5

POLITICAL PURPOSES OF SOCIALIZATION

Scholars of American democracy care deeply about the ways that everyday citizens try to influence their government. In theory, actions like voting, protesting, and donating to campaigns are the mechanism through which people shape their government and in turn, create the world they want to live in. Here, we argue that socialization choices are a commonplace and overlooked form of political action. What Americans teach their children, or the ways they try to shape the education of children more generally, is political participation. In the words of Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995, 38), it has the "intent or effect of influencing government action."

Our theory suggests that most adults—parents and non-parents—believe that what children learn when they are young shapes their future attitudes and behaviors in adulthood. As a result, people see the socialization of kids as a way to pursue specific political futures. In this chapter we turn to the question of whether everyday Americans endorse the tenets of the kids are the future folk wisdom and if they have explicit goals for children's future political attitudes. We examine this across race, party, and parental status, finding that in all subgroups, the kids are the future folk wisdom is widely held and that most people have clear political goals for America's children. Further, among parents, a belief in the kids are the future folk wisdom strongly predicts socializing behaviors.

Prior work has largely considered attitude replication a sign of parental influence. One implication of our theory is that people may have particular political goals for socialization that are not simple replication. Our findings bear this out, showing that many Americans seek for children to be a more extreme versions of themselves. Liberals want their kids to be more liberal; conservatives want their kids to be more conservative. And, this extends to racial attitudes too. While past works have often thought about replication of attitudes as the primary sign of transmission in socialization, we show instead that the kids are the future folk wisdom leads adults to seek children who are more ideologically pure than they are—contributing, we think, to the broader polarization trends observed in the United States today.

"kids are the future" in public opinion

We have argued that a widespread folk wisdom in the United States shapes how people see children in relationship to the government. We call this the "kids are the future" folk wisdom. We think that this folk wisdom has multiple elements, which together motivate elites and the public alike to incorporate children's socialization into their political projects. These elements include:

1. Malleability. Kids' beliefs and world views are influenced by social forces. This includes parents and schools.

2. Persistence. What kids learn when they are young sticks with them into adulthood. That is, socialization has staying power.

3. Future voters. Children will eventually be fully enfranchised citizens. They are the future of the self-governing body.

Collectively, these ideas produce a logic about how children can be a pathway for controlling the political future. If children are malleable, then we can influence their values, beliefs, and goals about politics today. If this socialization stays with them as they age, then what we teach them now will guide priorities as adults. And, down the road, these young citizens we have shaped and put on a certain path will become the next voting and decision-making public. As a result, socializing kids the *right way* today can make them better citizens tomorrow—and maybe even help solve problems in the nation. Influencing adults and government systems is hard—but children are right here in front of us, hungry to learn. As a result, shaping what kids learn is one way to achieve a certain political future.

Importantly, we do not yet claim that any or all of these tenets are *empirically true.* Rather, it is likely the case that kids come into the world malleable on some dimensions and with set personalities on others. Children are active agents in their own right as they interpret and make meaning of their experiences with the world around them. Further, we know from past works that over the life course, socialization from childhood is combined with other forces like higher education, marriage, and political events that degrade the effects of youth socialization over time (Engelhardt and Kam 2025; Jennings and Niemi 1981; Margolis 2018; Scott 2022; Sears and Valentino 1997). Despite the complexities of human behavior, we expect that many Americans—we'll even say, most—endorse the tenets of the kids are the future folk wisdom. This leads them to embrace the logical conclusion that kids are important for future political outcomes and to pursue opportunities to make their children and American children more generally reflect their political goals.

We make four empirical claims that we'll test in this chapter. First, the elements of the kids are the future folk wisdom form a cohesive

outlook. We can measure each of its elements and then create a single measure to capture how strongly or weakly an individual believes that kids are a way to shape the political future. We expect that most Americans will embrace the kids are the future folk wisdom: although there will be variation in the individual measures, we anticipate that the distribution of the kids are the future folk wisdom index will skew leftward and the mean will be statistically distinct from the mid-point of the scale.

Second, we expect endorsement of the folk wisdom will exist in the American population as a whole, but also among politically relevant groups. Examining the strength of the kids are the future folk wisdom by race, party, and parental status, we expect that across these groups with deeply different political attitudes and experiences, the kids are the future folk wisdom is equally prevalent. Further, we expect these groups to foreground parents and schools as primary socializers in this process.

Third, we expect that, despite a widespread belief that what kids learn matters, politically relevant groups differ in what, exactly, kids should learn. That is, they have different political projects they infuse into their socializing choices. Across partisanship, racial group, and parental status, Americans hold meaningful beliefs about the direction and content of kids' education. They have goals for their children and the children of America that go past simply replicating their own values.

Fourth, we test the predictive value of the kids are the future folk wisdom on socialization behaviors. We expect that this belief can predict whether parents engage in socializing conversations and actions with their children, and do so more effectively than other predictors of political engagement, like strength of partisanship or political interest. When people think kids are an avenue to political progress, they try to influence their children. Collectively, evidence for these claims would suggest that Americans see the in-home, private world of raising children as a political battleground—and a place to pursue their political goals.

ELEMENTS AND DISTRIBUTION OF KIDS ARE THE FUTURE

To test these claims, we collected an original survey with YouGov between April and May of 2025. We call this study the Parenting in Polarized Times Survey (PPTS). Our goal was to understand how both parents of young children and other American adults across race and party view socialization. We worked with YouGov to construct a unique sample that includes large numbers of parents of school-aged children, as well as oversamples of Black and Latino respondents. Ultimately, our survey included 3,800 respondents. Table 6.1 shows the racial breakdown of our sample as well as how they fit into a

Table 6.1: Sample Distribution for Parenting in Polarized Times Survey (PPTS)

	Never Parent	Ever Parent	K-12 Parent
Black ($N = 1300$)	$n = 369$	$n = 931$	$n = 650$
Latino ($N = 1200$)	$n = 367$	$n = 833$	$n = 550$
White ($N = 1300$)	$n = 348$	$n = 952$	$n = 650$

Notes: Race of respondent was asked in a mark one or more format. Respondents who identify with more than one racial/ethnic group were then asked with which group they most closely identify and were then included in that racial subsample. 92.7% of the sample identified with only one racial/ethnic group in the initial question. The Never Parent subsample are those who respond that they do not currently nor have ever had children. Parents are defined as those who currently or have ever had a child. K-12 Parents is the subset of Parents who currently have a child between 5 and 17 years old. We often refer to this sample as "parents of school-aged children."

number of different relevant subgroups. Throughout our analyses, we sometimes look at these groups individually, applying group-based weights for the subpopulation, while other times we pool respondents and apply a survey weight to correct our estimates to something approaching a national sample.[1]

We designed new measures to capture agreement with the kids are the future folk wisdom. We ask about the tenets of the belief system first in the realm of politics generally, then about race in particular. Table 6.2 shows these items in both the political and racial domains. Collectively, these items tap into the elements we've argued comprise the folk wisdom: that children are malleable, that what they learn persists into adulthood, that children will ultimately shape the future of the country and so what they learn when they are young will produce future political changes. Items 1-5 in the table capture these ideas.

