



The Transmission of Ideology across Generations:  
A Comparative Analysis

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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that this work contains no materials accepted for any other degrees in any other institutions. This thesis contains no materials previously written and/or published by another person unless otherwise noted.

Elena Cristina Mitrea  
November 2020

*To my family*

## **Abstract**

Although ideology has generated a considerable amount of research, many of the questions surrounding the role of the family in the development of the ideological position of the youth remain unsolved. Moreover, due to a paucity of suitable data, even less is known about the mechanisms of the family transmission of ideology across different cultural and political contexts. This dissertation seeks to fill this gap by examining levels of intergenerational ideological congruence in Europe. It employs new multigenerational data on family socialization and political attitudes from nine EU member states (Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom) and two associated countries (Switzerland and Turkey). The diversity of the countries included in the study in terms of their socioeconomic, cultural and political configuration makes the data a fertile ground for exploring the cross-national dimension of the family transmission of ideology. Taking advantage of this cultural and socioeconomic variation, this dissertation assesses the strength of the status inheritance and social learning models across different national contexts. The empirical chapters explore the conditions under which parents successfully exert an influence over the political attitudes of their children and the factors that facilitate intergenerational congruence in ideological position. Some of the key results of this dissertation are that young adults who perceive their parents as warm and autonomy supporting during adolescence have a higher likelihood of sharing their ideological position, especially in countries high in individualism. On the other hand, the likelihood of intergenerational congruence decreases for upwardly mobile young adults, who are more likely to lean rightward of their parents' position, especially in countries with high levels of youth unemployment and social spending. Therefore, this dissertation contributes to existing research in the fields of political socialization and political attitudes by enlarging the scope of previous studies and analyzing socialization mechanisms in scarcely researched European countries, different from established democracies in institutional and cultural configuration.

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# Introduction

Ideology pervades daily lives in myriad ways, some more obvious than others, from the daily news to the choice of friends and even family. Given its consequences for individuals and political systems, interest in people’s ideological position lies at the core of political science research. More recent developments, such as the deepening of ideologically inspired conflict and polarization (Abramowitz 2010; Shor and McCarty 2011; Brandt et al. 2014; Hare and Poole 2014; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Mason 2015), and the surge in populism in the US, as well as in Europe (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017; Mudde 2017) warrants renewed efforts to elucidate the antecedents of attachments to liberal or conservative ideas.

Such an endeavor naturally takes its starting point in the family. Families remain the socializing environment where children first enter into contact with the political world, learning from their parents about parties, elections and government. Moreover, through observation, interaction, conversation and play, children take early political cues from their parents and are exposed to their views, attitudes, and behaviors. This results in levels of attitudinal and behavioral congruence between parents and their offspring which are far higher than what would be expected by chance, as decades of research in political socialization has shown (Jennings and Niemi 1968; Jennings and Langton 1969; Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009).

Levels of congruence between the outcomes of parents and children, be they in the form of educational level or, of interest here, political ideology, can be fairly easily ascertained. However, the driving factors behind such similarities, or the conditions that facilitate them, which Schönplflug (2001) terms “transmission belts”, are far from being clarified. Disentangling the mechanisms behind observed parent-child similarity can lead to significant insights. For example, the children of high socioeconomic status parents could be more interested in politics as a result of the social milieu they share with their parents or the latter’s’

particular preferences and parenting practices, likely different from those of low socioeconomic status parents. Hence, as social scientists and policy practitioners debated the declining influence of families and the generational conflicts such a process might bring about (Hooghe 2004), more attention was devoted to advancing the understanding of the mechanisms behind parent-child attitudinal congruence.

These transmission belts which facilitate parent-child ideological congruence, such as the transmission of social status from parent to child or parenting behavior, have been insufficiently explored especially across different cultural and political environments. Comparative studies of political socialization are still rare, since most of the literature is focused on single country analyses, especially in established democracies, looking particularly at the American or British context (Sapiro 2004). The key barrier to quality comparative research is the lack of cross-country multi-generational longitudinal data, due to the complexities and high costs entailed by such a data collection exercise. Available data, such as the Socio-Economic Panel in Germany (GSOEP) (Goebel et al. 2019), Belgian Parent-Child Socialization Study (Hooghe et al. 2013), Children of the Great Depression (Elder 1974), the Student-Parent Socialization Study (Jennings 1965) or the Longitudinal Study of Generations (Silverstein and Bengtson 2019) meets only two of the three criteria, namely it is multi-generational and longitudinal, yet mono-contextual. Moreover, it offers information about families in established democracies, mainly the United States and Western Europe, while significantly less is known about countries in Central and especially Eastern Europe.

