

CHAPTER 5 POLITICAL LEARNING AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Learning Objectives:

- What are the major influences in forming the political values of children?
- How have the sources of political learning changed over time?
- What special methods did the German Democratic Republic use to socialize political values; how successful were these methods?
- What are the major sources of political information today?

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How do we form our political identities? If stable political systems require that the citizens hold values consistent with the political process, then one of the basic functions of a political system is to perpetuate the attitudes linked to this system. This process of developing the political attitudes and values is known as [political socialization](#). (1)

Political socialization is a life-long process. Learning begins at an early age, long before people are old enough to participate formally in the political process. Most children acquire a sense of class, religious, and national identity before their teens. Early youth is also a time when basic political orientations develop, when the beliefs anchoring the political culture take root, and when partisan and ideological tendencies first emerge. This process continues into adulthood as people develop policy beliefs that reflect their previously-learned values. New experiences are often viewed through the prism of previous values. Some elements of the socialization process, such as the media, also perform a crucial function of communicating between citizens and political leaders.

The socialization process is especially significant for Germany. The change in regimes in 1945 and again in 1989 have twice created the need to reform political values to support the new system. This chapter examines these experiences, and how contemporary political values are formed. During the 1950s, the West German government used the schools and the mass media in a large-scale reeducation campaign to transform the culture inherited from the Third Reich. As democratic values took root in the West, the nature of socialization shifted to reinforcing these beliefs and providing the information that people need to make informed political decisions. The socialization role of parents changed as they became more supportive of democratic values. The contemporary media also provide a rich source of information about politics and a vehicle for political communication.

Western reeducation activities pale, however, in comparison to the socialization efforts in the East. The GDR government tried to create a new social and political environment that enveloped the individual. The government used a variety of "transmission belts," such as schools, mass organizations, and the SED itself to educate the public politically and to reshape social relations. The state was an omni-present force in the East, or so it must have seemed to many of its citizens. Political indoctrination activities never abated in the East. Perhaps this was an indication of the government's inability to remake the political culture despite its more extensive reeducation efforts (see chapter 4). In any case, the collapse of the East and the integration of its citizens into the Federal Republic renews the importance of political socialization as an agent of political change.

Family Influences

Political learning in most societies begins within the family. Parents are usually the major influence in forming the basic values and attitudes of their children. During their early years children have few, if any, sources of learning comparable to their parents. Family discussions can furnish a rich source of political information as parents provide political role-models for their children. Thus, children often internalize their parents' attitudes and beliefs. Most parents and children also share the same cultural, social, and class milieu, providing additional sources of indirect political cues. For all these reasons, the family normally has a pervasive effect on the future adult's thoughts and actions.

In post-WWII Germany, the role of the family was more ambiguous. Researchers linked the traditional authoritarian style of German family patterns to authoritarian aspects of the political culture. As Ralf Dahrendorf, for instance, maintained that the German father furnished a model for the Kaiser or the Führer (or the SED-led state in the East): [\(2\)](#)

the German father is, or at least used to be, a combination of judge and state attorney: presiding over his family, relentlessly prosecuting every sign of deviance, and settling all disputes by his supreme authority.

This characterization was more true of the family earlier in the twentieth century, but this pattern of family relations partially carried over to the postwar period. Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, for example, found that West Germans were less likely than either Americans or Britons to say that they participated in family decision making during their youth. Furthermore, these nondemocratic family environments affected adult feelings about the democratic process.[\(3\)](#)

As in many new political systems, the family often played a limited socialization role in postwar political education. Many adults did not openly discuss politics because of the depoliticized environment of the period. In addition, parents were understandably hesitant to discuss politics with their children for fear of discussing the past. "What did you do during the Third Reich, father?" was not a pleasant source of conversation for the parents or their offspring. Furthermore, even if western parents had wanted to educate their children into the democratic norms of the Federal Republic, they were ill-prepared to do so because their own democratic experiences were limited. Most parents in the 1950s had spent the majority of their adult lives under authoritarian regimes. These experiences served as examples of what politics should not be, rather than fostering democratic political values. In other words, adults were learning the new political norms at almost the same time as their children.

Starting from these uncertain beginnings, the content and importance of parental socialization in the FRG changed over time. As people accepted democratic principles and values, the frequency of political discussion increased. Family conversations about politics are now commonplace. Moreover, today's parents were themselves raised under the political system of the Federal Republic. Helmut Kohl once

described them as "the generation blessed by the grace of late birth." These parents thus can pass on democratic attitudes that they have held for a lifetime. (4)

Social relations in the family have also changed. The dominating-father role has largely yielded to a more flexible authority relationship within the household, especially in middle class families. Western parents now place more emphasis on teaching their children to be independent and self-sufficient, rather than obedient. For instance, a 1999 survey comparing East and West found that barely half (56 percent) of Westerners over 65 thought parents should stress independence in raising their children, but this increases to 83 percent among 25-34 year olds who are the parents of today. (5) Younger Germans are now less likely to be deferential to authority, and more independent—and democratic—in their political values.

Socialization patterns in the East followed a different pattern, however. In the postwar period, families in the East had inherited the same structured family relationships and hierarchical authority patterns as in the West. Eastern parents also had lived through the rise and fall of the Third Reich and then the creation of a new political order. Parents initially were hesitant to talk about politics, and in any case were themselves learning the new communist norms of the German Democratic Republic.

Over time the family's role as a socializing agent also grew in the East. (6) Although the state bombarded young people with political indoctrination, the family was an important source of political learning. For example, a 1990 survey of adolescents in both Germanies found that 62 percent of Eastern youth frequently discussed politics with their parents, compared to only 32 percent in the West. (7) Most young people also claimed to hold the same political opinions as their parents. The personal closeness of family ties was one reason why parents were an important source of political cues. In addition, the family was one of the few settings where people could openly discuss their feelings and beliefs. The family setting created a private sphere where individuals could be free of the watchful eyes and ears of the state. Here the state could be praised, but doubts could also be expressed.

