

A Summary of Findings from the General Social Surveys

By

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Research using the General Social Surveys (GSS) has been large in volume and diverse in content. Over 1,500 pieces of research have been completed (Smith and Fujimoto, 1986) and these represent every discipline and virtually every sub-field in the social sciences (Smith, 1986b). In this report we have not tried to systematically examine, categorize, and organize this massive literature. Rather we have selected from among the research literature a number of important findings that are of interest both in their own right and also illustrative of the range of research findings that have emerged from the GSS. As such this essay is more of a montage than a synthesis.

### Culture

In recent years the social sciences have come to realize that culture plays a larger role in contemporary society than previously recognized. As Davis notes (1982):

In the last twenty years Sociology, empirical and theoretical, has shown an almost obsessive interest in the occupational structure of modern societies. Consequently, we have learned an enormous amount about these structures and their demographic metabolism. It is quite possible, however, that this knowledge is self-contained and if we are to understand other facets of contemporary societies, new theories, perhaps more cultural than structural, may be in order.

Mounting evidence indicates that various cultural attributes, such as religion, ethnicity, geographic origin, and farm background, have a strong impact on shaping attitudes, specifying relationships, and influencing various social processes. While the existence of cultural diversity and significant subgroups has of course been recognized, their importance and even use as explanatory variables have been shunted aside in favor of class and stratification variables. (The one partial exception is the wide use of

race. Race however has most frequently been used as a measure of social stratification and often the "use" of race amounts to nothing more than the exclusion from the analysis of blacks to clarify the analysis. Of course by pooling the GSS surveys it is often possible to keep blacks in the analysis).

Despite some well-accepted sociological theorizing that religion does not matter (or should not matter or at least will not matter much longer), religion continues to play a strong role in shaping the lives and attitudes of Americans. The rise of a New Religious Right as typified by the Reverend Jerry Falwell's Liberty Federation (nee Moral Majority) has apparently sparked interest in religion in general and the Evangelicals and Fundamentalists in particular (Mueller, 1983). Research indicates that denominational differences (primarily the distinction between "conservative" fundamentalist denominations and "liberal" mainstream denominations) and strength of religious commitment (often measured by church attendance) are strong predictors of various attitudes. A fundamentalist orientation and/or active involvement in religion are among the strongest predictors of opposition to abortion (Peterson, 1986; Granberg and Granberg, 1980; and D'Antonio and Stack, 1980), sexual permissiveness (Bock, Beeghley, and Mixon, 1983 and Wood and Hughes, 1984), non-traditional roles for women (Powell and Steelman, 1982a; Peek, and Brown 1980,) secular schools (Elifson and Hadaway, 1985), and science (Smith, 1984). Similarly, large differences have been found to remain among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. While Catholic/Protestant differences have been documented for some time (Greeley, 1976; Fee, 1976), national comparisons of Jews and Gentiles have emerged more recently. For example, Cherlin and Celebuskis (1983) found large differences between Jews and Gentiles on childrearing and childbearing. When asked to rank 13 qualities of children, 42% of Jews chose "good sense and sound judgment" as the most

important quality, while this was selected by only 19% of Catholics and 17% of Protestants. Similarly, the proportion ever divorced was 24% for white Protestants, 17% for white Catholics, and 12% for Jews. Finally, research indicates that religious commitment is a major factor promoting successful integration into society as a whole (McIntosh and Alston, 1982 and Martin and Stack, 1983).

Ethnicity is another cultural variable that is supposed to vanish as a meaningful predictor as immigrants and their descendants assimilate. And important changes are occurring as the last of the great European immigration wave (1899-1914) dies off and their descendants shift from the second to third and fourth generations. Assimilation, at least in terms of a lower predictive power of ethnicity as generation increases and an increase in mixed ancestry, has occurred (Smith, 1983 and Alba and Chamlin, 1983), but notable subgroup differences still remain. For example, ethnicity is a major predictor of 1) SES differences (Jencks, 1983 and Roof, 1979), 2) patterns of alcohol consumption (Boscario, 1980 and Greeley, McCreedy, and Thiesen, 1980), and 3) participation in voluntary groups (Thomson and Knoke, 1980 and Smith Forthcoming c). In fact, Alba and Chamlin (1983) report that ethnic identification is increasing among the youngest cohort which "corroborate(s) the widespread claim of an ethnic resurgence in the last decade." (Also Yinger, 1985 and Smith, 1985c.)

