

## GENERAL LIBERALISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN POST WORLD WAR II AMERICA: A SUMMARY OF TRENDS\*

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**ABSTRACT.** There has been a general shift towards liberalism during the post World War II period. A plurality of attitude trends have moved in the liberalism direction. There is, however, some evidence that this liberal shift has weakened, but not reversed during the last decade. Topical disaggregation shows that the liberal movement has not been uniform across subjects. Attitudes towards abortions, civil liberties, race relations, and religion have moved most consistently in the liberal direction while crime/violence and spending/taxation items have showed more conservative trends.

The main causes of the general liberalism trend were modernization and liberal idealism assisted by the New Deal Realignment and institutional leadership. The main countervailing forces to liberalism were found to be stagnation, taxation level, and crime. Despite the waning of liberalism in recent years there is no evidence to support the idea that most liberal advances over the past four decades will be reversed in the immediate future.

The general liberal hypothesis contends that over the last four decades or so attitudes in the United States have been largely moving in a liberal direction and that the general liberal drift of sundry attitudes is not coincidental but has followed from some common, shared causes. Two recent statements of the general liberal hypothesis present the proposition as follows:

During the great depression of the 1930s, active political opinion in most rich countries moved several degrees to the left. This did not mean that many (or indeed any) great nations voluntarily voted into office any very left-wing governments in the next 40 years. But it did mean that it became easier to lead almost every individual political party from its own left of centre. The 40 years during which the active pressure was thus from the left created many muddles....Those 40 years of forward march by the left also brought some great human and technical advances.... - (*The Economist*, Aug. 21, 1976.)

I would say that there is solid empirical ground for suspecting that the changes observed here [increased support for civil liberties] were not isolated changes in these particular attitudes, but part of a general movement including all sorts of (issues) of the liberalism/dogmatism variety (not economic liberalism), including civil liberty, racial prejudice, women's right, tolerance of nudity and sexual experimentation.... - (Anonymous Referee quoted in Davis, 1975.)

Although the general liberalism hypothesis has been popularly entertained by numerous political commentators and scholars, it has not been subjected to systematic and empirical examination. There have of course been many studies of attitude change of particular topics (e.g., race relations, feminism, and civil liberties) that have detected liberal trends, but there has been little cross-topical examination and synthesizing about the nature, causes, and extent of general liberalism. In fact, the general liberalism hypothesis has often been studiously avoided. Political scientists studying changing patterns of electoral participation, voting, and attitude consistency have explicitly or implicitly ignored net ideological shifts in attitudes (Nie *et al.*, 1976,p.195; Nie and Rabjohn, 1979, pp. 144 -

145; and Bishop *et al.*, 1979, pp.188- 189). Others have resisted considering the general liberal hypothesis because of data limitations or interpretive complexities (Schlitz, 1970 and Duncan *et al.*, 1973,p. 115).

We will attempt to test the general liberal hypothesis by examining liberalconservative trends on a large number of applicable attitudes during the postWorld War II period in order to see if they show a general movement in the liberal direction. Next, we will extend our analysis of general liberal trends by studying (a) the periodization of change to see if the direction and magnitude of the attitude changes have been consistent over the last four decades or if there have been notable subperiod variations in direction and/or magnitude and (b) the areas of change to see if trends have been similar over various topics or if there have been major differences within areas of interest. Finally, after looking at the pattern of topical changes and the timing of trends, we will attempt to identify the causal factors and changes that are powering and shaping the attitude trends.

## I. THE LIBERAL/CONSERVATIVE CONTINUUM

It would be desirable to have a succinct yet comprehensive definition of liberalism and explicit standards to judge whether an issue tapped the liberal/ conservative continuum and to fix the liberal and conservative side of the issue. Unfortunately liberalism is a conceptual tar baby that becomes more entangling and shapeless as one struggles with it. The concept has changed significantly over time, has no authoritative, orthodox bible, does not have a tightly reasoned and logically developed ideology, and is riddled with contradictions and ambiguities because of historical, social, and political singularities and interactions.<sup>1</sup> Because of these problems, we will not attempt to develop definitive and rigorous criteria for measuring liberalism.

Instead we will classify issues and positions as liberal/conservative by comparing issues to (1) a list of liberal/ conservative attributes and (2) archtypical liberal/conservative reference groups. After this initial classification of issues and positions, we will compare the assigned items to liberal and conservative groups in the general population.

First, we surveyed contemporary liberalism (variously described as interventionist, reform, social, new, etc. liberalism to differentiate it from earlier *laissez faire* or classical versions) and made a list of its prime attributes. The list is far from comprehensive and ignores the problem that these attributes are not always complementary and occasionally contradict one another. Accepting these limitations we found contemporary liberalism is (1) reformist, opting for change and rarely satisfied with the status quo, (2) democratic, favoring a maximization of electoral rights (e.g. one-man, onevote and outlawing the poll tax), (3) libertarian, supporting full extension of civil liberties such as free speech and the right to assemble, (4) regulatory and interventionist, backing the management of business and the economy by the government, (5) centralist, using the federal government to set and enforce national standard and guide state and local governments, (6) humanitarian, establishing a social welfare system for the care and protection of society in general and the lower class in particular (e.g., Social Security, Medicare, CETA, etc.), (7) egalitarian, advocating as a minimum equal treatment for all and as a maximum of equal condition for all, and (8) permissive, tolerating and often approving of nontraditional life styles and practices (e.g., homosexuality, nudity, the use of marijuana, etc.) We took this list of attributes as rough guides and evaluated (a) whether issues were related to any of these attributes, and (b) if related, judged the liberal/conservative position on the issue.