The collapse of the GDR forced many adults to rethink their political beliefs and past practices. Parents are again learning the norms and procedures of a new political system at the same time as their children. For instance, the same 1999 World Values Survey found that Easterners were more likely than Westerners to express respect for parents and authority in general. In addition, younger Easterners are less likely than Westerners to say that parents should stress independence in raising their child, and more likely to emphasize obedience. (8) These values are changing among those raised since the fall of the Berlin Wall, but it will take time because social values in the East fully adopt to the new social structure.

Because of these changes over time, the 'generation gap' in many political values is greater in Germany than in many other established Western democracies. Youth in the West are more liberal than their parents, more positive about their role in the political process, more postmaterialist, and more likely to engage in unconventional forms political action. (9) Eastern youth are also a product of their times. The youthful faces of the first refugees exiting through Hungary in 1989 or at the democracy protests in Leipzig or East Berlin demonstrated the importance of the youth culture within East Germany. And most research indicates that Eastern young are more quickly accepting the new social and political order of the Federal Republic. Like the family in the film *Goodbye Lenin*, the older generation has experienced a mid-life change, while the young are being raised in this new social order.

The Educational System

The educational system is another important source of political learning. In contrast to the family, governments can control the content of education and use it to develop political values—this is typically done when a country experiences a change in regime. Thus, political leaders in both West and East saw

the educational system as an important tool for developing new political beliefs, albeit with different goals in mind. The Western Allies and politicians in the Federal Republic wanted to enlist the schools in their efforts to reeducate the public to support for the democratic norms of the new state.⁽¹⁰⁾ The Soviets and East German politicians wanted to create a "socialist personality" consistent with their new social and political order.

In the West, the regime expanded the curriculum to include new courses in civics and more offerings in history. Instruction aimed at developing a formal commitment to the institutions and procedures of the Federal Republic. History courses worked to counteract the nationalistic views promulgated under Weimar and the Third Reich. Social studies classes stressed the benefits of the democratic system, drawing sharp contrast to the Communist model. In addition, modern teaching methods supplanted the authoritarian educational structures and classroom practices of the past. More participatory forms of education, and even student "co-administration" programs, signaled a new set of social norms. These innovations marked a sharp change from the traditional authoritarian ways of the German educational system.

[YouTube video on German education system \(2:44 min\)](#)

Beginning in the mid-1960s, textbooks began emphasizing an understanding of the dynamics of the democratic system: interest representation, conflict resolution, minority rights, and the methods of citizen influence. The model of the passive citizen yielded to a more activist orientation. Education adopted a more critical perspective on society and politics. The new texts substituted a more pragmatic view of the strengths and weaknesses of democracy for the idealistic textbook images of the 1950s. The system sought to prepare students for their adult roles as political participants.

The political impact of formal schooling is typically greatest when prior family learning is lacking, such as the conditions in postwar West Germany. The reeducation program helped to develop a stronger sense of political interest and democratic beliefs among West German youth. In the early 1970s, for example, West German students ranked highest in support for democratic values in a 10-nation study of youth.⁽¹¹⁾ Nevertheless, the broader social and political trends in society gradually made this program of formalized political education redundant. Social studies courses now reinforce democratic political beliefs learned from parents and peers, rather than creating them in the first place. Thus, the education system in the West now plays a socialization role that is similar to civics courses in the United States, Britain, and other established democracies.

The school system also played a key role in the GDR's program of political reeducation, although the ultimate political goals and therefore the content of instruction were much different.⁽¹²⁾ The schools attempted to create a socialist personality that encompassed a devotion to communist principles, a love of the GDR, a feeling of socialist brotherhood with the Soviet Union, and participation in the activities of the state. The ideological content of instruction was more extensive than in the West, and did not moderate over time. The regime's principles reached into the curriculum in many ways. Civics courses stressed Marxist-Leninist principles. Economics courses stressed the inevitable decline of capitalism and the eventual victory of socialism. History classes explained the Third Reich as the consequence of capitalist imperialism and portrayed the Federal Republic as the Nazi's successor. The schools stressed the importance of the collective over the individual. The GDR's constitution stated the government's goal to create: "a socialist community of well-rounded and harmoniously developed persons who are inspired with the spirit of socialist patriotism and internationalism."

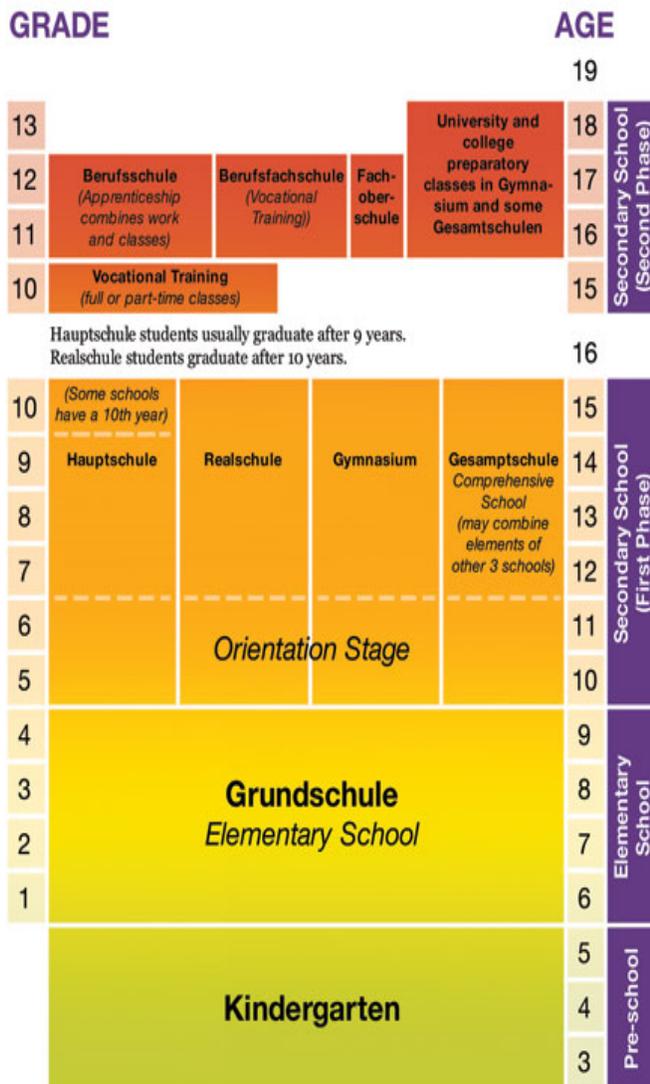
Yet the rhetoric of education regularly conflicted with reality. Paramilitary training was a regular component of the curriculum and became mandatory for 9th and 10th graders in 1978, but social science and history texts proclaimed the government's peaceful goals. Educators forecast the inevitable victory of

