INTRODUCTION

Places and Political Learning

I think it's gotten a lot better. 'Cause I remember when I was little—it's not that I was scared of Hispanics, but like, everyone else hated them, or they hated us or whatever. I think it's gotten a lot better, 'cause the kids—we're so used to it. It's not a big deal if you have, like, eight Hispanics in your classroom.

—Student, Perry High School, 2002

When I was ten, my family moved from New Orleans to Paducah, Kentucky. The move has caused me to wonder how growing up in a relatively small town has influenced who I am and how I might be a different person if my family had stayed in New Orleans. Unfortunately, the literature on political socialization has not given a great deal of insight into the effects of local context. Political science has been especially quiet with regard to small towns and rural communities. This book hopes to shed some light on the political socialization effects of growing up in small towns. It is an analysis of adolescents being raised in small communities in Iowa and examines one important aspect of the community: the influence of ethnic diversity.

The most common reaction when people hear about my book is surprise: "You're studying ethnic diversity in Iowa? That must be a short book." Most analyses of diversity take place in major urban centers or in suburbs. However, in small communities across the Midwest and South, towns are rapidly diversifying through immigration. Most of the towns have not experienced foreign immigration since the nineteenth century, and as recently as 1990 their racial compositions, especially in the Midwest, were almost completely White and non-Hispanic.

This book focuses on the political attitudes and inclinations of native adolescents who are growing up during a time when their communities are undergoing dramatic change. It compares them with young people in nearby communities of similar size whose populations have remained static. Group conflict theory predicts that White majorities may be initially threatened by ethnic

minorities and respond with intolerance or hostility. Research on social capital formation also suggests that the initial reaction of many people is to withdraw from politics in the wake of rapid demographic change.

This book asks the following questions: How does rapid and significant demographic change affect the political socialization of native White youth? Does this contact with people from different ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds lead to increased tolerance for diversity, or does it lead these native young people to become more intolerant? Does it make them more (or less) knowledgeable about politics; does it affect their political efficacy or the sense that their voice matters and they are heard by those in power; are they more likely or less likely to say they will vote and to participate actively in their schools?

It looks at the next generation and whether young people choose to reject the transformation occurring within their communities, or whether they accept and welcome these changes. Based on the assumption that adults' political behavior is shaped primarily by experiences during adolescence, this book gives a glimpse into how demographic change is likely to influence politics in the future. The main argument of this study is that over time, native adolescents in ethnically diverse rural communities begin to accept and welcome newcomers. The book also shows that native adults in these communities also become more tolerant of newcomers over the 20 year period. The arrival of immigrants in small towns was initially accompanied by reduced levels of political knowledge, efficacy, participation, and tolerance among native students compared with native youth in similarly situated, predominantly White towns. Over time, however, the gaps between these groups shrank. Like the young man in Perry whose statement opens this chapter, young people adapt rather quickly to their environments. In his words, "It's not a big deal."

This book is the result of a ten-year research project that uses a natural experimental design of five small towns in Iowa. Three of these towns are "traditional" Iowa communities, in which residents are nearly all White and most are longtime residents (Boone, Carroll, and Harlan). These towns have almost no ethnic or racial diversity. The other two towns have experienced dramatic population changes since 1990, due in both cases to the arrival of Latino immigrants attracted to jobs at local meatpacking plants (Perry and Storm Lake). In Storm Lake, a small influx of Asian refugees in the 1970s and 1980s gave the community a head start in coping with demographic change. These towns now have substantial portions of the population who are non-White, including many who are foreign born or are the children of those who are foreign born. In the fall of 2001, a team of researchers traveled to each community and surveyed students at the public high schools within each town. We returned in 2002 and surveyed many of the same students again. The following year, we conducted focus groups with students, and for the past several years I have spoken with school and town officials about changes taking place, both good and bad. Although certainly not a true laboratory experiment, this design allows me to compare five very similar towns with one major difference: the presence of immigrants.