Next, we reexamined the issues and asked whether they had usually been defined in liberal/conservative terms during the post World War II political scene. Although considering in general the alignment of various political parties, personalities, and groups, we focused in particular on the Americans for Democratic Action as an

archetypical liberal group and the American Conservative Union as a conservative model. We asked (a) if the issue had typically been framed in liberal versus conservative terms in the political arena, and (b) checked in particular the positions of the ADA and ACU to clarify and verify the liberal and conservative poles of an issue.

TABLE I

Summary of trends<sup>a</sup>

Item <sup>b</sup>	Liberal response	Years	Number of points	Trend (change per annum)			
					Liberal direction	Constant Nonlinear	Conservative direction
<i>GSS Items</i>							
Abortions for defects	Allow	1962 - 1978	12	0.0211			
Abortions for mother's health	Allow	1962-1978	11	0.0110			
Abortions for unwanted pregnancy	Allow	1965-1978	9	0.0229			
Abortions for poor	Allow	1962-1978	11	0.0266			
Abortions for raped	Allow	1965 - 1978	8	0.0181			
Abortions for unmarried	Allow	1965 - 1978	8	0.0230			
Church attendance	Infrequent	1964-1978	8	0.0154			
Housing of elderly	In children's home	1957-1978	5	0.0066			
Ideal number of children	Fewer	1936-1978	23	0.0058			
More children	No	1957-1978	7	0.0017			
Communist teach college	Yes	1954-1977	6	0.0159			
Atheist teach college	Yes	1954-1977	6	0.0139			
Socialist teach college	Yes	1954-1974	4	0.0217			
Divorce laws	Easier	1968 - 1978	6	0.0104			
Vote for woman president	Yes	1937 - 1978	16	0.0101			
Woman working	Approve	1938 - 1978	8	0.0146			
Getting ahead	Luck, other	1973-1977	4	0.0096			

Marijuana	Legalize	1969 - 1978	7	0.0201
Hunting	Don't hunt	1959-1977	4	0.0048
Euthanasia	Approve	1947-1978	4	0.0058
Atheist book in library	Allow	1954-1978	7	0.0114
Communist book in library	Allow	1954-1978	7	0.0142

Item <sup>b</sup>	Liberal response	Years	Number of points	Trend (change per annum)			
					Liberal direction	Constant Nonlinear	Conservative direction
Socialist book in library	Allow	1954-1974	4	0.0184			
Gun ownership	No	1959-1977	11	0.0028			
Birth control reformation	Permit	1959-1977	9	0.0111			
Police hit abusive	No	1968-1978	5	0.0036			
Pornography an outlet	Yes	1970-1977	5	0.0325			
After-life	None	1944-1978	8	0.0020			
Ban on school prayers	Support	1971-1977	4	0.0113			
Premarital sex	Not always wrong	1972-1978	6	0.0124			
Having black to dinner	Yes	1963-1977	9	0.0173			
Object to school with a few blacks	No	1958-1978	16	0.0098			
Object to school half black	No	1958-1978	16	0.0132			
Object to school mostly black	No	1958 - 1978	16	0.0038			
Neighborhood integrated	Yes	1966-1978	21	0.0188			
Miscegenation laws	No	1963-1977	9	0.0243			
Vote for black for president	Yes	1958-1978	13	0.0192			
Blacks shouldn't push	Disagree	1963 - 1977	10	0.0055			
School Integration	Yes	1956-1977	15	0.0184			
Neighborhood segregation	Disagree	1963-1977	7	0.0114			
Russia	Not dislike	1953-1977	12	0.0229			
Sex education	Approve	1970-1977	4	0.0328			

Atheist speak	Allow	1954 - 1978	7	0.0121
Communist speak	Allow	1954-1978	7	0.0139
Socialist speak	Allow	1954-1974	4	0.0095
Birth control information for teenagers	Allow	1974-1977	3	0.0145

Item <sup>b</sup>	Liberal response	Years	Number of points	Trend (change per annum)			
					Liberal direction	Constant Nonlinear	Conservative direction
Wiretapping	Disapprove	1969-1978	5	0.0326			
Homosexual teach college	Allow	1973-1977	4		X		
Homosexual relations	Not always wrong	1973-1977	4		X		
Homosexual book in library	Allow	1973-1977	4		X		
Crime spending	Too much	1971-1978	8		X		
Educational spending	Too little	1971-1978	8		X		
Police hit murderer	No	1968-1978	5		X		
Police hit escapee	No	1968 - 1978	5		X		
Pornography	For adults	1973 - 1978	4		X		
Black to home	Have had	1973 - 1977	4		X		
Open housing	Favor	1973-1978	4		X		
Homosexual to speak	Allow	1973-1977	4		X		
Spending for foreign aid	Too little	1971-1978	8			X	
Party identification	Democratic	1956 - 1978	18			X	
Police hit assailant	No	1968 - 1978	5			X	
Pornography informs	Agree	1970-1978	5			X	
Pornography attacks morals	Disagree	1970 - 1978	5			X	
Extramarital sex	Not always wrong	1970-1977	5			X	

School busing	Favor	1970 - 1978	9	X	
Women not suited for politics	Disagree	1974-1978	5	X	
Women should stay home	Disagree	1974-1978	4	X	
Gun registration	Favor	1959-1977	16	X	
Communism	Not worst govt.	1973-1977	4		-0.0217
Hitting	Dissapprove	1968-1978	5		-0.0138
Hit robber	Disapprove	1968-1978	5		-0.0117