world socialism, as the gap between Eastern and Western living standards steadily grew. Given these contradictions, these education efforts may have had limited effect in reshaping the beliefs of the young. In part, the educational system was trying to develop values that were inconsistent with the realities of politics. Many young people certainly accepted the rhetoric of the regime, but surveys indicate youth's growing political disaffection during the 1980s.⁽¹³⁾

German unification produced fundamental changes in the Eastern educational system. ⁽¹⁴⁾ Western experts oversaw a wholesale restructuring of curriculums, and again the educational system was used to reshape citizen values. Just as foreign language courses in Russian were replaced with English as a second language, education in socialist economics gave way to principles of market economies. It was relatively easy to replace old textbooks with new editions from the West. The FRG government also replaced thousands of school administrators and university instructors with new personnel. Gradually, the content of the educational systems in the East have converged with those of the West.

The Structure of Education

Figure 5.1. The Structure of Education



The educational system is also important in shaping the social structure. Public education in Germany historically functioned with two contrasting goals. One goal emphasized personal growth and the development of intellectual creativity (*Bildung*) among the top students who comprise the future leaders of society. Another goal stressed job-oriented education (*Ausbildung*) for the masses.

The Federal Republic's adherence to these two differing educational models leads to a highly structured and stratified educational system. Figure 5.1 shows the general structure of the educational system, although this varies across states because educational policy is a state responsibility. The social stratification of the educational system most clear appears at the secondary school level. All students attend a primary school together for their first four years, and then are divided into one of three distinct secondary schools tracks. Students in each track attend separate schools with different facilities, teachers, and curriculums. One track, the main school or *Hauptschule*, provides a general education leading to a working class occupation. This limited formal schooling ends at age 15 in most *Länder*, and students then begin a program of vocational training. About two-fifths of students follow this track.

The second track is the intermediate school, or *Realschule*. About a quarter of secondary students now attend a Realschule. The Realschule mixes vocational and academic training. For example, students study a second foreign language and take higher level mathematics. Students graduate from the Realschule at age 16 and receive a completion certificate (*Mittlere Reife*). Graduates choose between an apprenticeship or a more extended period of technical training, perhaps even including study at a technical college. Most Realschule graduates hold lower middle-class occupations or work in the skilled trades.

Academic training at a *Gymnasium*, an academic high school, is the third track. The Gymnasium is the traditional route to social and economic success. About 25 percent of secondary school students in the FRG attend a Gymnasium, a substantial increase from a generation ago. The curriculum stresses advanced academic topics as preparation for a university education. After completion of final year exams, the Gymnasium student receives an *Abitur*, which confers a legal right to attend a university.

Nearly all German universities are government institutions. Once at the university, students follow the traditional Humboltian model of academic learning. For the student this means the freedom to develop one's intellectual potential largely unfettered by regulations and formal course requirements. In many social science fields, students are free to develop their own program of studies. The courses themselves are often equally unstructured: no quizzes, no finals, no homework, no required attendance, and no grades. Science programs are usually more structured, but still relatively open by American standards. The university system was designed for a small number of strongly self-motivated students, allowing great freedom to the individual.

This highly stratified system of public education in the Federal Republic has prompted criticism on several fronts.⁽¹⁵⁾ One persisting criticism highlights the unequal public spending on the different tracks. Educational spending is concentrated on the academic track rather than the vocational tracks. The Gymnasiums have lower student/teacher ratios than the Hauptschulen and Realschulen; and teacher qualifications for the Gymnasium are more rigorous than for the other tracks. In short, there is an obvious distinction between education for the masses and education for elites.

The educational system did not create social inequality within West Germany, but the system tends to perpetuate this inequality. After only four to six years of primary schooling, students are directed into one of the three tracks. At this early age, family influences are still a major factor in the child's development. Most children assigned to the academic track are from middle-class families, and most students in the vocational track are from working class families. For instance, if the value 100 represents the average student's chance of attending a Gymnasium, then the chances for different social classes in 1980 were:

Civil servant's child	Self-employed's child	Salaried employee's child	Manual worker's child
396	212	140	21

Thus, the child of a government official has nearly 20 times the chance of attending a Gymnasium as the child of a manual worker. These social differences are replicated in university enrollments, and have not greatly lessened over the years. Furthermore, because of the social and educational gap between secondary school tracks, few students take advantage of the option to transfer to a higher-level school. The educational system thus inevitably reinforces class distinctions within society.

Reformers have repeatedly attempted to lessen the elitist bias of the FRG's educational system. One reform was the creation of comprehensive schools that include all secondary school students in a single school with differing curricula. Without a uniform national policy, only half the state now have

comprehensive schools as an optional fourth track. About a tenth of secondary school students are now enrolled in comprehensive schools.