The study has three major aims. First, I want to expand the literature on the effects of social context on political socialization. Most scholarship on socialization examines the process outside of time and space, and very little of the literature on social context considers adolescents. Second, I hope to push others to realize that there are very interesting phenomena outside urban and suburban areas. Millions of Americans live in small communities, but political scientists are especially guilty of failing to systematically analyze the politics of small places. Finally, this study sheds light on the increasing cultural and ethnic diversity of the United States and how some communities are coping with these changes. The remainder of this introduction examines the rationale for looking at the influence of social context on political socialization and outlines the book to come.

Political Socialization and the Influence of Local Communities

Political socialization is the process by which young people develop their political attitudes and inclinations to participate in politics. Thanks to the vast scholarship on this process, we know a great deal about the agents and outcomes of political socialization. Not surprisingly, parents have considerable influence on their children, especially when it comes to party identification.[1] Peers and schools are important agents of socialization.[2] Recent research has focused on the apathy, mistrust, and general disdain that young people, especially Generation X, have toward government and how the millennial generation seems to have a different perspective on politics from that of its predecessors.[3] One of the major problems with most literature on political socialization, however, is that it treats the process as if it occurs in a vacuum, outside of time and space.[4]

Intellectual Foundations of Examining Political Socialization in Context

With some notable exceptions, in most political science literature on political socialization, communities are ignored altogether or, in some cases, accepted as important but not examined.[5] Until recently, most of our knowledge about how places influence attitudes and behavior comes from outside political science. The school of symbolic interactionism posits that human behavior is best understood in relation to the environment. According to Herbert Blumer, who coined the term, humans behave based on the meanings they ascribe to objects and events, and these meanings are derived from interaction with others.[6] To Blumer's predecessors and mentors, Charles Cooley and George Herbert Mead, individuals' beliefs about themselves (and other objects) are based on one's interpretations of the imagined impressions of others.[7] Like other pragmatists, these scholars believed that reality is created as activity in the world; it is a dynamic process based on the interaction between the individual and society.

As people interact with the world around them, their interpretations of the meanings of objects form the basis of their knowledge and beliefs. One's "mind" emerges only through one's interaction with others within the social environment. Sociologists from Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim to Edward Shils and David Reisman all wrote, at one level or another, about the inextricability of the individual from society.[8]

Social and developmental psychologists also have more fully developed theories about how individuals are embedded within physical places that influence their experiences and opinions about the world. Kurt Lewin argued that to understand individual behavior, one must look at the person's "life space," which includes his or her immediate social circle. The well-known psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner constructed the ecological theory of child development. This theory contends that humans develop not in isolation but, rather, in relation to their families, schools, communities, and society.[9]

In the study of political behavior, however, most political scientists fail to adequately consider the influence of social context. One of the basic tenets of *The American Voter* is that adults' attitudes are shaped by the process of adolescent political socialization, especially the adoption of party identification.[10] The authors depict vote choice as a product of a "funnel of causality" in which the effects of group membership, religion, and, presumably, the local community are found at the far end of the funnel, indirectly influencing vote choice through candidate evaluations and partisanship. Angus Campbell and his colleagues recognized not only that political choices are internal, but also that private decisions are greatly influenced by the people by whom one is surrounded. Even so, scholars have spent most of the past 50 years closely examining political behavior outside the contexts in which it takes place. Due in part to the influence of rational choice theory and the reliance on survey data that have failed to account for the social environment, most research in political behavior assumes, either implicitly or explicitly, an individual making political choices in isolation from those around him.[11]

Disciplinary boundaries have kept many of the ideas from sociological and social psychological theory outside of mainstream political science. Even before Campbell and his colleagues wrote their classic study, behavioral social scientists across disciplines worked closely on theories of voting. These early studies showed that informal social pressures from one's family, neighbors, and friends can have a powerful impact on vote choice, and scholars theorized that vote choice, like other preferences, is a social activity.[12] In *The People's Choice,* Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues state, "There is a familiar adage in American folklore to the effect that a person is only what he thinks he is, an adage which reflects the typically American notion of unlimited opportunity, the tendency toward self-betterment, etc. Now we find that the reverse of the adage is true: a person thinks, politically, as he is, socially."[13]

In recent years, there has been a return to the early ideas of Bernard Berelson and Lazarsfeld, to the notion that we cannot understand political behavior

by plucking people out of the time and space in which they live. Political scientists have begun to attempt to account for the influence of "social context" on political behavior, but few have examined political socialization. These scholars focus on how communities structure the types and frequencies of social interaction and how this interaction imparts information that people use in making political choices.

