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Source: *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 69, No. 4 (Dec., 1975), pp. 1316-1335

Published by: [American Political Science Association](#)

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# Continuity and Change in Political Orientations: A Longitudinal Study of Two Generations\*

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At the height of the student movement in the United States it was being freely predicted that an unbridgeable gulf was forming between the generations. Differences over political ends and especially over the means to reach those ends reached epidemic proportions. The defensive reaction of the middle-age "establishment" seemed merely to speed the widening of the chasm.<sup>1</sup> Nor were the differences confined strictly to the ranks of committed college radicals, as the movement expanded to include a wide array of sympathetic supporters on the campuses.<sup>2</sup> Some observers also saw strong signs of generational change among working-class youth.<sup>3</sup> And at a more general level the counterculture seemed likely to diffuse into all segments of the rising generation, thereby helping create and sustain a sociopolitical cleavage between the generations.

With the softening of young voices and the alteration of the public agenda, the predictions of *politically* conflicted generations have diminished. The failure of the McGovern campaign to realize fully the youth vote potential, visibly expanded by the franchise extension, was seen by many as the swan song of the youth movement and age-based politics. What had appeared to be unresolvable conflict a few years previously, now seemed to be more like tolerable tension. If vivid differences in life styles still marked the generations, these differences did not appear to have their sequels in the political sphere.

\* The research reported on here was supported by the National Science Foundation and the Ford Foundation. We would also like to thank Greg Markus and Gina Sapiro for their participation and assistance and Philip Converse and Ronald Inglehart for their comments on an earlier version of this paper presented at the meetings of the American Political Science Association, New Orleans, 1973.

<sup>1</sup> In addition to the more spectacular evidence of generational cleavage, a good deal of survey data has been offered. Perhaps the best known, partly because of its three-part showing on CBS television, is Daniel Yankelovich, Inc., *Generations Apart: A Study of the Generation Gap Conducted for CBS News* (New York: Columbia Broadcasting System, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> For example, Milton Mankoff and Richard Flacks, "The Changing Social Base of the American Student Movement," *The Annals*, 395 (May, 1971), 54-67.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Flacks, "Strategies for Radical Social Change," *Social Policy*, 1 (March-April, 1971), 7-14.

Of course, some observers never regarded the intergenerational differences as constituting what came to be called the generation gap.<sup>4</sup> The apparent cleavage was said to be an illusion, a function of the vociferous few, something which would dissolve as the young passed through another life stage, or as a phenomenon not really very different from past illustrations of age-graded conflict. On the other hand, some observers maintain that the gap still exists, that basically different kinds of political orientations and frameworks have been adopted by the young, and that the youthful cohorts baptized into politics from the mid-1960s onward constitute a new political generation. Still others argue that there has been selective continuity and change, that in some respects the rising generation has evolved a different set of preferences and modes of behavior, but that in other respects it echoes very faithfully the generation of its parents.

Complicating even more these divergent perspectives is the possibility that older generations may be in a state of flux also. While a good deal of the social science literature—especially in the area of political socialization—holds that change is relatively rare after adolescence,<sup>5</sup> there are signs that older people were not immune to the same forces affecting the young in the recent past, and that they were not completely impervious to the lessons which the young were trying to broadcast. The more dramatic forms of youthful expression may have simply overshadowed movements which were also at work among older people.

Any attempt to sort out these conflicting views on change and continuity can profit by using longitudinal materials. It would be helpful to

<sup>4</sup> A very useful discussion of different interpretations of the generation gap, from which the following discussion borrows, is Vern L. Bengtson, "The Generation Gap: A Review and Typology of Social Psychological Perspectives," *Youth and Society*, 2 (September, 1970), 7-32.

<sup>5</sup> Two works stand out for their emphasis on change throughout life—Stanton Wheeler and Orville Brim, *Socialization After Childhood: Two Essays* (New York: Wiley, 1966); and Theodore Newcomb, Kathryn E. Roenig, Richard P. Flacks, and Donald P. Warwick, *Persistence and Change: Bennington College and Its Students after Twenty-Five Years* (New York: Wiley, 1967).

know what the parental and filial generations were like both before and after the onset of a radically changed political climate beginning around the middle of the past decade. At the simplest level this would help resolve the question of the absolute and relative size of the so-called generation gap at different points in time, thereby shedding light on propositions about age-based political cleavages and on propositions about the changing political character of the American citizenry. More fundamentally, however, such materials would enable us to go beyond the generation-gap formulation. In particular, we could (1) specify the domains of continuity and change; (2) detect the residues and trace elements of the historical period on each generation; (3) establish the degree to which one's stage in the life cycle prompted change and continuity; and (4) define as precisely as possible those political traits which might constitute a more or less permanent schism between the generations.

In order to gain a better understanding of these dynamic elements of political behavior, and in particular to investigate change and continuity in early and middle adulthood, we undertook a panel study of two age generations. Beginning with a representative national sample of high school seniors and their parents in 1965, we re-interviewed a large proportion of these respondents during the first part of 1973.<sup>6</sup> This study design allows us to investigate questions of continuity and change both across and within generations more adequately than is usually the case. In this paper we will present the initial results from this study by comparing the two-wave aggregate response patterns for both generations. Since this study design is unusual, and since many patterns of development could conceivably be observed, we shall begin by discussing the major models of continuity and change which we are likely to encounter, along with the interpretations appropriate to these models.

### Models of Continuity and Change

In comparing generations with each other and with themselves over time, one must be alert to four types of phenomena: continuity over time and three kinds of discontinuity arising, respectively, from generational effects, life cycle effects, and period effects.<sup>7</sup> It will be helpful to sketch in

diagrammatic terms some configurations which would describe these various processes at work among our two generations. Figure 1a, for example, depicts a near-perfect continuity model. Scarcely any difference marks the generations in 1965, and neither shows any change by 1973.

Life-cycle effects are ordinarily interpreted as movements by the young which, as they pass through time, bring them into line with the older generation (or at least to the point at which the older generation was when it was in that age bracket). This interpretation rests on the assumption that certain kinds of change are endemic to the life course. These changes stem from shifting responsibilities, opportunities, and needs which accompany the aging process. Many of these changes are held to transpire as people move through young adulthood and into the middle years. But life cycle effects may also be a function of movements among older people which would increase (or conceivably decrease) the distance between them and the young. A conventional life-cycle effects model is shown in Figure 1b, in which the filial generation moves toward the older one, and in which change in the older generation has stopped. Implicit here is the assumption that subsequent shifting by the young generation would only serve to bring it even closer to the older one.

An ideal type of generational difference model is shown in Figure 1c. Here the two stand apart in 1965 and maintain that division in 1973. Sustained cleavages of this order are what people usually have in mind when speaking of a *true* generation gap. Generation effects derive from age cohorts undergoing a shared community of experiences under roughly similar circumstances at pivotal, impressionable points (usually before adulthood) in the life cycle. Differential experiences within a generation can lead to generation units, distinctive clusters of like-minded people.<sup>8</sup>

The third major indicator of discontinuity is displayed in its ideal form in Figure 1d. Period

version by Matilda White Riley, "Aging and Cohort Succession: Interpretations and Misinterpretations," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 37 (Spring, 1973), 35-49.

<sup>8</sup> The classic formulation of the generational concept remains that of Karl Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," in Mannheim, *Essays in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Oxford, 1952), pp. 276-320. Herbert Hyman anticipates some current analytic problems in *Political Socialization* (New York: The Free Press, 1959), chapter 6. One of the best empirical applications of the political generation concept is David Butler and Donald Stokes, *Political Change in Britain* (New York: St. Martins, 1971). For a provocative cross-national application see Ronald Inglehart, "The Silent Revolution in Europe: Intergenerational Change in Post-Industrial Societies," *American Political Science Review*, 65 (December, 1971), 991-1017.

<sup>6</sup> The most complete report of the original study is M. Kent Jennings and Richard G. Niemi, *The Political Character of Adolescence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

<sup>7</sup> A comprehensive treatment of these topics is found in Matilda White Riley, Marilyn Johnson, and Anne Foner, *Aging and Society, Vol. III, A Sociology of Age Stratification* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1972). See especially Chapter 2, and a shorter

