representation of the group's and their guest speaker's views. This fits right in with his experiences with "the left" as well as his rejection and dislike of liberal or left-leaning views. He cited Gamergate[3] as an event that shaped his beliefs, saying that "the politics creeping into the gaming industry was really obnoxious." His conservative upbringing and consistent spurning of left-leaning ideas combined with this wrongful disbandment debacle to solidify his views against those on the opposite side of the aisle.

Meanwhile, Ramisa spoke a lot about being Muslim in a post-9/11 America and the effects it had on everyone in their family. Their father's coworkers expected him to feel bad for Osama bin Laden's death purely by virtue of both men being Muslim, and their sister's third grade teacher singled her out in front of the class:

> [Her teacher was] showing [the class] a video of the towers being attacked. My sister came home crying that day because […] [her] teacher kind of used her as an example; the teacher asked her "do they say anything extreme in the Qur'an?" She said she kind of felt singled out, like she was supposed to have answers to these questions when all we were raised with was that Islam was a religion of peace, and to treat others with compassion and kindness.

Despite being one of *very* few non-white families in their small Indiana town and the only Muslims in their school, this was one of the first times that Ramisa's Muslim and child-of-immigrant identities really made themselves apparent to her in a social and political sense. In the aftermath of 9/11, Islam was painted as a violent and extreme religion when it is an Abrahamic religion just like Christianity or Judaism and teaches many of the same values. This baseless image and fear of Islam was unjustly extended to its practitioners and anyone who looked the part. As Ramisa said in the focus group, "even now when someone

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[3] Gamergate was an online campaign against the rise of feminist and other progressive ideas both in and around video games. It began in 2014 and heavily involved publicly revealing the private information of, harassing, and sending violent threats to, women in the video game industry.

says 'terrorist,' the first things that [pop] into my head is 'a brown person' or 'a Muslim' because [those words have] forever been associated with 'terrorist.'" The nation's reactionary fear, exemplified by her local community members, pushed both her and her sister further left, away from their center-right hometown.

Losing Trust

Losing trust in some authority figure or group was also a common theme, often compounding with the former two and pushing participants away from whatever side of the aisle the subject of distrust was associated with.

Ish lost trust in his high school teachers and their ability to uphold the school's value of diversity because of how they often "tried to silence [him] and censor [him]" for holding different beliefs from the rest of his community, further cementing his views against left-leaning people. Makenna and Churchill grew up in the same hometown and discussed a similar shared memory about losing trust in their former educators. In class discussions about the book *Nothing but the Truth*, their teachers never mentioned that refusing to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance was a legal right that everyone had, and the one teacher who did mention it promptly "followed it up with 'but if you do, I'll know who you are.'" Such a simple right was never presented as an option for them, at least not without some vague threat for disturbing the status quo. Their knowledge of this right, and by extension their ability to exercise it, was curbed by some teachers' refusal to mention it and another's attempts to instill a more fear-based loyalty. Though the duo did not realize the meaning of these actions as middle-schoolers, the implications, which Makenna described as "horrible," now serves to cement their position against the more right-wing community they grew up in.

As jarring as that may have been to look back on, Churchill's notion of what was "normal" had already been cracked a few years before that:

> This was the day that Michael Brown was shot [...] I remember watching that news broadcast and being just—not knowing what to do, and not knowing how to feel, and being so young, and having to confront the thought that "we have institutions in this country that are meant to protect us, and yet they can do things like this, and murder people who don't deserve to be murdered." And coming to grips with that, and my entire structure of trust in our country got shaken even though I was like 11.

He learned and had to reckon with this new image of police as potential threats instead of protectors early on. While I am unsure of whether this specific event on its own pushed him further in either direction politically, this distrust in the police fits in with the more left-leaning views I know he currently holds. This experience

with police is paralleled in one of Citlalli's stories, only *much* more personally and viscerally. Since Citlalli comes from a community and family with undocumented immigrants, the police were never really a protective force for her. As a result, she grew up under the constant fear of her parents and neighbors being taken away, and this came to a head both during Romney's 2012 campaign and when police would stage what she called "raids" in her home city:

> [P]olice would have raids in the streets. [Neighborhood residents] would communicate with each other—they had a system with their cars too, signaling to other people "oh there's cops around here, watch out, because they might ask you for your documentation."

Alongside these raids, Citlalli also had to deal with persistent media narratives of "citizenship [being] equated with being a good person." Her family and her community were demonized, and their characters were regularly misrepresented, all based on something entirely unrelated. These false narratives and raids pushed Citlalli further away from the right, which Romney represented with his largely anti-immigration views and his status as the Republican presidential candidate.