Item <sup>b</sup>	Liberal response	Years	Number of points	Trend (change per annum)			
					Liberal direction	Constant Nonlinear	Conservative direction
Spending for arms	Too much	1971-1978	9				-0.0116
Spending for cities	Too little	1971-1978	9				-0.0139
Spending for drug addiction	Too little	1971-1978	9				-0.0073
Spending for environment	Too little	1971-1978	9				-0.0058
Spending for welfare	Too little	1971-1978	9				-0.0150
Spending for health	Too little	1971-1978	9				-0.0041
Spending for blacks	Too little	1973-1978	7				- 0.0089
Spending for space	Too much	1971-1978	9				-0.0262
Capital punishment	Oppose	1953-1978	19				-0.0052
Pistol	Doesn't own	1959-1978	11				-0.0044
Police hitting	No	1968-1978	5				-0.0043
Pornography causes rape	No	1970-1978	5				-0.0087
Taxes	Not too high	1947 - 1977	22				-0.0013
X-rated movie	Seen	1973-1978	4				-0.0195
Hit women beater	No	1968-1978	5				-0.0133
Hit demonstrator	No	1968-1978	5				-0.0017
Courts	Not tougher	1965 - 1978	12				-0.0220
United Nations	Remain in	1951-1978	14				-0.0027
<i>SRC Election items</i>							
Women's rights	Equal roles	1972-1978	4	0.0092			

Urban unrest	Solve cause	1968 - 1976	5	0.0142	
Government guarantee jobs for all (5 points)	Yes	1956-1974	4	0.0084	
jobs for all (agree/disagree)	Agree	1964-1974	3	0.0122	
jobs for all (7 points)	Yes	1972-1978	6		-0.0096
Govt. Medical Care (5 points)	Yes	1956-1974	3	0.0165	

Item <sup>b</sup>	Liberal response	Years	Number of points	Trend (change per annum)			
				Liberal direction	Constant	Nonlinear	Conservative direction
Govt. Medical Care (agree/disagree)	Agree	1964-1974	3	0.0265			
Govt. Medical Care (7 points)	Yes	1970-1978	6		X		
Govt. help blacks (5 points)	Agree	1956-1974	4			X	
Govt. help blacks (agree/disagree)	Agree	1964-1974	3	0.0102			
Govt. help blacks (7 points)	Yes	1970-1978	7				-0.0035
Desegregation vs segregation	Desegregation	1964 - 1978	6	0.0117			
Open housing	Yes	1964-1976	5	0.0195			
Govt. help desegregate hotels/restaurants	Yes	1964-1972	4	0.0212			
Busing	Favor	1972 - 1976	3	0.0154			
Abortions	Never forbidden	1972-1978	3		X		
Federal aid to schools (5 points)	Yes	1956 - 1974	4			X	
Federal aid to schools (agree/disagree)	Agree	1964-1974	3				-0.0046
Rights of criminals	Protect	1970-1978	5				-0.0073
Kept utilities/housing private	Disagree	1956-1974	4				-0.0053
Govt. too powerful	No	1964-1978	7				-0.0202
Federal govt. help school integration	Yes	1964-1978	7				-0.0126

<sup>a</sup> The items were selected in the following manner. All attitudinal and behavioral measures on the GSS that appeared at least three times were evaluated as being related to the liberal/conservative continuum. No elaborate theoretical model of liberalism or conservatism was employed. The items were evaluated simply by asking whether there was a commonly assumed liberal or conservative position to the question. This procedure led to the classification of 87 questions as related to the liberal/conservative continuum. This evaluation was then checked by crosstabulating all attitudes and behaviors on the GSS by two indicators of liberalism/conservatism: respondent's self-ranking on a seven-point scale of liberalism/conservatism and presidential vote in 1972. This led to the deletion of five items. Approval of hitting a drunk or a child beater did not correlate with either measure, and religious intensity did not correlate in three of four cases. International involvement was dropped because of changing historical references and a mixed association with liberalism. Self-ranking was dropped because it was being used as a criterion variable. Three variables were kept despite their lack of a significant association with either measure: approval of tax level, spending on crime, and approval of police hitting murder suspect. In addition, seven items related to liberalism/conservatism were added. These were: living near blacks, approval of Russia, euthanasia, planning more children, owning a pistol, birth control information for teenagers, and support for extended families. A number of other items which showed a mixed relationship to liberalism/conservatism and were judged tangential were not added. Chief among them were: (1) the 13 quality-of-children values that had four variables related to both measures of liberalism/conservatism, four variables related to neither measure, and five variables related to one measure but not the other, (2) the nine anomia items that showed opposite signs or one insignificant association for each item, (3) the three misanthropy items which were not significant in two of six cases, and (4) the 13 confidence items which had insignificant associations in 5 of 26 associations. This weeding and transplanting led to the final selection of 89 items from the GSS as measures of liberal/conservative attitudes or behaviors. A similar process was used to locate 22 items from the SRC's American National Election Studies. While some of the included and excluded items undoubtedly represent errors of both commission and omission, the vast majority of items have both a *prima facie* and empirical association with the liberal/conservative continuum.

<sup>1</sup>More detailed data analysis of the GSS items appears in Smith (1980). Wordings and marginals for the GSS items appears in Davis *et al.* (1980). For the election wordings they can be found in various codebooks 1956-1978 and for the 1974 NORC point that replicates the election questions, the wordings and marginals are available from the author.

After having evaluated the issues in terms of their association to major liberal precepts and their relationships to actual political divisions, we checked our evaluation of issues against two indicators of liberalism/conservatism in the general public-self-ranking on a seven-point scale of liberalism/conservatism and presidential vote in 1972. We then compared these three evaluations to each other and selected from the General Social Surveys and American National Election studies the items listed in Table I. (See note to Table I for more particulars.)