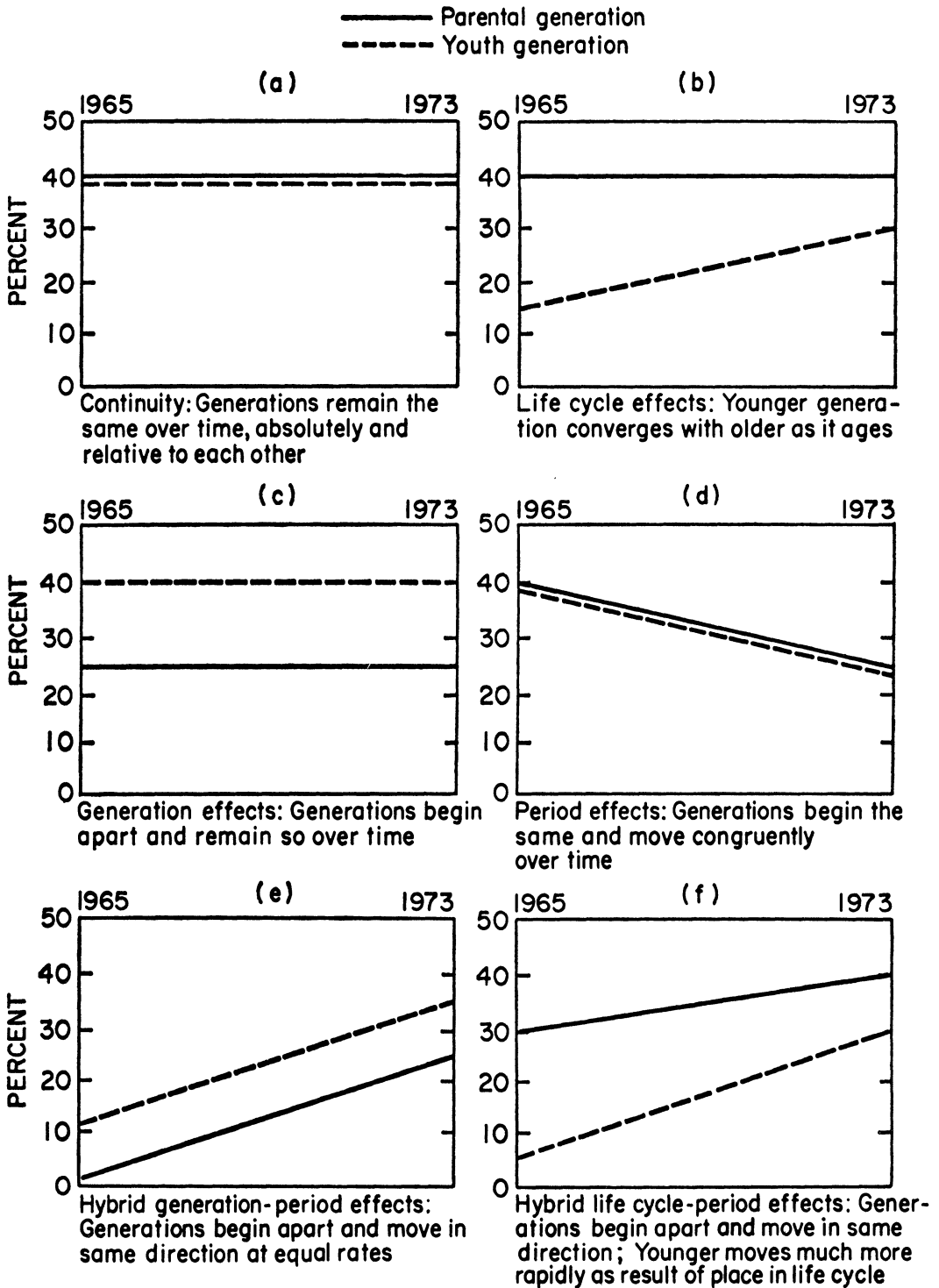


Figure 1. Models of Continuity and Change

effects work their will on each generation, reflecting the important events and trends of the time. They are often referred to as *Zeitgeist* effects. True period effects have a roughly common impact on all or most segments of society. Illustratively, certain elements of a war, an economic depression, a unique regime, a technological innovation, or mass cultural movement leave their mark on the entire society, even though other elements touch population segments in unique ways.

It would be difficult to interpret Figure 1d as illustrating anything other than period effects, given the great life-cycle and experiential differences in the two generations. Of course period effects, like the other processes, are not usually so easily identified in the real world. Rather, the three factors of age, date of birth, and historical periods often work simultaneously and in varying combinations. One very likely illustration of this is contained in Figure 1e, which depicts a hybrid, generation/period effects model. The gap between the generations in 1965 remains in 1973, but each generation has moved at a corresponding rate over time.

Another hybrid model, life cycle plus period effects, is demonstrated in Figure 1f. In this instance the generations are set apart in 1965, and both move with the times. But the younger generation, because of its still impressionable years, changes more rapidly and begins to converge with the older.

One can imagine other consequent patterns based on complex relationships among aging, generations, and periods. For example, curvilinear life-cycle development would add to the array of patterns we might expect to find, thereby adding to the difficulty of interpreting changes observed in the real world. Even some of the relatively "clean" models already presented are susceptible to alternative interpretations. One must certainly take into account substance and theory in assessing over-time patterns. Nonetheless, the processes we have outlined are among the most prominent patterns to be expected and will at least serve as points of departure.

The foregoing types of change and stability deal with aggregates rather than individuals. It is known that aggregate stability within a generation may disguise enormous individual level movement; and apparent large movement at the aggregate level may be a function of a minority undergoing sizable shifts. Moreover, the *reasons* for change and stability often lie largely untapped in an aggregate analysis. Any good understanding of political generations must ultimately be able to draw on what is occurring at the micro level.

Nevertheless, there is much to be said for a more aggregated approach also. In the final analysis political leaders and lay persons alike deal in

gross, average, grouped modes of thought. For example, while it is vitally important to know the why and how much of individual changes which have led to a marked decline in political trust over the past few years, the politically significant event is that it declined in the aggregate and especially so in some identifiable segments of the aggregate.

Furthermore, generational discontinuities are no less real simply because there are compositional factors "explaining" them. It is often speculated, for example, that differences between young and old arise because the young are much better educated. Controlling for education washes out the generation gulf. Such explanations no more reduce the age cleavage as such than do those which say that the young will become more like the old in due time. Clearly, we want to know whether the generational cleavage is temporary or permanent and whether it rests on a true difference in "communities of shared experiences" or has other bases. But in terms of some vital functions of the system the point is whether sequential generations are more like or unlike—regardless of the reasons.

#### Study Design and Panel Composition

This panel study began with a representative cross-section sample of 1669 high school seniors and their parents, interviewed in the spring of 1965. Eight years later, in the late winter and early spring of 1973, an attempt was made to reinterview all youths and one of their parents. Reinterviews were completed with 1119 out of an original pool of 1669 youths, and with 1118 of a possible 1562 parents.<sup>9</sup> Mail questionnaires were received from 230 youths and 61 parents who were inaccessible to the interviewers.

The study design allows for a multiplicity of analyses across generations and across time. For the initial presentation of the data we will simply compare the aggregate changes in each generation on some of the political orientations first tapped in 1965. Detailed comparisons between those retained in the panel versus those not retained, based on 1965 characteristics, indicate the presence of very little bias in the panel subset. For example, differences in the distributions on social and political characteristics rarely exceeded five per cent.

It is worth dwelling on the life course and historical corollaries of the two biologic generations that we have studied. First, and most obviously, there is a sharp difference in their place in the life cycle. Three-fourths of the parents were between 40 and 54 years of age in 1965 and, inexorably, were between 48 and 62 by 1973. By definition, all

<sup>9</sup> The difference between 1562 and 1669 stems from the fact that we were unable to interview a parent in 107 instances in 1965.



had a child at least 25 or 26 years of age; a majority by 1973 had seen their last child through high school. Their place in the life cycle contrasts sharply with the youth sample, all of whom were born *after* the end of World War II and represent the first installment of the post-war baby boom. Even by 1973 one-fourth of the youth sample had not been married, and among those who had children most of the children were still pre-schoolers.

Accompanying this discontinuity is the generational one. All but a handful of the parents were born before the crash of 1929, and most were old enough to remember FDR's first election. World War II touched them very personally. They began their families in the Cold War era, and they saw at least one of their children finish high school in 1965, shortly before the Great Society began to dissolve in riots and demonstrations.

The contrast offered by the political history of their offspring is well known. Most of them have only the dimmest recollection of Eisenhower's first election. Kennedy's 1960 victory is probably the first one recalled with precision. They entered high school with the civil rights movement, and about one-half left college in the midst of turmoil and discontent.

In addition to being distinguished by current age and date of birth the two generations also differ on where the life course has taken them over the eight-year period covered by our observations. Whereas the personal lives of the parents underwent relatively little alteration (one of the major ones being the leave-taking of a child) the same was scarcely true of the young adults. The period between high school graduation and the mid-twenties is obviously one of major mobility, new endeavors, and role changes.<sup>10</sup>

As noted above, apparent age-related differences can be artifacts of compositional differences. For example, rather than being derivative of "shared communities of experiences," the deviance of a generation may simply be due to a change in its composition, say by race and eth-

nicity, migration, skill level, educational attainment, or selective mortality.<sup>11</sup> At this stage, we have considered the most obvious compositional difference between the two generations, *viz.*, educational attainment. Not uncommonly, the educational disparity has been cited as the cause of the putative generation gap. Therefore, for all of the analysis to follow we have also examined the results for each of three subgroups in the junior generation: those who had no collegiate schooling after finishing high school (40 per cent); those who matriculated but did not receive a four-year degree (26 per cent); and those with at least a college degree (34 per cent). There are some absolutely large attitudinal and behavioral differences across the three groups, not only in 1973 *after* most of the educational achievements, but in 1965 as well, *before* the achievements.

For the present, however, the central point is that the three educational subgroups tended to move in tandem between 1965 and 1973. Thus regardless of whether the drift was down, up, or stable, the direction of the drift tended to be very much the same for all three. This being the case, most of what we report below concerning the young generation (in terms of direction at least) is not a function of one subgroup performing at odds with another nor of wildly disproportionate contributions from the college educated. While not completely solving the composition problem by any means, these results do tell us that when we observe what appear to be either generational, life-cycle, or period effects, we can be reasonably sure that all three educational strata are sharing in these processes.

### The Saliency of Public Affairs and Politics

As will be demonstrated momentarily, the *objects* of political interest change substantially over relatively short periods of the life cycle. But what about the *level* of political interest? It has been argued that the rising generation—being highly educated and coming of age in exceptionally politicized times—has already surpassed the parental generation in its concern with political matters. Judging from previous adult data, however, overall political interest appears to grow at a moderate rate well into the middle years. (There is some controversy about whether it tails off among the very old.<sup>12</sup>) If political interest rises

<sup>10</sup> The time lapse happens to embrace what have been called the most crucial age years for creating a distinctive, self-conscious political generation. There is nothing magic in these figures, but Mannheim put the span at 17–25. Another scholar has recently built an elaborate biosocial rationale for 18–26 as the span wherein "political-cultural consciousness" takes firm hold and wherein, if the psycho-historical conditions are appropriate, a new political generation may be born. See T. Allen Lambert, "Generations and Change: Toward a Theory of Generations as a Force in Historical Process," *Youth and Society*, 4 (September, 1972), 21–46. At a more general level, Erik H. Erikson's work on identity crisis singles out late adolescence and early adulthood as a potentially important period for political character formation. See his *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968).

<sup>11</sup> Although this explanation seems simple enough, the reality is more complicated. For example, there is the question of whether certain compositional factors, education being a prominent one, have the same equivalency of measurement over time. This is one of the drawbacks to standardization as a statistical way of checking for compositional effects.