In addition, items 6-8 consider motivations for socializing children. Should children be socialized for their own benefits (*success*, *skills*) or for the broader society (*better world*)? We expect that respondents may see all three reasons as important, but expect that the *better world* is the primary motivation. Each of these items asks whether the respondent agrees or disagrees with the statement and then captures agreement on a 0 to 3 scale.

Our first step is to determine whether these beliefs are widely held. We expect to see variation, but if this belief system is as we suggest—a widespread folk wisdom—the scores should cluster on the right-hand side of the scale. To test this, we display means for each item, averages of the combined additive scales, and Cronbach's α for each.

For fifteen of the sixteen items, the average in our sample falls well-above the midpoint of the measure, skewing towards more agreement

---

[1] Please see the appendix materials for more detailed information on the sampling frame and the survey weighting procedure.

Table 6.2: Kids are the Future Measures

How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?
1. Kids are impressionable: [their thinking about politics/what they think about racial groups] is shaped by the adults around them. **(Impressionable)**
2. What kids learn about [politics/racial groups] when young sticks with them into adulthood. **(Sticks)**
3. What kids learn about [politics/racial groups] when young doesn't matter much for the kind of adult they become. **(Kind of adult)**– *reverse coded*
4. The person who controls what kids learn about [politics/about race] today controls the future of politics in America. **(Control the future)**
5. If kids are [not brought up with the right political values/brought up with the wrong ideas about race in America], our nation will have problems in the future. **(Problems)**
6. Teaching kids to [be good citizens/to have the right understanding of race in America] can make the world a better place. **(Better world)**
7. What kids learn about [politics/other racial groups] when young affects whether they will be successful in adulthood. **(Success)**
8. Learning about [politics/other racial groups] when they are young gives kids the skills they need to navigate adulthood. **(Skills)**
Note: Response options are on a four-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

than not as expected. Looking to the general measures first, we find that, on average, Americans score 2.7 out of 3—or, leaning toward strongly agree—with the idea that "teaching kids to be good citizens can make the world a better place." Further, most Americans agree that kids are impressionable, that what they learn when young sticks with them into adulthood, and that "the person who controls what kids learn about politics today controls the future of politics in America."

Measures designed to capture political socialization as having individualized benefits (*success* and *skills*) tend closer to the mid-point, suggesting that the collective benefits of socialization (*better world*) undergird the belief more strongly. In fact, only the *success* measure in the politics scale is not statistically distinct from the mid-point.[2]

---

2 We acknowledge that acquiescence bias could inflate agreement and thus produce these specific distributions. We think our general conclusion of overall agreement would be unchanged, however, as our reversed item *kind of adult* has agreement rates that also fall on the agree side the midpoint. Similarly, factor analysis and item response models do not yield parameter estimates for the item that differ markedly from other scale items. We interpret this as evidence that acquiescence bias, while important to bear in mind, is potentially less consequential for overall endorsement rates.

Table 6.3: Mean Scores on Kids are the Future Items

Item (0-3)	KTF: Politics	KTF: Race
Better world	2.710*	2.429*
Impressionable	2.434*	2.437*
Sticks	2.034*	2.234*
Problems	1.997*	2.443*
Control the future	1.949*	2.006*
Skills	1.932*	2.221*
Kind of adult	1.747*	1.963*
Success	1.477	1.707*
Scale (0-24) $\bar{x}$	16.278*	17.440*
Cronbach's α	0.729	0.767

These are weighted means. Items range from 0 to 3, where higher scores indicate more agreement with the kids are the future elements. The mid-point of each item is 1.5 and the midpoint of the scales is 12. * indicates that the mean score is significantly higher than the midpoint of the scale in a two-tailed weighted t-test at $p < 0.05$.

The items specific to race show similarly strong agreement. With 1.5 as the mid-point of the scale, Americans score on average above this number on all eight items, with means statistically distinct from the mid-point ($p < 0.05$). This suggests that the generalized attitude about kids as the future transfers to the specific dimension of race socialization. Americans believe that kids are malleable, that what they learn when young sticks with them into the future, and that what we teach kids today will shape America's future—and they think that racial attitudes are one dimension on which this logic works. If anything, the higher scale average in the combined index for race (17.44) compared to the general score (16.28) suggests Americans believe even more strongly that teaching the right racial values to children when young will impact the direction of our nation.

Collectively, these items form coherent scales. We use confirmatory factor analysis to estimate models separately for the politics and race scales. Each scale offers reasonable evidence for unidimensionality.[3] Further, tests suggest the two scales capture separate concepts: a model treating the scales as separate constructs fits the data well and supports our perspective that people can endorse a kids are the future outlook that is unique to politics or race.[4] Taken together, our two

---

3 For the politics scale, the scaled CFI was .964, scaled RMSEA .058 (90% confidence interval .050-.066), and SRMR .049. For the race scale, the scaled CFI was .975, scaled RMSEA .053 (90% confidence interval .047-.060), and SRMR of .039. Each scale estimated correlated residuals across items from the relevant subscales (kids can change the future, motivations for socialization), retaining all that were statistically significant in the final model. Both models incorporated survey weights.

4 The scaled CFI was .943, scaled RMSEA .048 (90% confidence interval .045-.051), and SRMR of .060. This model accounted for common wording across scales by correlating residuals. With all items recorded on agree-disagree scales we also estimated a

item sets demonstrate clear structure, suggesting the items can be merged together to create two additive scales.[5] These resulting scales demonstrate good internal consistency according to Cronbach's α (0.73, 0.77).[6]

Therefore, we add each of the items from the scales to create a general kids are the future folk wisdom scale (*ktf-politics*) and one for race specifically (*ktf-race*). These scales range from 0 to 24, with a mid-point of 12. For the ktf-politics scale, the average for the sample is 16.3; for the ktf-race scale, the average is 17.4.[7] Both averages are statistically distinct from the mid-point of the scale, suggesting widespread agreement with the items.

