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Facilitators of intergenerational similarity in social and political attitudes: the role of discussion, sophistication, attitudinal homogeneity, and gender

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Abstract

While parents remain key socializing agents for political attitudes of adolescents, we observe that parent–child similarity in these attitudes is less substantial than initially theorized and seems to vary across studies and type of attitude. We hypothesize that social learning mechanisms explain differences in the strength of parent–child similarity. To assess this proposition, we compare the moderating power of political discussion, political sophistication, parental homogeneity, and gender using data from the Belgian Parent–Child Socialization Study 2013 ($N=1943$ families). Our results demonstrate that parents and children resemble in their political and social attitudes and that this similarity is stronger for concrete and socially salient attitudes and reinforced by frequency in political discussion. Results also indicate that social learning practices, or at least the ones considered in this study, are not necessary conditions (anymore) for parent–child correspondence. Frequency of cue-giving in the form of direct communication is important to internalize parental attitudes but political sophistication and consistency in cue-giving less so. Parents and children correspond even in the absence of optimal social learning conditions which suggests that informal learning and observation of parental behavior are crucial to consider as well.

Keywords Parent-child similarity · Political attitudes · Political discussion · Political sophistication · Parental homogeneity · Social learning

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Introduction

If we want to understand political and social attitude development among adolescents, the family remains the key socialization agent to investigate (Degner and Dalege 2013; Flanagan 2013; Glass, Bengtson and Dunham 1986). The past five decades on political socialization research have shown that parents exert a continuing influence on the development of core social and political attitudes such as party identification (Jennings and Niemi 1981; Ojeda and Hatemi 2015), ideological orientation (Rico and Jennings 2012, 2016; Ventura 2001), political engagement (Jennings et al. 2009), and intergroup relations (Degner and Dalege 2013) in (late) adolescence and early adulthood. Although attitudes are still malleable and sensitive to experiences, adolescence remains the formative phase in life in which the foundations of key democratic attitudes and societal beliefs are being developed (Flanagan 2013; Rekker et al. 2015; Vollebergh et al. 2001).

These insights stem from a rich literature on intergenerational similarities, initiated by influential works in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s (Hyman 1958; Jennings and Niemi 1981; Tedin 1974) and recently regained scholarly attention (Degner and Dalege 2013; Dinas 2014; Hatemi and Ojeda 2020; Katz-Gerro et al. 2019; Ojeda and Hatemi 2015). Using more sophisticated analytical models and longitudinal data, and criticizing the initial theoretical approach of top-down parent–child ‘transmission’ or ‘inheritance’ of attitudes, recent studies show a more qualified view on the basic socialization patterns in the family, with more emphasis on child agency (Hatemi and Ojeda 2020). When examining possible bottom-up processes and alternative explanations such as social status inheritance (Glass et al. 1986; Jennings et al. 2009; Min et al. 2012) and genetic patterns (Eaves et al. 1997; Hatemi et al. 2009a, b), the top-down parental influence in shaping a variety of social and political attitudes among adolescents is present, but more limited than initially hypothesized.

The fact that direct parental influence in politics seems to be less substantial than initially theorized might be related to a number of mechanisms in the learning process that are not always taken into account in empirical studies. For instance, not all families are comparable in terms of political sophistication, not all parents share similar political opinions, and not all attitudes are as easily picked up by children. If children ‘imitate, internalize and reproduce what parents say or do’ (Kinder and Kam 2010, p. 61), there are a few important mechanisms that can affect this social learning process.

Social learning is in essence a communication process in which frequent, consistent, and clear cue-giving by the parents are central mechanism (Bandura 1977). This process is also the theoretical foundation of models on direct political socialization in which political preferences and behaviors are transmitted from parents to children (Jennings et al. 2009). Social learning theory essentially stipulates that individuals learn from others within a social context (in this case the nuclear family), through modeling and observational learning. Bandura (1977) describes four steps in this learning process: attention, retention, production, and motivation. All of these steps are directly or indirectly related to these immediate



responses or learning cues. The cues provided by parents reinforce desired and discourage unwanted behavior. When it comes to politics and political socialization, however, the clarity of those cues might differ between attitudes and between families.

First, if parental cues are related to a very concrete political action or preference such as voting for party X, they are more easy to be retained, internalized, and reproduced by their children. If parental cues are related to more abstract societal orientations such as a leftist or rightist ideology, they might be more fluid and harder to grasp. A cue such as “In this family, we are Republicans” is more direct and easy to retain than a broader ideological leftist or rightist world view or value pattern. Therefore, to really understand the role of parents in direct political socialization, we think it is essential to *compare different political and social attitudes* within the same target population. Secondly, communication in itself stands at the center of political socialization within the family. In families where learning cues on politics are provided more often, the social learning process will run more smoothly and hence parent–child similarity will be higher. The *degree of politicization* within the family is therefore essential. Thirdly, as consistency (and thus simplicity) of cues is an important facilitator in the retention step of social learning, *parental homogeneity* comes to the forefront as well. If cues are provided consistently by both parents, internalization of attitudes among the child will be higher, increasing parent–child resemblance. Fourthly, political learning can also be a matter of *political sophistication*, as a lot is dependent on the cognitive capacities of the child to contextualize and interpret the given cues. Identifying and understanding parental cues is essential, and requires a certain level of interest and knowledge on the matter, especially when it comes to politics. Imagine a situation in which a father is, for instance, complaining about ‘radical left unionists’ at the company he is working for. These cues will affect the political worldview of a child more strongly when she/he understands what both ‘radical left’ and ‘a union’ are. This requires a certain level of sophistication. Therefore, political sophistication can play a role in this socialization process as well. Finally, frequency of cues can vary between parents. Early studies have often theorized that mothers might be more influential in this political learning process within the family, because of more frequent interaction with their children (Jennings and Niemi 1974; Zuckerman et al. 2007).