We do not claim this to be a definitive list of liberal/conservative issues. It obviously cannot be since it is restricted to a rich but limited number of survey items and one can think of numerous important liberal/conservative issues that are not represented in this selection. Even considering the restricted set of issues that we were evaluating, there are undoubtedly errors of commission and omission. Furthermore, there is the possible bias of presentism. Although unintentional we have undoubtedly tended to judge issues from current standards and where these judgments are notably influenced by present conditions and not applicable to the post World War II period as a whole, we have probably erred in giving the present disproportionate weight. This possibility is clear in the case of checking issues against self-ranked liberalism and presidential vote since this was based on associations prevailing in the seventies only. Still we doubt that these dangers of presentism have led to too much bias. In fact we find that the final list of issues we selected turned out to be very similar to a list of liberal goals that Max Lerner (1957) offered twenty-two years ago:

(I)t (liberalism) has developed in its concrete struggles an armory of facts and argument and a passion for battle - against the 'octopus' of the big corporation, against rate discrimination by railroads, for free public education, for civil liberties, for



Negro equality for religious freedom, for land conservation, for trade-union organization, for aid to farmers at the mercy of a shifting market, for state control of public utilities for public use of natural resources, for public development of hydroelectric power, for wage-and-hour legislation, for women's rights, for Social Security.

## II. A SUMMARY OF TRENDS

Table I contains a rich and varied collection of serial data. There are from three to twenty-three data points per item with an average of 7.5 readings per item. The series cover from 3 to 42 years and average a little over ten years. Unfortunately the data are far from optimum in their coverage. Not only are many possible topics not covered at all, but the serial coverage is sketchier and shorter than it ideally should be. We would like to have annual readings for all items from 1940 or earlier to the present. Instead the series often have long gaps between readings and often cover only the later part of the period under study (3 series start in the 1930s, 3 in the 1940s, 30 in the 1950s, 35 in the 1960s and 40 in the 1970s). While these shortcomings in the data hamper a definitive analysis of attitude trends and particularly handicap our examination of periodization, the data are adequate to portray the general outline and nature of liberal trends in the United States since World War II.

Table I contains a description of the issues/behaviors covered, the side of the issue or behavior defined as liberal, the years covered by the series, the number of data points included in the series, and a trend analysis of the series. To assess the trends, a series of models are fitted to the data. First, we try the constant model that all data points are simply random variations around a stable proportion. An estimate of the pooled (or average) proportion is made and we test to see if the observed data points vary significantly from it. If this model is rejected, then the linear model that all data points are random variations around a linear trend is tried. Four outcomes are possible: (1) constant, (2) significant linear component, (3) significant linear trend, and (4) non-constant, non-linear. The constant model is accepted when there is no significant variation from the constant or pooled proportion (i.e., the probability is 0.05 or greater). The significant linear component model is accepted when (a) the constant model is rejected, and (b) the linear model is also rejected, but (c) the linear model is a significant improvement over the constant model (i.e., the difference between the linear and constant models is significant at the 0.05 level). The significant linear trend model is accepted when (a) the constant model is rejected, and (b) there is no significant variation from the linear fit (i.e., the probability is 0.05 or greater). The nonconstant, non-linear model is accepted when (a) the constant model is rejected, (b) the linear model is rejected, and (c) the improvement is not significant between the linear and constant models. (For more details on the tests used here, see Taylor, 1976.)

In Table I we grouped together those trends showing linearity (significant linear components and significant linear trends) and then separated them into trends moving in a conservative or a liberal direction. For the trends that show a net linear direction, the annual change in proportions is given. Liberal trends are positive and conservative trends are represented by negatives (i.e., change from the liberal position).

Totaling across all items we see that change has been overwhelmingly in the liberal direction. Of the 111 trends analyzed here, 52.3 percent moved in a liberal direction, 11.7 percent were constant, 10.8 percent showed no net direction (non-constant, nonlinear), and 25.2 percent shifted in a conservative direction.<sup>2</sup> Of the 77.5 percent of the items showing some net trend, liberal shifts outnumbered conservative shifts two to one. In addition, liberal trends were not only more common, but also stronger than the conservative trends. The average change per annum for liberal items was 1.45 percent while conservative items averaged only 1.02 percent per annum.<sup>3</sup> In brief, liberal trends have outpaced conservative trends in both frequency and magnitude indicating that attitudes have shown a general liberal shift during the post World War II period.

The liberal edge has not been so preponderant as to treat it as monolithic, however. Only slightly over one-half of all items showed a clear liberal shift and a non-trivial one-quarter moved in a conservative direction. In order to examine in more detail the general liberal trend we will analyze trends by subperiods and topics. These refinements should help us to understand the balance between liberal and conservative trends and also the cause of general liberalism

### III. PERIODIZATION

To look at variations by subperiod we would ideally like to chart annual changes in the magnitude and direction of trends. Unfortunately the series are not sufficient for this purpose. Instead we will partially examine the question of periodization by examining the general liberal reversal hypothesis that liberal trends that predominated since World War II began to reverse themselves in the 1970s and that conservative trends are now predominating.