Region and community of origin as well as current region and community type are yet a third set of cultural variables that has been shown to exert strong influence over contemporary American life. To cite only five diverse examples, Glenn and colleagues (Glenn and Shelton, 1983; Glenn and Shelton, 1985; and Glenn and Supancic, 1984) have shown that living in America's divorce belt (the west and southwest) has a large independent contribution to

the probability of divorce. They conclude that the main factor promoting undisrupted marriage is living in a highly integrated social system that is characterized by solidarity, value consensus, and effective social control. Davis has found that the attitudes of blacks are more conservative if raised and still living in the South, intermediate if raised in the South but now living in the North, and more liberal if raised and still living in the North. Stephan and McMullin (1982) show that non-metropolitan origins and current residence in non-metropolitan areas are strongly associated with non-permissive sexual attitudes, with the community of origin having the largest effect (see also Wood and Hughes, 1984). Wilson (1986) demonstrates that community size increases social heterogeneity, but only for cultural variables. Finally, region and community type remain strong predictors of racial attitudes. (This is discussed below in the section on race relations.)

Finally, farm origin has been shown to be the paternal occupational status that has the largest impact on current attitudes (Davis, 1982) as well as being probably the most distinctive niche in the occupational transmission matrix (Blau and Duncan, 1967). In brief, cultural variables appear to exert a major influence on many phases of life and often top stratification variables in their predictive power.

#### Stratification

Major modifications and refinements of stratification and the attainment processes have also emerged. Two prominent theories about the impact of inconsistent status positions have been challenged. Davis (1982) demonstrates that status inconsistency resulting from intergenerational changes has virtually no impact across 49 dependent behaviors and attitudes. Similarly a case study of attitudes on pornography shows that status discrepancy has no influence on these attitudes (Wood and Hughes, 1984), while

a study of moral issues reached similar conclusions (Simpson, 1985). Likewise, the theories about the negative impact of overeducation have been questioned. These theories argue that having too much education for one's occupation (or rather having to settle for a job beneath one's educational station) will increase job dissatisfaction, social and political alienation, and leftist and radical political ideals. Several investigations show at most a small job dissatisfaction effect when the disparity between education and occupation is great, but no general effects on anomia, political efficacy, partisanship, political activity, ideology, or policy preferences (Davis, 1982; Burris, 1983; and Glenn and Weaver, 1982).

In addition several new formulations of class structure have been examined. Brint (1982 and 1984) has shown the idea that a "new class" (defined by superior education and working in a job that focuses on the processing of information) has a unique and powerful role in shaping attitudes and behaviors is greatly exaggerated (See also Wuthnow and Shrum, 1983). Similarly, Nackenoff (1983) found that dual-economy models (Beck, Huran, and Tolbert, 1978 and 1980 and Hauser, 1980) fail to predict the material and ideological underpinning of consent.

While certain status inconsistency theories and new stratification formulations have been found wanting, SES is of course still an important sociological predictor. Research indicates that of the three standard components of SES (education, occupation, and income), education is consistently the best explainer of attitudes and behaviors (Davis, 1982; Hyman, 1979; and Miller and Sears, 1986).

Major refinements in the understanding of the intergenerational mobility or attainment process have also been made. The major findings are that the process is not as simple or unidimensional as previously thought and

that there are intergenerational effects in other occupational aspects besides status. Blake (1985) shows that increases in educational mobility over time occurred only among individuals from small families. Logan (1983) finds that education and race account for status inheritance among the upper white-collar group, but not among manual and farm groups. Robinson (1984) demonstrates across five nations that class and prestige models of attainment produce different results and that the inheritance of business ownership is distinct from general inheritancy effects. Similarly, Hout (1984) shows that non-status dimensions such as autonomy and technical background are also transmitted across generations.

#### Family

Considerable insight on the family has been gained from the GSS. Two areas of note are work on the influence of spouse's attributes on respondent's attitudes and factors contributing to marital and family disruption.