Does the strength of the kids are the future folk wisdom vary across politically relevant groups? We explore whether there is agreement with the measures across three salient subgroups (partisanship, race, and parental status) by plotting density curves in Figures 6.1.[8]

The first panel of Figure 6.1(a) shows that Democrats and Republicans have strikingly similar levels of agreement that kids are the future in politics. Visually, the distributions almost perfectly overlap. Empirically, a Kruskal-Wallis test fails to reject the null hypothesis that the two distributions are equivalent ($t(2989) = -0.11$, $p = .91$), suggesting partisans in the U.S. share an attitude strength distribution. Despite having increasingly distinct attitudes about politics specifi-

---

method factor defined by all items from both scales but that was uncorrelated with the two traits. The model incorporated survey weights.

5 We also investigated whether this additive approach and unidimensional perspective, while parsimonious, was appropriate. First, we estimated different factor models treating item subsets as separate dimensions. We define an *openness* subdimension with items 1-3 in Table 6.2, a *purposes* subdimension with items 4-6, and a *utility* subdimension with items 7 and 8. While these models fit the data well, they do not improve upon a unidimensional model. Further, the interfactor correlations are all quite high (0.67, 0.81, and 0.90 for politics; 0.74, 0.78, and 0.93 for race), pointing to discriminant validity issues. Consequently, we treat the 8-item measure as a single dimension, but encourage future work to refine and extend the potential subdimensions.
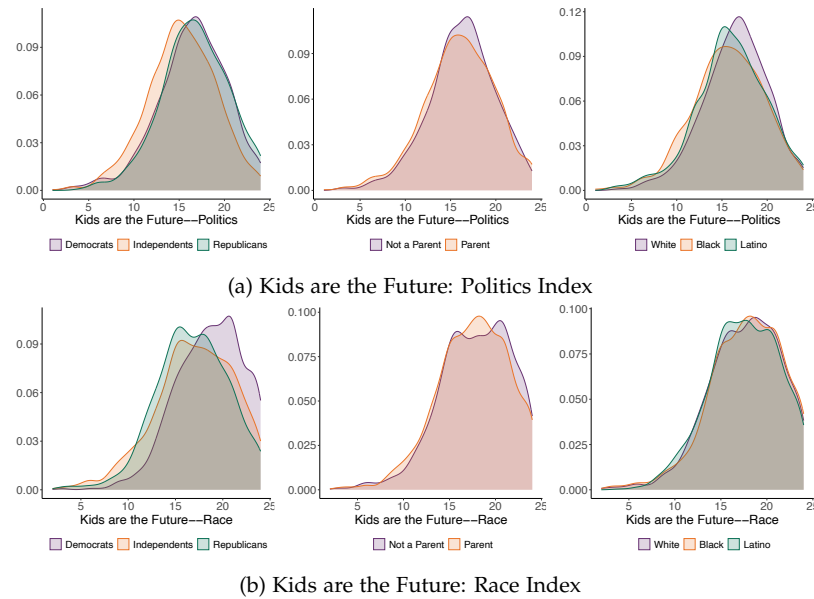
Second, summed scales can misleadingly score individuals if the construct is not compensatory—where high scores on one subdimension can make up for low scores on another, for instance (Wuttke, Schimpf and Schoen 2020). If we take seriously the possibility that the *openness* dimension is particularly important for setting up beliefs on the other two dimensions, then we do not want to score people as high if their score on this dimension is low or moderate. Consequently, we scored respondents using the minimum summed score calculated across each of the 3 subdimensions (Wuttke, Schimpf and Schoen 2020). This scoring correlates quite highly, but not perfectly, with the additive scale (0.85). We also find no substantive differences predicting later outcomes. Consequently, we retain the additive index for simplicity.

6 Revelle's ω_{total} provides quite similar internal consistency estimates (0.76 for politics and 0.81 for race).

7 We find that the additive indices correlate at 0.48. After using a covariance structure model to correct each scale for random and systematic measurement error this increases to 0.56. They are thus related but clearly distinct concepts.

8 We first established that our scales met measurement equivalence across each group. Evidence from multi-group confirmatory factor analysis models support common interpretations and response tendencies across groups.

Figure 6.1: Distributions of Kids are the Future Indexes by Subgroup

(a) Kids are the Future: Politics Index

(b) Kids are the Future: Race Index

Notes: Unweighted density plots of each index grouped by relevant social characteristics: partisanship, whether the respondent has ever been a parent, and racial group.

cally and outlooks on life generally (Hetherington, Engelhardt and Weiler n.d.), Democrats and Republicans share a set of beliefs about the malleability and importance of socializing kids the right way. This is a bipartisan belief.

The density plot of political independents, too, shares a great deal of overlap with the partisan groups, but is shifted slightly to the left. The mean score for independents is approximately 1.5 points lower than partisans, a statistically significant difference from both Democrats and Republicans ($p < 0.005$ for each). This difference suggests that those who are more invested in political socialization might also be those with stronger, more politicized attitudes. By comparison, when it comes to the kids are the racial future scale in Figure 6.1(b), Democrats score approximately 2 points higher, on average, than both Republicans and independents. They feel more strongly that children's racial attitudes are malleable, that what they learn when young sticks with them into adulthood, and what children learn about race today matters for the well-being of our nation. Despite these differences, it is worth noting that the average propensity for all three groups is toward the top of the scale, suggesting widespread agreement with the folk wisdom and its logic.

Do parents and those who have never been parents differ in their attitudes toward the malleability of children and impact of socialization? We might expect that beliefs about children's malleability could vary by whether someone has ever raised children. The second column of panels in Figures 6.1 shows substantial overlap between these

two subsamples on both the politics and the race scales. On average, however, parents score slightly lower on the two scales—0.47 points on politics and 0.60 points on race—than non-parents in a weighted linear regression model.

The same is true across race, with relatively small differences emerging across Latinos, Black Americans, and White Americans. White folks score slightly higher on average on the ktf-politics scale than do Black and Latino respondents ($p < 0.05$ for each), but for all three groups, the mean of the scale is well above the mid-point (weighted means: 16.59 for White respondents; 15.68 for Black respondents; 16.03 for Latino respondents). For the ktf-race scale, Black respondents score higher than White and Latino respondents, but again these differences on average are fairly small at less than one point on the 0 to 24 scale.