Reformers were more successful in other areas. Several state governments agreed on curriculum reform that narrows the gap between secondary schools. In these reforms the Hauptschule curriculum has shifted from the basic, practically oriented, and atheoretical subject matter toward a more specialized set of course offerings. The curriculum and resources of the Realschule underwent similar upgrading, contributing to its growing popularity and enrollments.

Another significant reform expanded access to the universities. In the early 1950s only 6 percent of college-aged youth attended a university. Today, more than 30 pursue university studies. The increase partially results from the growth of Gymnasium graduates with the necessary *Abitur* to enter the university. University programs broadened to include new fields of study. Educators also made a concerted effort to provide alternative educational paths into the universities for those who did not attend a Gymnasium (although few students use these alternative paths). The Federal Republic's university system retains an elitist emphasis, but its upper class accent is a little less distinct.

Of course, the socialist ideology of the GDR led to a much different educational structure in the East. By the 1960s, comprehensive 10-year polytechnical schools were the core of the educational system.⁽¹⁶⁾ Students from different social backgrounds, and with different academic abilities, attended the same school -- much like the public education system in the United States. Those with special academic abilities could apply for the extended secondary school (*Erweiterte Oberschule* [EOS]) during their twelfth year, if they supported socialist political values. Less than a tenth of the young followed the academic track to university training.

The contrasting educational structures of the FRG and GDR illustrate the practical problems posed by German unity. The unification treaty called for the gradual extension of the Western educational structure to the East, although several Eastern Länder have emphasized comprehensive schools at the secondary level. Ironically, the restructuring of Eastern schools lead to new pressures for liberal reform within the Federal Republic's educational system.

State Actions

Although both the FRG and GDR actively tried to shape the political values of their citizens, the role of each state was sharply different. With the exception of the school system, the reeducation efforts in the West largely occurred through indirect mechanisms, relying on an autonomous media, social groups, and the powers of persuasion. Explicit political education by the government decreased as the new system took root. The East German government, in contrast, took a very active and direct role in the socialization process that even went beyond the factors we have already discussed. And in contrast to the West, this role remained constant or even increased over time.

[YouTube video on GDR propaganda film \(4:07 min\)](#)

A cornerstone of the East German socialization process was a system of government supervised youth groups. Most children in primary school were enrolled in a young Pioneer group. The Pioneers combined the normal social activities that one might find in the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts with a basic dose of political education. At age 14, about three-fourths of the young graduated into membership in the Free German Youth (FDJ) group.⁽¹⁷⁾ The organization stressed political themes, and participation in a FDJ collective provided the state with another opportunity to direct the political development of the young and foster a socialist personality. The FDJ was also a training and recruiting ground for the future leadership

of East Germany, selecting the brightest and most politically aware for higher positions in the organization and future membership in the SED.

Another important socialization activities was the Ordination of Youth (Jugendweihe). This ceremony had developed in Germany as a secular alternative to the Christian confirmation. The GDR used this ceremony to strengthen the socialist identity of the young. Each spring, 14-year-olds assembled in public ceremonies to pledge their commitment to socialist beliefs, brotherhood with the Soviet Union, and the principles of international socialism. Table 5.1 presents the four pledges that were the heart of the ceremony, illustrating how political indoctrination was intermixed with the rites of passage to adulthood. While West German youth celebrated their coming of age at a birthday party or similar occasion, East Germans celebrated by pledging their fraternal loyalties to the Soviet Union. Surprisingly, after the fall of the GDR this tradition has continued in the East, but now without the heavy political overtones.

Table 5.1 The Four Pledges of the East German Youth Ordination

- As young citizens of our German Democratic Republic, are you prepared to work and fit loyally for the great and honorable goals of socialism, and to honor the revolutionary inheritance of the people?
- As sons and daughters of the worker-and-peasant state, are you prepared to pursue higher education, to cultivate your mind, to become a master of your trade, to learn permanently, and to use your knowledge to pursue our great humanist ideals?
- As honorable members of the socialist community, are you ready to cooperate as comrades, to respect and support each other, and to always merge the pursuit of your personal happiness with the happiness of all the people?
- As true patriots, are you ready to deepen the friendship with the Soviet Union, to strengthen our brotherhood with socialist countries, to struggle in the spirit of proletarian internationalism, to protect peace and to defend socialism against every imperialist aggression?

[Youtube video of a Jugendweihe](#)

Young people waiting for the Jugendweihe ceremony to begin (2006). As a sign of how things have changed, instead of playing patriotic music, the city band is playing “Mama Mia”! (1:03).

Other social spheres mirrored the socialization activities of the youth groups. At work, individuals participated in labor collectives, where employment and politics issues were discussed. Nearly a third of the population belonged to the state-sponsored Society for German-Soviet Friendship (DSF), and almost a fifth of all women belonged to the Democratic Women's Federation of Germany (DFD). Such mass organizations provided the government with other transmission belts to educate the public, and control social and political norms. Government officials also monitored the content of mass media, literary magazines, book publishers, and performing artists. Publications with political themes were subject to especially close scrutiny. The censorship even went as far as excluding Hansel and Gretel from some publications of Grimms' Fairy Tales; socialist states did not recognize the existence of hunger and did not condone disrespect toward one's elders. The government-approved writers union further regulated those who would tell a story, write a play, or pen a novel.

The politicization of social life even extended to sports. The GDR encouraged sports as a way to keep people socially involved while promoting the value of physical fitness that drew upon the traditions of the socialist working class movement. In addition, the famous East German Olympic sports machine provided a source of national pride and became a basic tool of GDR foreign policy. The government used the medal count at the summer Olympics as an indicator of the domestic accomplishments and new international stature of the GDR.