Not only parental characteristics, but spousal attributes have major associations with respondent attitudes. The traditional literature showed primarily that the SES attributes of husbands affected the class perceptions, satisfaction levels, and attitudes of wives who were homemakers (e.g. Mugford, 1980 and Freudiger, 1983). Evidence is accumulating that spousal association flows both ways. Smith (1985e) demonstrates that having an employed wife is associated with more feminist attitudes by husbands (net of other control variables). Smith (1982b) also finds that having a spouse employed as a teacher increases support for educational spending by both husbands and wives.

The second major area of interest is family disruption. Sweetser (1985) indicates that the proportion growing up in intact homes has been roughly stable across cohorts. While family disruption from divorce has risen in recent cohorts, disruption from deaths has fallen, leading to no net change

in the share of intact families. The disrupted homes have changed however becoming much more female-headed. Smith and Meitz (1984) find that most of the increase in divorce in the seventies occurred among a World War II period birth cohort and among those with average (high school level) education. This refutes other descriptions of the divorce trend that suggested it was younger and better-educated cohorts that caused the rise in divorce. Much research has also been done on the causes of divorce (Glenn and Shelton, 1983; Glenn and Shelton, 1985; Hanson and Tuch, 1984; and Glenn and Suspancic, 1984). As alluded to above, the main discoveries have been that 1) many cultural factors such as community type and region influence divorce along with low SES and 2) divorce propensity is transmitted across generations with adults from divorced homes more likely to become divorced.

#### Attitudes

A strong causal connection between public opinion and public policy has been discovered. Page and Shapiro (1983) in their examination of several hundred public opinion trends and policy changes demonstrate that there is "considerable congruence between changes in preferences and policies [and] that public opinion is often a proximate cause of policy, affecting policy more than policy influences opinion." That impact appears to affect the courts as well as the elective branches of government (Barnum, 1985 and Silver and Shapiro, 1984). A similar conclusion on the impact of public opinion on policy was also reached by Burstein (1985) in his case study of equal employment opportunity legislation. (And see Jencks, 1985 on defense spending.)

Second, several extensions of earlier work (Davis, 1975) on civil liberties and tolerance have been carried out (Corbett, 1980; Wilson, 1985; Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus, 1982; Abrahamson and Carter, 1986; Weil, 1982;



and Smith and Petersen, 1980). The key advance has been McCutcheon's (1985) latent class analysis of the tolerance scales regarding Communists, atheists, militarists, racists, and homosexuals that shows that most people (78%) fit along a general tolerant/intolerant dimension, but that there are smaller groups that are tolerant of the right and intolerant of the left (11%) or tolerant of the left and intolerant of the right (10%). This shows that tolerance is a more complex dimension than initially conceptualized by Stouffer.

Third, considerable work has been done on race relations (Smith and Sheatsley, 1984; Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo, 1985; Cutler, 1983; Case, 1983; Smith, 1983; Ransford and Miller, 1983; and Miller and Sears, 1986). Findings include that 1) support for principles of racial equality have continually grown at a reasonably steady rate for the last four decades and have not stopped or reversed in recent years (see discussion of general trends over the last decade and a half in the section on social change), 2) that changes involving principles have been larger and more consistent than changes dealing with implementation (Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo, 1985); 3) that the opposition of whites to racial equality is primarily a function of closeness to the old plantation culture of the South. This closeness can be measured in terms of being from an older cohort, rural and farm origins in the South, and less educated background. Each of these factors places one in closer proximity with the Old South. And 4) that between about 1970 and 1972 a profound and untypical shift in racial attitudes occurred in the South. Racial tolerance increased substantially and almost all of this change occurred among the younger, better educated, and urban sector of the South suggesting that large portions of the cutting edge of the New South made a rapid and collective decision to withdraw support for the racial values of the Old South and

abandon the "segregation now and forever" opposition to racial equality that had hallmarked the South from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s.