Collectively, these analyses confirm our first set of empirical claims. The kids are the future folk wisdom, comprised of multiple elements, is widely held in the United States. This is true across racial, partisan, and parental-status subgroups. Although we observe some variation in the distribution of these measures—namely, partisans more strongly endorse the folk wisdom, Democrats more strongly see race as an important dimension of socialization, and White people are slightly more likely to endorse the folk wisdom—answers to the index cluster on the right-side of the scale for all groups, producing a leftward skew. Still, variation that exists in this measure allows us to test its predictive capacity. We return to this later in the chapter, considering how the kids are the future folk wisdom relates to socializing behaviors—but first, we look at who Americans think is doing the socializing.
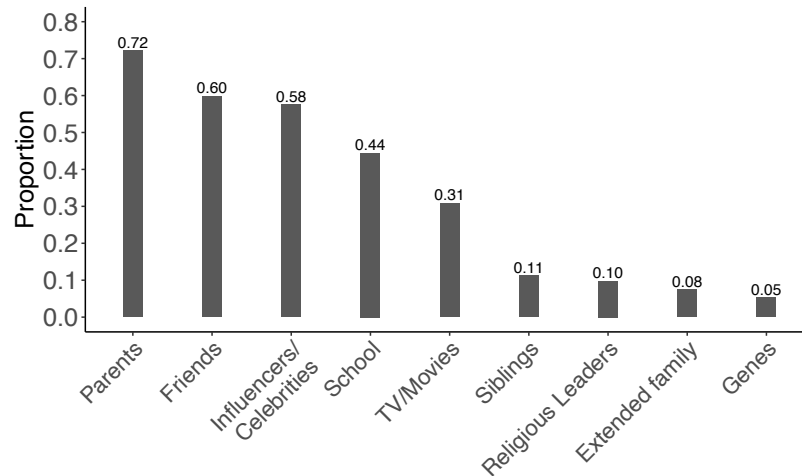
WHO SOCIALIZES KIDS?

The first tenet of the kids are the future folk wisdom claims that kids' beliefs and worldviews are malleable, shaped by the social forces around them. When Americans think about how kids are influenced, who do they think has the most impact?

We asked respondents, "There are a lot of things that people think shape kids' beliefs and behaviors once they become adults. Which three things do you think have the most influence over kids these days?" We then offered a variety of possible options, in randomized order: parents, schools, friends, genes, siblings, extended family, friends, social media influencers and celebrities, television and movies, religious leaders, and an option to write in another influence over kids. Figure 6.2 shows the proportion of respondents who selected each influencing agent as one of the three most important.

In a 1977 *Handbook of Political Socialization*, Paul Allen Beck wrote, "An examination of the impact of the various agents of political socialization should begin with the parents—almost universally expected to be the primary agents" (122). The American public appears to

Figure 6.2: Most Important Socializing Agents

Notes: Weighted means. Bars indicate the weighted proportion of respondents who identified a socializing agent as one of the three most important agents, therefore proportions do not sum to 1.
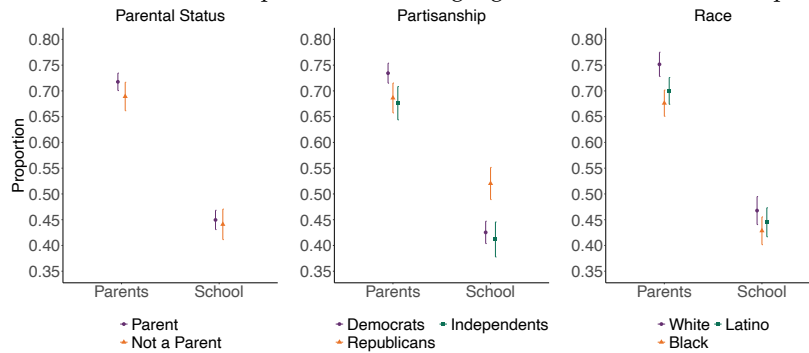
agree. Out of the nine possible socializing agents offered, parents are the agent most often selected. Nearly three-quarters of respondents (72%) see parents as a primary influence on children's adult beliefs and behaviors.

Close behind are friends (60%) and influencers/celebrities (58%). Schools arrive as the fourth most selected option with just under half of respondents selecting them (44%). Interestingly, genes are the force least often included in people's top three selection. Only 5% of the sample think that genes are one of the three most influential things shaping people's beliefs and behaviors as adults, underscoring the power of social forces in Americans' thinking about socialization.

The prioritization of parents, and the placement of schools in the top-three by about half the population, is consistent across subgroup analyses as well. Figure 6.3 shows that across party, race, and partisanship, Americans are remarkably similar in emphasizing the role of parents, with 67-75% of each subgroup selecting this agent. Schools, too, show similarity across groups with only one clear outlier: Republicans are significantly more likely to select schools as a primary influencer compared to Democrats and independents.

That parents and schools are among the top actors that people believe will influence children's future behaviors fits with our sense that elites will seek to influence both parent behavior and school policies. Given that adults, including parents, have goals for children's political futures, providing parents with new information to socialize their children or changing school policies might yield results.

Figure 6.3: Proportion of Respondents Who Say That Parents or Schools Are
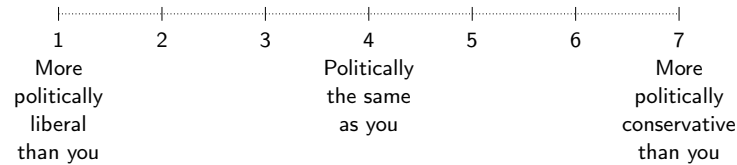the Most Important Socializing Agent across Relevant Groups

Notes: Unweighted means. Bars indicate the proportion of respondents within a particular
subgroup who identified either parents or schools as one of the three most important agents.
Error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

EVERYDAY PEOPLE HAVE GOALS FOR KIDS' POLITICS

So far, we've shown that people tend to endorse the kids are the future
folk wisdom. Across party, race, and parental status, there is wide
agreement that kids can be influenced, that this influence shapes the
kind of adult they become, and that these choices matter for the future
of our nation. While the kids are the future folk wisdom is widely
shared, we expect that what, exactly, people want children to learn
and the future they seek varies by race and party. That is, people
have different political projects in mind that they hope to influence
children to adopt. Rather than childrearing being separate from poli-
tics, confined to some private sphere, we expect most Americans have
clear and meaningful political goals for children's education. The
widespread belief that what kids learn matters and the marked differ-
ences in political goals across salient subgroups makes childrearing
contentious.