This dissertation contributes towards filling this gap by taking a comparative approach and inquiring into cross-country differences in socialization mechanisms and pathways of parent-child ideological congruence. It employs data collected through a cross-national multigenerational (children and parents) survey conducted in 11 European countries, within the framework of an international research project focused on the formation of young adults' attitudes in the cultural context of the family.<sup>1</sup> By including information on left-right self-placement, as well as a number of other variables of theoretical interest, a data collection exercise of such scope provides an excellent opportunity for inquiring into a host of aspects surrounding the formation of political orientations in the context of the family.

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<sup>1</sup><http://cupesse.eu/>



The diversity of the countries included in the study in terms of their socioeconomic, cultural and political characteristics also makes them a fertile ground for exploring the cross-national dimension of the family transmission of ideology. Taking advantage of this cultural and socioeconomic variation, this dissertation aims to assess the strength of the status inheritance and social learning models of parental influence across different national contexts. It thereby contributes to existing research on political socialization and political attitudes by enlarging the scope of previous studies and analyzing socialization mechanisms in scarcely researched European countries, different in institutional and cultural configuration from established democracies.

## 1. Research aims and questions

This dissertation aims to contribute to a better understanding of the role parents play in the development of their children's political attitudes across different national contexts. It examines three inter-related sets of questions regarding the transmission of political attitudes, specifically ideological position, across generations. These address the conditions under which parents successfully exert an influence over the ideological leaning of their children or the factors that facilitate intergenerational ideological congruence.

### Parenting behavior

The first set of questions concerns the role of parenting practices and parent-child interaction quality in fostering intergenerational ideological congruence. Research in the area of value transmission indicates that the behaviors parents engage in towards their children and the quality of the home environment fosters parent-child value and habit congruence (Grusec and Goodnow 1994; Mohr and DiMaggio 1995; Grusec, Goodnow, and Kuczynski 2000; Friedlmeier and Trommsdorff 2011). This is due to the fact that children growing up in a warm and supportive home environment are more likely to correctly perceive (Whitbeck and Gecas 1988; Knafo and Schwartz 2003) and internalize their parents' values (Rudy and Grusec 2001; Knafo and Schwartz 2003).

When it comes to political attitudes, foundational studies of ideology such as those of Adorno et al. (1950) and Lane (1959) have highlighted the importance of parental upbringing, especially by the father figure, in the development of children's ideological leaning. More recently, Murray and Mulvaney (2012) and

Rico and Jennings (2016) reported that warm parent-child relationships and certain parenting style choices increase intergenerational ideological similarity. Nevertheless, the bulk of the political socialization research in this area is dated (McClosky and Dahlgren 1959; Jennings and Langton 1969) and restricted to single country analyses, mainly of the United States or other Western countries (Tedin 1974; Fraley et al. 2012; Murray and Mulvaney 2012). This undermines the generalizability of these findings, since parenting behaviors and their effects on child outcomes were shown to vary across cultural contexts (Dwairy et al. 2003; Trommsdorff 2009; Olivari et al. 2015; Smetana 2017).

Authoritative parenting, which couples high levels of parental warmth with high levels of supervision or control, is the most popular and socially accepted parenting style in Western countries (Smetana 2017). This also appears to be the most conducive to parent-child value congruence. However, recent research has suggested that the effects of this parenting style might not travel equally well in other cultural contexts, which do not prize individualism as highly as the West does (Rudy and Grusec 2001; Trommsdorff 2009; Sümer et al. 2019). These findings offer ground to expect differences in the association of certain parenting behavior dimensions to parent-child ideological congruence between collectivistic and individualistic cultures.

