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Introduction

When Whitney, a 26-year-old Euro-American college graduate living in a small Midwestern town, told me that “crime among our adolescents” was one of the biggest problems facing America at the end of 1999, I asked her why she felt that way.

> WHITNEY: The media. The media and all the school shootings. I know when I was in high school we had a teenager who took a gun to the principal . . . and it never made the news, but it was pretty serious.
>
> MC: So you get the sense that the news media—
>
> WHITNEY: —I think that . . . what they are doing has been around . . . but now the media . . . can’t ignore it any more because of Columbine . . .
>
> MC: So . . . the reality has . . . been there but news media are covering it now? . . .
>
> WHITNEY: Right. And I think . . . the more we hear about gangs—of course, there aren’t really any gangs here, but there are some . . . in [the African American section of the nearby metropolitan area]. And I know from [my husband] being a cop that they have tried to take families from the projects and move them to smaller towns pretty close to us, and the gangs have continued to thrive there. So there’s not a gang in [our town], but there is one in the town next to us. So, there’s gang activity, the drugs, and the killings. . . . [T]o think that a 12 year old has already tried to kill two people—that’s really sad.
>
> MC: What sorts of things do you learn about crime from talking to [your husband]?
>
> WHITNEY: Just the reality of it. That it *is* just like it is on TV—some of it. It’s not as glamorous, but it does happen. There *are* 12 year olds out there dealing drugs and selling guns and there *are* contracts out on people. People from [the African American neighborhood] *do* drive to [a town miles away] to kill someone.

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MC: And do you get the sense from talking to [your husband] about what needs to be done about . . . crime among our adolescents?

WHITNEY: What should be done? Of course, stricter laws. The prisons are crowded, so that 12 year old is going to be sent to a juvenile hall, and then he'll be let out, and the only way of life he knows is where he grew up, and he probably learned a lot more things . . . in juvenile hall. I think it all comes back to family. And parents . . . two parents in the home. And if you can't have both parents, at least the one parent should be able to . . . see their child before 8 o'clock at night. . . . Or if they have to work nights, the child isn't left unattended at home. I don't know, it's just an endless circle. When you're poor, you're poor. And you work to survive, but you can't do everything. You can't be home and bring in a big paycheck.

MC: So do you sympathize with people in that sort of situation?

WHITNEY: Oh yeah. I do. I think it's just an endless circle for them. . . . [P]eople that are on welfare continue to have children so that the welfare checks are bigger and that they keep coming. I mean, that guarantees them more and more. But those children are brought into just a hopeless situation.

This book is about Whitney and her contemporaries, their politics, and how they came to learn and acquire them—an array of processes usually called "political socialization." Whitney and the other Americans presented here were interviewed at length about their politics and news media engagement, and material like the above passage was examined closely on several fronts. I am interested first in Whitney's various *political attitudes and beliefs.*

We began by talking about juvenile crime, but this brief passage would eventually suggest a great deal, at least implicitly, about her views on a whole host of sociopolitical issues and phenomena, including the criminal justice system, poverty, public housing programs, family, childcare, personal responsibility, and welfare. It of course requires contextualization not only in everything Whitney said during the many hours that we talked, but also in the fact that she was, for instance, an understandably protective mother of her first child, a baby girl whom she tended to throughout our first interview. But what she says here alone nevertheless suggests that Whitney was, for example, concerned about the apparent encroachment of crime into her community, that she seemed to associate that crime with African Americans, and that she envisioned conventionally conservative solutions to the problem.

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I am also interested in the totality of Whitney's political perspectives, her overall *ideology*. This passage is indicative of an eclectic ideological framework at work. On the one hand Whitney had compassion for those families trying to do the right thing and raise their children well, but who struggled with their socioeconomic status and ability to earn a living. On the other hand, as an example of how families commonly respond to such problems she evoked the myth that welfare mothers have additional children for the express purpose of receiving bigger checks, a selfish and disastrous choice (if it were true) that puts a burden on the rest of society. (Much like the program that apparently takes families from the projects and plants them and their pathologies in nearby towns, this also may have suggested to her that government responses to social problems were unwise.) Further, Whitney suggested that this particular 12-year-old criminal was a predictable product of his difficult environment, and thought his fate was sad. On the other hand, she seemed genuinely afraid of this person and what he represented, and thought it was obvious that stricter laws—and perhaps more prisons—were essential for coping with the problem.