The general liberal reversal hypothesis has been widely touted in organs of political commentary and public opinion analysis<sup>4</sup> and has even received some systematic and empirical examination by scholars (Davis, 1978; Davis, 1980; Ladd, 1978; Ladd, 1979). We have examined the reversal hypothesis by looking at trends over all years and then within the seventies (Table II). Among all items for all years we found previously that there was a liberal conservative edge of 0.271 (proportion liberal-proportion conservative). If we then exclude from analysis items which do not have a time series in the seventies, we find that for the remaining items over all years the difference is 0.243. If we however look at just the points in the 1970s, we find (1) many more items show change or no net direction (partly a function of a shorter time span and fewer data points), (2) among the changing items conservative trends outnumbered liberal trends ( - 0.020), and (3) the liberal trends were weaker (1.30 percent per annum) than conservative trends (1.51 percent per annum). This indicates that among measured trends in the seventies, there has been a virtual balance between liberal and conservative trends. This however does not demonstrate whether there was a shift from generally liberal trends before the seventies to a more conservative mixture thereafter since many of these trends do not have readings before the seventies and therefore pre/post 1970 comparisons are not possible. We can partly overcome this problem by looking at the third set of figures in Table II. Here we include only those surveys with a series in the seventies and at least one pre-1970 point. Looking at all years we see that the liberal-conservative balance is 0.477. If we remove all pre-1970 points the balance falls to 0.093 suggesting that trends in the seventies were more conservative (or less liberal) than before then. This conclusion is further supported by the fourth set of figures in Table II which includes only those items that have separate series both before and after the beginning of the seventies. The liberal-conservative balance before the 1970s is 0.621 and during the 1970s it drops to 0.241.<sup>5</sup>

TABLE II

Comparison of trends pre and post-1970

	Liberal trend	Constant	Non-constant/ Non-linear	Conservative trend	N
All items					
All years	0.523	0.117	0.108	0.252	(111)

Excluding items without series in 1970s

All years	0.505	0.131	0.101	0.262	(99)
1970s only	0.222	0.343	0.192	0.242	(99)

Excluding items without series in 1970s & without pre-1970 points

All years	0.677	0.046	0.077	0.200	(65)
1970s only	0.262	0.354	0.215	0.169	(65)

Including items with series in both pre-1970s & 1970s

All years	0.724	0.000	0.069	0.207	(29)
Pre-1970s	0.759	0.000	0.103	0.138	(29)
1970s	0.448	0.138	0.207	0.107	(29)

Other evidence of a waning of liberalism comes from examining the slope of trends that either remained liberal or conservative before and after the 1970s. Of the 11 items that remained liberal eight had lower annual rates of increase and three had higher rates. For the two consistent conservative trends the annual rates both increased.

In brief, the evidence while not strong enough to support the notion of a general liberal reversal or tide of conservatism does indicate a waning of liberal trends and waxing of conservative. If we look at all series that we have available for the seventies, we find that conservative trends actually nose out liberal trends and that a majority of trends showed no net direction during these years. Because the representativeness of our 99 items is unknown, it is difficult to interpret this pattern. It does seem, however, that a liberal plateau may have been reached for many items and among those items showing directional trends conservative runoffs have increased.<sup>6</sup>

#### IV. TOPICS

Next, we classified our items into major areas of topical interest to see if the propensity toward liberalism was generally uniform across various topics. Our categorization indicates that there have been some major topical variations (Table III). Among all items liberal trends outnumbered conservative trends by 0.271, but among the topics used in Table III the differences ranged from a liberal high of 1.000 to a conservative high of -0.750. This wide variation in the balance of liberal and conservative trends suggests that while there has been a general liberal trend, it has not influenced all areas equally, but rather has shown pronounced variation by topic.<sup>7</sup>

At the liberal end of the scale we find that religious items, abortion, civil liberties, race relations and feminism have each shown a majority of liberal trends and almost a complete absence of conservative countertrends (only 2 out of 48). On these issues most attitudes moved in a liberal direction, or at least had no net change of direction. Next comes sexual morality and social welfare which had a plurality of liberal trends and a net liberal balance. Tied evenly at one liberal trend versus one conservative trend are our two international items. Finally, crime/violence and taxes/spending items show a tilt toward the conservative.<sup>8</sup> We will not at this point attempt to

explain why this pattern of differentiation has occurred, but we will return to this question after we have discussed the major causes of general liberalism and use that analysis to help explain the variation in topical trends.

TABLE III

## Distribution and trends by topical areas

Topics	Liberal-conservative index <sup>a</sup>	Trends				
		Liberal direction	Constant	Non-linear	Conservative direction	Total
Religion	1.000	1.000	0.0	0.0	0.0	(3)
Abortions	0.857	0.857	0.143	0.0	0.0	(7)
Civil liberties	0.750	0.750	0.025	0.0	0.0	(12)
Race relations	0.619	0.714	0.095	0.095	0.095	(21)
Feminism	0.600	0.600	0.0	0.400	0.0	(5)
Miscellaneous	0.545	0.727	0.0	0.091	0.182	(11)
Sex	0.250	0.417	0.167	0.025	0.167	(12)
Social welfare	0.111	0.444	0.111	0.111	0.333	(9)
International	0.000	0.500	0.0	0.0	0.500	(2)
Crime/violence	-0.294	0.235	0.118	0.118	0.529	(17)
Taxes/spending	-0.750	0.000	0.167	0.083	0.750	(12)
All	0.271	0.523	0.117	0.108	0.252	(111)

a Liberal-conservative index is calculated by subtracting the proportion of trends moving in a conservative direction from the proportion of trends moving in a liberal direction. For example, for crime/violence, it is  $0.235 - 0.529 = -0.294$ .

## V. CAUSES OF GENERAL LIBERALISM

In general, attitudes tended to move in a liberal direction during the last forty years. The movement has not been uniform across time nor across topics, but the general liberal direction of attitudes is clear. The question that naturally arises is what factors and forces fueled the growth of general liberalism, why has that growth declined in recent years, and why has the rate of growth varied dramatically by topic.