Adults' Political Behavior and Social Context

Borrowing from schools of symbolic interactionism and ecological theory, some political scientists again understand that through the process of social interaction, one's social context exerts powerful influences on political behavior. For example, regardless of where they live, people receive much political information from the mass media, but local perceptions of media bias in news stories are more influential on political behavior than actual news content, indicating that voters filter national news through their local climate of opinion.[14] Further, the mass media are not the only sources of information. In 2008, when my neighbors put signs for Barack Obama in their yards, I did not need the national press to tell me that New Orleans was Obama territory. People rely on their friends and neighbors for information, and they place great value on the opinions of their spouses, co-workers, and community leaders.[15] Informal social interactions expose people to knowledge that can expand their understanding of politics by offering different information than one possesses individually.[16]

There are many forms of social interaction that transmit information about politics. Face-to-face encounters with close friends and family members, as well as relative strangers, impart information about the community's expectations and preferences. Models based on "social cohesion" contend that intimate relationships are responsible for considerable personal influence on political attitudes.[17] For example, having friends who are active in politics makes people more likely to get involved themselves.[18] Relationships that may be considered "weak ties" also have profound implications for one's choices and attitudes. Discussions with co-workers and neighbors provide information and, often, social pressure to think or behave in a particular way, even politically.[19] Citizens who are more socially connected to larger communities—for example, to groups outside their immediate families—are generally more politically active.[20] Diana Mutz finds that political differences of opinion are better tolerated within relationships characterized by weak ties than by strong or intimate connections.[21] And, of course, a great deal of information is translated through nonverbal communications, such as my neighbor's yard signs.[22]

Through normal, everyday interactions in a variety of settings, we are constantly bombarded with information. Scott McClurg, however, points out that social networks tend to influence political participation only "when they carry political substance."[23] Although there are many forms of social interaction, it is the *substance* of the communications that matters in predicting political

outcomes. Talking about the latest George Clooney movie or episode of *Project Runway* may tell you something about another person, but it is unlikely to impart much politically relevant information and is unlikely to significantly influence political attitudes or participation. Many studies show that the heterogeneity of one's social networks is an important mediating factor. Those whose social networks or neighborhoods are more politically or ethnically heterogeneous are less likely to discuss or participate in politics, largely because, it is thought, exposure to dissonant information creates ambivalence.[24] This is especially true for people who find themselves a political minority within their neighborhood or community.[25] These findings form part of the basis for expecting young people in ethnically diverse communities to be less politically engaged than those in homogeneous places.

In addition to the content of the information, the local setting also helps to determine the salience of particular issues and make certain information more cognitively accessible. In Los Angeles, debates about farm subsidies are unlikely to be profoundly interesting to most people or take place very often, just as information about gang violence may be of only peripheral concern to people in rural Montana. In this way, the environment "may alter which content is most likely to be used" in making political decisions.[26] Individuals develop a heightened sensibility to particular information based on the biases in their environments. Because individuals consume massive amounts of information, that which is most accessible is likely to be used in making judgments about new information.[27]

Political Socialization and Social Context

Most of the research on social context and politics has focused on adults' political behaviors and attitudes—voting and other types of political engagement, political discussion, and partisanship. These theories and findings are also relevant to the process of adolescents' political socialization. Just as people do not make political choices in a vacuum, they do not turn eighteen and suddenly become political animals. Although one certainly could go back (and some have gone back) to young childhood to study socialization, this study looks at the period of middle adolescence (age 14–18). This is when individuals begin to develop their self-identities, including their civic identities.[28] During adolescence, individuals begin to settle on the opinions and values that many will maintain throughout their lives.[29] It is also when most young people live at home with a parent or parents and have not ventured much beyond their local communities.