Finally, when persuasion failed the government relied on its powers of physical control and intimidation. The infamous Ministry for State Security (*Stasi*) was in charge of domestic security. Stasi agents not only collected data on radicals who might pose a threat to the state, they also were a tool for enforcing compliance with the regime. The Stasi had its agents in social, economic and political organizations in order to monitor and control their actions. The Stasi maintained files on more than 6 million individuals, nearly a third of the entire population. Several hundred thousand part-time informants provided information on co-workers or neighbors who engaged in "anti" behaviors. The expression of political criticism might threaten one's job security or the ability of one's children to attend university -- or might result in prosecution by the state. In the wake of German unification, thousands of Easterners recounted stories of neighbors who were arrested and imprisoned by the Stasi, children who were unable to attend a university because of their questionable political record or the records of their parents, and political dissidents who disappeared into Stasi-run prisons. If East Germans had internalized the norms of the regime, would such a security apparatus have been necessary?

The Lives of Others

The 2007 movie, *The Lives of Others*, tells the story of how the Stasi monitored a group of artists and writers in the years leading up to the collapse of the GDR. It illustrates the Stasi's power under the GDR, and how individuals accommodated themselves to the state's power--and how a captain in the Stasi struggled with his role in this process. Two thumbs up from Ebert and Roeper. It won the best foreign language film award at the 2007 Oscars.

[YouTube video of the trailer for the film](#)

These examples show the reality of life in the GDR. The SED and state institutions directed most aspects of social, economic, and political life. From a school's selection of texts for first grade readers to the speeches at a sports awards banquet, the values of the regime touched everyday life. For those who accepted these values, the political socialization but the state was unnoticed because it was merely an expression of values they shared. Despite these extensive efforts, however, the remaking of the East German culture remained incomplete. This was partially because of the contradictions between the rhetoric and reality of the regime, and because Easterners were aware of a different way of life in the West.

Informal Sources of Political Learning

In any nation, informal personal relations constitute another important source of political learning. As soon as children begin to explore the world outside their parents' home, they develop friendships and peer-group ties that teach them about social (and implicitly political) relations. Co-workers in the factory are often a valuable source of information about political matters. Friends discuss politics, compare ideas, and debate current political issues. Although difficult to measure in a systematic fashion, these informal contacts constitute a crucial part of the socialization process.

The 1999 World Values Survey asked about involvement in such informal networks. The survey found that 59 percent of Germans said they spend time with their friends on a weekly or more frequent basis, 28 percent spent time with others in social clubs, 12 percent with friends from work, and 11 percent with friends from their church. And as might be expected, the frequency of these social connections was higher among the young. For example, while only 33 percent of 45-54 year olds spent time with friends on a weekly basis, 86 percent of those 15-24 spent time with their friends.

Such peer groups can easily influence the values of their members. There is much interaction and exposure occurs in the group, which persists even when the influence of family and schools begins to wane. Receptivity to the norms of the group is also high, because it is composed of individuals with strong personal ties and common interests.

Explicit political learning is a minor part of most youth groups, but under some circumstances the peer group may exert a substantial impact on political beliefs. For instance, a variety of biographical studies and impressionistic evidence suggests that the student movement of the 1960s created a youth subculture in the FRG that socialized a new political perspective among many university students.⁽¹⁸⁾ The friendship groups and subculture formed during this period have endured into adulthood for many activists of the 1960s. In the East, most interaction with one's peers involved a greater degree of political learning because this interaction was often structured by membership in the FDJ, youth brigades, or other officially-sponsored youth associations. Even in the GDR, however, peer networks revolving around environmental discussion circles or church groups seemed to nurture those who harbored doubts about the system.

Personal discussions with friends, family, and political activists can be a meaningful source of political learning. Most adult friendship networks reinforce previously-formed beliefs, rather than providing a source for learning new political values. By adulthood most individuals have developed their basic political values and thus any new learning must first overcome previous learning. In addition, people generally select friends with similar social and political values. Nevertheless, the interaction among friends and co-workers signifies an important source of political information and an opportunity to discuss political viewpoints. A steelworker in the Ruhr, for example, hears about politics from his co-workers and other working-class neighbors and friends. This social milieu provides repeated cues on which issues are most important to people like oneself, which policies will provide the most benefit, and which party represents these interests. Similarly, a Bavarian Catholic learns about political issues at weekly church services, from Catholic social groups, and from his or her predominately conservative Catholic friends.

Finally, personal interactions can provide information that is qualitatively different from newspapers, television, and other mass media. Face-to-face communication is interactive. People can discuss information until its meaning is understood; the transfer of information can be tailored to the recipient. Friendship ties often make personal communication a more persuasive source of information than impersonal newspaper accounts of the same events.

The Mass Media

Throughout their adult lives, people need information about current events and new political issues in order to perform their responsibilities as citizens. The mass media are prime sources of such information. People often lack direct experience with government and specific policy outcomes. In many instances, the media provide the only linkage between citizens and political affairs. Still, the media's role as a socialization agent is normally limited. The media less likely than the family, peers, or school to socialize new political beliefs. Rather, the mass media provide information that reinforces prior opinions or provides information for evaluating new events in the context of these opinions.

Germans place a heavy reliance on the media as a source of political information. Even early studies of the West German public found that media usage was exceptionally high among the public, a trait that persists to the present.⁽¹⁹⁾ Similarly, East Germans had a voracious appetite for the printed word. This section examines how the contemporary media provide political information to the citizenry.

The Press(20)

Throughout modern German history, the press has been closely involved in the political process. During the Weimar Republic, various social and political groups developing their own network of newspapers; about one quarter of all papers had official or unofficial ties to a political party. The exploitation of the press reached its worst level under the National Socialists. The *Völkischer Beobachter* was the official organ of the National Socialist movement, substituting nationalism, racism, and anti-liberal propaganda for factual news. The regime suppressed non-Nazi publications and eventually forced most to close.