The central aim of this study is to provide a qualified view on the role parents have in their children’s development of political attitudes. We shed more light on the relative importance of different social learning facilitators for parent–child similarity—more specifically: political discussion, political sophistication, parental homogeneity, and gender—and hope to get more insight in the different mechanisms at play. Imagine, for instance, a mother with a clear negative attitude towards immigrants. Under which circumstances will her daughter or son adopt this view? Is it essential that the father shares this negative attitude? Does the mother need to talk about these kind of topics frequently? Does the child need to have a certain level of political sophistication in order to identify cues and internalize them? From previous studies we can put together bits and pieces of this answer, but with the current article we aim to integrate these insights and map the relative importance of social learning mechanisms for parent–child similarity in political attitudes.



Furthermore, we advance existing literature by comparing family socialization processes of different attitudes and investigate what kind of social and political attitudes are easily learned within the family and which attitudes are more likely to be developed outside of the family sphere. We rely on the unique data of the Belgian Parent–Child Socialization Study (PCSS), in which children and both their parents were directly questioned about a whole range of social and political attitudes. We can thus evaluate parent–child similarity and their reinforcing mechanisms for mothers and fathers instead of random parent–child dyads, a specific shortcoming in quite some empirical studies (Hatemi and Ojeda 2020).

Parent–child similarity in social and political attitudes

The strength of parent–child correspondence in social and political attitudes tends to vary between studies (Degner and Dalege 2013; Jennings et al. 2009; Zuckerman 2005; Zuckerman et al. 2007). One reason for this variation is methodological, as differences in sample design, source of parental information, measurement overlap between parents and children, and the age of the children influence parent–child similarity scores (Degner and Dalege 2013). Another reason can be found in the characteristics of the examined attitudes (Trommsdorff 2009).

Based on political socialization literature (Neundorff and Smets 2017) and social learning theory (Bandura 1977), we could, for instance, expect that attitudes that are more salient and central (vs. non-salient or distant) to the belief systems of the family members—and children in particular—will be more visible and thus more easily transformed into social learning cues. Following that same logic, we could also expect that attitudes that have a more concrete character (e.g., a party preference, an attitude towards immigrants) will generate more specific and coherent parental cues than more abstract cues such as a leftist or rightist ideological orientation. The latter is of course only true for a political context in which the concepts of Left and Right are more difficult to grasp. This is particularly the case for families who live in a fragmented multiparty setting in which cross-cutting cleavages do not one-dimensionally divide the political landscape in left and right such as Belgium (Deschouwer 2009). It is not true for contexts in which the left–right dimension is used to clearly divide the political landscape with one overarching ideological axis, as Ventura (2001) and Rekker et al. (2019) have shown. As a result, the abstract character or saliency of a specific political orientation can be context-specific.

Similarities are found to be more outspoken when it concerns a central trait for parents and children (Pinquart and Silbereisen 2004), and when the parents perceive the attitude to be normatively important in society (Tam 2015). Further, attitudes are more likely to be shared if they have the function to maintain a social position in a group and are visible in the public sphere and political debate (such as issues related to immigration) (Schönflug 2001). Attitudes are thus more likely to be salient and visible if they are value-laden, affective, and have a moral component (Degner and Dalege 2013; Jennings et al. 2009). Next to that, we can expect stronger parent–child similarity when attitudes are concrete, easily recognizable, understandable, and tangible, especially from the point of view of the adolescent. In contrast, more abstract



political attitudes such as political trust or efficacy are expected to generate less specific socialization cues (Jennings et al. 2009).

In their comparison of intergenerational similarities in different social and political attitudes in the US context, Jennings et al. (2009) found that congruency seemed to be higher on issues with a clear moral component that are at the heart of public debate (e.g., partisan attitudes, gay rights, abortion, women's rights, and environmental concern) (r s ranging between 0.36 and 0.70). Similarity was weaker for more abstract and less affect-laden attitudes (e.g., political trust, political interest, and opinions towards limited government) (r s ranging between 0.09 and 0.17).

In line with these earlier studies, we expect parents and children to resemble in social and political opinions, but the degree of correspondence might depend on the characteristics of attitude under consideration:

H1 The social and political attitudes of adolescents and their parents are positively correlated (i.e., the higher the correlation, the stronger the parent–child similarity), but the strength of the parent–child similarity will differ between types of attitudes.