In looking at the development of America over the last century we find two basic forces that have aided the growth of liberal attitudes: modernization and liberal idealism. We also find that there were less fundamental but very important forces that assisted liberalism in the post World War II period in particular: the New Deal realignment and institutional leadership. Finally, we find that for various reasons these forces have not been

constant in their impact, but that this impact has varied by time and topic, due to countervailing developments in the economy and society such as stagflation and crime. The net result of the interaction of basic social forces and more particular pro-liberal and pro-conservative factors has been the balance of liberal/conservative trends by period and topic that we observed earlier.<sup>9</sup>

One of the basic societal developments shifting attitudes in a liberal direction has been modernization. Modernization is a comprehensive term for the generalized economic development and reorganization that America has been undergoing since the beginning of the nineteenth century. It initially moved America from an agricultural and handicraft preindustrial economy to an industrial economy and since the beginning of the twentieth century has been moving America into an 'advanced industrial' or 'post-industrial' economy. This economic transformation has drastically restructured society in general and liberal/conservative attitudes in particular.

Economic modernization has pushed attitudes in a liberal direction in several ways. Economic modernization increasingly rests on rationalization including technological innovation, scientific progress, professionalization, and the efficient organization of people and knowledge. This tendency aids liberalism in two ways. Rationalization, seeking to maximize output by application of principles of management and science, undermines illiberal attitudes based on such fallacies as race superiority and prejudice. It also necessitates an upgrading of the labor force through an expansion of college-level education and college-level education promotes liberal attitudes.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, by continually demonstrating that new ways of production or organization work better, that tasks can be done in more efficient ways (or even done away with entirely), it paves the way for experimentation and innovation in other areas of life as well.

Modernization also leads to centralization. It strengthens the power and influence of national elites and the national mass media and weakens the position of local power brokers and opinion leaders. It likewise gives people a more cosmopolitan perspective reducing parochial viewpoints.

Modernization has also increased the complexity and interrelationship of society. This has strengthened the power of the federal government, vis-a-vis, that of the states and localities and has increased the power of government against that of the private sector.

Finally, it has greatly increased the per capita wealth and income so that the vast majority of the population is securely above the subsistence level and a plurality are experiencing genuine affluence. This has aided liberalism in several ways. It has nurtured an atmosphere of permissiveness. Without the specter of scarcity hovering closely overhead, people tend to be more tolerant of others, less wedded to rigid traditionalism, and less needful of scapegoats to blame their plight on or a subservient caste to feel superior to. Affluence thus creates a margin of generosity that favors the development of liberal attitudes. In brief, modernization in America has aided liberalism through its promotion of rationalization, innovation, centralization, statism, and prosperity.

A second basic factor that assists the development of liberalism is America's liberal idealism.<sup>11</sup> 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, the Bill of Rights, and numerous state constitutions. As Lincoln noted, America was "*conceived* in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men

are created equal" (emphasis added). Of course, just because great liberal ideals are innately present in American society does not mean that Americans have always lived up to or followed these principles. Americans have shown a well-developed talent to cling to liberal ideals in theory and violate them in practice. Yet as often and as seriously as Americans have violated these principles, they have never in any substantial number been willing or able to forsake the ideals themselves. This frequently creates a tension between liberal norms and illiberal attitudes. Often Americans are able to live with the contradictions, but the liberal ideals continue to exert a pressure to bring attitudes and folkways into line with the principles. The degree to which the pressure is successful in changing attitudes varies considerably by time, place, and issue. Often it is imperceptibly eroding illiberties, but at times it can sweep away illiberal practices in a torrent of idealism.

Of course while distinct, these two factors, modernization and liberal idealism, were not entirely independent of each other. America's liberal birthright probably accelerated the pace of modernization and certainly helped shape its form and direction. Modernization in turn has increased the pressure that liberal idealism has borne down upon contradictions of those principles. The increase in education has made the contradictions more apparent to the public and more difficult to live with. The centralization of leadership, knowledge, and the media brought national norms into regions and localities that had contently lived with their contradictions or even forgotten the ideals. It forced these areas to face up to their inconsistencies. Initially their reaction was often a violent rejection to the intrusion and a redoubling of support for the local conventions and customs regardless of their inconsistency with established liberal ideals. Eventually, however, the result was to modify these attitudes and practices and move closer to the basic liberal creed.

In addition to these main forces moving America in a liberal direction, there have been many more particular and specific factors that have aided the growth of liberalism during the last forty years in particular. These include the New Deal realignment of the Great Depression. The ascent to power of Franklin D. Roosevelt with his new Democratic coalition of immigrants and blacks, southerners and urbanites, laborers and intellectuals moved America several notches to the left. First, it operationalized a set of social welfare measures that became very (especially Social Security and national minimum wage/maximum hour legislation) and deeply entrenched in the government, the economy, and society in general. These provided an important starting point for the expansion and extension of similar measures during the post World War II period. Second, it led to the political and economic socialization of a new generation of citizens in New Deal/Fair Deal policies and programs and this made entering cohorts during the fifties and sixties more liberal than the preceding generations. Third, the New Deal put together a political coalition that was dominated by constituencies and interest groups that backed liberal policies (especially as white southern influence in the coalition faded) and was able to maintain a legislative majority during most of the post World War II period.

In brief, the New Deal, New Democratic coalition not only spurred liberalism by enacting certain liberal centerpieces in the thirties, but laid a groundwork for continued liberal development by (1) building a foundation on which additional programs could be easily added, (2) creating a liberal coalition that was able to dominate politics during most of the next forty years, and (3) spawning a political generation more liberal than its predecessors.