Those charged with overseeing the redevelopment of the press in the Federal Republic kept this historical legacy in mind. Immediately after the war, the Allied military forces licensed newspaper publishers within their respective occupation zones. Only newspapers and journalists who were free of Nazis ties could obtain a license. The Allies also tried to encourage political diversity in the media. The Basic Law (Article 5) ensured that the press would be independent and free of censorship, and licensing restrictions were removed in late 1949. By then, the overall structure of the postwar press was established.

This pattern of press development had two consequences. First, journalists, publishers and the government created a new journalistic tradition, committed to democracy, objectivity, and political neutrality. During the early postwar years, the press had an important part in the political education of the public. Along with radio, newspapers shaped public images of the new political system and developed an understanding of the democratic political process. Today, the press is not only responsible for the dissemination of information, but monitors the actions of government and educates public opinion. The public and political leaders expect newspapers to be social and political critics—even if criticism is often unwelcomed. Press laws grant the media specific legal rights to assist them in this task: the right of access to government information, the legal confidentiality of sources, restrictions on libel suits, and limits on government regulation. At the same time, most newspapers avoid the political propagandizing of the past by adopting political neutrality and clearly separating factual news from editorial evaluation.

Second, the postwar pattern of press development produced a regionalization of newspapers. The licensing of newspapers within each occupation zone created a network of local and regional daily papers that continues today. Each region or large city has one or more newspapers that circulate primarily within that locale. In 2010, there were over 350 daily newspapers in the Federal Republic, with a combined weekday circulation of about 25 million. Following unification, the newspapers in the East were generally integrated into this same framework. Most of the prominent GDR newspapers were sold to Western buyers, and only a few pursued their own independence. This produced new regional media centers in Berlin, Leipzig and other eastern cities. However, newspaper readership and circulation has been declining over the past two decades, as people find other sources for their daily news.

The decentralization of the press produces diversity and pluralism in political commentary, but it also means that the Federal Republic lacks the common national media environment found in Britain, France and other European states. In both content and circulation patterns, the regional press might bear a closer resemblance to American newspapers than to its German antecedents.

The average citizen has several newspapers from which to choose. Table 5.2 lists the newspapers with the largest circulation in 2010. *Bild Zeitung* has the largest circulation with almost 3 million daily readers. The *Bild* is the only truly national paper in the Federal Republic, sold at almost every kiosk and newspaper stand. However, the *Bild* and the other boulevard newspapers offer outlandish stories focusing on criminal activity, bizarre events, or celebrity lifestyles. A daily diet of such information can hardly develop a well-informed and sophisticated public.

Table 5.2 The Top Ten Daily Newspapers by Circulation in 2010

Newspaper group	Circulation (in '000s)
Bild-Zeitung	2,900
Westdeutscher Allgemeine Zeitung	807
Cologne Group	515
Süddeutsche Zeitung	428
Frankfurter Allgemeine	363
Rheinesche Post	354
Augsburger Allgemeine	330
Zeitung Thüringen	306
Freie Presse	283
Nuernberger Nachrichten	280

Source: World Association of Newspapers, World Press Trends 2012.

Several "quality" daily newspapers -- *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Die Welt*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and the *Frankfurter Rundschau*-- have national reputations because of their sophisticated and detailed news coverage. Their quality is comparable to the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, or the *Washington Post*. These papers are widely read by political and business elites, and they are available by subscription or from newsstands throughout the country. Because of their elitist orientation the circulation figures for the quality press are quite modest.

[List of German Newspapers available online](#)

Several weekly newspapers and news magazines are also part of the elite press. [Die Zeit](#) and the *Welt am Sonntag* are national papers that review the news of the past week and provide an analysis of recent events. Probably the most influential single publication in the Federal Republic is the weekly news magazine, *Der Spiegel*. Its weekly issues combine coverage of on-going news events with investigative journalism.

Most people read neither the best nor the worst of the press, but draw their information from their local or regional newspaper. A citizen of Hamburg reads the *Hamburger Abendblatt*, the *Volksstimme Magdeburg* is popular in Saxony-Anhalt, a Cologne resident subscribes to the *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, Leipzig residents read the [Leipziger Volkszeitung](#), and so forth. In smaller towns the citizens might subscribe to a small local paper, which devotes more attention on local news and public interest stories.

Germans place a high premium on being informed about political matters, and most citizens rely on newspapers and other printed media as a source of information on current events. For example, a survey conducted during the 2013 election found that newspapers were cited as the second most important source of political information (by 17 percent) and the majority reported regularly reading a newspaper for information.[\(21\)](#)

The press performs a distinct function in the process of political learning in Germany (and other established democracies). Rather than influencing basic value formation, newspapers are a source of

contemporary political information. The media are probably more influential in determining what people think about, through their choice of news stories, than in actually influencing what people think. Still, newspaper readership is related to certain aspects of a participatory political culture. Studies regularly find that regular newspaper readers are more involved in politics and more informed about political matters.⁽²²⁾ Reading a newspaper might not create these orientations, but access to a ready supply of political information is necessary to sustain this behavior.

Questions often arise over the political orientation of the press. On the one hand, liberals note that most major newspapers openly profess impartiality and include such terms as *überparteilich* or *unabhängig* ("nonpartisan" or "independent") under the title banner. Yet, their editorials generally reflect conservative viewpoints. The *Frankfurter Rundschau*, *Der Spiegel* and *TAZ* are notable liberal exceptions among a generally conservative press. On the other hand, conservatives point to evidence that most newspaper journalists lean toward the SPD. Periodic political criticism of press coverage is probably an inevitable feature of a free press, and Germany is not exceptional in this regard. Nevertheless, most of the major national newspapers are known for their attempt to separate editorial judgement and news reporting, giving the public access to a diverse and high quality press.

Radio and Television

Germany entered the age of the electronic media -- radio and television -- during the Weimar Republic. The radio became a regular part of everyday life in the 1920s and early 1930s. Quickly the radio became an important source of news and entertainment for the average citizen. The world's first regular television service began in Berlin in 1935; television usage grew very slowly, however.