<sup>12</sup> Recent work indicates that the widely perceived disengagement of older people is in part an artifact of

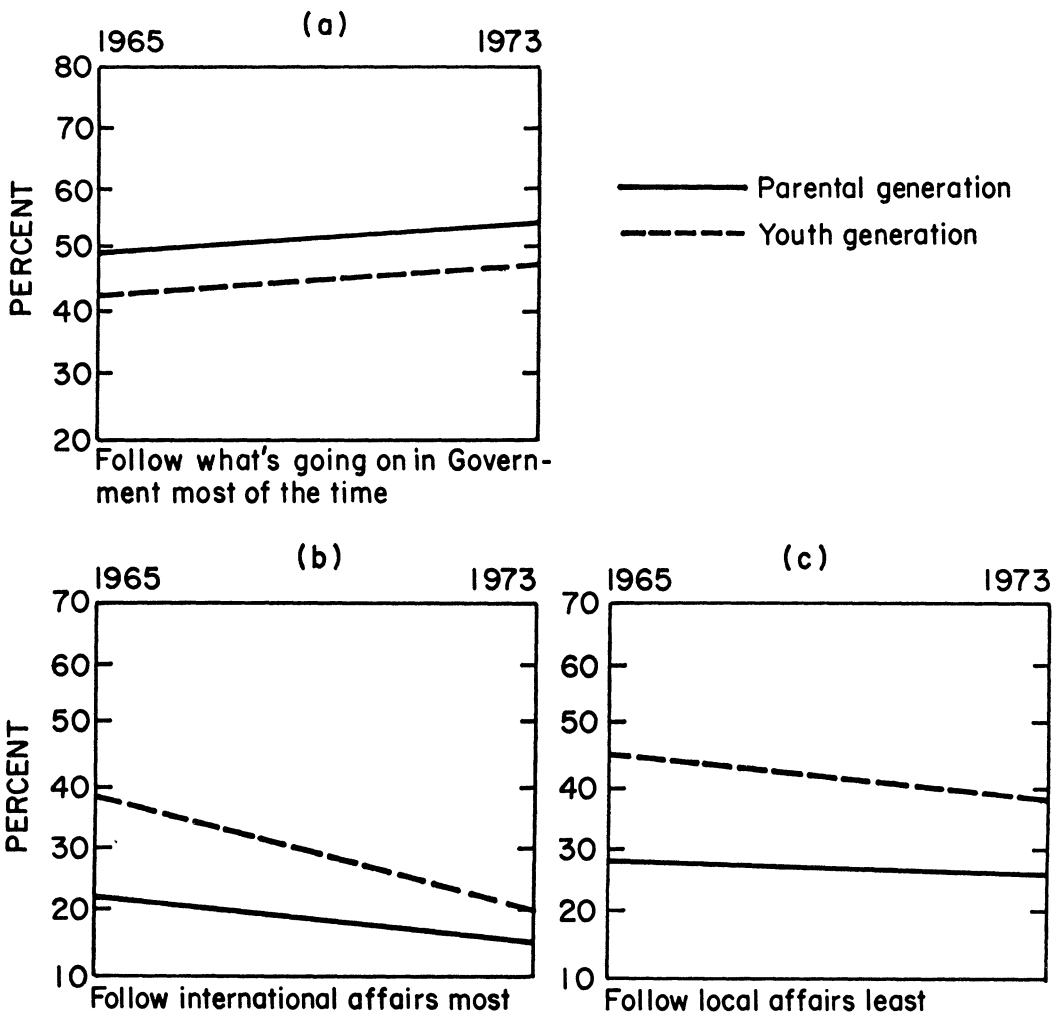


Figure 2. Saliency of Public Affairs

with age, both the parent and young adult generations should have changed to reasonably similar degrees over the eight-year span covered by our study.

That this is what happened can be observed from Figure 2a. The percentages signify the proportions of respondents at each time period indicating that they follow what is going on in government "most of the time." In interpreting this development it is essential that we have been able to

draw upon previous data about life-cycle development, because the parallel lines of change could be interpreted as indicative of period effects. Here we have an instance, however, in which life-cycle effects do not occur solely among young adults, but continue throughout most if not all of adult life. Thus a pattern that might reflect period effects is more likely to be a result of normal life-cycle changes. While the young adults have nearly reached the level of interest expressed by their parents in 1965, we expect that they will surpass this level by the time they reach a comparable age because of their greater overall education.

If it is true that the general saliency of public affairs changes only modestly but at a similar rate for the two generations, it is clearly not true for the saliency of particular arenas of politics. We have advanced elsewhere the idea that individuals

socioeconomic composition. See Norval Glenn, "Aging, Disengagement, and Opinionation," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 33 (Spring, 1969), 17-33; Norval Glenn and Michael Grimes, "Aging, Voting, and Political Interest," *American Sociological Review*, 33 (August, 1968), 563-75; and Sidney Verba and Norman Nie, *Participation in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), chapter 9.

develop salience maps of public affairs and politics.<sup>13</sup> One such mapping operation arranges public affairs according to geopolitical domains, specifically the arenas of international affairs, national affairs, state affairs, and local affairs. The relative emphasis placed on these various levels may be conceptualized as representing one's degree of cosmopolitanism or of its mirror image, localism.

From the gross indicators used at this stage, it is obvious that the geo-political orientations of the young have changed considerably, whereas those of the middle-age have shifted only slightly. Figure 2b shows the proportions selecting international affairs as the domain to which they pay most (first-rank) attention. Since there is only slight movement among the older generation, we may rule out large-scale period effects.

Is there something peculiar about this generation which causes the precipitous drop, or is this restriction of scope a normal life course development? A generational interpretation is suspect, because this young generation has been more exposed to international stimuli, including travel, than any previous one. Rather, the press of other domains becomes the political reality with which people must deal. For a student sitting in the high-school classroom, the romance and intrigue of the international scene hold great attraction. But in the "adult world," there are more localized institutions, officials, and forms which must be dealt with; and news must be monitored which has more potential personal consequence. The pattern displayed here also fits cross-sectional data from national surveys taken in 1966 and 1968. The sizable dip thus seems to be very much a function of alteration in the life stage.<sup>14</sup>

If the young as high school seniors were heavily oriented to international affairs as their first loyalty, they were equally oriented to local affairs as their last (fourth-rank) domain of interest. Figure 2c reveals that parents held steady but that their offspring showed a modest drop in placing local affairs as their least favored domain. As young adults begin to settle into a community and feel its impact on their lives, they begin a slow gravitation toward the local arena. That the gap between the young and old still persists, though narrowed, suggests that further penetration into the life cycle will be necessary before they achieve union with the parental generation.

Now let us turn to another set of rather general

measures, this time assessing media behavior in regard to politics. Here the problem is complicated by long-term trends in media usage, as we shall see in a moment. First, judging solely from previous cross-sectional data, we would expect newspaper readership and television viewing to rise considerably among the younger adults. In contrast, use of the radio and magazines could be expected to increase little, if any, judging by the relatively small differences between parents and youths in 1965. Superimposed on these life-cycle expectations, however, are probable long-term changes in media usage. These seem to be working primarily in the direction of increasing reliance on television and decreasing reliance on radio and, to some extent, newspapers.

Data on usage of all four media are presented in Figure 3. The results are not entirely as expected. Television viewing does rise dramatically in the filial generation. But newspaper readership is almost constant over this eight year period and remains well below parental levels, even though parental usage itself has declined slightly. Altered patterns of daily time use and something as simple as having one's own television set are life-stage developments related to the sharp gain in television watching. Hence the first generation raised on television assumes its rightful place. Even within the parental generation there is a modest movement away from newspaper readership and toward television viewing, but this movement is overshadowed by the shift just discussed.

The declines in magazine readership and in radio listening are perhaps not surprising, but they suggest still further the increasing reliance being placed on television. While magazine readership was quite high among the seniors in 1965, there was still room for marginal advances to achieve parental levels at that time (taking into account the greater education of the young). But instead of gaining slightly, magazine readership dropped very noticeably among the young adults. The decrease in radio usage is perhaps less surprising but no less significant. Certainly the radio was no longer the primary source of political news even by 1965, but the level of usage was still quite high, perhaps owing in large part to captive audiences such as car drivers and to news coverage picked up as an incidental part of entertainment listening. For whatever reason, however, it is clear that minimum levels of radio usage for political news had not been reached even by 1965.

Though it seems almost contradictory that overall interest should rise while attention via at least some of the mass media declines, there may be a very simple explanation. The declines for the printed media and radio may be compensated for by the increases in television viewing. (Unfortunately, we do not know the absolute amount of

<sup>13</sup> Jennings and Niemi, *Adolescence*, Chapter 10.

<sup>14</sup> Data from 1966 are presented in Jennings and Niemi. A period effect may have accelerated the movement in the young cohort, however. Disengagement from Vietnam and the rise of severe domestic issues are secular forces which probably contributed disproportionately to the declining internationalism of the current young.



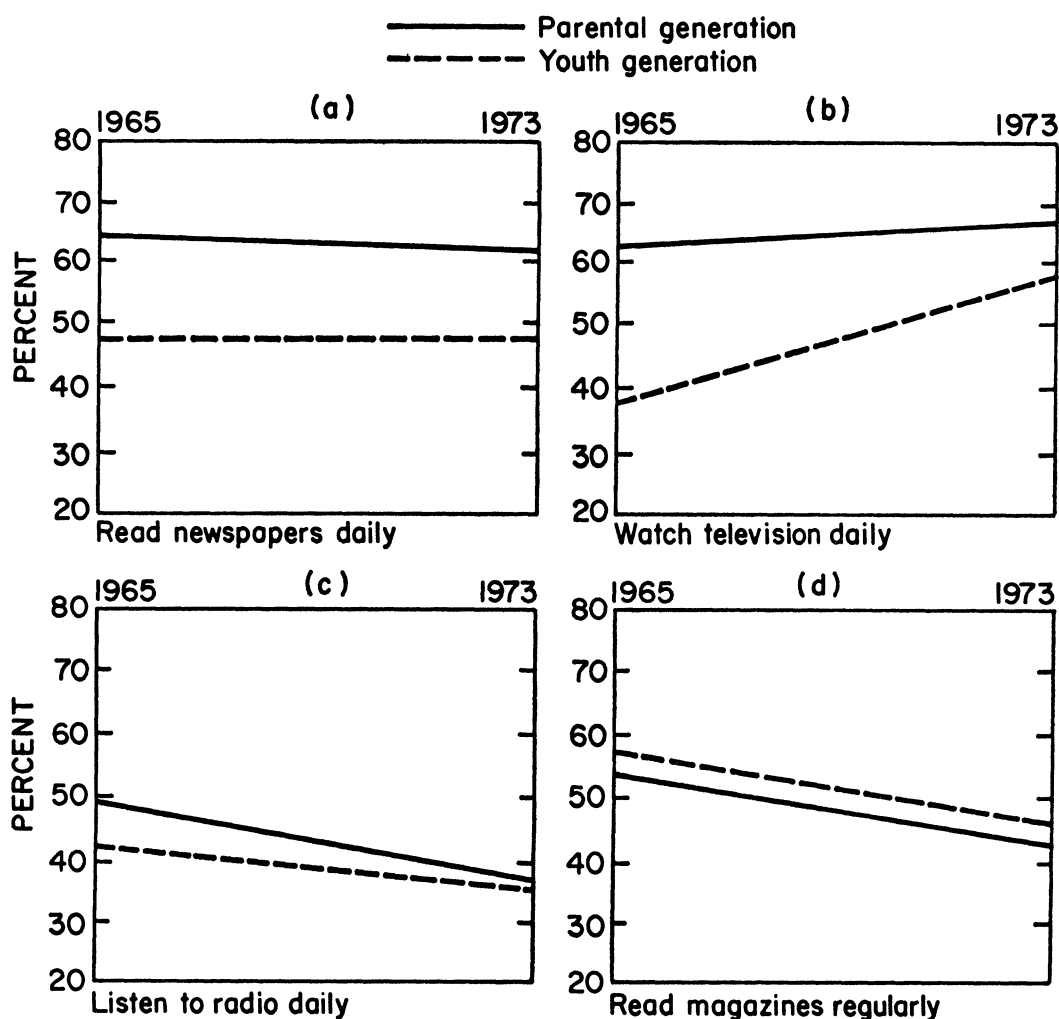


Figure 3. Following Public Affairs Through Mass Media Usage

daily time devoted by our respondents to watching news and public affairs on TV.) Thus there may be no anomaly between rising professed interest in politics and lack of increase in three of the media.