To explore whether people have clear political goals for kids we
develop two measures: one explores whether adults desire that chil-
dren have particular ideological outlooks in the future and one asks
whether they'd like kids to have particular racial attitudes. We begin
with the ideology measures, which we adapt from standard measures
of liberal-conservative political ideology (Mason 2015). First, we asked
respondents to place themselves on a scale from "very politically lib-
eral" to "very politically conservative." We then gave respondents
a prompt to consider their children—if they currently have a school-
aged child—or else children in America, and to select where they hope
they will be as adults relative to the respondent, on the scale below:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
More politically liberal than you			Politically the same as you			More politically conservative than you

Immediately following each of these placement items we asked the respondents how important it was to them that children hold this particular ideological position in the future, on a four-point scale ranging from "not at all important" to "very important." Together these measures can tell us if people have clear preferences for children's future political ideology and how strongly held these attitudes are.
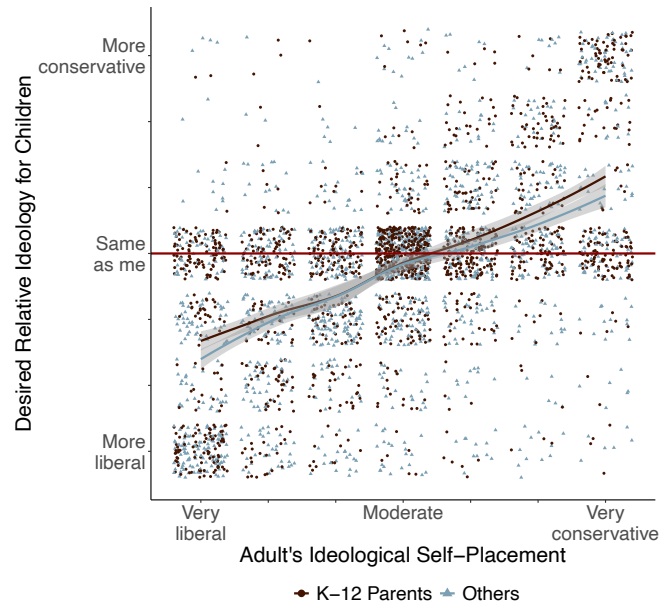
We examine the relationship between adults' ideological self-placement and where they say they'd like children to be in the future. Figure 6.4 plots these two variables: self-placement on the x-axis, goals for children on the y-axis. We group estimates by whether the respondent is a parent to a school-aged child and thus was asked about their own child's future political ideology, or does not have school-aged children and thus was asked about American children in general. We plot jittered points for each respondent and smoothed local regressions for parents and non-parents. If adults simply sought replication in children—desiring that children hold an identical ideological position to themselves—we would expect the model to be a horizontal line at the midpoint of the scale. We plot this line at $y = 3$ to indicate where we would expect our data to cluster if this were the case.

This is not what we observe, however. Instead, the regressions show that people tend to want children to be more extreme versions of themselves. Fitting a linear model produces a regression coefficient of approximately 0.40, which indicates that people who fall on the liberal side of the ideology scale want children to be more liberal than they are, while conservatives desire even more conservative children. Moreover, there is very little differentiation between parents and non-parents: parents want their own children to be more extreme versions of themselves and people want children in general to do the same. An interaction term in a fitted model shows statistically insignificant differences between the two groups.

These findings have implications for a growing body of scholarship on political polarization. Socialization research has historically used the process of generational transmission to explain stability in political cultures (Greenstein 1965; Hess and Torney 1967; Sears 1993). These works generally take *replication of attitudes* (parent to child) as the primary sign of transmission (e.g., Weissberg and Joslyn 1977). Parents—acting almost as mindless models—create children that look like them in attitudes and actions, having absorbed social cues over a lifetime.
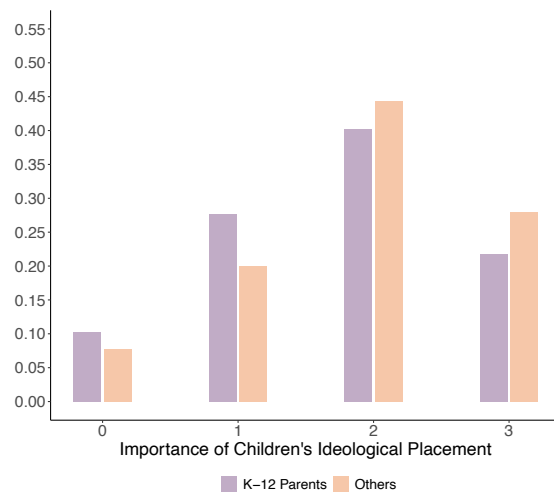
Our data suggest instead that sometimes the goals of parents and other adults is not to make children the same as them, but rather,

Figure 6.4: Desired Ideological Placement for Children by Adults' Ideology

Notes: Plot shows unweighted jittered data points for where adults place themselves on the seven-point scale from politically liberal to conservative and where they said they desire children to be. K-12 parents were asked about their own children while others were asked about children in the U.S. generally. The horizontal line indicates where we would expect responses to cluster if respondents wanted children to share their ideological outlook.

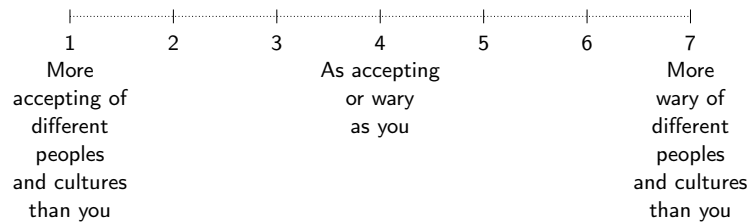Figure 6.5: Importance that Children Develop a Particular Ideology, by Parental Status

Notes: Plot shows the unweighted proportion of K-12 parents and non-K-12 parents along the scale of how much importance they place on children's future political ideology. K-12 parents were asked about their own children while others were asked about children in the U.S. generally.

more extreme version of themselves (we'll explore in chapter 9 how effectively this works). If we think of adults as political actors who have clear goals for children and see them as a way to seek an ideal future political arrangement, then the possibility that socialization produces *new* political orders emerges. Specifically, our evidence suggests that socialization may foster increased polarization. People who fall toward the ends of the political ideology scale seek greater extremity in the next generation. And, people who are strong partisans tend to think that kids are a way to pursue political goals. If the actors in our sample have their way, this suggests their children will end up more extreme partisans than themselves.