In addition to Whitney's discrete attitudes and beliefs, and her ideology, I examine here her accounts of her *political and civic behavior*. As it turned out Whitney was rarely involved in political or civic endeavors and had only voted once in her life, when someone she knew ran for local office. Relatedly, she also did not follow politics or current affairs very closely in the news—although she did regularly watch television news, something suggested by her comments about news coverage of the Columbine shootings and other crime. Although she made it clear that she did not feel sufficiently well informed to actually argue about politics, Whitney did talk about social and political issues occasionally, typically with her police officer husband, as she recounted here, and with women friends who also had young children and similar concerns about social problems like crime. As a new mother working part time and preparing to go back to work full time as a health insurance administrator, Whitney not surprisingly felt she was short on free time, and did not necessarily see the benefits of becoming more interested and involved in politics.

Finally, and most importantly, I want to explore the sources for and origins of Whitney's politics—*the learning, acquisition, and development of beliefs and behavior*. What amalgam of experiences, relationships, identity characteristics, cognitive processes, and large-scale social, cultural, economic, and political processes and phenomena—some arguably endemic in America for centuries, but many more particular to the last thirty-plus years—has resulted in Whitney's and her contemporaries' particular constellation of

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politics? More specifically, what is *the contextualized significance of news media in individual political development*? The passage above clearly suggests that Whitney's engagement with news media—TV news in particular—has contributed fundamentally to her perceptions of sociopolitical realities, crime most notably, but so have her conversations with her husband, her deep roots in a particular community, the fact that she is a Euro-American woman and the mother of a young child, and countless other aspects of her life and the times in which she has lived. Then again, those other aspects of her life and times probably have themselves been shaped by the contemporary news media environment.

INDIVIDUAL POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT AND NEWS MEDIA

Two basic perspectives have emerged in political socialization theory since the field was first mapped out in the 1950s and 1960s. The "individual-level" perspective is most concerned with the processes through which an individual learns about and experiences his or her social and political worlds. This perspective shares some common ground with "political psychology" subfields such as "psychodynamics," "cognition," and "decision-making" (for an overview see Iyengar and McGuire 1993; Kuklinski and Chong 2002; Sears et al. 2003), but with more of a focus on social relations. The "system-level" perspective, on the other hand, is focused on the ways in which people are inculcated with the ideals and beliefs of a larger society and political system (Barner-Barry and Rosenwein 1986, 80). A review of the political socialization literature reveals that while both perspectives are common, the system-level perspective is predominant. For example, Rieselbach and Balch (1969) define political socialization as the imparting of values to a new generation of citizens, writing that it serves to "stabilize the system." Similarly, Gimpel, Lay and Schuknecht (2003) define political socialization as "the process by which new generations are inducted into political culture, learning the knowledge, values, and attitudes that contribute to support of the political system" (13). Following from this predominant perspective, researchers have typically investigated the various and discrete "agents" of influence in an individual's political socialization. Family, school, peer groups, social categories, workplace, religion, and mass media are the agents most commonly analyzed, with the first three getting the bulk of the attention. Hyman (1959) states simply that the family—which in the literature typically means an individual's parents, and less often siblings or other relatives—is "foremost among agencies of socialization" (51).

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The family is often described as a "primary" or, generally, face-to-face relationship through which political socialization occurs (peer groups are another). Mass media are among the so-called secondary relationships or agents studied, a categorization which hints at the relative lack of attention given to mass media's significance. The effects and implications of political communication have of course been studied for several decades, but much more often in connection with short-term, quantifiable changes in learning, belief, and behavior, not political socialization (see for instance Lazarsfeld et al. 1948; Gunter 1987; Mutz 1998; Barker 2002). To be sure, there have been dissenters on the subject of political socialization and media effects, among them Steven Chaffee and his associates (1977), who conclude that "the overall summation from the evidence reviewed . . . seems inescapably to be that mass communication plays an important, in some ways primary, role in the process of political socialization" (258).