Thus, we should expect the local context to exert a significant influence on adolescents' socialization—even, perhaps, a more substantive one than for adults' political behavior. In one of the few comprehensive contextual studies of political socialization, David Campbell argues that "the civic norms within one's adolescent social environment have an effect on civic participation well beyond

adolescence: *what you do now depends on where you were then.*"[30] He shows that homogeneous communities instill in young people a strong sense of civic duty that compels them to vote later in life, while heterogeneous communities provide an incentive to participate primarily to protect their interests. Both motivations, however, are instilled within the community in which one grows up.

Context operates through the same mechanism as for adults: social interaction. But there are important differences between adolescents' socialization and adults' political attitudes, both in how interaction operates and in the influence of the local context. In many ways, social interaction operates for young people in much the same way as it does for adults. Face-to-face discussions with family and friends, interactions with relative strangers, and nonverbal communication all serve to teach young people about their community's culture and expectations. The main difference is that for young people, many of these interactions, especially about politics, are not among equals.

Of course, adolescents talk about politics with their friends, but in their childhood and early adolescence, most of the knowledge they obtain about whether politics is a worthwhile enterprise, or which party best suits their preferences, or what these preferences ought to be, is learned from adults who have some measure of authority in the eyes of young people. These include teachers, parents, coaches, church leaders, grandparents and other extended-family members, and other adults in the community. When adults discuss political parties, candidates, or hot-button issues, such as the arrival of immigrants in their town, children are listening and absorbing this as information, even at perhaps unconscious levels, about what is appropriate and good. How often have we parents been shocked by our child repeating something we have said when we thought he or she was not listening? Or saying something at odds with our values and beliefs and wondering, "Where did that come from?" In all likelihood, depending on the child's age, he or she heard it from a trusted adult. While it is certainly true that not all adult interactions are between equals (bosses and employees or pastors and parishioners, for example), it is often the case that adults have chosen to enter into these situations.

This is one of the main ways in which the context is likely to affect children and adults differently. Young people do not choose their context; adults do. Children have almost no control over where they live. This solves one of the greatest hurdles for those who study the effects of social context. For adults, it is difficult to know whether contextual effects are not, at least in part, products of self-selection. Have people chosen their residence because of its inhabitants' views, or do the interactions with other residents exert significant effects on their behavior and attitudes? This suggests a much clearer causal chain between the community and political behavior for young people than for adults. For young people, the culture and norms of the surroundings almost certainly precede their attitudes and inclinations. With the exception of friendship groups, children cannot self-select into any particular community or school. Adults, especially parents, have a significant influence on the "nature of their child's

social networks by seeking out schools or activities characterized by differing degrees of class-based, ethnic, gender and/or religious diversity/homogeneity."[31] Though young people do pick their friends, youth networks tend to be shaped primarily by the school and leisure activities that have been chosen by their parents.[32]

Another important difference between adults and youth with regard to the influence of social context is that adolescents are more confined to their local environment than are adults. Even though the Internet and cable television may have expanded the opportunities for young people to experience some of what the larger world has to offer, most teenagers' lives revolve around family and friends in their immediate local area. Adults, however, may have to commute to work outside their residential area and may have friends in places all over the country. Their information environment is larger than it is for the typical adolescent.

The small nature of the local environment is especially true in rural areas where the population is relatively homogeneous and stable. In fact, one of the advantages often mentioned about rural areas is that everyone knows one another, that people share the same values and goals, and that there is a great deal of predictability about life. According to Sonya Salamon, "Daily life [in rural areas] thus takes place among a cast of familiars whose social networks are overlapping rather than segmented."[33] Youth may encounter the same adults in several different settings, serving to homogenize the information available to young people. For those who may leave the community only to attend an event in a neighboring community (that probably looks much like their own town), it may be rare to encounter anyone with dramatically divergent views or life experiences. According to William Freudenberg, "In a stable small community with a high density of acquaintanceship, socialization can often be as much a community effort as a familial one, and hence it can also be vulnerable to disruption in the face of community change."[34]

There are, of course, many aspects of the community that get translated through social interaction. Studies of adults have shown that one of the most important aspects of the social context is its ethnic composition. This research is reviewed extensively in the coming chapters. In particular, this book looks at diversity in the context of rural America. Ethnically diverse communities and neighborhoods in the heart of rural America are a relatively new phenomenon. How do young people in diverse communities feel about their new neighbors? Do they reject the changes occurring around them, or have they welcomed the increasing diversity in their communities?