Overall, both the relative and absolute rise in the use of television to keep informed about public affairs, coupled with a fall or no gain for other media describes a strong period effect. The continued lag in newspaper usage by the younger generation also suggests a net generation effect, and the increased use of television a life cycle effect.

#### Partisanship and Electoral Behavior

Virtually all previous work on partisanship leads to one clear expectation about the eight-year period of the panel. Partisanship among the

parents should change very little if at all. Even in unsettled times, such as realigning periods, it is the young who are peculiarly susceptible to the currents of partisan sentiment flowing largely in one direction or the other. Parents, having had many years in which to develop and nurture a partisan attachment, should be highly resistant to short-term ebbs and tides in party fortunes. That this is true is borne out nicely by the data in Figure 4a, which differs from previous figures in showing the entire partisan distribution for parents in both years. The slight decline in the proportion of strong partisans may slightly contradict the life cycle processes that have been evident in earlier years. But the great similarity of the overall distributions in the two years unequivocally supports the view that partisanship among the middle-age adults is quite stable.

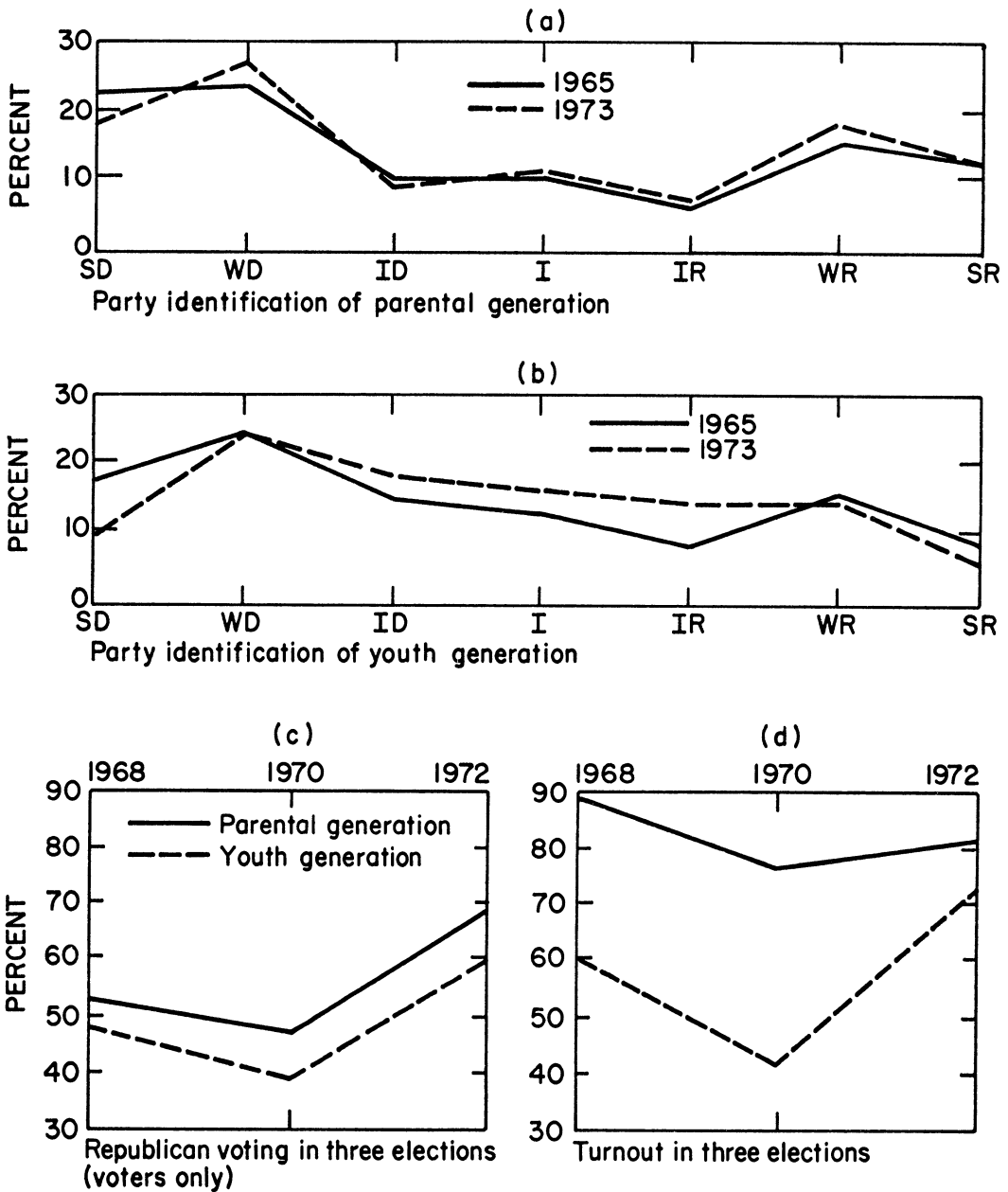


Figure 4. Partisanship and Voting, 1965-1973

More change in partisanship should be apparent among the younger generation, but exactly what changes should be expected are not altogether clear. On the one hand, the generation is maturing at a time marked by a significant rise in the proportion claiming to be free of allegiance to either of the major parties. Thus the proportion

of Independents might be expected to rise above what it was in 1965.

Working against this possibility, however, are two factors. First, these young adults are several years into the adult life cycle. All have been able to vote in at least one congressional and one presidential election, and many have been able to vote

in two presidential elections. Past studies indicate that partisan feelings begin to jell fairly quickly after the individual enters the active electorate.<sup>15</sup> If this force is operative, we would expect the proportion of Independents to have already declined slightly. Second, compared with other orientations, the transmission of party attachments across generations is carried out quite successfully except, possibly, in realignment periods. Though the question of whether the present time constitutes such a period has been repeatedly raised, opinion is far from unanimous that it is. Hence it would not be surprising if the offspring, after flirting with independence while in high school and perhaps in college, returned to the partisanship of their parents in fairly large numbers.

These two countervailing tendencies should at least keep the proportion of Independents among the young adults from rising much, if at all. With these thoughts as a backdrop, the change in the partisan distribution of the filial generation between 1965 and 1973 is startling (Figure 4b). The proportion of Independents, already very high in 1965, rose another 12 per cent, to include almost half of the sample. At the same time, the proportion of strong identifiers was cut nearly in half. Such an increase in the proportion of Independents at a time in the life cycle when we would ordinarily have expected the beginning of a long term decline, provides a compelling argument for a generation effect.

What will the future development of partisanship be for this generation? Although there may be a decline in the proportion of Independents in the future, the rate of decline probably will not bring this proportion down to levels observed in previous generations for some years, if ever. The decline of political trust which we shall observe later, along with negative implications about parties and the party system generated by disclosures through the Watergate scandal, would very likely support this feeling of independence. Moreover, the degree of independence from parties that many of these respondents have felt for several years is also likely to make them more resistant to future changes. On the other hand, sustained psychological attachment to the rather abstract concept of "independence" seems intuitively more difficult than attachment to the more concrete entity of a political party.

Generation effects also emerge when considering voting behavior. Of equal or greater importance, however, are the short-term period effects.

While the younger generation consistently voted more Democratic by a small margin (an average of 7 per cent), the movement from one year to another followed very much the same pattern in both generations. A look at the reported vote in the presidential election of 1968, the congressional election of 1970, and the presidential election of 1972 demonstrates this very nicely (Figure 4c). Thus both generations manifest signs of Nixon's hairline victory in 1968, the traditional "decline" in the off-year election, and a spectacular "surge" represented by Nixon's landslide of 1972. These parallel movements occur despite the intense Democratic attempts to woo the young in 1972 and despite the much greater proportion of Independents among the young adults. Especially given the differential composition of the two generations, Figure 4c appears to be a good example of a hybrid, generation/period effects model.

Another aspect of electoral behavior is turnout. The life cycle pattern of initial low turnout rates, which then grow rapidly and level off, has been observed so frequently that it would be surprising if it were not found in our panels. As Figure 4d shows, parental turnout—the figures for which are inflated because of the middle-aged character of the sample—is high for all three elections. The reduced turnout in 1972 compared to 1968 is consistent with the lower national balloting in the later year.

In contrast, the younger generation began its voting history with a turnout markedly below that for the elder generation. This is so even though the youth sample includes the better educated three-fourths of the total cohort (i.e., all were at least high-school graduates). Predictably, turnout decreased in the off-year election, but in an exaggerated fashion. Finally, in 1972, while the nation's overall turnout was dropping from its 1968 level, voting in the young cohort rose by 12 per cent, reflecting that cohort's increasing engagement in the political world and the development of the voting habit. By 1972 the large 1968 difference between the two generations had been reduced severely. In its voting record this young generation registers the same slow start and rapid growth that has been observed almost universally in the past. Life-cycle effects are clearly at work in this process, as they are in the much less volatile performance of the senior generation.