### Social Change

Both because of its adoption of baseline items from previous surveys and by its own replication of questions across time, the GSS is especially designed to study societal-level change. Hundreds of case studies have been carried out analysing change in one topical area or another. (Among the most popular are a) race relations, b) the role of women, c) confidence in institutions, d) abortion, and e) political tolerance.) Rather than review this large literature we will highlight instead the overall pattern of social change as revealed by the GSS.

### Since World War II

During the period since World War II America generally moved in a liberal direction (for the operationalization of this term see Smith, 1982a). An examination of 335 time trends (from the GSS, its baseline readings, and ancillary sources), indicated that 51% of the time trends showed significant shifts in the liberal direction, 29 had conservative trends, and the remaining 20% were either constant or bounced around showing no net direction. Liberal and conservative trends both averaged 1.4% per annum, both showed substantial linear associations with time with liberal trends slightly stronger (an average  $r^2$  with time of .62 for liberal trends and .54 for conservative trends) (Smith, 1985b).

Analysis to date suggests two long-term and systemic forces and two period effects drove this general liberal movement: modernization and liberal idealism. Modernization is simply a general and comprehensive term covering the societal changes associated with the economic development and structural

reorganization that America has been undergoing since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Modernization promotes liberalism through its promotion of rationalization, innovation, centralization, statism, and prosperity (Smith, 1982a).

The second basic factor that assists the development of liberalism is America's liberal idealism. More than any other country America is historically, politically, culturally dedicated to a constellation of liberal ideals enshrined in such fundamental documents as the Declaration of Independence. While often not lived up to, these ideals have always remained ideals and as such have continually exerted a pressure to bring attitudes and folkways into line with these principles (Smith, 1982a).

In addition to these two underlying forces moving America in a liberal direction, there have been many particular and specific factors. The two most prominent of these period effects are the New Deal Realignment of the Great Depression that provided institutional and coalitional bases for liberal growth and the liberal institutional leadership provided by the Supreme Court in particular and other institutions of the government and society in general.

This liberal edge has not been constant throughout the post World War II period. While we lack enough time series to study in detail trends prior to the mid-fifties, there was substantial and steady liberal growth from the fifties to the mid-seventies (See Figure 1). Around 1973-74 the average liberal growth across items ended. Nearly 90% of the items that had readings both before and after the mid-seventies showed lower liberal slopes in the seventies and eighties than before. Yet the seventies did not see a wholesale reversal of previous liberal gains. Very few trends changed direction from the liberal to the conservative. The two most common patterns were for liberal trends to level off or for their slopes to lessen, not for the slopes

to reverse. Instead of being swept to the right by a conservative tide, America since the mid-seventies has been atop a liberal plateau (Smith, 1985a, see also Smith and Spinard, 1981; Yinger and Cutler, 1982; Chafetz and Ebaugh, 1983; Ferguson and Rogers, 1986).

Liberal-conservative change has also not been uniform across topical areas. Certain areas such as social control, anti-Communism, and, to a lesser extent, attitudes towards government spending and taxes have shown net conservative trends. Other areas such as race relations, feminism, sexual morality, and tolerance of political and social deviants has shown especially strong and consistent trends in the liberal direction (Smith, 1982a; 1985a; 1985b).