To explore these potential differences, we study parent–child similarity for different attitudes: political ideology (left–right orientation), attitudes towards immigrants, environmental concern, and party preferences. Left–right orientation is the most general and abstract political attitude in the study—at least for the Belgian context—and an important political concept in studies on democratic attitude formation in adolescence (Rekker 2016). Anti-immigrant prejudice is a key attitude that has shaped the public debate for years and has strongly influenced electoral outcomes in the Belgian context from the 1990s onwards (Abts et al. 2011; Deschouwer 2009). Environmental concern took the center stage of the political debate more recently in Belgium, but is indisputably salient in public opinion as well (Inglehart 2008). Finally, we also consider similarities in party preferences, central in this strand of literature (Fitzgerald and Dasovic 2012; Jennings and Niemi 1981; Nieuwbeerta and Wittebrood 1995). When the Michigan School developed the theoretical concept of party identification (Campbell et al. 1960), they already hypothesized that this affective orientation to a specific political entity is developed early in life, within one's immediate social surrounding. Since then, intergenerational similarities in party identification (or an adapted measure of party attachment within a multiparty context—see Thomassen and Rosema 2009) have been an essential part of political socialization literature (Hyman 1959; Jennings and Niemi 1968; McClosky and Dahlgren 1959).

We focus on preferences for the three most popular parties among Flemish adolescents in the time of data gathering (2012): the Flemish-Nationalist (*N-VA*), the Christian-Democratic (*CD&V*), and the Green party (*Groen*). Elections and political parties remain the most direct, visible, and concrete externalization of the broader concepts of politics and democracy, especially in election years. From previous research we know that adolescents have a general understanding of what political parties stand for and are able to connect political viewpoints with the 'correct' party (Boonen et al. 2014).



Facilitating conditions: political discussion, sophistication, parental homogeneity, and gender

A number of individual and family characteristics are found to facilitate the development of intergenerational similarities. These facilitating factors are based on social learning mechanisms, in which certain parental cues become more visible, salient, and clear. A first and obvious facilitating condition is *discussion within the family*. Talking about social and political attitudes plays a direct role in attitude similarities (Dinas 2014; Jennings and Niemi 1981; Jennings et al. 2009; Meeusen 2014a). Indeed, family politicization is key to come to clear and consistent socializing cues (Bandura 1977). Frequent discussion about a political topic within the family gives children the opportunity to recognize and internalize the cues that support the development of their viewpoints. Frequent communication is essential in this process, and discussion about political and societal issues is therefore identified as a key facilitator in the social learning process. Therefore, our second hypothesis reads as follows:

H2 Parent–child similarity is stronger in families that regularly discuss political and societal issues.

For social learning cues to be retained effectively by the adolescent, political sophistication is an important facilitator. A politically sophisticated individual can be described as someone who can effectively connect different elements of a political belief system and who can organize political ideas using abstract and ideological constructs (Gastil and Dillard 1999). Therefore, political sophistication is also expected to play a role in parent–child similarities. Correctly interpreting, remembering, and internalizing political cues is easier for politically sophisticated adolescents who can put those specific cues in a broader framework. Furthermore, earlier studies have shown that political sophistication can also affect the perceptual accuracy of parental political preferences (Boonen et al. 2017). As we can argue that politically sophisticated adolescents will be more likely to correctly interpret parental cues, and as they can more easily connect them to other preferences within the families' shared belief system, we hypothesize that political sophistication will enhance parent–child similarities:

H3 Parent–child similarity is stronger for children with higher levels of political sophistication.

Similarly, also *consistency in parental cues* might be a moderator for intergenerational similarities (Boonen 2015; Jennings et al. 2009; Rico and Jennings 2012). Following social learning theory, children will be more likely to correctly perceive, retain, and internalize parental cues if they are consistent (Berelson et al. 1954; Holmberg 2007; Zuckerman et al. 2007). Exposure to consistent cues will directly facilitate the learning process (Bandura 1977; Jugert et al. 2016). If parents send similar signals and share consistent views, we expect that their cues will be more easily picked up by their children:



H4 Parent–child similarity is stronger in families with higher attitudinal homogeneity between the parents.

When analyzing similarities between mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters, gender is never out of the picture. As such, many studies have been devoted to gender patterns in intergenerational similarities (e.g., Jennings and Langton 1969; Filler and Jennings 2015). A general assumption is that due to social–structural, cognitive, motivational, and biological processes boys and girls are socialized differently and that parental influence is therefore gender-specific (Acock and Bengtson 1978; Flanagan 2013; Roest et al. 2010). Early studies assumed that mothers have more influence in the formation of their children’s attitudes because they interact more frequently and regularly with their children and are more concerned with their upbringing (Acock and Bengtson 1978; Degner and Dalege, 2013; Jaspers et al. 2008). Consequently, children have more opportunities to learn from their mother than from their father. This mother dominance hypothesis states that child–mother similarity is stronger than child–father similarity for all kind of social and political attitudes:

H5a Mother–child similarity is stronger than father–child similarity for social and political attitudes.

We also consider two alternative hypotheses put forward in the literature. The first is the gender-matching hypothesis, saying that the influence of mother and father is dependent on the gender of the child: daughters are expected to resemble their mothers more than their fathers and sons are expected to resemble their fathers more than their mothers (Nieuwbeerta and Wittebrood 1995; Vollebergh et al. 2001).

H5b Mother–daughter similarity is stronger than mother–son similarity, and father–son similarity is stronger than father–daughter similarity for social and political attitudes.