Perhaps people have political goals for children's ideological position, but they are weakly held rather than intense attitudes. Figure 6.5 shows that this isn't the case. More than two-thirds of respondents say that it's somewhat or very important to them that children develop their preferred ideological views, and the weighted average score is 1.875 on the 0 to 3 scale. Perhaps even more interestingly, non-parents score significantly higher on this importance measure: 62% of parents chose either important or extremely important compared to 72% of people who do not have a school-aged child.
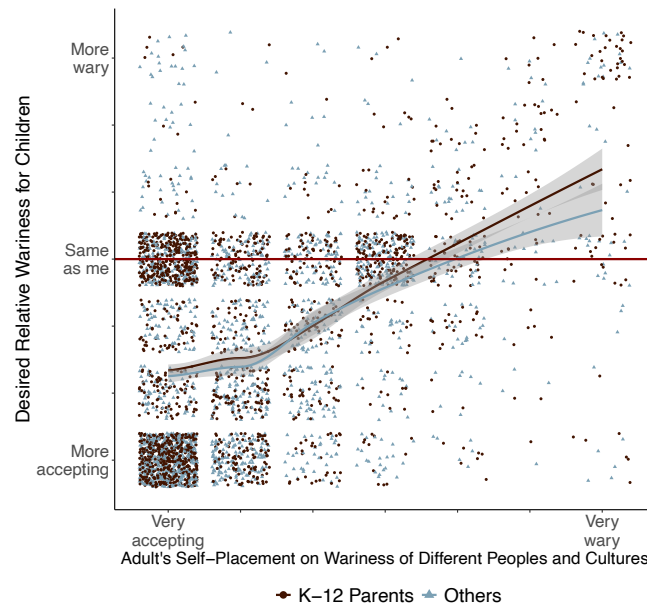
We repeated this process a second time, but with a focus on views about outgroups that draws from ethnocentrism research (Kinder and Kam 2010). We asked respondents to assess how wary or accepting of different people and cultures they are on a seven-point scale from "very accepting" to "very wary." Then we asked them to indicate whether they would like their children (for parents of school-aged kids) or children in America (for all other respondents) to be more accepting or more wary of different peoples and cultures than they are, on the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
More accepting of different peoples and cultures than you			As accepting or wary as you			More wary of different peoples and cultures than you

Then, as with our ideology measure, respondents were asked about the importance, or intensity, of this attitude.
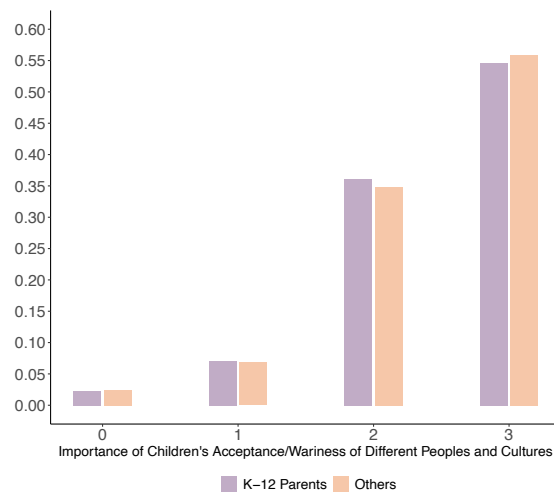
Figures 6.6 and 6.7 show the results of these questions. We once again plot the horizontal line at $y = 3$ to show where we would expect responses to cluster if adults desire that children have congruent attitudes in adulthood. As with the ideology scales, however, people generally prefer children to be more extreme versions of themselves. Adults who say they are very open to different peoples and cultures want children to be even more open. Adults who say they are wary want children to be warier still. An estimated linear regression coef-

Figure 6.6: Desired Wariness of Different Peoples and Cultures for Children by Adults' Wariness

Notes: Plot shows unweighted jittered data points for where adults place themselves on the seven-point scale from accepting to wary of other groups and where they said they desire children to be. K-12 parents were asked about their own children while others were asked about children in the U.S. generally. The horizontal line indicates where we would expect responses to cluster if respondents wanted children to share their outlook toward other groups.

Figure 6.7: Importance that Children Develop a Particular Openness toward Other Groups, by Parental Status

Notes: Plot shows the unweighted proportion of K-12 parents and non-K-12 parents along the scale of how much importance they place on children's future openness or wariness toward other groups. K-12 parents were asked about their own children while others were asked about children in the U.S. generally.

ficient of 0.48 for the whole sample is statistically significant. And again, we see very similar patterns between parents who are asked about their own children and adults who are asked about American children generally. An interaction term on parental status in a fitted linear model is statistically insignificant.

There are several important distinctions with these variables compared to ideology, however. With these measures we see significant leftward shifts. That is, people typically describe themselves as open to other groups, and they desire for children to be open to other groups as well. There are relatively few respondents who place themselves on the wary side of the scale (10% of the full sample, weighted) or who say they'd like children to be warier of other groups than they are (9% of the full sample, weighted). This is a striking comparison to political ideology where we observe polarization in both directions. Here, it is clear that respondents express less ethnocentric attitudes themselves and a preference for less ethnocentric attitudes among children.

As with the importance of children's ideology, Figure 6.7 shows that people have strong preferences over children's openness toward different peoples and cultures. A majority of respondents place themselves at the highest point on the importance scale, saying that it's very important to them that children develop their preferred attitude toward other groups. In fact, 91% of both parents and adults without school-aged children say that it's either important or extremely important that children do so. Clearly, these are even more intensely-held attitudes than the preferences for children's ideology.

PREDICTIVE POWER OF KIDS ARE THE FUTURE FOLK WISDOM

Americans, on average, believe that what kids learn matters for the future of the nation. They also have clear political goals for kids both in terms of political ideology and ethnocentrism. We expect that those who believe children are a way to pursue a certain political future will follow that belief with behaviors. They will find opportunities to socialize children in the ways that they see fit. By connecting the kids are the future folks wisdom to socializing actions in the home, we seek to show that childrearing can be intended as a political act—one designed to influence governmental outcomes in the future.

We focus next on the political socialization behaviors of parents of school-aged children. As Beck (1977, 122-123) notes, "no other agents enjoy such a cumulative edge in exposure, communication, and receptivity" than parents have with their own children, placing parents in "a highly favorable position" for socialization. We return to how other people—those without school-aged children—might pursue socialization goals through public education in Chapter 8.