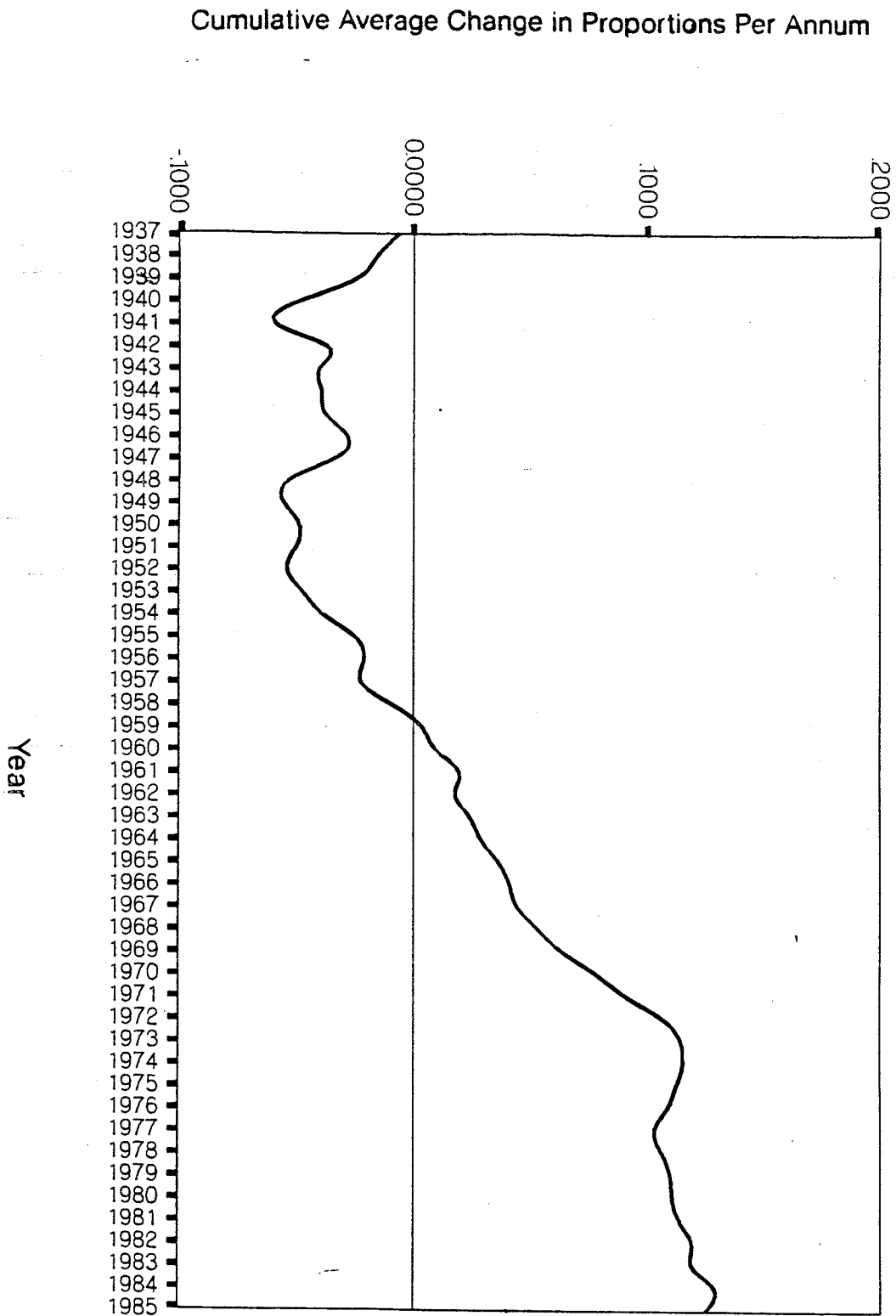
#### Since 1972

Before the GSS the study of social change is hampered because of 1) the lack of time series, 2) the thinness of observations in the available time series-leaving large temporal gaps that can be bridged only by risky interpolation (Mueller, 1984), and 3) purposive sampling-since most other time series contain data points from periods when the data collectors thought the question was topical and/or newsworthy or, even worse, only when they thought the item had changed (rather biased criteria it comes to measuring change). Since 1972 however the GSS provides a more systematic basis for monitoring and analysing social change. There are many time series with closely spaced readings and they are asked according to a set schedule and are not triggered by transitory whims.

Davis (1986) systematically covers 243 time series that spanned the decade from 1972-75 to 1982-85. As a broad generalization we can say that change is pervasive, steady, and slow.

# Figure 1. The Liberal Plateau in America 1937 - 1985

Summary Trend



Note: Maximum interval between data points is five years.

Year

Davis' subheadings sum up the story:

Most items change . . .  
But few change a lot . . .  
And even the most volatile items shift steadily  
not precipitously  
With quite modest slopes

Since the trends tend to cumulate, many trends are large in magnitude over the span of the GSS. (Even a modest, but steady annual change of 1.5% points translates over a decade into a 15% shift).

The GSS thus questions many headline-driven, pop sociology interpretations of social change and recent American history that describe America as being wildly jerked around like a yo-yo. The GSS indicates that many of the popularized sea changes of the last decade were more charted currents than chaotic tidal waves (Page and Shapiro, 1982).