A final facet of partisanship to consider is the respondents' understanding of the differences between the parties. Unlike partisanship, knowledge of presumed party differences is not widespread among young children.<sup>16</sup> And while such knowl-

<sup>15</sup> Philip E. Converse, "Of Time and Partisan Stability," *Comparative Political Studies*, 2 (July, 1969), 139–71.

<sup>16</sup> Fred I. Greenstein, *Children and Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), chapter 4; and

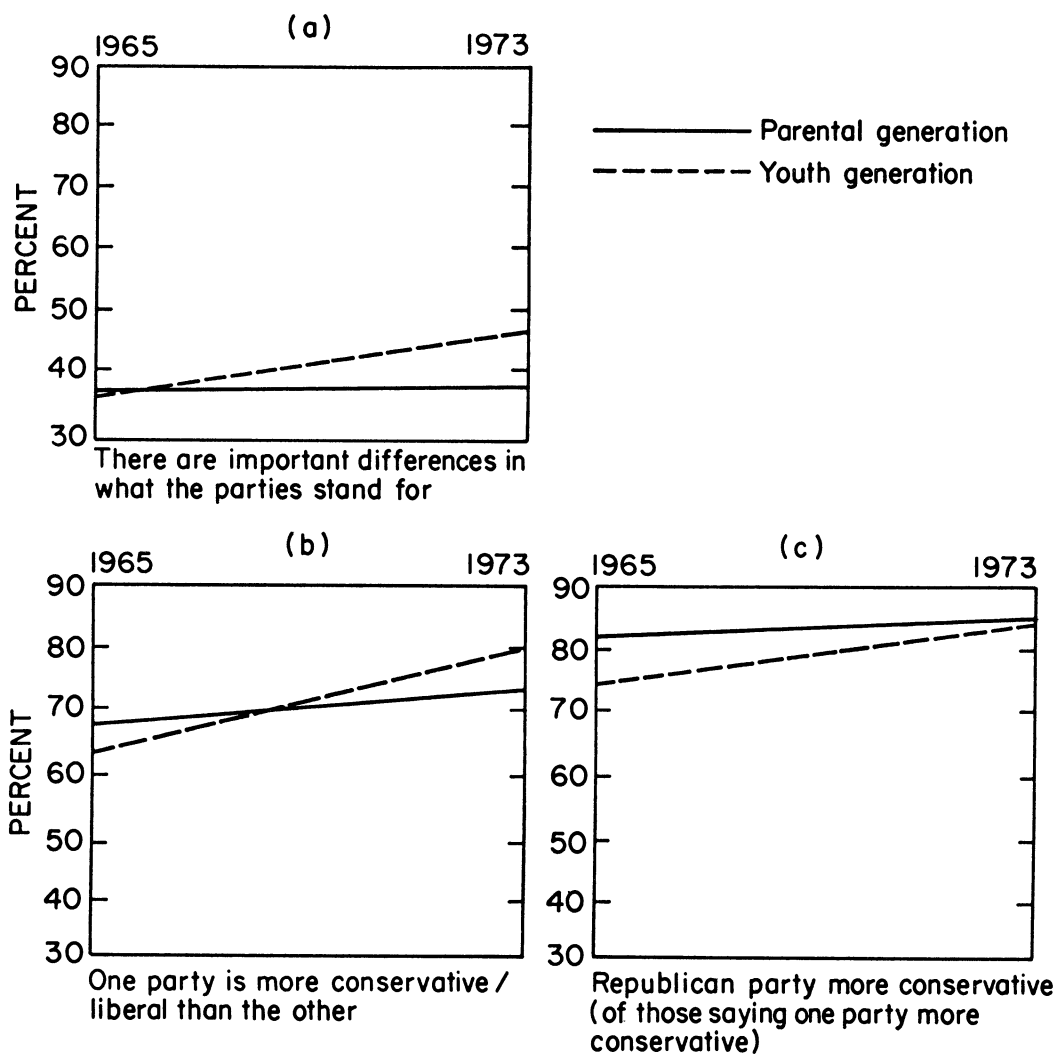


Figure 5. Perceptions of Political Parties

edge grows rapidly during the high school years, high school graduates are still slightly less knowledgeable than their parents. We would expect this knowledge to expand somewhat in the early years of adulthood. In contrast, parental views would change very little on the basis of life-cycle developments. However, images of the parties have certainly changed during the past couple of decades, and it is possible that some adult movement will be observed in the 1965 to 1973 period.

Based on responses to three questions about party differences, more change occurred among the young than among their elders (Figure 5). The

Jack Dennis, *Political Learning in Childhood and Adolescence* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Research and Development Center for Cognitive Learning, 1969), chapter 2.

youths' understanding of political party differences rose on each of the three measures. Rather surprisingly, given its greater proportion of Independents, the filial generation in 1973 ascribed *more* differences to the parties and was at least as aware of the liberal and conservative tags as was the senior cohort.

More so than with other measures we have used, it is unclear to what extent generational effects account for the patterns observed. Our results seem to show primarily how fast young adults learned the typical views of political party differences. It is impossible to say however, how much this was due to the particular circumstances of the late '60s and early '70s. That the young not only caught up with but also surpassed in some respects their elders suggests the operation

of both life cycle and generational processes at work. The complexities of information acquisition deserve more attention, and we now turn more directly to that topic.

### Political Information

Part of what guides an individual's processing and evaluation of political events is the storehouse of factual information accumulated over the years. While perhaps not as crucial as goals, values, and attitudes, an awareness of current and past political history and a comprehension of the machinery of government undoubtedly make for a difference in individual political behavior. Six questions to which there were right and wrong answers were asked of the respondents at both points in time. Although these questions by no means exhaust all types of factual information, they cover a good range of history, geography, and political institutions. The workings of a variety of dynamic processes can be seen in the differential patterns based on answers to the six questions.

Parents are unlikely to have changed very much at all with regard to the questions that we have used. On the one hand, they should not really have forgotten significant historical phenomena that occurred during their lifetimes. On the other hand, for questions concerning facts and figures about governmental machinery, we presume that if parents were to forget what book learning they may have had, they had already done so by 1965. Surely the older generation would have increased its knowledge of individuals and events primarily of recent significance (such as Vietnam), but on the questions we asked very little change ought to be observed among the parents.

In contrast, young people ought to show a definite decline in one area, namely, the technical operations of government. Eight years after high school graduation fewer of the young adults are likely to answer correctly such questions, just as they have probably forgotten specific names, dates, and places from their history books. Less clearcut is what is likely to take place in the younger generation's knowledge of major historical events of the recent past. Young people obviously cannot relive these events, so that we would rarely expect dramatic increases in their knowledge of them.<sup>17</sup> They may, however, come to know more about such events as they enter the

adult world where much of the population assumes that one knows about such things and where considerable political interaction presupposes knowledge of those forces shaping the contemporary world. Thus youthful awareness of recent historical events and personalities should rise, though not very steeply.

The data for the six questions are rich in their variety and rewarding in the extent to which they fit these theoretical expectations. As can be seen in Figure 6, parents were remarkably stable on every question. A saturation point seems to be reached by the middle years. Over this eight year period the greatest change in parental response was a 3 per cent gain in the number who were able to indicate correctly the number of Supreme Court justices. Given the amount of attention devoted to the Supreme Court during this time period, so very slight a climb strongly suggests that older adults' knowledge of many features of governmental structure and processes is firmly fixed.

In contrast to the stability of parental responses is the movement in both directions observed in the young adults' answers. As expected, the declines come in their knowledge of governmental structure. We would expect some further decline in the percentage able to answer these questions in the future. The percentage will probably remain higher than for the parents, however, because of the young adults' higher education level.

Most interesting to us are the increases in young people's knowledge of historical events and current personalities. Two features are important—that there *is* an increase and that the rise is relatively small. Nearly three in ten youths are still ignorant of the partisan era in which their parents matured. Despite the small gain registered, there continued to be a true and substantial generational difference. Only where a political personality continues to occupy the stage (e.g., Tito) did familiarity grow by more than five to six per cent.

The development of political knowledge reveals both life cycle and generational patterns from which we can tentatively generalize beyond the specific questions asked. Information held by the new adult about forms and processes of governmental operations appears to have a deteriorating quality. Knowledge of facts and figures may rise slowly over generations as the level of education rises; but in each generation we can probably witness a cycle of expanded technical knowledge toward the end of formal schooling, coupled with the trailing off of the ability to recall this information as one leaves school. In the aggregate this drop probably occurs relatively quickly at first and then slowly as a more or less steady state is approached. Here a life-cycle pattern seems most significant in understanding the learning process.

<sup>17</sup> As E. E. Schattschneider says: "What people think about public affairs depends to a great extent on when they were born. Since life is short and history is endless, what anybody remembers of the past illuminates only a brief segment of the whole story." See his *Two Hundred Million Americans in Search of a Government* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 83.