Another perspective states that gender patterns are to some extent related to the characteristics of the transferred attitude (O’Bryan et al. 2004). Mothers and fathers play different roles and emphasize different values. For example, mothers tend to stress interpersonal attitudes and behavior, while fathers underscore instrumental attitudes and behavior (Kosterman et al. 2004). Similarly, as sons and daughters might be socialized differently, they might also be more receptive for parental influence with regard to certain attitudes (Jaspers et al. 2008). Depending on the attitude, different gender patterns may occur.

H5c Gender patterns in parent–child similarity vary between social and political attitudes.



Empirical research on gender patterns is mixed and there is (dis)confirmation of hypotheses in all directions. This study can provide an additional empirical test for the three hypotheses by simultaneously testing gender lineages for a diverse set of attitudes.

Up until this point, we have mainly adopted a model of direct political socialization. This social learning mechanism described above is indeed the dominant model in this process and is also the perspective that we take in this study. The interactive learning process, however, is only one of the possible paths to parent–child similarity. Recent studies have shown relevant nuances to this model, emphasizing that socialization might not only be a matter of ‘inheritance’ or ‘transmission,’ but also contains bidirectional elements (i.e., children that influence their parents) (Hatemi and Ojeda 2020; McDevitt and Chaffee 2002; Ojeda and Hatemi 2015; Zuckerman et al. 2007).

A second nuance to the direct top-down political socialization model is the importance of shared socioeconomic status: children indirectly take over attitudes from their parents via the inheritance of socioeconomic status, a strong predictor of social and political attitudes (Glass et al. 1986; Hello et al. 2004; Vollebergh et al. 2001). Although support for this hypothesis is limited (Rico and Jennings 2016), it is important to control for this process in analytical models. Third, recent studies have proposed the hypothesis of shared genetics as a possible additional explanation (Eaves and Hatemi 2008). The influence of genetics varies across the life span and are more pronounced when adolescents leave home and parents have less direct control (Hatemi et al. 2009a, b). Results of these alternative mechanisms are mixed and do not provide empirical evidence to rule out top-down processes. They do demonstrate, however, that we should be careful when interpreting correlational data merely as evidence of top-down parent–child influence. Therefore, in the interpretation of our results, we will keep to the term ‘intergenerational similarity.’

Data and methods

Data

The data for this study stem from the Parent–Child Socialization Study (PCSS), a two-wave panel study conducted among a sample of adolescents and both their parents in Flanders. The PCSS is designed to analyze socialization mechanisms within the family and covers a diverse set of political and social attitudes related to citizenship, democracy, tolerance, and policy. For the first wave of data collection in 2012, 61 secondary schools were randomly selected and visited by a trained team of researchers. All students in the fourth grade of high school (mostly 15-year olds) filled out a questionnaire during school hours and received two questionnaires for their mother and father. Parents were asked to fill out the survey individually and to return the questionnaire by mail. Data for the second wave were gathered in 2013, in exactly the same way. A total of 3598 pupils participated in the second wave, and 1943 (54.0%) mother–father–child triads returned a filled-out questionnaire.



We use data from this second wave, as only this wave contains all measures needed for the study. The adolescent questions were based on several validated scales from comparable Belgian and international surveys and were tested via cognitive interviews with the adolescents. The parent survey contained almost identical questions. As such, the study does not rely on single parent data (only the mother, or only the father) or on perceptions of parental opinions gathered among adolescents, allowing the use of direct information from both parents of a random sample.

Measures

We specifically look at parent–child similarity in different attitudes: political ideology, anti-immigrant attitudes, environmental concern, and party preferences. Political ideology was operationalized with a traditional *left–right identification* variable ranging from 0 (left) to 10 (right). *Anti-immigrant attitudes* and *environmental concern* were measured via Likert-type scales (1 = ‘disagree completely,’ 4 = ‘agree completely’) that proved to be one-dimensional and reliable (Cronbach’s alpha ranging between 0.74 and 0.91 for children, mothers, and fathers). Sample items for anti-immigrant attitudes (8 items) and environmental concern (5 items) are, respectively, ‘if a country wants to reduce tension, it should stop immigration,’ ‘the presence of too many immigrants is a threat for our way of life,’ and ‘the government should introduce stronger measures to halt pollution since few people will regulate themselves,’ ‘I am prepared to pay for research on renewable energy’ (Meeusen 2014a; Meeusen and Dhont 2015). Factor scores were calculated using the regression method in SPSS 26; higher values indicate more negative attitudes towards immigrants and more environmental concern, respectively. Finally, we include party preferences in the form of the *propensity to vote* (PTV) for a number of different parties (Boonen et al. 2014). Respondents were asked to indicate the likelihood they would ever vote for each of the (relevant) parties in the Flemish party system (Van der Eijk et al. 2006). This concept is particularly useful in fragmented multiparty settings in which voters are more likely to have multiple preferences. We consider the three largest parties among the adolescents in our sample: the Christian-Democratic party (CD&V), the Green party (*Groen*), and the Flemish-Nationalist party (*N-VA*).