The development of the electronic media differed in important ways from that of the printed press. Newspapers were privately owned; radio and television were considered public services. The Weimar government owned a majority of the shares in the public broadcasting stations, and a government ministry regulated what went out over the airwaves. The Third Reich fully exploited the power of this new medium. Hitler communicated directly with the population via the radio, which magnified his considerable oratorical skills. The Third Reich's propaganda ministry relied on radio broadcasts to generate public support for the regime and develop a national consciousness. The Nazis considered radio's influence so powerful that receivers built during the war were constructed to receive only German stations. Listening to foreign radio broadcasts could warrant the death penalty.

In the Federal Republic, the Western Allies reestablished a regional radio service within each occupation zone. Radio broadcasting was a public resource to be controlled by the government. To avoid the exploitation of the media by a strong national government, as happened during the Third Reich, the Basic Law made the state governments responsible for radio and television broadcasting. Control of the first broadcasting stations passed to the individual *Länder* governments, although not every state has its own broadcasting corporation.

There are two public broadcasting corporations in the Federal Republic. The first channel, ARD, was formed in 1952 as a consortium of the individual state corporations. It includes nine regional stations in the West, and since 1992 a regional network based in the new *Länder*. The second channel, ZDF, is organized as a single corporation, rather than the consortium arrangement of ARD. All state corporations also broadcast their own regional programming on a third channel.

Deutsche Welle

Deutsche Welle is Germany's international broadcaster. It produces programs for television, radio and the web—in German, English and other languages. It serves as Germany's voice to the world, similar to the British's BBC and the United States' Voice of America. DW has been broadcasting since 1953 as a public agency.

[Visit the Deutsche Welle homepage](#)

[Visit Deutsche Welle news videos "on demand"](#)

Most of the state broadcasting corporations follow the same organizational principles. A broadcasting council (*Rundfunkrat*) sets the general policy for the corporation and watches over the public interest. In most Länder the broadcasting council consists of representatives of the Land government, the churches, unions and business organizations, educational institutions, and other "socially relevant" groups. The broadcasting council selects the members of a smaller administrative council that supervises the actual operation of the corporation.

Public control over radio and television has both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, stations typically devoted a higher proportion of their programming to public service activities and cultural events because they are non-profit organizations. During election periods, the political parties receive a modest amount of free advertising as a public service (there is no paid political advertising), and extensive airtime is made available for interviews with party representatives and debates among party leaders. On the other hand, the quality and variety of programs reflected its limited funding base and the small number of channels. In the past, one might see a documentary on truck assembly plants featured during prime time viewing hours, and the quality of many third channel programs often falls below the standards of U.S. or British television. Critics also complained about the broadcasters' paternalistic attitude toward the public, showing what they think people should watch rather than what the public prefers. More problematic are questions about the possible bias of government-controlled media. There were also concerns that the government could use its control of the media to distort the content of reporting, although such instances have been rare in the Federal Republic.

Beginning with this public broadcasting base, technological advances have changed the television environment over the past few decades. The advent of satellite and cable broadcasting eventually ended the government's television monopoly. Instead of three networks, most German households now have access to dozens or hundreds of channels. Technological progress means that one can eavesdrop on the national television of nearby states, commercial channels, and a wide range of content. A variety of pan-European channels have also developed.

The advent of private television does not mean that the government is willing to relinquish its role in radio and television. The ARD and ZDF still compete for viewers, and often they are seen as the preferred information sources for news about politics. Although their format and content have changed in reaction to competition with the commercial channels, many of their key features remain. For instance, the nightly news on both networks remain as mainstays in providing political information, and the network's content still reflects a stronger emphasis on education and not just commercial programming. Despite doubts when commercial media first became available, it is now clear that Germans have a much richer source of information available because of these changes. A survey during the 2013 election found that 71 percent of the public claimed that television was their most important information source on the campaign.⁽²³⁾

Although television primarily serves as a source of information on current events, the electronic media have also played an important role in shaping political attitudes during Germany's two democratic transitions. During the early postwar years, the FRG used its control of the mass media to mold public images of the new political system and develop public support for the democratic process. It was one of the few tools of public education available to the government, enabling the new democratic leaders to communicate directly with the citizenry. Research demonstrated a strong relationship between media usage and political involvement.

Television also played an important role in the process of German unification and the reshaping of the East German political culture during the 1980s. Even before unification, West German television could be seen in about two-thirds of the East. Moreover, when one traveled through East Germany it was obvious that the TV antennae were pointed toward the Western stations. Exposure to the Western media showed Easterners another way of life and another version of history that contradicted the claims of the East German regime. Life did not look so brutish in the West; the freedoms of Westerners brought home the restrictions of the SED-state, and Western living standards illustrated the lagging development of the GDR's socialist miracle. Western news also reported on political reforms in the Soviet Union and changes in the rest of Eastern Europe that went unreported in the official East German press. Through the electronic media, both Germanies were already unified before the Berlin wall fell.

Online Information

While the traditional media sources are still the dominant sources of political information, the Internet is becoming increasingly important. People are more and more likely to turn to online news reporting online versions of the traditional media. Nearly all of the major newspapers now have an online presence, for example. Between 2006 and 2010 online newspaper readership doubled. In addition, Germans are avid users of social networking sites such as Facebook and Wer-kennt-wen, where information can flow between friends. Blogging (*digitale Netztagebücher*) is also popular among German youth, just as business websites such as Xing are popular among older Germans. As of 2014, Germany had one of the highest usage rates of social media in all of Europe. And when it is election time, voters can turn to a variety of websites for independent information about the political parties and their policy positions. Compared to other information sources, the Internet offers greater variety and greater volume of information--often at the direction and control of the individual.