Liberalism was also assisted by the strong leadership role played by the Supreme Court mainly and to a lesser extent by other institutions of government and society. Clearly without the intervention of the Supreme Court in such areas as race relations, abortions, and voting rights, the progress of liberal attitudes would have been much slower. Similarly the general willingness of the presidents to support the Supreme Court's decisions through the use of federal troops and executive powers reinforced the impact of the Court's decisions.

Numerous other specific causes for particular attitude changes can be specified but the two general historical forces, modernization and liberal idealism, coupled with the specific historical impact from the New Deal realignment and institutional leadership from the Supreme Court and other organizations, are probably the most important and most general causes of the growth of general liberalism during the post World War II period.<sup>12</sup>

Given the casual framework advanced above, we ask next why liberalism has waned in recent years. We note first that modernization has continued, but its influence has been weaker in recent years than previously. Stagflation and energy crises have eaten away at the present and prospective affluence of Americans and probably reduced the margin of generosity. Second, the shortfall of attitude and practices to ideals still exists, but many of the contradictions have been narrowed. On other issues the points at issue have become conflicts between differing liberal principles (e.g., a fair trial versus a free press) and therefore not formulable as a struggle between liberal ideals and illiberal actualities. While it would be overly optimistic to state that many of the inconsistencies have been removed, they have been reduced and contradictions are temporarily less apparent to the public. As a result, the pressure to reconcile is less at present. Third, the cohort jolt of the New Deal and Great Depression has pretty much worked its impact on society and is exerting a weaker influence than previously. Fourth, the special role of the Supreme Court has dimmed (1) with the loss of certain liberal jurists (Warren, Douglas), and (2) with a decline in civic support for the Court and other institutions of government. Without a solid base of broad popular legitimacy the Supreme Court is less likely to try to lead public opinion forward. Fifth, liberalism has created many specific causes for its own slowing. Social welfare programs have absorbed a growing percentage of the national income and reduced the disposable share of people's incomes. Inefficiencies in management and misdirected programs have highlighted the limits of government's ability to solve social ills. Finally, there may be a natural cycle of reform periods or movements. There have been sufficient examples of alternating periods of reform and retrenchment in American history to suggest that perhaps liberal reform movements cannot indefinitely maintain their momentum. Perhaps reform movements or public attitudes have an internal dynamic that leads to a natural alternation of reform with stability.<sup>13</sup>

In brief, there has been a general weakening of the forces supporting liberalism. As a result liberal shifts in attitudes have slowed or stopped. In addition, other forces have developed that have pushed select attitudes in a conservative direction. While not as fundamental as the basic liberal forces of modernization and liberal idealism such conservative factors as stagflation, rising taxes, and crime have been strong enough to halt or reverse liberal trends. The net prognosis seems to be that America has once again entered a period of stability and will remain there for the immediate future.

Given that the forces delineated above have tended to move attitudes in a liberal direction, the question arises why certain topics have moved overwhelmingly in a liberal direction while others have shown a net conservative shift (Table III). The basic answer is that this wide differentiation is not really surprising but rather the expected pattern. Liberalism as we noted above is not a tightly knit logically integrated set of principles, but a loosely aligned set of ideals that contain a fair amount of internal differences. As a result, we would not expect all liberal attitudes to be moving as an unit, but rather expect considerable variability by topic and substance. Given this likelihood for differential development, it is not hard to specify some of the reasons for the different liver of liberal shifts by topic.

The conservative shift of spending priorities in the seventies can be explained by (1) the rising burden of taxation, (2) the weakening of economic growth, (3) the disillusionment at Great Society promises, and (4) the fact that spending does not present a clear conflict between liberal ideals and illiberal attitudes. These factors

(and undoubtedly others) reduced the level of public support for liberal social welfare programs although the rank order of spending priorities still has a basically liberal profile (Smith, 1979 and Davis, 1978, 1979). The conservative direction of crime and violence measures can largely be credited to a large upsurge in violent and property crime coupled with a decrease in judicial punishments (Stinchcombe et al., 1980). The impact of the crime wave was strong enough to counteract both the general drift toward liberalism and numerous Supreme Court decisions protecting the rights of the accused. The topics that moved most in the liberal direction were those that (1) had strong backing from the Supreme Court (e.g., abortions and race relations), (2) were relatively dollarfree not explicitly requiring a large expenditure of government funds (e.g., civil liberties and abortions), (3) clearly conflicted with the liberal ideals of the American creed (e.g., race relations and civil liberties), (4) were supported by well-organized social movements (e.g., the civil rights movement), and (5) were not counteracted by some strong countervailing trend as criminal justice and spending/taxation were. It is of course possible to go into more detailed analysis why certain topic enjoyed relative strength and how the various trends complemented or occasionally obstructed one another, but we will not attempt to go into such detail here. It is sufficient to observe that some of the basic reasons for the relative strength and weakness of various topical trends have been specific and other reasons also exist.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Examination of a large and varied body of attitude and behavior trends over the last several decades supports the general liberal hypothesis that there has been a shift toward liberal attitudes during the post World War II period. A limited examination of the trend by period also found some support for the liberal reversal hypothesis which argues that the general liberal trend weakened and reversed during the seventies. The data suggest however that the reversal is not as extreme as the hypothesis posits and involves a waning of liberal trends to a point where there are about an equal number of liberal and conservative trends and a large number of trends showing no net direction rather than a wholesale conversion of previous liberal trends into conservative trends. Topical disaggregation of the general liberal trend also shows that it is not monolithic but has varied in direction by subject area. Although there was a general social impetus to move attitudes in a liberal direction, this was not so strong and uniform as to affect all topics and overcome special countervailing tendencies.