We expect that parents who more strongly endorse the kids are the future folk wisdom will also be more likely to create opportuni-

ties to politically socialize their children. This can include through planned discussions about politics or by involving children in political experiences (Anoll, Engelhardt and Israel-Trummel 2022).

We asked parents to help us understand how conversations about politics and race begin in their home. The first question prompt read as follows:

> There are lots of things that can lead us to have difficult conversations with our children.

> Sometimes we plan these conversations and other times they are prompted by questions from our kids or events in the world.

> Think about politics. What kinds of things have led you to talk about politics with your [child/children], if you've talked about it all? Please assign a percentage to reflect the mix of things that prompt these conversations.

We then offered a series of possible catalysts for political conversations: events in the news, experiences their children have, questions from their children, planned conversations, books or television shows, things their children learn at school, and things other children tell them. We also offered an "other" category and an option to say they never discuss politics with their child.

These variables range from 0 to 100 for each potential source of conversation, and we rescaled them to range from 0 to 4 where 0 indicates that none of the conversations come from that source, 1 indicates 1-9 percent from that sources, 2 indicates 10-19 percent, 3 indicates 20-29, and 4 indicates 30-plus percent of conversations come from that source. We also code respondents who said they don't know where these conversations come from as zeros on each variable. We analyze the variables that capture how much political conversations result from planned conversations and from events in the news. We expect that parents who strongly believe the kids are the future folk wisdom will spend more time initiating and planning conversations with their kids about politics, but also may be more likely to take opportunities to respond to news events with political conversations compared to parents who do not endorse the folk wisdom.

Second, we consider whether the kids are the future folk wisdom predicts engaging children in political experiences. A host of studies show that political participation is a learned behavior and that children whose parents are voters are more likely to become voters themselves as they observe their parents' behavior (Bhatti and Hansen 2012; Gidengil, Wass and Valaste 2016; Kudrnáč and Lyons 2017; Sandell and Plutzer 2005). Parents who are particularly invested in cultivating their children's politics might therefore go beyond talking about their political behavior, and seek to involve their children in political actions.

We expect that parents who more strongly believe that kids are the future will engage in more political acts with their children.

We measured participation with children by adapting standard batteries about adult political participation to ask whether parents had involved their children in political participation in the past 12 months. We created an index where respondents received a point for each of the following: 1) taking their child with them to vote, 2) volunteering with their child for a political party or campaign, 3) attending any political meetings, rallies, speeches, dinners, etc. in support of a particular candidate with their child, 4) giving their child a button, sticker, item of clothing, etc. that supports a political candidate, 5) helping their child give money to a political party, candidate, organization, or ballot issue, 6) attending a protest march, rally, or demonstration with their child, 7) helping or encouraging their child to contact an elected representative or government official, 8) helping or encouraging their child to join a group working to solve a problem affecting their community, and 9) attending a meeting with their child to discuss issues facing their community. We truncate the scale to range from 0 to 3 so that all respondents who did three or more of these acts scored a 3.

Table 6.4 reports the results of linear regression models for each of our three political socialization dependent variables: how much parents' conversations about politics are planned, how much they result from news events, and how much parents participate in political activity with their children. Our key independent variable is the ktf-politics scale. We include in the models traditional predictors of political participation: party strength and political interest capture a general psychological engagement with politics and education can serve as a proxy for resources (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). We also control for race and gender. To compare effect sizes, we rescale all independent and dependent variables to range from 0 to 1 so that coefficients demonstrate full-scale effect changes.

We find that first kids are the future attitudes are significantly and positively associated with planning conversations about politics. Parents who score highest on kids are the future are 14 percentage points higher on the planning political conversations outcome. In comparison, the other common predictors of political participation show half the effect size. Moving from a non-partisan to a strong partisan increases the share of conversations that are planned by 8 points. Political interest also produces an 8-point effect. Moving from a high school degree or less to graduate degree increases the outcome variable by 7 points.

By comparison, conversations prompted by news events are more related to political interest. This makes sense because political interest is measured by asking to what extent respondents follow what's going on in government and public affairs. We would anticipate, of course, that people who follow the news are more likely to have

Table 6.4: Kids are the Future Attitudes and K-12 Parents' Political Socialization Behaviors

	Planned Conversations	News Conversations	Participation with Children
KTF-Politics	0.14 (0.03)*	0.08 (0.04)*	0.21 (0.04)*
Partisan strength	0.08 (0.02)*	0.04 (0.02)*	0.07 (0.02)*
Political interest	0.08 (0.02)*	0.18 (0.03)*	0.14 (0.03)*
Education	0.07 (0.03)*	0.08 (0.03)*	0.16 (0.03)*
(Ref: White)			
Black	0.04 (0.02)*	-0.07 (0.02)*	0.07 (0.02)*
Latino	0.05 (0.02)*	-0.05 (0.02)*	0.02 (0.02)
Woman	-0.04 (0.01)*	0.01 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)
(Intercept)	0.09 (0.03)*	0.23 (0.03)*	-0.06 (0.03)*
Adj. R^2	0.06	0.08	0.11
N	1850	1850	1850

Unweighted OLS models as the sample is restricted to K-12 parents. *Planned Conversations* ranges from 0 (none of parents' conversations about politics are planned) to 1 (30-plus percent are planned). *News Conversations* ranges from 0 (none of parents' conversations about politics are in response to news events) to 1 (30-plus percent are in response to news). Respondents answering "don't know" are coded as 0 for each source. *Participation with Children* ranges from 0 (did no political participation with their child) to 1 (did at least 3 acts with their child). All independent variables range from 0 to 1. $^*p < 0.05$.

political conversations at home prompted by the news. But still, even accounting for political interest, the ktf-politics scale is statistically related to the outcome variable. These results suggest that parents who embrace the kids are the future folk wisdom are more likely to intentionally find opportunities to talk to their kids about politics and are also more likely to respond to events in the news than parents who don't believe the folk wisdom.

Finally, we turn to parents' political participation with their children. Here, again, the kids are the future folk wisdom out-performs all the other predictors included in the model. Moving from rejection of the kids are the future folk wisdom to strong endorsement increases the likelihood a parent includes their child in political participation by 21 points on the 0 to 1 participation scale. Strength of partisanship, political interest, and education are all also significantly linked to political participation with children, but the magnitudes of these effects are smaller, ranging from 7 to 16 points.