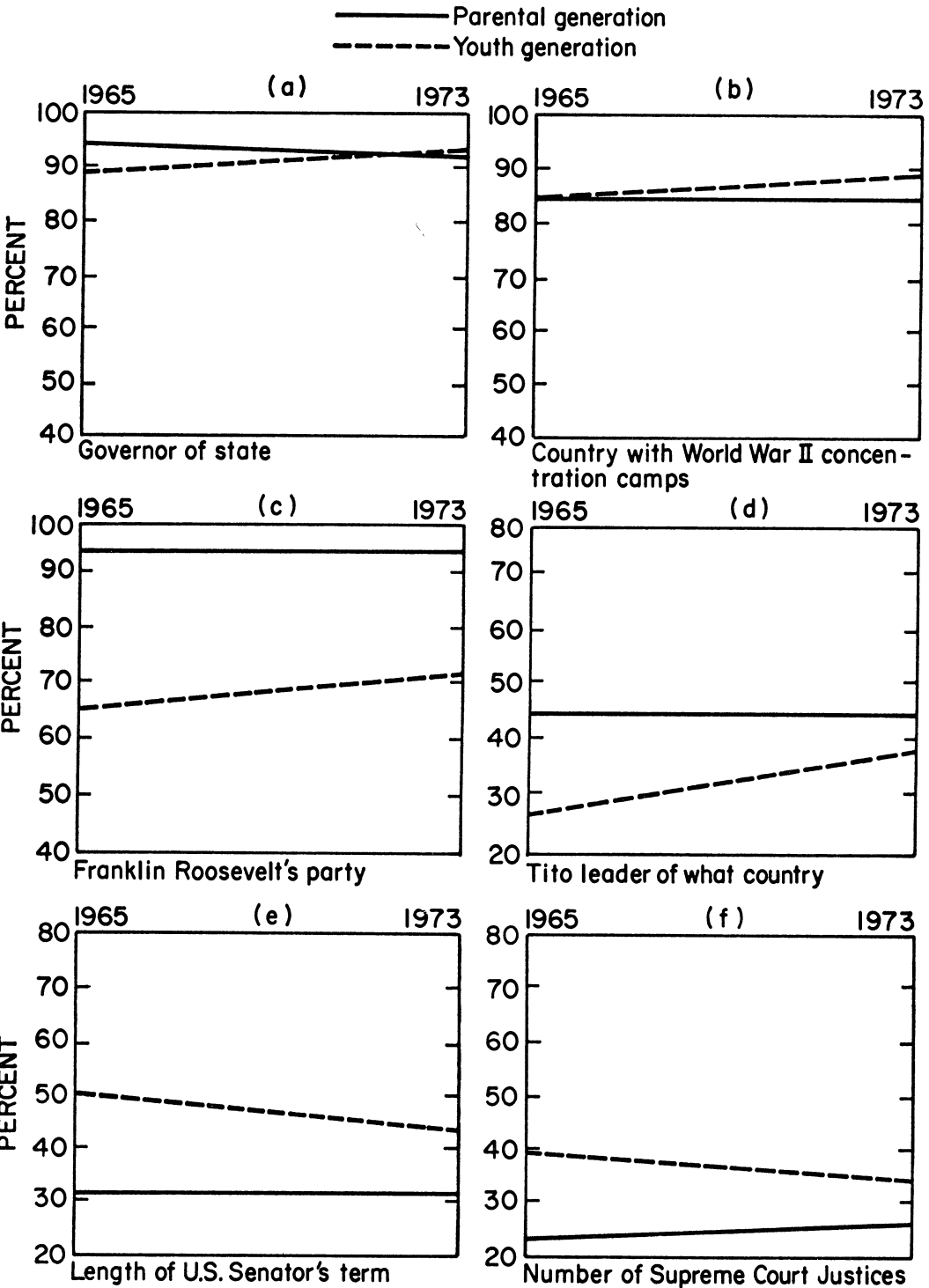


Figure 6. Factual Knowledge About Politics (Per cent Giving Correct Answer)

A sharply different picture emerges for events and personalities prominent in the present or recent past. Because of their recent entry into the adult world of politics and increasing exposure to politically-relevant media content, the rising generation improves on its awareness. On the other hand, the parental generation has reached a saturation point: those who will learn have learned. (Strictly speaking, of course, this needs individual level analysis for support.) Set off against these life cycle effects are generational effects, as exemplified by the discrepancy over the New Deal era. This type of discrepancy, and the variety of images, experiences, and emotions attached to it, is likely to stand as a permanent part of the political landscape.

### National Images

If *Zeitgeist* means anything it should mean that individuals within a political system are sensitive to and affected by the critical problems of the time. It would be absurd, for example, to think that the traumatic events of the Civil War, World Wars I and II, and the Vietnam War were not perceived by people experiencing them as tests of the nation's ability to survive either physically, morally, or both. Similarly, the various economic panics and depressions have not passed unnoticed among those experiencing them. Broad social-political ills and gains also help set off major and minor political periods. To the extent that they are recognized and experienced, these events and movements form the citizenry's image of the political periods through which they are passing. They constitute, in short, one barometer of the "spirit of the times."

We have tapped this spirit by asking our respondents what things they are least proud of as Americans. Answers to this free-response question were coded under a great number of specific categories, which in turn fall under a few general rubrics. By observing the marginal distributions of these rubrics for each generation we can catch the kinds of events and processes which struck them as constituting national negative images. These images may be taken as one indicator of a political era.

Political historians are already referring to the 1960s as the civil rights decade. Beginning with the sit-ins of the late 'fifties and early 'sixties, and culminating with riots, strong legislation, favorable court decisions, and administrative enforcement, the civil rights movement centered primarily on the struggle for Black equality. The question at hand is whether this sense of the times is shared by our two generations, and whether it is shared to the same degree. According to our data, the judgment of the political historians is matched by the images of the mass public. We have taken

the total number of responses referring to civil rights and percentaged them against the total number of responses of all kinds in answer to the question about the "least proud" aspects of being an American.<sup>18</sup> In 1965 both generations placed extraordinary emphasis on the civil rights area (Figure 7a). Responses of this type more than doubled those in other areas. And the great majority of these responses dealt specifically with white-black problems, with only a scant few being overtly hostile to the movement.

The relative and absolute focus on civil rights as of 1965 strongly suggests a period effect at full tide. But without another observation point, that developmental state would be difficult to document. By using exactly the same coding scheme on the 1973 replies (except for adding new categories) we are able to replicate the 1965 procedures. As Figure 7a shows, there was a staggering drop in the salience of civil rights on the part of both generations. The attrition was slightly sharper for the younger generation, virtually removing the modest edge it possessed in 1965. Aside from this small difference, the two generations moved almost in parallel, pointing toward a decisive *Zeitgeist* phenomenon.<sup>19</sup>

Exactly what the long-range consequences of the absorption with civil rights in the mid-sixties would be on the two generations is beyond the scope of this paper. So also is the equally significant question of the consequences of its eclipse by early 1973. It is worthwhile, however, to offer one vivid piece of fall-out from the civil rights movement which shows concretely the behavioral consequences of the historical period.

In both 1965 and 1973 our respondents were asked if they had any close friends of the opposite race. Blacks of both generations responded much more in the affirmative, and exhibited little change over time. Not so among the whites. While noticeably less than half of each generation claimed close black friends at either point in time, the trend was definitely up for each over the eight-year span (Figure 7b). Other explanations are possible, but it is difficult to account for this in anything other than period effects, flowing directly out of the civil rights movement. This explanation is all the more convincing because movement among the parents parallels (in fact, slightly exceeds) that for the youths. If it were only the "compositional" effects derivative of the younger generation being better educated, the shift should

<sup>18</sup> Similar patterns emerge using respondents rather than responses as the percentage base.

<sup>19</sup> One might challenge data of this type on the grounds that people simply report "what is in the news" at the time. To a great extent that is precisely the point, but only when that "news" is continuously repeated and reinforced by other phenomena—as was clearly the case for civil rights.

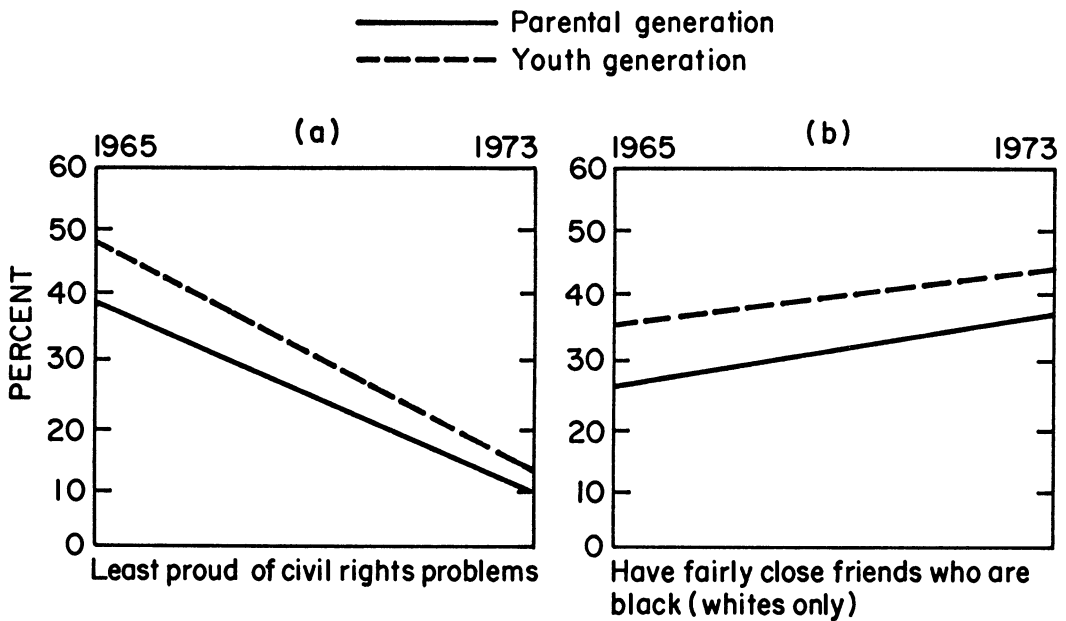


Figure 7. Salience of Civil Rights and Black-White Friendship

be less among the parents. That the filial generation still holds an edge over the older does point, however, toward a continuing generation gap in an absolute sense. Parents by 1973 had reached just about the same level the young had reached as of 1965. Overall, the pattern suggests strong period effects leavened by generational ones. The edge for the young would seem to be very much a function of being socialized in an environment more sensitive to racial injustice and strife.

Returning to the original question about negative national images as an indicator of the spirit of the times, it is significant that 1965–1973 comparisons for each generation reveal that they moved in tandem for every major substantive area. For example, perceptions of national shortcomings in the domain of moral, ethical, and religious conduct rose from 9 per cent to 18 per cent among the middle-aged, and from 5 per cent to 14 per cent among the young—the same absolute increase for each. Similarly, references to failings of the domestic political system climbed from 16 per cent to 31 per cent among the old, and from 14 per cent to 29 per cent among the young, again an absolute increase of equal magnitude. What we may be capturing in the latter category are the strong, rising sentiments that the domestic political system is failing. Because the field work was completed well before the shattering developments and spinoffs of the Watergate affair, the 15 per cent climb probably understates what will ultimately be a pronounced period effect. In this sense the increased references to failings of the

political system are of a piece with the tide of responses to the political trust items to be reported next.

#### Political Trust and Cynicism

Of all recent changes in mass public attitudes, those regarding political trust have been perhaps the most widely discussed. Cohort and cross-section analysis have shown remarkable drops in the level of trust accorded the national government.<sup>20</sup> Our unique contribution will be to trace that pattern for two distinct generations over an extended time-frame.

We have relatively well-developed theoretical expectations about the course of development of political trust. Two kinds of processes are expected jointly to structure the patterns of change for the older and younger generations. On the one hand, strong period effects are likely to be found. Trust in the government has been declining for a number of years, particularly since 1966. Thus the level of trust shown by the parent and young adult samples should decline markedly; conversely, levels of cynicism should rise.