But in general, the attention paid to mass media's role in political socialization has too often been cursory, and when not, tends to conclude that mass media are not significant factors. Hyman (1959), for instance, mentions mass communication only in passing, and altogether spends less than a page discussing its significance, while Dawson and Prewitt (1969) analyze the role of mass media for only six pages, and Langton (1969) for four. Admittedly this literature only reflects the tenor of the times in scholarship on mass media, with the "limited effects" paradigm lingering while political socialization research experienced its one and only boom from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s (Baran and Davis 2000, 120–76). But even when one looks at the scarce, slightly more recent, major works on political socialization, such as Sigel (1989)—which includes not a single extended discussion of news media or political communication—it is clear that the significance of mass media for political socialization requires further study, especially in a so-called Information Age now featuring multiple twenty-four-hour cable television news networks, political talk radio, and the Internet. In fact, after the field's apparent exhaustion by the end of the 1980s, at least in the United States, political socialization in general would seem to warrant more original and contemporary research and scholarship.

This lack of attention given to the role of news media and political communication in political socialization is one of two serious problems with most existing research on how people come to have and exhibit the political beliefs and behaviors that they do. The other problem is broader, and concerns the insufficient attention given in the literature to the individual's developmental processes, meaning making, and acculturation. In this

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respect the terminology in the field is telling: "political socialization" connotes direct and top-down influence, with a council of elders programmatically instilling the proper political norms and values in the young so as to regenerate the system and culture, while the focus on so-called agents suggests that the individual is a passive recipient of distinct and discrete effects. Of course it is important to pay heed to the "system-level" perspective as well because, as I argue in different ways throughout this book, the historically specific social, cultural, political, and economic contexts and environments in which people live will inevitably have implications for who they become. Even here, though, the system-level perspective of political socialization seems to give little thought to the possibility that the norms, values, and myths passed along to a new generation of citizens may for example be fraught with cynicism, misinformation, and an undemocratic spirit nowhere to be found in a civics textbook. In other words, the political culture of a given time may indeed be largely passed on to the young—with significant room for their agency and resistance—but this is not necessarily carried out intentionally or programmatically, and it does not necessarily bode well for a democratic system's stated ideals. That depends in large part on what the particular political culture passed along *actually is.* It is for these disparate reasons that I am setting aside the term "political socialization" and using instead the term "individual political development."

Just as the focus of political socialization theory and research has mostly proved insufficient for attending to the individual's developmental processes and meaning making (within particular contexts and environments), so it has been with the most common methodologies used to investigate news media—or political communication—effects. Most research done on news media's implications for and effects on people and their politics have relied on hypothetical scenarios, or on quantified survey data, and have been, with occasional exceptions such as "cultivation analysis" (Gerbner 1998), focused on short-term effects (for reviews, see for instance Gitlin 1981; McLeod et al. 1991; Lenart 1994, 9–14). While these methodologies are invaluable, they are not necessarily appropriate for investigating the complex processes that are part and parcel of the meaning-making and long-term development of individuals. It is true that since the 1980s there has been much more qualitative research on the role of mass media and popular culture in people's lives (see for instance Morley 1980, 1986; Radway 1984; Press 1991; Buckingham 1993, 2000; Fisherkeller 2002). Often using ethnography and conducting in-depth interviews with individuals, this cultural studies approach generally strives to better understand particular phenomena by studying

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sociocultural processes and meaning making. And yet there is scant qualitative research on how the American news media of recent years are involved in the complex and long-term processes of individual political development. A more dynamic and contextualized perspective and approach is needed—for considering the particular significance of news media, and for understanding contemporary American individual political development in general.