Davis (1986) details the change in 17 topical clusters. Cumulatively significant, large, and important changes occurred in many areas. Family attitudes, particularly growing acceptance of greater sexual equality, showed the largest average level of change. International politics, which tend to be especially driven by specific events, hold the next largest level of change. Indicators of rising anti-Communism in the late seventies and early eighties were especially strong. Morale came next with large changes in institutional "morale" (e.g. confidence in the leaders of major institutions) and very few changes in personal morale (e.g. satisfaction with various domains of life and happiness). Other topics that were popularly deemed to be undergoing rapid fluctuations turned out to be among the most stable. Religious attitudes and behaviors have been among the least fluctuating and general values (e.g. qualities favored in jobs and children) form the most stable cluster.

### Models of Change

The GSS years not only allow a much more detailed description of the rate and range of change, but also permit us to develop and empirically test models of change.

Daivis (1976) examines in depth three standard social change models:

1. Sociological phenomena follows short term economic fluctuations.
2. American society is undergoing massification.
3. Society changes through cohort replacement.

Tackling the first proposition we come to the conclusion that economic fluctuations (i.e. the business cycle and related economic changes) drive economic variables, but have very little impact on more sociological matters. They can be a powerful engine for influencing economic expectations, financial satisfaction, and other items closely related to economic activity, but the engine does not power general social change.

The massification hypothesis has two basic components. The basic proposition is that subgroup differences are diminishing under the continuing nationalization of news, culture, economic power, etc. These homogenizing influences are assumed to eliminate subgroup differences in general and regional and rural/urban differences in particular. Secondly, the massified norm towards which we are heading is not simply the pre-existing national average, but the position of the elite, urban and cosmopolitan segment of the population that runs the national institutions in society, government, and the economy.

We find that the homogenization of America into a bland, national mode as subgroups differences across classes, regions, and other categories

disappear is not generally occurring (see also Dison, 1984; Cutler, 1985; Shapiro and Page, 1984). However, among the minority of items that show shifts in subgroup differences, these items tend to show massification rather than differentiation.

While massification is not a general phenomenon, the second part of the massification proposition is supported in that society has tended to move towards the liberal side of the social structure. Structurally we defined the progressive or modern sector of society as the better educated, those living in metropolitan areas outside of the South, and members of younger cohorts (see Davis, 1986 for elaboration). For most items their means shifted towards the attitudes and behaviors shared by this avant garde group and away from the position held by the rear guard (the less educated, older, rural Southerners). Since the shift for most items tended to be across all groups, this pattern agrees with the general liberal movement hypothesis introduced above, but does not confirm the convergence part of the massification hypothesis.

The cohort replacement hypothesis states that change occurs with the replacement of older, less educated cohorts with younger, better educated cohorts. While in its simplest, most mechanical form the model merely indicates that change of an unspecified nature will occur as the distribution of cohorts inexorably shifts from older to younger cohorts, it is usually applied in contemporary American society to explain the growth of liberal attitudes. Overall the model works quite well, explaining a statistically significant amount of the shifts observed on the GSS. The model does have limitations however. It can not explain all that is going on and in particular its demographically set dynamics can explain only slow, cumulative change - not short term surges when they occur. Second, during the GSS period



while cohort was pushing in a liberal direction, there was a statistically significant age/period effect pushing back in a conservative direction. If we accept this as a contemporary period effect, we come to a partial understanding of the liberal plateau described above. In part the flattening of the general liberal trend comes about because cohort-education is still (on average) pushing items upwards in a liberal direction, while period is pushing items in a conservative direction and thereby canceling out the cohort change. (Of course the situation is more complex than this and varies by cluster and items, but these countervailing forces appear to explain part of the contemporary picture.)