In addition, a life-cycle change should also be observed. It has been shown repeatedly that young

<sup>20</sup> See especially Arthur H. Miller, "Political Issues and Trust in Government: 1964–1970," *American Political Science Review*, 68 (September, 1974), 951–972; and Arthur H. Miller, Thad A. Brown, and Alden S. Raine, "Social Conflict and Political Estrangement, 1958–1972" (paper presented at the 1973 Midwest Political Science Association Convention, Chicago).

children are more idealistic about political authority than older persons. This is true even of the late '60s and early '70s when the extremely positive views of earlier years were no longer so evident. By late adolescence, idealistic views decline, but in 1965 we still found the young generation to be much more positive about the government than were their parents. In the years since then we would expect their cynicism to have grown because of their encounters with the "real" world of politics, quite apart from any period effects.

Combining these two expectations, we should find growing cynicism among both generations, but a faster rate of change among the young adults.<sup>21</sup> Strong confirmation of these expectations is observed in Figure 8. The percentages indicate the proportion giving *cynical* replies to each of five questions about the government in Washington. In each case exceptionally strong *Zeitgeist* effects are seen in the growth of cynicism among both parents and young adults. One seldom sees in longitudinal data the precipitous slopes especially prominent in Figures 8a, 8b, and 8c.

But the young have changed more, drawing closer to, and in two cases overtaking, parental levels. The depth of cynicism that this represents can be seen by the fact that in 1973 the young adults are consistently more cynical than were their parents in 1965, usually by a moderately wide margin. In more normal times we would have expected the younger set to change by a relatively small amount, perhaps approaching the degree of cynicism held by parents in 1965. Under the impetus of events beginning in the late 60s, however, this generation was catapulted well beyond what probably occurred in most preceding cohorts.

Despite the very rapid change among the young, for three of the five questions they still remain less cynical than their parents. This suggests that there is room for yet a further increment in the cynicism of the younger population arising solely from life-cycle effects. That likelihood is also supported by data from adult cross-section samples showing change well into adulthood among individuals as well educated as our young adults. Moreover, we would speculate that having reached this degree of cynicism, the young would be unlikely to re-embrace attitudes of trust even when the political atmosphere becomes less charged. The greater than usual advance of cynicism among the young adults would then keep the level of cynicism quite high even if the young are replaced over the next

few decades by new, less cynical cohorts. We may be witnessing not only period and life-cycle effects, but also the makings of generational effects.

As political trust in the national government has declined dramatically in absolute terms, the relative place of the national government in the three-tiered U.S. system has also declined. In contrast to absolute trust, however, there are also marked age-related contrasts. These contrasts suggest the additional workings of life cycle effects.

Our evidence comes from questions about the level of government—national, state, or local—in which the respondents have the most faith and confidence and the least faith and confidence. In 1965 a majority of each generation vested more confidence in the national government, but there was a chasm between the overriding majority point of view of the younger group versus the more moderate margin among the older (Figure 9a). Based only on those figures, and making no allowance for period and life-cycle changes, one might well have predicted a continuing generational cleavage. What happened in the eight years approached landslide proportions among the young. Both generations recorded a decline, thereby fitting our presumption of period effects. But the decline was momentous among the young, bringing them into virtual congruence with their elders.

Strictly speaking it is difficult to distinguish between life-cycle and generation effects in accounting for the exaggerated movement of the filial generation. Evidence from other work suggests a similar dip at that age range among previous cohorts.<sup>22</sup> This would support a period/life-course hybrid model. On the other hand, as noted earlier, period effects often fall unequally on the generations. Because of their still impressionable years it is conceivable that the secular trend is falling especially hard on the young. Nor should we rule out the possibility that while period effects account for virtually all of the shift among the parents, a combination of period, generational, and life cycle processes is operating on the young adults.

Although this is a good example of the complexities of trying to unravel the threads of change and continuity, of one thing we can be sure: for both generations trust in the federal government declined relative to other levels of government as well as absolutely. The main beneficiary of that decline was the local government and, to a much smaller extent, the state government. Figure 9b shows that local government gained slightly in the senior generation and very substantially in the younger. Again, there is presumptive evidence for

<sup>21</sup> The relationship between age and cynicism among adults tends to be curvilinear and somewhat inconsistent over time. Moreover, race and social class complicate the age trends. See Miller, Brown, and Raine; and Jennings and Niemi, *Adolescence*, chapter 10.

<sup>22</sup> Jennings and Niemi, chapter 10.

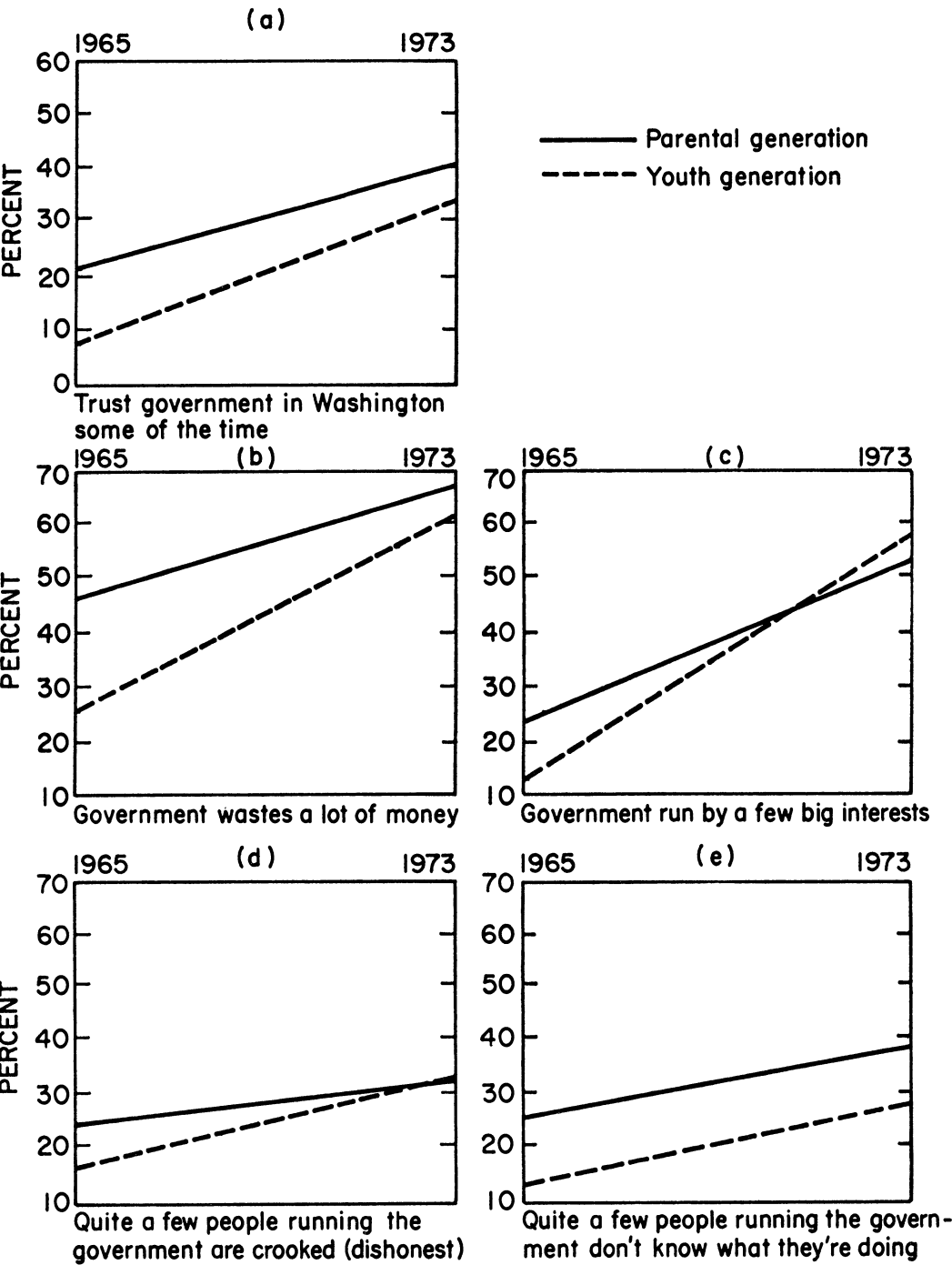


Figure 8. Political Trust and Cynicism



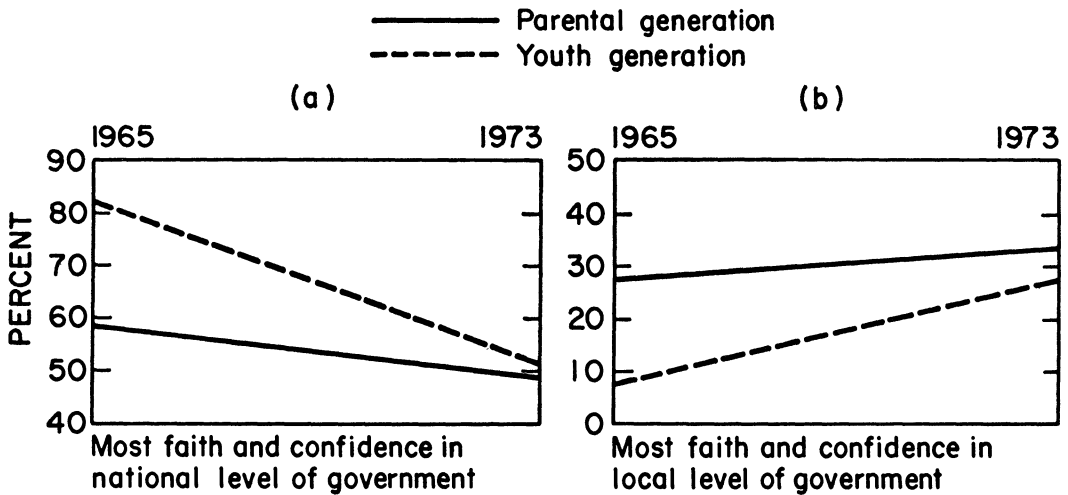


Figure 9. Faith and Confidence in Levels of Government

a secular shift affecting both, and either life-cycle and/or generational processes heavily affecting the younger. Regardless of the processes, the two generations are now in much closer proximity than they were eight years previously.