METHOD

This book is about the individual political development of fifteen contemporary Americans, and the contextualized role of news media in that development. In three stages between 1999 and 2003, I interviewed all of these people about their experiences and understandings of how news media engagement has been significant for their political development—along with, and frequently in the context of, such other institutions and phenomena as family, peers, schooling, community, religion, work, political advertising, and popular culture. The research participant sample consisted entirely of Americans born between 1965 and 1978, a group commonly referred to as "Generation X" (see the discussion below) (Smith and Clurman 1997; Bennett and Rademacher 1997; Halstead 1999). The ostensibly unusual and distinctive, sorry state of this generation's political and civic attitudes and orientations (apathy, ignorance, and cynicism), and its news media engagement (or lack thereof), have been the subject of great popular concern, speculation, large-scale assumptions, and quantified survey research (see for instance Oreskes 1990; Howe and Strauss 1993)—but much less qualitative scholarly work of the sort done here. (For more detailed information on methodological issues and research tools, see the appendices.)

While a great deal of research centers on news media effects, and on political socialization, much less uses qualitative methods and/or a cultural studies perspective and approach. Even less research has used qualitative methods and cultural studies to synthesize the two (Barnhurst and Wartella 1998; Buckingham 2000)—although other research has done so to focus specifically on individuals and what the authors argue is their substantial ability to process and understand political information (Gamson 1992; Neuman et al. 1992). Thus, working with a framework of cultural studies and modest "social constructivism" (Collin 1997), and relying specifically on in-depth, semistructured interviews, I gathered and interpreted the participants' talk and to a lesser extent their writing—the latter in the

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form of completed questionnaires—about how they experienced and understood their individual political development and news media engagement.

The participants were recruited through a personal networking approach and chosen through purposeful selection geared toward diversity on several fronts. The main delimitation of this group of Generation X'ers was that they were all college educated, meaning here that they had completed at least one year of college. I limited my participant population to the college educated for two reasons in particular: First, these are the Americans of whom the most is expected in terms of news media engagement and political knowledge and participation. And second, I focused on college-educated Generation X'ers because the conventional characterizations of this generation have typically been, without acknowledgment, specific to this group. My recruitment of the participants was also influenced by the fundamental importance of diversity in the participants' politics and news media engagement. I was able to find a range of participants with politics that cover a wide spectrum. Some reported voting rarely while others did so without fail; some followed the news regularly and through a variety of sources, while others did so only occasionally, and with a focus on entertainment and gossip. Finally, the personal networking approach and purposeful selection also allowed me to assemble a population diverse in age (within the parameters of Generation X), gender, race/ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, and even, to some extent, geography (see the beginning of chapter 3 for a numerical breakdown). Given the nature of what I was investigating this diversity was essential.

My close-up focus on fifteen people follows in the rich but still all-too-rare tradition of such qualitative studies of Americans and their politics as Lane (1962), Lamb (1974), and Reinarman (1987), all of whom relied on in-depth interviews with similar numbers of people. There is of course no pretense of representativeness or generalizability in such a study, but these fifteen people no doubt have much in common with millions of other Americans, their contemporaries in particular. It is also inevitable, I will argue, that who these people are—how they think and talk and behave politically—will tell us something about the times in which they have grown up and entered adulthood. But more importantly, this in-depth method allows for the kind of particularity, idiosyncrasy, real voices, and political "thick description" (Geertz 1973) that cannot be found in large samples and quantitative research.

All told, I interviewed each of these people for upwards of seven hours, over the course of more than three years, and generated a raft of tran-

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scribed interview data, to go along with the participants' completed questionnaires and my tracking and analysis of the participants' most common news media sources (see the appendices). The interviews allowed me not only to compile life histories—focused on but not limited to politics and news media engagement—but also to inquire about their current experiences, thought processes, and views regarding such topics as the 2000 presidential election controversy, September 11th, and the ongoing "War on Terrorism." The richness of detail here is abundant, and has allowed me to explore, analyze, and interpret with significant depth the complex and interrelated processes, phenomena, and institutions involved in news media engagement and individual political development.