Four moderating variables were introduced: political discussion, political sophistication, parental attitudinal homogeneity, and gender. *Political discussion* is operationalized averaging four items probing how regularly (1 = ‘never,’ 4 = ‘often’) children discuss general politics, European issues, environmental pollution, and issues related to other countries and cultures with their mother and with their father (one-dimensional and reliable: alpha-mother=0.77 and alpha-father=0.79) (Meeusen and Dhont 2015). *Political sophistication* of the child was operationalized with a scale comprising multiple indicators (Dassonneville 2012; Lachat 2007): political interest (‘to what extent are you interested in political and social issues’; 1 = ‘not interested at all,’ 4 = ‘very interested’), political knowledge (sum of five multiple choice questions about politics), following the news via traditional media (‘how frequently do you watch, read, or listen to the news’; 1 = ‘never,’ 5 = ‘daily’), and following the news on internet (‘how frequently do you follow the news on the



internet'; 1 = 'never,' 5 = 'daily') (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.583$, factor loadings between 0.499 and 0.805) (see also Boonen et al. 2014). Factor scores were again calculated using the regression method and higher scores represent higher levels of political sophistication of the child. The absolute difference between the attitude of the mother and the attitude of the father is used as the indicator of *parental attitudinal homogeneity* (Fitzgerald and Curtis 2012). The higher the value, the larger the attitudinal distance between mother and father. *Gender* is a dummy variable, with 0 = 'male' and 1 = 'female.'

We control for the education level of the parents and the children. Education track is used as an indicator for the *adolescents' educational level*: general education, artistic and technical education (reference group), and vocational education. *Parental educational attainment* was measured with a five-point scale summing the educational attainment of the mother and the father, which was subdivided into five categories: primary school, lower secondary, higher secondary, higher non-university, and university education. Finally, we also control for the *ethnic origin* of the adolescents. Adolescents are classified as 'non-Belgian' when at least one of the parents is not born in Belgium.

Afterwards, all the continuous variables were rescaled from 0 to 1 to ease interpretation of the moderation models. The descriptive statistics of the social and political attitudes are summarized in Table 1; for the moderation and control variables see Table 3 in Appendix.

Analytical strategy

First, the strength of the parent–child similarity is quantified using Pearson correlations and multiple regressions. As a correlation does not provide information on the absolute similarity of the attitudes, we add information on shared variance in combination with mean differences via the intraclass correlation (Degner and Dalege 2013; Tedin 1974). Control variables are included in all models.¹ Second, we assess the moderating power of political discussion, political sophistication, parental attitudinal homogeneity, and gender by including the product–interaction between the attitude of the parent and each of the moderators. A significant moderation effect means that the correlational strength of the parent–child similarity varies with frequency of political discussion with parents, levels of political sophistication, mother–father attitudinal homogeneity, and gender of the child. For example, if the moderation effect of political discussion (M) is positive and significant that means that for each unit increase in political discussion (thus more frequent political discussions), the effect of the attitude of the parent (X) on the attitude of the child (Y) will increase with the estimated coefficient of the moderation. Following our hypotheses, we expect a positive moderation for political discussion (H2)

¹ We did not control for clustering in schools because for 264 child–mother–father triads we did not know which school the children are in (i.e., new pupils who switched schools between the first and second wave). Additional analyses showed almost identical results when controlling for clustering in schools.



Table 1 Univariate statistics, Pearson correlations, and intraclass correlations (ICC) for parent-child similarity

	<i>N</i> triads	Univariate statistics				Correlation				ICC
		Range	<i>M</i> _{child} (SD _{child})	<i>M</i> _{mother} (SD _{mother})	<i>M</i> _{father} (SD _{father})	Child-mother	Child-father	Mother-father		
								Child-mother	Child-father	
Left-right ideology	1508	0-1	0.52 (0.17)	0.53 (0.17)	0.57 (0.20)	0.249	0.224	0.445	0.308	
Anti-immigrant prejudice	1570	0-1	0.57 (0.20)	0.57 (0.19)	0.59 (0.20)	0.374	0.368	0.544	0.426	
Environmental concern	1674	0-1	0.50 (0.17)	0.56 (0.15)	0.58 (0.17)	0.225	0.245	0.393	0.290	
PTV Green party	1558	0-1	0.46 (0.30)	0.46 (0.33)	0.39 (0.33)	0.391	0.353	0.492	0.413	
PTV Christian-Democratic party	1558	0-1	0.52 (0.28)	0.51 (0.33)	0.49 (0.34)	0.325	0.348	0.536	0.407	
PTV Flemish-Nationalist party	1544	0-1	0.56 (0.30)	0.53 (0.36)	0.58 (0.36)	0.426	0.382	0.526	0.445	

Note All correlations are significant with $p < 0.001$.

PTV propensity to vote, ICC Intraclass correlation



and political sophistication (H3) and a negative moderation for parental attitudinal homogeneity (H4) (i.e., the higher the absolute difference between the attitude of the mother and the attitude of the father, the weaker the effect of the parents on the child). For gender, a positive moderation would indicate that parent–child similarity is stronger for daughters compared to sons. The moderation effects are tested in one model for mothers and one model for fathers. This way, we can assess the relative importance of the different moderation mechanisms for mother and father. For all analyses, we only consider full mother–father–child triads.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations

Based on a series of paired sample *t* tests (results can be requested), we learn that children are more leftist than their parents and are more likely to vote for the Green party than their fathers. While family members are similar in their opinions about immigrants, children score lower on environmental concern than their parents (note that the data stem from 2013, years before the Youth for Climate actions). The correlations provide a first indication for parent–child similarity. The range of correlations for the PTVs is relatively high (range between 0.325 and 0.426) compared to the correlations for environmental concern and left–right ideology (range between 0.224 and 0.249). Parent–child correlations for anti-immigrant attitudes are comparable to those of the PTVs: 0.374 for children and mothers and 0.368 for children and fathers. The correlation between mother and father is higher than between parents and children, but follows the magnitude found among parent–child similarity, suggesting that attitudinal similarity is a family issue. Although directly comparing the size of the correlations is not completely warranted (attitudes are measured with different granularity and measurement quality, potentially affecting the size of the correlations), they do suggest that parent–child similarity is weaker for abstract attitudes like political ideology or politically less salient attitudes as environmental concern (anno 2014 at least). The ICC quantifies the between-family (mother–father–child) variance or the extent to which families differ with regard to the attitudes. The higher the ICC, the more families differ from one another and thus the higher the congruence (in terms of absolute and relative agreement) within families (i.e., similarity between child, mother, and father). The ICC is the highest for anti-immigrant attitudes and the PTVs.

H1: Parent–child similarity

Next, we performed multiple regression analyses taking into account socio-demographic control variables and the effect of the other parent on the child (Table 2). First of all, even if we control for the (shared) educational background and congruence with the other parent, there is still significant parent–child correspondence for all attitudes. Parent–child similarity is relatively strong for anti-immigrant attitudes



Table 2 Regression and moderation analyses for different attitudes

	Political ideology			Anti-immigrant attitude			Environmental concern		
	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i> -value	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i> -value	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i> -value
Model H1: parent–child similarity									
Mother attitude	0.178	(0.027)	<0.001	0.248	(0.029)	<0.001	0.134	(0.029)	<0.001
Father attitude	0.126	(0.024)	<0.001	0.230	(0.028)	<0.001	0.168	(0.026)	<0.001
<i>R</i> ²	0.104			0.257			0.108		
Model H2–H5: moderations									
Mother									
Mother attitude	0.087	(0.097)	0.367	0.001	(0.094)	0.990	0.122	(0.103)	0.234
Father attitude	0.136	(0.031)	<0.001	0.205	(0.034)	<0.001	0.137	(0.031)	<0.001
*Political discussion	0.235	(0.128)	0.067	0.403	(0.132)	0.002	–0.026	(0.137)	0.849
*Political sophistication	–0.066	(0.160)	0.679	0.186	(0.158)	0.239	0.027	(0.173)	0.877
*Parental homogeneity	0.233	(0.174)	0.182	–0.138	(0.194)	0.477	–0.072	(0.200)	0.719
*Gender	–0.068	(0.055)	0.215	0.057	(0.052)	0.268	.031	(0.057)	0.587
<i>R</i> ²	0.105			0.273			0.151		
Father									
Father attitude	–0.171	(0.092)	0.064	–0.056	(0.091)	0.540	0.001	(0.100)	0.999
Mother attitude	0.186	(0.037)	<0.001	0.256	(0.037)	<0.001	0.137	(0.035)	<0.001
*Political discussion	0.269	(0.144)	0.018	0.184	(0.114)	0.106	0.254	(0.120)	0.034
*Political sophistication	0.327	(0.144)	0.023	0.336	(0.151)	0.027	–0.053	(0.167)	0.753
*Parental homogeneity	0.156	(0.173)	0.367	0.145	(0.213)	0.496	0.191	(0.174)	0.274
*Gender	–0.028	(0.048)	0.561	0.023	(0.049)	0.637	0.028	(0.052)	0.599
<i>R</i> ²	0.115			0.270			0.150		
	PTV Green party			PTV Christian-democratic party			PTV Flemish-nationalist party		
	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i> -value	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i> -value	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i> -value
Model H1: parent–child similarity									
Mother attitude	0.242	(0.024)	<0.001	0.161	(0.024)	<0.001	0.254	(0.023)	<0.001
Father attitude	0.209	(0.024)	<0.001	0.200	(0.024)	<0.001	0.175	(0.023)	<0.001
<i>R</i> ²									
Model H2–H5: moderations									
Mother									



Table 2 (continued)

	PTV Green party			PTV Christian-democratic party			PTV Flemish-nationalist party		
	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i> -value	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i> -value	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>p</i> -value
Mother attitude	0.107	(0.078)	0.170	0.013	(0.084)	0.873	0.050	(0.080)	0.531
Father attitude	0.200	(0.026)	<0.001	0.212	(0.036)	<0.001	0.129	(0.037)	0.001
*Political discussion	0.238	(0.113)	0.036	0.268	(0.109)	0.014	0.432	(0.101)	<0.001
*Political sophistication	0.063	(0.138)	0.648	-0.028	(0.135)	0.836	0.177	(0.127)	0.163
*Parental homogeneity	-0.006	(0.071)	0.928	0.071	(0.120)	0.554	-0.199	(0.112)	0.076
*Gender	0.042	(0.047)	0.365	0.020	(0.045)	0.660	0.022	(0.042)	0.594
<i>R</i> ²	0.227			0.164			0.257		
Father									
Father attitude	0.177	(0.079)	0.025	0.180	(0.086)	0.036	0.033	(0.080)	0.682
Mother attitude	0.249	(0.026)	<0.001	0.135	(0.037)	<0.001	0.218	(0.039)	<0.001
*Political discussion	0.178	(0.111)	0.109	0.060	(0.104)	0.564	0.430	(0.097)	<0.001
*Political sophistication	0.026	(0.073)	0.723	0.007	(0.137)	0.958	0.028	(0.126)	0.823
*Parental homogeneity	0.035	(0.078)	0.654	-0.008	(0.122)	0.946	-0.098	(0.115)	0.395
*Gender	-0.033	(0.047)	0.485	-0.007	(0.044)	0.867	0.010	(0.042)	0.807
<i>R</i> ²	0.226			0.161			0.253		