Two other models of social change which have not yet been subjected to detailed examination are:

4. Discrete historical events drive change.
5. Reform cycles create generational waves of change and constancy.

When cast broadly enough it is impossible to deny that events lead to changes. Even the cohort model is driven by the different events/circumstances that characterize the socialization phase of each successive cohort. Similarly the economic peaks and valleys of the business cycle can be deemed as events. We refer however to relatively distinctive (if not totally unique) historical occurrences as opposed to cumulative, secular changes or to the general milieu of a period. The impact of this category of events is undeniable and numerous examples can be cited, such as the drop in confidence in the federal executive branch as a result of Watergate disclosures (Smith, Taylor, and Mathiowetz, 1980), the doubling of support for more defense spending after the Afghanistan invasion (Smith, 1986a), a lasting 10% point increase in approval of a Catholic for president after Kennedy's

election, and the well-known effects on presidential popularity of foreign crises (Dautrich, 1986). Unfortunately it is often difficult to model such events, since many are either unique (such as the election of the first Catholic president in 1960), are qualitatively distinct even while part of a larger class of events (e.g. comparing Watergate to other scandals such as Sherman Adams, Bobby Baker, or Abscam), or at least unique during the period subject to empirical study (e.g. comparing the Afghanistan and Baltic occupations). Also it is not well-known what type of events affect what dependent variables to what degree (but the presidential popularity research has obtained some generalized understanding). While the analysis in Appendix 5 indicated that such effects are not common, they are clearly needed to understand certain time trends.

Most speculative of all, is the cycle of reform hypothesis that suggests that American society periodically switches between periods of activist reform and eras of conservative consolidation (Smith, 1985b). Such theories are commonly advanced in history, sociology, and political science and appear to have a descriptive validity for the last century and a half of American history. But they are difficult to empirically demonstrate because of the large number of years involved in the cycle, the lack of hard data--especially before the advent of public opinion polling in the mid-thirties, and uncertainty over what mechanisms supply the periodicity (among the explanations are organic rest-activation, problem solving blockage, political generations and various combinations). While the GSS pattern is quite consistent with this model, no definitive test of its validity is as yet possible (Smith, 1985b).

Of course these models, while conceptually distinct, may well be working in tandem to shape trends. We already alluded to how cohort and

period effects are partially cancelling out one another since the mid-seventies. A specific example of a combination of cohort and period effects is Duncan's (1985) analysis of trends in support for the legalization of marijuana. The analysis shows a) a slow and steady increase in support across more recent cohorts as well as b) a period effect in the sixties that dramatically increased support for legalization among the cohort that was college-aged around 1970, thereby widening the cohort difference between this cohort and earlier groups, and c) a period effect that is uniform across all cohorts in the late seventies. Similarly, Davis has demonstrated that a model that incorporates economic fluctuations and structural changes in marital composition can explain changes in general happiness from 1973 to 1984 (Davis, 1984 and Smith, 1985d).

### Conclusion

The findings cited above (as well as many equally important discoveries that we have been forced to omit) have emerged from the sociological imagination of hundreds of researchers. They have mined the GSS with a varied combination of theoretical leverage, number crunching, and imagineering. Their efforts have been aided (or at least shaped) by several basic design features of the GSS. First, the content of the GSS has been described as sociologically eclectic, a banquet for secondary analysts, a Wishbook for social scientists, and a smorgasbord. It has aimed at being both relevant and diverse, trying to reach many of the important research niches of the social sciences. Its wide and varied use attests to the success of this feature. Second, the GSS has an extensive and detailed set of demographics. The GSS not only includes all basic current demographics on respondents, but also has a rich selection on family background and the attributes of spouses. These demographics often contain great detail, especially in the areas of work and religion. Their inclusion has of course permitted studies of intergenerational transmittances and marital interactions, as well as other demographic models. Third, the GSS regularly replicates. This replication strategy allows both time-trend studies of social change and the pooling of studies in order to examine subgroups. These basic design features of the GSS - replication, demographics, and breadth, along with other features such as national representativeness, availability, and data quality have allowed the hundreds of scholars who have worked with the GSS to produce a rich and wide-ranging set of findings. Finally, one relatively new design feature of the GSS, cross-national comparisons, should appreciably influence research in the near future. Planned international collaboration started in 1982 between the

GSS and the ALLBUS in West Germany and has now expanded to nine nations (the US, Germany, England, Australia, Austria, Italy, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Hungary). Thus, future investigation will not only be able to examine the workings of contemporary American society, but will be able to compare societal processes in the United States to those of other nations.

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