GENERATION X: THE EMBODIMENT OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

The substantial benefits of this method and approach notwithstanding, one might still reasonably ask why one would want to engage in such a close-up examination and study of Generation X. After all, isn't this a distinct and alien cohort, far removed from the political ideals, democratic norms, community ties, and habitual news media engagement of its predecessors, and for that matter, from the relatively more thoughtful, faithful, and active Generation Y, a.k.a. the "Millenials" (Howe and Strauss 2000)? Don't the lives led by these Generation X twenty- and thirtysomethings—defined in this book as those born between 1965 and 1978, but sometimes elsewhere as the birth years 1961 to 1981, or 1965 to 1981—suggest little more than the fact that they are intrinsically (and somehow simultaneously) apathetic, cynical, alienated, anxious, indecisive, and ironic (Gross and Scott 1990; Oreskes 1990; Pew Research Center 1990, 1996; Howe and Strauss 1993; Amato and Booth 1997)?

In reality, the politics of Generation X are very similar to those of the latter half of their Baby Boomer predecessors, those born between 1955 and 1964, and to Generation Y, those born in 1979 and after—something alluded to occasionally, but less often foregrounded, in existing research (see for instance Putnam 2000, 247–76). In fact, I will argue here that Generation X is in many ways the very embodiment of America and its politics over the last thirty-plus years, and only the most visible and disparaged cohort in an unwieldy generation of Americans born between 1955 and 1984. Consider the following age and generation categorizations of Americans and their politics, on four different fronts: general interest in public affairs, newspaper reading about presidential campaigns, voter turnout, and partisanship.

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The National Election Studies indicate that in the presidential election years between 1972 and 2000, the difference in general interest in public affairs between those under 30 (18–29) and those over 65 changed dramatically. In 1972 a greater percentage of Americans surveyed who were under 30 expressed interest in public affairs than those who were over 65, but by 2000 those numbers had reversed, and then some. In 2000, 64% of Americans over 65 expressed a general interest in public affairs, compared to 38% of those under 30—a twenty-nine-point change in the difference between those groups dating back to 1972 (Wattenberg 2002, 89). This would seem to suggest that Generation X'ers represent a drastic drop in political interest as compared to their predecessors, but a closer look at these same statistics indicates something else. By 1980, before even the oldest Generation X'ers were of voting age, there had already been a nineteen-point change in the difference between Americans under 30 and those over 65. In other words, in eight years time between 1972 and 1980 the change was nineteen points, while in twenty years time between 1980 and 2000 the change was an additional ten. In 1972 the 18 to 29 age group was born between 1943 and 1954; in 1980 that group was born between 1951 and 1962.

Another important indicator of the decline in political interest among Americans born in the mid-1950s, again derived from the National Election Studies (reported in Wattenberg 2002, 89), concerns the 30 to 44 age group. In every presidential election year between 1972 and 1992, Americans surveyed between the ages of 30 and 44 expressed a level of interest in politics more similar to Americans between the ages of 45 and 64—usually to those 65 and older as well—than to Americans under 30. For instance, in 1976, 67% of Americans 30 to 44 years of age expressed interest in politics, a percentage more similar to that of Americans 45 to 64 (70%) and over 65 (65%) than to that of Americans 18 to 29 (58%). In 1996, however, a significant gap emerged for the first time between the percentage of the 30 to 44 age group expressing political interest (51%), and the percentage of Americans 45 to 64 and 65+ who did so (64% for both). That year the 30 to 44 age group, born between 1952 and 1966, had more in common with the political interest of Americans born between 1967 and 1978 (45% expressed interest), than with Americans born in 1951 or earlier (64% did so).

National Election Studies statistics on newspaper reading can be used to tell a similar story about the shift that took place during the Baby Boom and then continued through Generation X and beyond. Between the presidential election years of 1964 and 2000, the percentage of Ameri-

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cans 18 to 29 who reported reading newspapers about the campaign declined precipitously, from 75% to 27% (part of which can be accounted for by a change in question format beginning in 1988) (Wattenberg 2002, 92). These statistics might be cited as evidence of Generation X's distinctive news media disengagement, but one again finds that the most significant shift took place within the Baby Boom. Newspaper reading about the campaign also declined significantly during this time among the 30 to 44 age group (80% in 1964 to 35% in 2000), and again we find that this age group now has more in common with those under 30 than with those over 45. Between 1964 and 1984, about the same percentage of the 30 to 44 age group and the 45 to 64 age group read newspapers about that year's presidential campaign. But beginning in 1988, and then especially in 1996, the 30 to 44 age group began to separate from the 45 to 64 age group and have more in common with Americans under 30. In 2000, Americans born between 1956 and 1970 were more similar to those born between 1971 and 1982 than to those born in 1955 or earlier.