The growth of online information also has a distinct generational component, like most other features of internet usage. For example, a recent survey found that three-quarters of teenagers visit forums, newsgroups or chatrooms every week, a much higher percentage than among older citizens. Similarly, only about 7 percent of the overall public mentioned the internet as their most important source of information during the 2013 elections.⁽²⁴⁾ However, the Internet was the most important information source to only 2 percent of people aged 70-79, compared to 28 percent among those under age 30. Among the under 30 age group, the Internet was only second to television as an information source. (Newspaper usage runs in the opposite direction, from only 5 percent citing it as most important among the under 30 group, to 20 percent among people aged 70-79). Thus the overall patterns of information should continue to change in the decades ahead.



In summary, all these various media outlets are important sources of information about political events. Because these media are treated as public resources, an usually large share of the programs are devoted to news, political discussions, current affairs, and other information programs. The public information content of German television ranks among the highest in Western Europe. Westerners thus rely on television as a primary source of information, and viewership is even higher in the East. When surveys ask about the most common sources of information, television is cited as the most common source of political information: 96 percent say they use television as an information source; newspapers, friends and colleagues, 87 percent; 85 percent; magazines 51 percent; and internet 48 percent.⁽²⁵⁾ Use of these multiple sources makes for an informed and aware public.

Conclusion

The past two decades produced important changes in how the German public learns about politics and how political leaders communicate with the citizens. Most important, the new citizens in the East have been integrated into the information network of the Federal Republic. They moved from a closed system where the GDR government controlled access to information to an environment where there is a near over-abundance of information to digest. In addition, the information context has changed in West and East as a function of technological change, ranging from the spread of satellite and cable television to the explosive growth of the internet. Today the average citizen has access to a wider and richer array of information about politics and society. If the old German saying “Wissen ist Macht” (knowledge is power) is correct, then the contemporary democratic citizenry should be very powerful.

Suggested Readings

Sterling Fishman and Lothar Martin, *Estranged Twins: Education and Society in the Two Germanys* (New York: Praeger, 1986).

Peter Humphreys, *Media and Media Policy in Germany: the Press and Broadcasting since 1945*. New York and Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1994.

John Rodden, *Repainting the Little Red Schoolhouse: A History of Eastern German Education, 1945-1995*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Meredith Watts, et al. *Contemporary German Youth and Their Elders* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989).

Notes

1. Gabriel Almond and G. Bingham Powell, *Comparative Politics* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978), chap. 4; David Easton and Jack Dennis, *The Development of Political Attitudes in Children* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1969).

2. Ralf Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), p. 139.

3. Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), chap. 12.

4. Also see chapter 4; David Conradt, "Changing German Political Culture," in Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, eds. *The Civic Culture Revisited* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980); Kendall Baker, Russell Dalton and Kai Hildebrandt, *Germany Transformed* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

5. From author's analysis of the 1999 World Values Survey in Germany (www.worldvaluessurvey.org): The percentage of each age group who say parents should stress independence in raising their children:

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
West	84	83	79	73	67	56
East	86	73	68	75	63	57

6. Hans Oswald, "Political Socialization in the New States of Germany." In Miranda Yates and James Jouniss eds., *Roots of Civic Identity: International Perspectives on Community Service and Activism in Youth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Christiane Lemke, "Political Socialization and the 'Micromilieu'" in Marilyn Rueschemeyer and Christiane Lemke, eds. *The Quality of Life in the German Democratic Republic* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1989).

7. Deutsches Jugendinstitut, *Deutsche Schüler im Sommer 1990* (Munich: Deutsches\ Jugendinstitut, 1990).

8. See endnote 5.

9. Meredith Watts, et al. *Contemporary German Youth and Their Elders* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989); Dalton, *Citizen Politics*, 6th ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2013), chap. 5.

10. Brian M. Puaca, *Learning Democracy: Education Reform in West Germany, 1945-1965*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009.

11. Judith Torney, A. Oppenheim, and R. Farnen, *Civic Education in Ten Countries*, International Studies in Evaluation, vol. 6. (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1975).

12. Sterling Fishman and Lothar Martin, *Estranged Twins: Education and Society in the Two Germanys* (New York: Praeger, 1986).

13. Friedrich Walter and Hartmut Griese, *Jugend und Jugendforschung in der DDR* (Opladen: Leske and Budrich, 199_).

14. Rosalind Pritchard, *Reconstructing Education: East German Schools and Universities after Unification* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999).

15. Max Planck Institute, *Between Elite and Mass Education* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1982).

16. Another distinctive feature of the Eastern educational system was the extensive network of state-supported day care and kindergarten facilities that enabled women to work. More than 90 percent of all 3-6 years-olds were in kindergarten; see John Rodden, *Repainting the Little Red Schoolhouse: A History of Eastern German Education, 1945-1995*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

17. John Rodden, *Repainting the Little Red Schoolhouse: A History of Eastern German Education, 1945-1995*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; Krisch, *The German Democratic Republic*, pp. 153-158.
18. Meredith Watts, et al., *Contemporary German Youth and their Elders* (New York: Greenwood, 1989), ch. 3.
19. Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture*, pp. 88089; Holli A. Semetko and Klaus Schoenbach, "The Campaign in the Media," in Russell Dalton, ed. *Germany Votes 1990*(Oxford: Berg, 1992).
20. Karl Christian Führer and Corey Ross eds., *Mass Media, Culture and Society in Twentieth-Century Germany*.. London: Palgrave Macmillan: Berg Publishers, 2006.
21. German Longitudinal Election Study, 2013 Election Survey (<http://gles.eu/wordpress/english/>).
22. Führer and Ross eds., *Mass Media, Culture and Society in Twentieth-Century Germany*.
23. German Longitudinal Election Study, 2013 Election Survey (<http://gles.eu/wordpress/english/>).
24. German Longitudinal Election Study, 2013 Election Survey (<http://gles.eu/wordpress/english/>).
25. Dalton, *Citizen Politics*, pg. 23.

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