Personal Identity and Threats vs. Free Speech and Hypocrisy

One interesting finding unrelated to any of the above themes is in the topics that each participant discussed. Those who leaned left mostly discussed aspects of their personal identities such as race, religion, gender, and sexuality. Everyone was part of a minority or historically oppressed group under at least one of those categories; for instance, everyone in the focus group identified as LGBTQ or questioning, while Ramisa and Citlalli are also part of minorities that have been actively demonized by US media. Because of this, ideas and discussion topics about living in a society that did not or does not fully accept them or those they love dominated that conversation. From larger moments and stories like those explored in previous sections to smaller moments like Citlalli recalling her reaction to when the Supreme Court declared same-sex marriage nationally legal: "[she] was like 'wow, it really took this long for queer people to finally be accepted'—not even completely accepted, but just given the right to marry."

Meanwhile, those on the other side of the aisle had much more to say when discussing their interactions with or reactions to those they now disagree with; where the left-leaners' most influential moments revolved around threats based on who they were, the right-leaners' most influential moments were about them being scorned for their views or their reactions to things left-leaners did. For Hannah, she knew that by going to her university of choice, she would be in a very small minority of right-leaning students on campus, and this idea returned multiple times throughout our conversation:

I also knew going into [this university] that—[…] it'd be a more liberal space, I'm trying to say it wasn't a surprise. It's very much a prominent fact that isn't hidden at all in conservative media that college campuses lean left. So knowing that I would—like instead of my high school friend being the one who has to keep quiet about his views lest he be ostracized for [them], now that person is going to be me. It wasn't a surprise.

I'm used to being more guarded about [politics] at [this university].

Hannah was much less outspoken about her beliefs than Greg or Ish to avoid conflict, but many of her responses were still about her interactions with left-leaning people, and her plan of staying guarded and acting "totally apolitical" does seem to have minimized the backlash she faces day to day.

In contrast to Hannah's avoidance of tension, Greg and Ish spoke much more about the faults they saw in the actions of those they disagreed with. Greg's answers that involved "the left" often had a hint of disdain to them. In addition to his remark about Gamergate, it was evident when he was talking about former President Trump: "I do appreciate [his] honesty, and [he] pretty much unmasked a lot of the left-wing conversation to me because [the left made] arguments that virtually never panned out in my experience […] it was really hard to take some of that stuff seriously when it came off as so dishonest." Likewise, Ish spoke vehemently about the apparent hypocrisy of the city and school he completed his secondary education in. While his teachers seemed to selectively forget about how much they value diversity in their school, other denizens of his city also appeared to selectively forget how much they valued equity in quality of education:

[My city] is a very segregated city, and the quality of education depends on what neighborhood you're in. […] So [in 2012] the city made a decision to, instead of having 16 K-8 schools, to have four 6-8 schools and 12 K-5 schools and mix everybody around the city. […] However, there was a certain group of "progressive, left-leaning" elites who are in the city's highest-earning bracket who pushed back against this openly. Even though this setup served the majority and served the diversity, equity, and inclusion that they champion, […] they opposed it.

This undercurrent of people who leaned left being dishonest or hypocritical ran through their many of comments about those people. These negative experiences with and perceptions of those across the aisle combined with their right-leaning upbringings and tendencies to solidify Greg's and Ish's positions against them.

Conclusion

While plenty of lesser themes appeared in smaller subsets of participants, these were the most common threads throughout all my conversations. Facing the very personal consequences of certain major political events defined their stories, with misrepresentation and loss of trust in certain authorities being the most common types of consequences. The events and experiences they spoke of often acted as deterrents, pushing the participants away from a certain side of the political spectrum; there were few influential instances discussed where they "liked" something they experienced, so to speak, and moved politically closer to agree with that thing or idea. This was especially apparent after noticing the pattern in what each side's stories were about. The left-leaners were repelled by the groups that seemed to threaten or attack aspects of their personal identities, while the right-leaners had very strong reactions to the apparent hypocrisy and dishonesty of the other side as well as perceived threats to their 1st Amendment rights. In each of these stories, they were driven away, politically, from whichever side the cause or perpetrator was associated with. In a similar fashion, losing trust in a certain authority generally resulted in the narrator wanting to politically distance themself from whichever side that authority figure represents.

Of course, findings based on a mere seven participants and their unique stories are not very generalizable. Future research is needed to determine if these trends hold up for the rest of Gen Z, including those who have already graduated, those who never went to or finished college, and those who have not yet finished their secondary education. Due to time constraints, the interviews and focus group were also kept quite short. If this study were to be repeated or redone, I would want to go on for much longer; plenty of topics and avenues of inquiry were left unexplored due to not having enough time. I personally would have also liked to conduct a focus group with entirely right-leaning participants to better see how they and their views might differ from those in my left-leaning group. One pattern I noticed that was not directly related to my research question was that those who grew up to have different views from their parents or others in their childhood environment had the most to say about their socialization process. Although the results would be even less generalizable, shifting the focus to those people may be worth considering to better understand what events were pivotal to causing such radical shifts in perspective.

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