What about voter turnout? In the 1972 presidential election, the U.S. Census Bureau found that the 18 to 24-year-old age group had a (self-reported) turnout rate of 49.6%, while in 1996 that year's 18 to 24 age group had a rate of 32.4%. This would again seem to indicate the change wrought by Generation X, but consider this: In the three presidential elections following 1972—1976, 1980, and 1984—the average turnout rate for the 18 to 24 age group (born between the years 1952 and 1966, and thus almost entirely Baby Boomers) was 41%, down 17.3% from 1972's figure of 49.6%. In the next three presidential elections—1988, 1992, and 1996—the average turnout rate for the 18 to 24 age group (born between 1964 and 1978, and thus almost entirely Generation X'ers) was 37.1%—down only 9.5% from the 1976 to 1984 average of 41%. In other words, voter turnout among young adults fell almost twice as sharply within the Baby Boom as it did between Boomers and Generation X'ers. The sharpest turnout fall took place among Americans born beginning in the mid-1950s (U.S. Census Bureau 1998, 2000a, 2002).

Another way to look at the shift in voter turnout is to look very specifically at different birth year groups and how they have voted in recent elections. For instance, if one looks at the U.S. Census Bureau's self-reported voter turnout statistics in the 1996, 1998, and 2000 elections, a similar divide appears between Americans born in the first and second halves of the Baby Boom. In those three elections, Americans born between 1946 and 1949—the first four years of the Boom—had a voting rate only 1.7% lower than that of Americans born in the four years pre-

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vious, 1942 to 1945. Moving ahead to the midway point of the Boom, there was an 8% difference in the turnout rate between Americans born between 1951 and 1954, and those born between 1955 and 1958. In fact, in those three elections, Americans born in 1955 turned out at a rate fully 5% lower than those born just one year earlier, in 1954. By way of slight contrast, in the same three elections the turnout rate for those born in 1965—the first year of Generation X—was only 3% lower than those born in 1964, the last year of the Baby Boom (U.S. Census Bureau 1998, 2000a, 2002).

And finally, consider the divide in partisan leanings and affiliations between those born before the mid-1950s and those born over the course of the next three decades. According to a national Kaiser Foundation poll in October of 2002, 42% of both the 18 to 29 age group *and* the 30 to 49 age group "leaned" Republican, and 41% of both the 18 to 29 age group *and* the 30 to 49 age group leaned toward the Democrats. In contrast, the 50 to 64 and 65+ age groups both clearly leaned toward the Democrats—by sixteen points (51% to 35%) and nine points (48% to 39%), respectively (Kaiser 2002). Based on these numbers (which admittedly can flucutate across polls and overtime), Americans born between 1953 and 1972 and between 1973 and 1984 have similar, relatively conservative leanings—or at least Republican ones—as compared to Americans born in 1952 and earlier. This is further evidence of a political generational divide not so much between the Baby Boomers and their predecessors, or between Generation X and the Baby Boom, but between the first half of the Baby Boom and what came before, and the second half of the Baby Boom, Generation X, and (based on emergent data) Generation Y. Born between 1955 and 1984, this latter generational grouping came of age in, and has to some extent contributed to, what I am calling post-1960s "contemporary America."