Employing recent, cross-national European data, Chapter 2 addresses these gaps in the literature by analyzing how the quality of parenting behavior as perceived by children during the impressionable years relates to levels of intergenerational ideological congruence when children reach young adulthood. Based on previous research indicating a possible variation in the effects of parenting depending on parent and child gender (Nieuwbeerta and Wittebrood 1995; McKinney and Renk 2008; Carlson and Knoester 2011), the chapter also pays attention to the gender composition of the dyads analyzed. Most importantly, this study inquires into the strength of this relationship across the countries studied depending on their level of individualism *vs* collectivism.

The chapter therefore addresses the following research questions: 1) how does the level of parent-child ideological congruence vary depending on the behaviors parents engage in towards their children? 2) is the association between parenting behavior and intergenerational ideological congruence conditioned by the gender composition of the parent-child dyads, and 3) does the strength of this association vary between collectivistic and individualistic cultures?

### **The challenge of intergenerational social mobility**

The second set of questions addresses the relationship between intergenerational social mobility and parent-child ideological congruence. By sharing their parents' social class throughout their childhood, children undergo similar experiences and are exposed to the same social context, which can shape their attitudes and give rise to intergenerational similarities to their parents (Verba, Schlozman, and Burns 2005). The transmission of social status from parent to child is therefore one of the main pathways of parental influence over their children's attitudes and behavior (Dalton 1982; Glass, Bengtson, and Chorn Dunham 1986; Bengtson, Biblarz, and Roberts 2002). In fact, most of the political socialization literature operates on the assumption that parents and children share the same social status, which serves to reinforce parents' influence over their children. However, to the extent that it is left unquestioned, this assumption may not reflect the reality of children's possible movement up or down the social ladder once they reach adulthood, especially in countries with high social mobility rates.

After reaching certain life-course milestones, such as completing education and leaving the parental home, young adults can share their parents' social class or move to a higher or lower one, depending on a number of factors. Among these are their aspirations, motivations, efforts, physical and mental ability, skills and qualifications. Western societies value upward mobility and are built on the expectation that, through hard work and personal responsibility, each generation will be better off in material terms than the one preceding it. However, as recent research has underlined, due to rising inequality and the diminishing returns of education (Lupton, Heath, and Salter 2009), young adults today are finding it harder to maintain the living standard of their parents and are at a higher risk of downward mobility (Urahn et al. 2012; Bukodi et al. 2015; Chetty et al. 2017). Moreover, they also have more pessimist expectations about the future and are more likely to expect downward mobility in the future (Chambers, Swan, and Heesacker 2015).

The experience, and even the expectation, of social mobility brings about a series of changes in people's daily lives and social connections which are consequential for their political attitudes and behaviors. *Socialization* theory holds that people are more likely to retain a greater similarity to the origin group in which they were born and socialized, due to the long-lasting effects of early formative experiences (Dalton 1980; Jennings and Niemi 1981; Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009). In contrast, the *acculturation* or *resocialization* theory

suggests that mobile individuals gradually adjust their preferences and behaviors to align to those of the destination group, which can be higher or lower on the social class hierarchy, depending on the direction of mobility (Blau 1956; Graaf, Nieuwebeerta, and Heath 1995; Piketty 1995; Daenekindt 2017). This is a result of associating and interacting with destination group members or giving in to group pressure. When there are significant differences in values and behaviors between social classes, the origin group can lose a part (or all) of its influence, as a consequence of the process of acculturation (Graaf and Ultee 1990).

Moreover, people's likelihood to retain or move away from their parents' ideological position is likely to vary across countries. Contextual social, political and economic factors, such as the level of youth unemployment, immigration rate or the extent of state social support, can have a bearing on people's ideological position. For instance, high unemployment (Jackman and Volpert 1996) and high immigration (Knigge 1998; Golder 2003) can move people rightward. The social and cultural context can therefore moderate the relationship between intergenerational social mobility and parent-child ideological congruence. However, the implications of moving up or down the social ladder for intergenerational congruence have not been closely scrutinized in a cross-national context so far.

Additionally, the strength of young adults' ties to their family can have a bearing on their likelihood of sliding away from the parents' position. People who have experienced or expect to be socially mobile, but who report strong ties to their parents are less likely to be exposed to the diverging influence of their destination group. The importance people assign to their family varies across cultural contexts, as Reher (1998) has shown. Weak-family systems, found in Central and Northern Europe, assign more importance to the individual, while in strong-family systems found in Southern Europe the family exerts a higher influence as socialization agent.