Entries are unstandardized regression parameters, with standard error (SE) in parentheses. Following control variables are included in all models: gender, nationality, education level, parental education. In moderation models (Model H2–H5), main effects of attitude of the mother and attitude of the father, political discussion, political sophistication, and parental homogeneity are included as well. All moderations were included in the same model for mothers and for fathers. For example, to test H2–H5 for political ideology among mothers, following regression was estimated: $Pol_ideol_child = intercept + Pol_ideol_mother + Pol_ideol_father + Pol_disc + Pol_soph + Parent_homog + Gender + Pol_ideol_mother * pol_disc + Pol_ideol_mother * Pol_soph + Pol_ideol_mother * Parent_homog + Pol_ideol_mother * Gender + Nationality + Educ_level + Parent_educ$. Values in bold are significant moderations ($\alpha = 0.05$)

(B -mother=0.248 and B -father=0.230) followed by the PTV for the Green party and the Flemish-nationalist party (B s ranging between 0.175 and 0.254). Parent–child similarity is slightly lower for the PTV for the Christian-democratic party, political ideology, and environmental concerns (B s ranging between 0.126 and 0.200). Hypothesis 1 can thus be convincingly confirmed: children resemble their parents for this selection of social and political attitudes. Further, the analyses also show that mother and father



both influence the attitude of their child independently and to a similar extent, rejecting the mother dominance hypothesis (H5a).

H2–H5: Moderation analyses: political discussion, political sophistication, parental attitudinal homogeneity, and gender

Regarding political discussion, we hypothesized that parent–child similarity would be stronger for parent–child dyads that discuss political issues more frequently (H2). Results are presented in Table 2 and confirm our hypothesis: all moderation effects are positive (except for the product-interaction political discussion * environmental concern of the mother, but this moderation is almost equal to zero, $B = -0.026$, with a p -value of 0.849) and the majority is significant with a p -value < 0.05 . For example, for fathers and children who often discuss politics (political discussion = 1), father–child similarity in political ideology increases with a factor of 0.269 (p -value = 0.018), compared to fathers and sons who never discuss politics (political discussion = 0). Moderation effects for the other attitudes can be interpreted in the same way. For example, mother–child similarity in anti-immigrant attitudes increases with a factor of 0.403 (p -value = 0.002) for children who often discuss politics with their mother compared to children who never discuss politics with their mother.

Further, we hypothesized that parent–child similarity would be stronger for children with higher levels of political sophistication (H3). We expect that these children are better equipped to pick up or understand political cues given by their parents. This hypothesis is partly supported by the data: only for left–right ideology and anti-immigrant attitudes father–child similarity was higher for politically sophisticated children compared to children without political sophistication. For environmental concern and the PTVs, the moderation effect was very close to zero (except for mother–child correspondence in PTV for Flemish-nationalist party; but this moderation was non-significant) meaning that political sophistication did not affect parent–child similarity in any way for these attitudes. Regarding our third hypothesis, we conclude that political sophistication can indeed reinforce parent–child similarity, but this is no guarantee and depends on the attitude under consideration. For the other two hypothesized moderators—parental attitudinal homogeneity and gender—we can be short: they do not significantly affect parent–child similarity in attitudes, controlling for the other social learning mechanisms and the attitude of the other parent. Thus, consistency in attitudes between mother and father does not increase the likelihood that children resemble their parents nor does a gender-match between parent and child augment similarity. Hypothesis 4, 5b, and 5c are not confirmed, at least not in the Flemish adolescent sample for these particular attitudes.

Conclusion and discussion

In sum, our results demonstrate that (1) parents and children resemble in their political and social attitudes; (2) this similarity differs between attitudes; (3) both mothers and fathers tend to exert this influence on their offspring independently from



one another; (4) political discussion and political sophistication can facilitate this process to some extent; and 5) parental attitudinal homogeneity and gender do not significantly affect parent–child similarities.

We conclude that social and political attitudes of adolescents and their parents are indeed positively correlated and the strength of the similarity can differ between attitudes. The results tentatively indicate that concreteness and social saliency play a role in direct political socialization: more concrete attitudes (e.g., party preferences) and attitudes with a clear connection to societally salient topics (such as immigration) display stronger intergenerational similarities, compared to more abstract attitudes like a left–right identification. As such, our findings seem to corroborate the often-cited study by Jennings et al. (2009), suggesting that concreteness and saliency moderate intergenerational transmission. However, aligning previous literature with our empirical results, we need to qualify the Jennings et al. proposition by emphasizing the importance of the political context. For example, while political ideology is a central and highly salient attitude engendering strong parent–child similarity in the US context, this is far less the case for Belgium, where left–right orientation is typically multidimensional. Similarly, regarding environmental concern, we expected to observe a strong parent–child correspondence, as this is a very concrete attitude that can easily be translated into social learning modeling cues regarding attitude and behavior. Results did not unequivocally match this expectation. One possible explanation being that environmental concern was not yet the salient political issue at the time of the data gathering (2013) that it is today. We do expect that parent–child similarity for this attitude has increased over the years, possibly with a strong bottom-up influence from adolescents to parents. Future research on the effect of the political climate on political socialization would be very valuable in this regard.