Theoretical work on generations and generational change builds on the foundation of Mannheim's (1952) classic analysis of the subject, which includes a discussion of "contemporaneity" as a part of the "romantic-historical" school. "Contemporaneity" here means that members of the same generation exist among similar, prevailing circumstances, and so can be assumed to share certain rough traits in common (282). Contemporaneity is similar to what are defined in this field as "generational" effects, which can be distinguished from "period" and "life-cycle" effects (see Craig and Bennett 1997, 3–8). I will be arguing that this thirty-year grouping—those born from 1955 to 1984—has indeed experienced generational effects, although one can take such an argument only so far given the admittedly unwieldy size of this makeshift generation. But given the fact

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that the larger political culture and news media environment was changing under their feet as early as the early to mid-1970s, as I demonstrate in chapter 2, and that this usually has had effects on a range of Americans regardless of age (although more so for this group), it should be clear that broader and deeper *period* effects were—are—also at work. And to the extent that this long generation of Americans now in their late teens through their late forties soon will be the prime shapers of American politics and society, it is all the more important to understand how and why they have developed in the way that they have.

AN OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

Part of what I am arguing in this book is that contemporary news media tend to play an essential and powerful part in individual political development, but one that is often quite subtle. Rather than contending that news media typically have direct, monolithic political effects (or, alternately, minimal ones), I instead maintain that their fundamental significance derives to a large extent from their interrelationships with, and effect on, the micro- and macrolevel contexts and environments in which contemporary Americans have grown up, entered adulthood, and now live. Looked at another way, news media and their informational and cultural outputs are *themselves* environments in which other institutions and phenomena of political-developmental significance—such as the larger political culture, or the family—exist and exert their influence, all the while being affected themselves by the news media environment. Given this, I explore here the significance of news media for individual political development *ecologically*, following the aptly named perspective of "media ecology" (see Postman 1979, 1985; Meyrowitz 1985; for historical roots see Innis 1950, 1951; McLuhan 1962, 1964). That said, my focus on contextualization and holism exists in tension with the need for structure and rhetorical clarity in the book itself. I have tried my best to negotiate that tension as artfully as possible in the organization of the book.

In chapter 2, I survey the contemporary American politics and news media landscape amid which these fifteen people have lived, and in particular the ways in which the political culture has been characterized by a shift to the right and by alienation and disconnection. For a host of reasons the news media of this era have been conducive to these developments, especially since the 1980s.

In chapter 3, I turn my attention to these specific fifteen contemporary Americans. I introduce them with sketches of their background, belief,

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behavior, and news media engagement—life histories, but with an added emphasis on the present. I discuss everything from such early experiences as the participants' first memories of politics and politicians, and the heroes and role models they have had throughout their lives, to their particular news media experiences of and views on such recent and even ongoing events as the contested 2000 presidential election, September 11th, and the "War on Terrorism."

My mostly microlevel focus in chapter 4 is on each of the different institutions and phenomena specifically implicated in the participants' individual political development dating back to childhood—family, peers, schooling, community, work, religion, political advertising, and popular culture. In each case (excepting religion), I also discuss the multiple ways in which their news media engagement interacted with and/or took place in the context of that institution or phenomenon; how, for instance, politically relevant experiences with their families were often intimately related with their news media engagement.

In chapter 5, I return in some ways to the subject matter of chapter 2. But instead of looking at the macrolevel political culture of contemporary America and the ways in which news media are conducive to that culture, I instead examine the specific ideologies and orientations of these fifteen people and secondarily how their particular news media sources, some of which I tracked and analyzed, may or may not have been conducive to their ways of seeing and explaining the sociopolitical world. I conclude in chapter 6 by tying together the micro- and macrolevel ecology of individual political development and the significance of news media in that development.

Sociologist C. Wright Mills published *The Sociological Imagination* in 1959. In it, the iconoclastic scholar called for new theory and research on contemporary phenomena that both utilizes and evidences an awareness of sociohistorical structures and environments:

> The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. Within that welter, the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated. . . . The first fruit of this imagination—and the first lesson

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> of the social science that embodies it—is the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period. . . . We have come to know that every individual lives, from one generation to the next, in some society; that he lives out a biography, and that he lives it out within some historical sequence. By the fact of his living he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of this society and to the course of its history, even as he is made by society and by its historical push and shove. The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise. (5–6)

I am more interested than Mills was in the specific, microlevel processes involved in how an individual experiences, negotiates, and shapes "the push and shove" of his or her times—in this case, contemporary America. But in a fundamental way, this book was inspired by Mills's call.

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