We found the main causes of the general liberalism trend were modernization and liberal idealism assisted by the New Deal realignment and institutional leadership. The main countervailing forces to liberalism were found to be stagflation, taxation level, and crime. Because of a weakening of the general and specific causes of liberalism and the strengthening of the counteracting conservative trends, general liberalism has been slowed, stopped, and to a limited degree reversed during the seventies. For the immediate future the outlook is for a continued period of liberal dormancy. Since however cohort effects are still generally in a liberal direction (that is, cohort turnover favors the growth of liberal attitudes) and the basic underlying forces behind liberalism still exist, there is no clear indications of a general conservative trend that would roll back the bulk of liberal attitude change achieved during the last forty years.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For general discussions of liberalism (historically and contemporarily), see Hartz, 1955; Ladd, 1969; Dolbeare and



Dolbeare, 1971; and Gerber, 1975. For a fuller listing of the voluminous literature on this subject, see the bibliographies in the general works cited above. Among the more recent additions to the literature, see Mansfield, 1978; KeUey, 1977; Horowitz, 1977; and Ladd 1976-77.

<sup>2</sup> One is cautioned not to overemphasize the precise distribution of trends since it is the arbitrary product of the mixture of items included. As we win see presently a different balance of items per topic would produce a considerably different distribution of trends. If we had used the eleven topics employed in Table 11 and had given equal weight to each topic rather than each item, we would have found that 56.8 percent of the trends were liberal. This aggregation would have been no less (or more) arbitrary than the procedure actually employed. There is no satisfactory way to aggregate trends. Ideally one would want to take a sample from all liberal/conservative trends, but there is no systematic way to do this. To the extent that this list overrepresents or underrepresents certain trend strata, we have a biased distribution. While it is impossible to determine the representativeness of these items, we feel that any distortion is insufficient to negate the basic observation that liberal trends have notably outnumbered conservative trends during this period.

<sup>3</sup> Liberal trends also tended to fit the linearity model better than conservative trends. The  $r^2$  between time and liberal trends averaged 0.790 but was only 0.660 for time and conservative trends. Both liberal and conservative trends were three-fourth bnear components and one-fourth linear trends.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Ladd, 1979, p. 73 'All conservative...', 1976; Range, 1979; *Time*, 1979, p. 17, 'Is America MovingRight...',1979; Bethell, 1979, 'Conservative Trend', 1978; Gelman *et al.*, 1977.

<sup>5</sup> As we reduce the number of trends from 111 to 29 to meet various criteria of comparison, the mixture of items changes and the basis for generalization becomes narrower.

<sup>6</sup> Other periods of rapid or slow liberalization may have existed during the last forty years but the data are insufficient to document such periodical variations.

<sup>7</sup> Most of the spending/taxation items referred to particular topics and as an alternative means of classification it is possible to parcel out these items among the other topics. Doing that results in the following changes in the liberal-conservative index in Table II:

Comparison of trends in liberal-conservative index

	Liberal-conservative Adjusted	Index change
Religion	1.00	
Abortion	0.857	
Civil liberties	0.750	
Race relations	0.545	(-0.074)
Feminism	0.600	
Miscellaneous	0.417	(-0.128)
Social welfare	-0.214	(-0.325)
Sex	0.250	
International	-0.400	(-0 400)
Crime	-0.316	(-0.022)

<sup>8</sup> Since various topics are clustered in certain period more than others and we have shown that trends have varied by the period, it is necessary to try to separate topical difference from period effects. Once again we find that our data fall far short of the ideal thereby making this disaggregation difficult. We find, for example, that no items in the civil liberty or social welfare topics have trends in both the pre- and post-1970 periods and that the tax and spending topic has only one

item that spans the subperiods. To deal with this problem we partially isolated the effects of topic and periods by (a) looking at the topical distribution of trends within the 1970's only (for which 99 of our original 111 trends have series), and (b) testing to see if the rankings of topics changed appreciably for the 29 items that had both pre- and post-1970 trends. We found that there was a fair degree of stability in the rankings of topics across periods. The mean liberal-conservative index of topics for all years correlated with the index for the seventies  $r = 0.855$ . Similarly the indexes for the pre-1970 trends and the post-1970 trends (29 items) correlated  $r = 0.820$ . Because of these associations we can accept Table 111 as giving a fairly accurate ranking of the relative liberal/conservative balance of topics and assume that minimal distortion is caused by the clustering of some topics in certain subperiods.

<sup>9</sup> This section is based on an extensive review of articles on specific attitude change ('case studies') and of numerous works on recent societal trends. Works consulted appear in the bibliography but are not cited in detail in the text.

<sup>10</sup> We do not explore why education associates with liberalism, but note that it is widely demonstrated in the case study literature.

<sup>11</sup> We are here faced with the disagreeable necessity of using 'liberalism' in two senses. The liberalism and conservatism we referred to initially are both generally within a 'liberal tradition' or 'liberal idealism' that pervades American society.

<sup>12</sup> One cause that we did not find support for was the idea of a socio-demographic group (e.g., the college educated) acting as a leading edge for reform. While group differences often exist, they tend to remain constant over time. There is little evidence of a leading group moving rapidly in a liberal direction with other groups catching up later on.

<sup>13</sup> The American experience suggests that during periods of reform liberal goals are advanced but during periods of stability the previously gained goals are not lost, but usually maintained. The pattern is a cyclic movement in which each peak (reform period) and trough (stable period) is higher (more liberal) than the previous peak or trough (Hofstadter, 1955; Forcey, 1961, Schlesinger, 1939; Reichley, 1971; Carleton, 1948; Faulkner, 1939).

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