#### Opinions on Political Issues

Much of the work on age and generational conflict has centered on the diversity of views on issues of the day. Age breaks in the popular polls often reflect sizable differences between young and old. Divisions of opinion on material, economic issues have traditionally been based much more on divisions of social class than of age. But claims to prestige and recognition, differences of views on life styles, competing moral structures, conflicts over means to achieve ends, and sometimes polarization over basic changes in the political order vary often with age.<sup>23</sup>

We draw on judgments made about four issues in comparing our two generations over time. The resulting patterns illustrate very nicely the diverse nature of issue continuity and change.<sup>24</sup> Emerging as a classic example of generational cleavage is the issue of prayers in the public schools. Despite court rulings that seemed to be unfavorable to the use of prayers, this position is agreed to by only a minority within each generation at both points in time (Figure 10a). More interesting, there has been scarcely any change in either generation,

with the younger group maintaining its moderate edge over the older. Given this continuing difference, it seems best to interpret the result as generationally inspired. The older generation was socialized in a time when religious interests were clearly more prominent than now and before the courts had drawn even sharper lines on the separation of church and state. Only a marked dip later on in life would bring the junior generation into accord with the older.

Another issue involving religion and the state yields a similar pattern of movement, although the opinions expressed are considerably different from those on the prayers in school issue. Figure 10b demonstrates that support for allowing speeches against churches and religion has remained very high among both generations. And the visible gap between the two generations remains, suggesting again a more or less permanent schism. Beyond that, there is evidence of a growing division. The increasing secularization of society and perhaps the residues of the free-speech movement have pushed the younger generation almost to a point of unanimity on the issue of freedom to oppose organized religion publicly.

Although prayers in school is a continuing issue which occasionally blazes into life, the third issue at hand has burned with a sustained flame over the eight-year period. To say that the federal government's role in integrating the schools has been a volatile issue and one which has seen some shifting of sides is to state the obvious. During the mid-sixties, at what may well have been the height of the civil rights movement, opinion among our respondents was very much on the side of a positive federal role in integration. Consistent with the theme of being socialized during a more ra-

<sup>23</sup> On this point see Anne Foner, "The Polity," in Riley, Johnson, and Foner, *Aging*, pp. 115-159.

<sup>24</sup> It should be stressed that the issues for which we have longitudinal data do not include (almost by definition) issues of more recent vintage. Initial inspection of the marginals on some issues included in the 1973 wave reveals some striking differences between the generations.

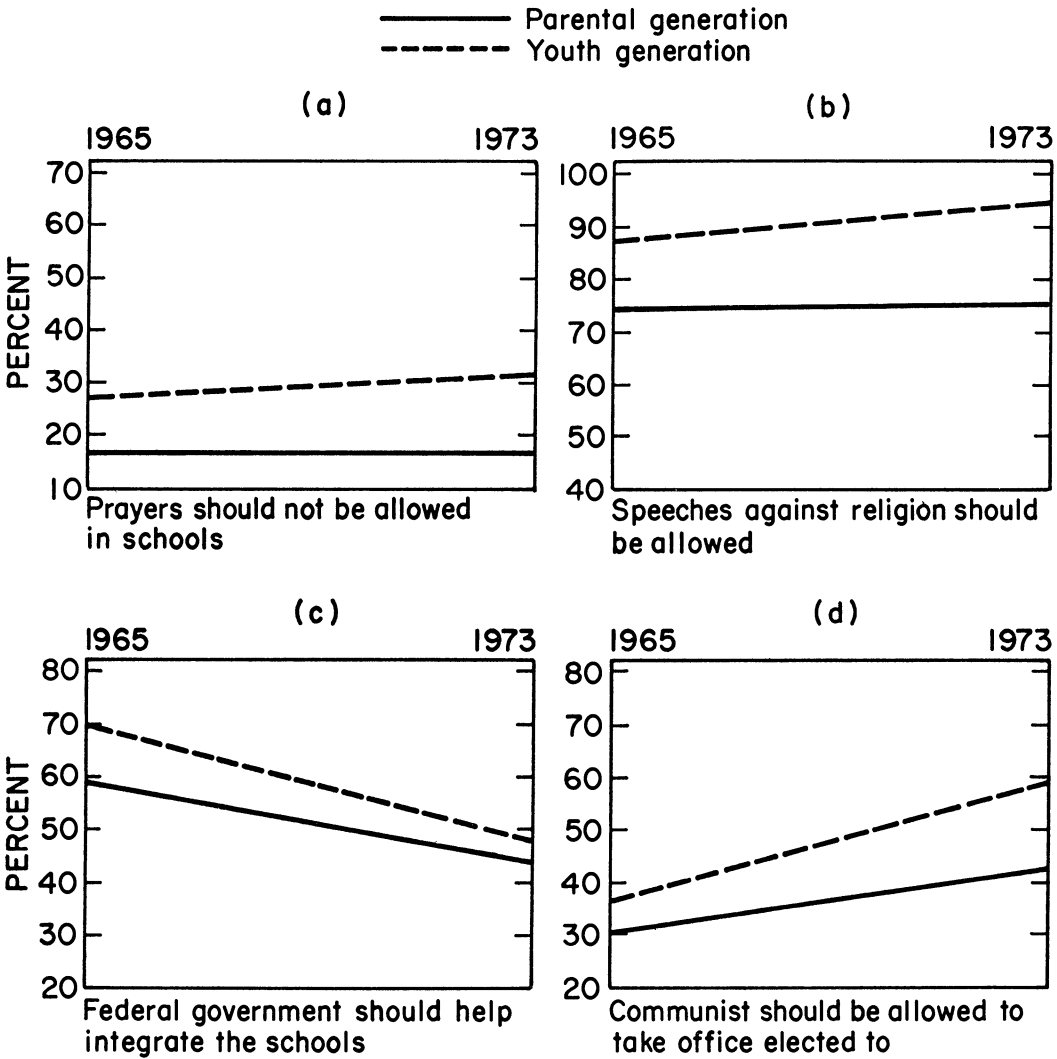


Figure 10. Opinions on Political Issues

cially liberal *Zeitgeist*, the upcoming generation was more positively disposed than the older (Figure 10c).

By 1973 a downturn had set in. Slightly under one-half of each generation favored a strong federal role, and the former edge of the young adults had come close to disappearing. So strong was the decline in youth support that by 1973 they were well below the point occupied by their elders in 1965. There are any number of reasons for the fall—the busing controversy certainly being amongst them. From the long-term perspective, however, the key point is the evidence of a strong secular pull operating on both generations. In contrast to the previous issue where essentially no period effect could be observed, this one shows it

in abundance, with perhaps an extra kicker effect on the young in particular.

While the secular trend has been away from the liberal position (*as of 1965*) on the school integration issue, it has been toward liberalism on an issue reflecting the waning years of the Cold War and anti-communism. About one-third within each generation agreed in 1965 that a Communist should be allowed to take an office rightfully won. By 1973 the figure had climbed appreciably for each generation, especially so for the younger one (Figure 10d). Since there is no plausible reason to suspect that Americans become less anti-Communist as a function of passing through middle age, period effects would seem to explain the increasing liberalism of each generation. As the

plots reveal, however, the very modest excess liberalism of the young adults in 1965 has grown to a net difference of 15 per cent. It would be difficult to construct a life-course explanation for the enlarging gap. Rather, it would seem that the era in which the young have been socialized has led them to be more receptive to the secular trends.

As is true of most of the other domains covered in this paper, no single model adequately describes the issue positioning of the two generations over time. That the youth cohort remains more liberal after an eight-year interim suggests the formation of a standing generational contrast along a liberal-conservative dimension. And thus far it is difficult to see any life-cycle effects at work. On the other hand, there are two marked instances of secular shifts overlaid on the generational differences. One (federal role in school integration) seems to be drawing the generations together, while the other (Communists taking office) separates them still further.

### Concluding Remarks

We began this discussion by noting the controversy and ambiguity surrounding the question of conflict between the generations. It is now time to take stock of where the generations stand in relation to each other in 1973 as compared with 1965. Much additional work must be done before definitive statements can be made, but simply on the basis of what we have seen thus far a clear pattern seems to be emerging.

The flow of the two generations over time has, if anything, worked to bring them closer together now than they were eight years earlier. Only in certain issue areas and in regard to partisanship were the generations noticeably pulling apart. To the extent that differences increased, they consisted of the rising generation's having emerged with slightly to moderately more liberal political views, greater independence of partisanship, and higher Democratic voting behavior. Of the other orientations covered (and others not reported in this paper), the pattern is either one of little change over time or of visible convergence. Considering that three-fifths of our young generation attended college, that approximately one-half of the males served in the military, that the country was in an uproar during much of the eight-year period, and that open efforts were made to pit the young and the middle-aged against each other, one can only marvel that the gulf did not widen rather than narrow.

Part of the explanation lies in the sorts of indicators we have used. Rather than restricting ourselves to matters of affect and preference we have also introduced measures of participation and cognition. To the extent that the generation gap hypothesis rests purely on contrasting issue preferences, the examination of these other dimensions probably reduces the likelihood of establishing a gap phenomenon.

More fundamentally, however, other processes can be seen either drawing the generations together or, less often, pulling them apart. Clearly, life-cycle effects were working primarily—but with significant exceptions—to hold the parents on a plane while drawing their offspring toward them. We saw this most vividly in the cognitive and participative domains. Period effects in some instances, most notably regarding political trust and civil rights, prompted parallel shifts in both generations. And there were, indeed, some visible signs of lasting generational effects as in information holding and certain issues of our time. Some evidence also clearly suggests nascent generation effects which may not be fully realized for some time.

On balance the forces acting to establish convergence seem to outweigh those creating divergence. True, there are forces drawing the age generations apart, and we shall address these in another place. But what stands out as we watch these two generations over time are the strong vectors acting to bring the generations in line. These come, in substantial part, from the life-space changes (e.g., marriage, family, employment, property ownership, organizational life) accompanying the aging process among the young. Those forces, while perhaps weaker now than in the past, are still massive shapers of behavior and belief. Complementing this source of convergence are the forces of contemporary history (e.g., economic conditions, war, technology, entertainment, the arts) which touch the lives of young and middle-aged alike. If the middle-aged were unresponsive to these effects, differences between the generations would persist or increase. While maleability is higher among the young, there is graphic evidence in our materials that change occurs in the middle years also. The net result of life-space changes among the young and of historical forces operating on each generation is a smoothing out of intergenerational antagonisms, a smoothing out accomplished even over the eight turbulent years covered by our observations.