These models also show baseline differences in political socialization across racial groups. Black and Latino parents report that a higher share of their conversations about politics are planned compared to White parents. This difference across racial groups extends prior findings that parents of color are more conscious of their racial socialization practices than White parents (Ayón, Nieri and Ruano 2020; Hagerman 2018; Hughes and Chen 1997; Nieri, Yoo and Tam 2024), to

the case of political socialization. By contrast, a greater share of White parents' conversations about politics are in response to the news. We return to this point—that White parents' socialization practices are more responsive to news events—in the next chapter where we explore changes in White parents' race socialization, specifically, during times of political disruption.
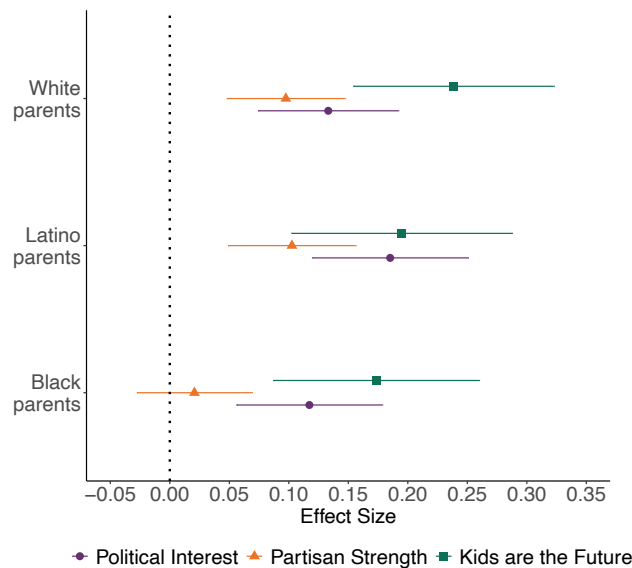
Finally, the results show that Black Americans are more likely than Whites, on average, to include their children in political experiences. This may reflect the fact that there are different group-based norms about politics across racial groups. Anoll (2022) shows that Whites place less value on political participation than Black Americans, and White and Laird (2020) show that Black political cohesion is produced through norm enforcement. Latinos, on the other hand, show no difference in the degree to which they include their children in political acts compared to Whites.

The results also speak to gender differences—or non-differences—in political socialization. In prior work, we've found that White fathers engage in more race socialization—both in terms of conversations and political action—than White mothers (Anoll, Engelhardt and Israel-Trummel 2022), and there have been longstanding gender gaps in political participation across racial groups (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). While our results show that mothers are less likely than fathers to plan their political conversations, discussion in response to news and political participation with children both yield null effects of gender—suggesting little difference between these two groups. That we see mostly parity across gender when it comes to political parenting may result from competing narratives about the gendered natures of the public and private spheres so that political parenting is both fathers' and mothers' work—or, perhaps, not clearly reserved for one parent.

Differences in group history, constraint, and opportunities mean that predictors of political behavior often operate differently across racial groups (Anoll 2022; Bracic, Israel-Trummel and Shortle 2019; Masuoka and Junn 2013). Does the relationship between the kids are the future folk wisdom and political participation with children differ for Black, Latino, and White American parents? In Figure 6.8, we again predict political participation with children, but this time do so for the three racial groups separately. The plot shows effect sizes for three key predictors in the models—political interest, strength of partisan identity, and ktf-politics—with 84% confidence intervals around them to visually indicate a two-sample t-test.

Figure 6.8 shows that, for all three groups, the kids are the future folk wisdom is the strongest predictor of engaging children in political experiences. Across groups, the predictor works in roughly the same fashion: the more a parent believes that kids are malleable, that what they learn matters, and that kids hold the key to a better

Figure 6.8: Relative Effects of Kids are the Future Beliefs on K-12 Parents' Political Participation with Children Compared to Partisan Strength and Political Interest

Notes: Plots show the expected change in political participation with one's children moving from the lowest to highest value of each independent variable derived from linear regression models for White, Latino, and Black parents separately. The dependent and independent variables are all coded to range from 0 to 1. The figure shows that the ktf-politics scale has an equal or larger association with political participation with children than either partisan strength or interest in politics. Plotted with 84% confidence intervals to approximate a two-tailed t-test between estimates.

future, the more likely they are to introduce their children to political participation. Moreover, for both White and Black parents, endorsing a kids are the future outlook has a stronger association with politically socializing their children than does strength of partisanship.

A POTENT POLITICAL ATTITUDE

The first section of this book showed that the kids are the future folk wisdom appears across time and place. Influential political theorists draw on these ideas as they lay out their view of a just society. Elites reference them as they seek to advance racial projects in both progressive and conservative directions.

This chapter moves to the American public: how does the average person think about these ideas? Using an original battery of measures to capture the kids are the future folk wisdom, we show that people generally endorse its tenets. Americans believe that children are impressionable, that what they learn when they are young persists into adulthood, and that teaching them the right lessons in childhood can lead to a better political future. There is also substantial agreement about these tenets across relevant social categories: across race, party,

and parental status, Americans tend to believe these things more than they do not.

We further show that beyond believing that kids hold the political future, adults have clear goals for children's future political attitudes and these goals depend on adults' attitudes. Political liberals want children to become liberal and political conservatives want children to become conservative. Moreover, they do not simply want children to hold the same political view—they want children to be more extreme versions of themselves. We find the same pattern when it comes to attitudes toward outgroups, though the data is shifted leftward. Adults who see themselves as open to different peoples and cultures want children to become even more open. The relatively fewer adults who see themselves as wary of others want children to become warier still.

Finally, we show that among parents of school-aged children, the kids are the future folk wisdom is linked to political socialization behavior. Parents who score higher on the ktf-politics scale say that more of their conversations about politics with their children result from planned effort. We also find a significant and positive relationship between kids are the future attitudes and political participation with children. Parents who more strongly believe that kids are the future are also more likely to facilitate their children's political participation by doing things like taking them to vote, attending protests with their children, or encouraging them to join activist groups.

Given that parents have clear political goals for their children, how might their socializing behaviors change during moments of political disruption? If political elites and social movements draw substantial attention to the importance of children's socialization and offer advice for best practices, might we observe changes in parenting behaviors? We turn to this question in the next chapter where we observe White parents' race socialization practices in the wake of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. As we saw this chapter, White parents are more likely to talk about race and politics in response to the news and less likely to do so because of prior planning, making them an opportune case to understand responsiveness to current events.