The questions that therefore arise are firstly, how do young adults' experience and expectations of intergenerational (upward or downward) mobility impact their level of ideological similarity with their parents? In other words, can parental influence over their children's ideological position resist the pressure of intergenerational mobility? Secondly, do the effects of intergenerational social mobility on parent-child ideological congruence vary across countries according to the level of youth unemployment, immigration rate and social spending? Thirdly, are socially mobile young adults who report stronger family ties more likely to retain a greater degree of ideological similarity to their parents?

### **Political discussion as mechanism of ideology transmission**

The third set of questions delves deeper into the mechanisms of the family transmission of ideology, looking at parents' active socialization efforts through political discussion with their children. Political talk within the family offers children the possibility to expand their political knowledge, learn their parents' positions on political issues of the day and form and share their own opinions on these issues. This increases the accuracy of their perception of parental views, which contributes to higher levels of intergenerational similarity (Tedin 1980; Grusec and Goodnow 1994; Hooghe and Boonen 2015; Ojeda and Hatemi 2015; Oosterhoff and Metzger 2016).

Therefore, political discussion within the family not only facilitates value transmission, but can also potentially moderate the relationship between parenting behavior and parent-child value congruence. Specifically, political discussion can enhance the expected positive association of parental warmth and autonomy support to intergenerational congruence. Moreover, it can act as a possible break on the centrifugal effects of social mobility on intergenerational similarity. This expectation is derived from the social learning model, which holds that the family exerts a stronger influence over the political attitudes of individuals when parents make active and conscious efforts to transmit their attitudes and values to their children.

Moreover, given the shortcomings associated to the use of left-right self-placement as a sole measure of ideological position, the chapter employs an additional multiple-item measure based on policy preferences. Although the left-right scale offers a widely recognized, succinct and internationally comparable indicator of ideology (Inglehart and Klingemann 1976; Sani and Sartori 1983), it is a sweeping measure which does not capture all of the nuances of people's ideological position (Jost 2006; Piurko, Schwartz, and Davidov 2011; Feldman and Johnston 2014), especially in particular country contexts.

Chapter 4 therefore addresses the following questions: 1) does political discussion with parents mitigate the negative effects of parental behavior on parent-child ideological congruence or can it compensate for a less favorable family climate? 2) are socially mobile young adults who discuss politics with their parents more likely to share their ideological position? In other words, can parental political socialization put a break on the diverging effects of intergenerational mobility? and 3) are there any differences in the family transmission of left-right self-placement and ideological conservatism?

## 2. Structure of the dissertation

This dissertation is structured in four chapters, which explore different aspects of the family transmission of ideology. The *Introduction* presents the main aims, research questions, design, and data employed in this dissertation. The *Conclusion* offers a discussion of the results, an overview of the limitations associated with this study and avenues for future research.

*Chapter 1* situates this dissertation in the political socialization field of research and outlines the theoretical background for the empirical chapters. It introduces the main concepts used throughout the dissertation, discussing their relevance, terminological uses and the important updates and revisions undertaken by previous studies. Secondly, it offers an overview of the political socialization literature and competing theories developed in socialization research, as well as relevant findings for the study of ideology transmission within the social context of the family.

*Chapter 2* presents the results of a comparative analysis of perceived parenting behavior as a mechanism of parent-child ideology transmission inside families. The chapter begins with a discussion of the main approaches to the study of parenting behavior, arguing for the use of a dimensional approach, which disentangles parenting into three main dimensions (parental warmth, autonomy support and control). Compared to a typological approach, this allows for a more fine-grained analysis of the specific parenting components which facilitate parent-child ideological transmission. The chapter reviews next the state of art on parenting effects on child outcomes, especially political attitudes, arguing for the need to extend previous research in a cross-national context. The analysis explores the relationship between parenting behavior and intergenerational ideological congruence, taking advantage of the variation in the level of individualism *vs* collectivism in the countries studied. Results indicate that the inclusion of parenting behavior in the investigation of family transmission of ideology increases explanatory power and allows for a better prediction of parent-child ideological congruence.