Outline of the Book

The first chapter describes population change in rural America in the past 30 years. It discusses the extent of foreign immigration into new destinations, focusing especially on Iowa. It reviews the literature on the economic, social,

and political effects of immigration. The chapter also reviews, in some detail, the extensive demographic changes in two immigrant-receiving communities: Perry and Storm Lake. It is important to note that these communities underwent a greater volume of in-migration than cities in traditional destinations in California and Arizona. Demographic changes were substantial, and given the original homogeneity of these populations, most would have expected to see significant friction.

The second chapter discusses the natural experimental survey research design. Because there is no appropriate pre-test, one of the best ways to measure the effects of ethnic diversity is to use the natural setting in Iowa. Several communities have undergone rapid ethnic diversification in the past 20 years, while most have had populations that have remained fairly static. This chapter discusses the selection of Iowa and the communities within the study. It demonstrates that the five cases were similar across nearly every social, political, and economic indicator prior to the arrival of immigrants in the 1990s.

Chapter 3 looks at the effects of ethnic diversity on support for immigrants. Based on the results from the 2001 surveys, the findings indicate that on some indicators, ethnic diversity dampens sympathy for immigrants. On closer inspection, however, this occurs only in Perry, the community with the least experience with diversity. In Storm Lake, where the diversification process began with a small group of Southeast Asian refugees in the 1970s and 1980s, young people are just as tolerant as the students in the homogeneous communities. The chapter shows that tolerance in Perry is a function of both positive affect toward Hispanics and an older, stubborn form of prejudice based on negative attitudes related to African Americans, a group that has very little presence or history in either community.

The fourth chapter examines the effects of rapid ethnic diversification on civic outcomes: political knowledge, efficacy, generalized trust, intention to vote, participation in school activities, and political discussion. On the whole, the findings do not support the idea that diversity lessens civic engagement. Native-born youth in Storm Lake and Perry have lower levels of political knowledge than their counterparts in the homogeneous communities. In Perry, youth have lower levels of external efficacy and are less trusting of others. There are no significant differences on any of the other measures of social capital or engagement. Furthermore, in Storm Lake, young people are significantly more engaged in school activities than youth in any of the other towns. These results suggest that as communities become more accustomed to diversity, differences in civic engagement decline.

Chapter 5 examines change over time. Chapters 3 and 4 rely on survey data from only one point in time: the fall of 2001. The differences between Storm Lake and Perry are primarily due to the fact that Storm Lake had slightly more experience with diversity than did Perry, owing to the Asian refugees who began to arrive in Storm Lake in the 1970s. Community leaders in Storm Lake began officially to come to terms with the demographic changes before those in other

diversifying communities. By the early 2000s, White high school students in Storm Lake had more experience with diverse cultures than did those in Perry. This chapter demonstrates that in a relatively short time, native-born youth in Perry became more supportive of immigration and more civically engaged. This chapter also chronicles the towns' responses to the demographic changes throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

Chapter 6 asks, "What happened to my town?" Native-born residents of small towns are often worried about the negative effects if immigrants move to their communities in large numbers. This chapter examines several of the most serious concerns and the extent to which they were realized over a 20-year period in Perry and Storm Lake. It looks at natives' concerns about becoming a minority group, about losing power to Latinos, about public costs, about the quality of the schools, and about immigrants' desires to assimilate into mainstream American culture. Chapter 6 also brings the demographic profiles of these communities up to date. Most of the fears about the potential negative effects of immigrants have not been borne out in either Perry or Storm Lake.

The final chapter discusses the implications of the findings, including the implications for immigration policy and rural communities. People adapted fairly quickly to their new environments. Given the dearth of rural research in political science, this may be surprising to those who assume that rural America is a bastion of intolerance, full of hostile and dangerous rednecks. My results challenge scholars to conduct more systematic research on small towns.