Next, we tested the moderating role of a number of key facilitators that we identified from political socialization literature: political discussion, political sophistication, parental homogeneity, and gender. By analyzing them simultaneously for a broad set of different social and political attitudes, we were able to draw the following key conclusions regarding the role of social learning. First of all, as political discussion was the most consistent moderator across the different attitudes, the adage for parents who want to influence their children's beliefs seems to be 'talk, talk and talk.' It is by discussing politics that children pick up cues, and retain and internalize them (McIntosh et al. 2007). At this point, we need to add an important footnote about causality, however. From a cross-cutting network point of view (Mutz 2002), it is reasonable to assume that parents and children who are like-minded will also be more inclined to talk politics with each other. On the other hand, critics might say that *not* sharing the same opinions stimulates discussion, but this requires more political sophistication from the part of the adolescent. An interesting future track to explore is the exact role of political discussion in various types of families characterized by different relationships or communication habits between its members.

Second, regarding political sophistication, the pattern is less clear, as only two moderation effects reached significance. Interestingly, while we did generally not observe very strong parent–child similarities in political ideology, political sophistication of the child did seem to promote parent–child similarities in left–right identification. One explanation is that indeed within the complex and fragmented Belgian



political landscape, some level of political sophistication is necessary to correctly interpret and contextualize parental cues related to a left or right identification. To some extent, this explanation could also explain the moderating effect of political sophistication on parent–child similarities in immigrant attitudes. Immigration is a complex, polarizing, and multidimensional political issue which does also require a level of interest and engagement from the adolescent to develop an opinion. What could be explored next is whether highly sophisticated children are more keen to ‘think for themselves’ and thus less inclined to uncritically internalize the cues of their parents.

Contrary to previous empirical studies looking at the role of parental attitudinal homogeneity (e.g., Jennings et al. 2009; Zuckerman et al. 2007), consistency of cue-giving did not affect parent–child correspondence in our Belgian sample. Successful attitude transmission does not seem to require mothers and fathers to have the same attitudes, in an absolute sense. The absolute attitude distance between the two parents does not reinforce parent–child correspondence.

Furthermore, our results indicate that gender does not seem to play an important role in social learning with the family anymore. In the early days of socialization research, mothers seemed to exert a stronger influence on their children, because of their central role in the education and the frequency of interactions with their children. Anno 2020 this is no longer the case. In fact, for all attitudes under study, we did not find any indication of gender patterns in intergenerational similarities. We can therefore conclude that—at least for the Belgian context where gender equality in education practices generally is the social norm—mothers and fathers have a similar influence on attitude development of their children.

Finally, we would like to point out a number of methodological limitations of this study, particularly regarding the set-up of the analytical models and the use of the household data. Regarding the analytical models, we investigated traditional top-down models of intergenerational transmission, although we are reluctant to interpret them as such. This means we did not take into account possible bottom-up learning processes of children actively influencing the development of parental attitudes (McDevitt 2006). We should note that earlier studies have never shown a convincing reversal of the process, but interpreted parent–child similarities as the result of a two-way interaction process. When looking at the PCSS data, we would like to note again that this study is conducted among a stratified random probability sample of adolescents in Flanders. However, in the analyses we focused on adolescents of which both parents filled out the survey, which is a specific subsample, and we are well aware that this could bias our results, since these are families in which traditionally both parents interact frequently with the child.

All in all it does seem that the traditional social learning mechanisms that we reassessed in this study are no longer necessary conditions for parent–child correspondence. Frequency of cue-giving in the form of direct communication remains important to internalize attitudes, but this is not the case for political sophistication and consistency in parental cues. Parents and children correspond even in the absence of optimal social learning conditions. This suggests that informal learning (e.g., a democratic family climate) and observation of parental behavior (e.g.,



parental interethnic contact—see Meeusen 2014b) are crucial to consider in studies on attitude development in the family as well.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Appendix

Table 3 Descriptives of moderator and control variables

	<i>N</i>	Range	Mean/percentage	SD
Gender	1943	0–1	0 = 53% male 1 = 47% female	
Education track children	1934	0–2	0 = 45% general 1 = 38% artistic or technical 2 = 16% vocational	
Ethnic origin	1783	0–1	0 = 86% Belgian, 1 = 14% non-Belgian	
Education level parents	1756	0–1	0.62	0.22
Political discussion with mother	1913	0–1	0.38	0.22
Political discussion with father	1859	0–1	0.39	0.23
Political sophistication	1653	0–1	0.46	0.18
Parental attitudinal homogeneity				
Left–right ideology	1627	0–0.80	0.14	0.12
PTV Christian-Democratic party	1590	0–1	0.23	0.22
PTV Green party	1588	0–1	0.35	0.28
PTV Flemish-Nationalist party	1579	0–1	0.24	0.25
Anti-immigrant prejudice	1627	0–1	0.14	0.12
Environmental concern	1698	0–1	0.13	0.12

PTV propensity to vote

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