*Chapter 3* challenges a key assumption behind most previous research in political socialization, namely that parents transmit their socioeconomic status to their children. As the *status inheritance* theory posits, parents and their children have a higher likelihood of holding congruent political views by virtue of their shared socioeconomic status. However, the assumption of shared social

status does not hold for the young adults who move either up or down the social ladder compared to their parents. The experience of mobility raises interesting questions with regards to its effects on young adults' political attitudes and attitudinal congruence with their parents, which have not been previously closely investigated in a cross-national setting. Therefore, the chapter analyzes the relationship between intergenerational mobility and parent-child ideological congruence, distinguishing between downward and upward mobility, and exploring this relationship across 11 European countries.

*Chapter 4* contributes to the study of the family transmission of ideology in a two-fold manner. First of all, by connecting two strands of literature, on political socialization and intergenerational mobility respectively, this chapter offers a novel test of the social learning model in the context of intergenerational mobility. It thus investigates the association of intergenerational social mobility (both experienced and expected) to parent-child congruence in left-right self-placement and the extent to which social learning can mitigate any potential mobility effects. Secondly, the chapter aims to overcome the shortcomings of using left-right self-placement as a sole measure of ideological position by employing an additional measure in the form of the Wilson-Patterson conservatism scale.

### 3. Methodology and data

The analyses presented in Chapters 3 to 5 rely on recent two-generation survey data collected within the scope of a multi-disciplinary research project on intergenerational value transmission.<sup>2</sup> The survey was carried out early in 2016 (February-April) in 11 countries, 9 EU member states (Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Spain, and the UK) and 2 non-EU members (Switzerland and Turkey). The data was collected in two steps. In the first step, a probability sample of at least 1000 young adults (aged 18 to 35) was drawn in each country. The respondents of this survey were asked to provide the contact details of their mother or father figure. This could include not only biological parents, but also grandparents, step-parents or other people regarded as parental figures. The young adult respondents also offered demographic information about their parents, such as their level of education and employment status. Further details about the recruitment and selection procedures are detailed by Tosun et al. (2019).

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<sup>2</sup><http://cupesse.eu/>.

In the second step, one or both of the people indicated as parental figures were interviewed using a “parental” survey, which was an abridged version of the “youth” survey with identical or near-identical question wording. Although the goal was to reach a sample size of 500 youth-parent dyads, due to budget constraints, this could not be met in all the countries included in the survey (see Table 4.11 in the Appendix). The full data consists of observations for 20,008 young adults, of which 5620 include data for at least one of their parents.

A detailed description of the CUPESSE two-generation survey data is offered in Tosun et al. (2019). Due to country specific factors (e.g. diffusion of the internet or landline phones), the survey mode differed between countries in order to maximize response rates (Stoop et al. 2000, 1). Notwithstanding this inevitable drawback, questionnaires were still harmonized to the greatest extent possible. Most importantly, the similarity in questions across the youth and parental survey allow for comparisons across generations. The data comes with country-specific demographic weights according to gender, age, education, and NUTS2 region.

As this dissertation makes use of both young adult and parent data, analyses are restricted to full dyads. Table 4.11 shows the distribution of the respondents by generation and the gender of the parents and the young adults included in the sample. Most country samples reach the 500 dyad threshold, with the exception of Denmark, Germany, Switzerland, and the UK. The highest number of parents who took part in the study (and consequently the highest number of parent-child dyads) are found in Spain (854), while the lowest is in Switzerland (268). The number of mothers exceeds that of fathers in all countries with the exception of the UK, where there are nearly 3 times more fathers in the sample (337 to 115 mothers). In terms of gender composition, there are more same- than different-sex dyads. Specifically, the number of mother-daughter exceeds that of mother-son dyads in all the countries. Comparatively, in the Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, and Switzerland there are more father-daughter than father-son dyads. Although this was not the specific aim of the study, there are also a limited number of cases in which both parents took part in the survey. There are 133 such cases in Hungary, 123 in Denmark, 99 in the Czech Republic, and 44 in Switzerland. Since the sample size of such triads is very limited, the analyses are based on father-child dyads in these cases, since there are generally less fathers in the sample.