

ATOP A LIBERAL PLATEAU? A SUMMARY OF TRENDS SINCE WORLD WAR II

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It is clear that our national mood has made more than a shift to conservatism; it threatens, in fact, to lurch to the far right [James M. Wall, Christian Century editor (1980)].

Since the 1980 elections, it has become all too clear that American society and the state are plunging day by day more deeply into right-wing reactionism. We confront an emergent power structure and political culture that are openly racist, antifeminist, and also antiliberal [Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, Feminist Studies (1981)].

There is a significant turn to the right . . . . Above all, you can see it in the fact that the right has seized the political and intellectual initiative . . . [Dissent (1979)].

There is a general consensus that American society moved to the right during the last decade (Hodgson, 1978; Kilpatrick 1978; Burnham, 1979; Smidt and Penning, 1981; Entman and Paletz, 1980). Both liberals and conservatives agree that the public and government began to reject standard liberal nostrums for social ills favoring instead the self-reliant faith healing of conservatives. Liberals have bemoaned the advances of the New Right; the bankrolling of Viguerie and NiCPAC, the moralizing of the Rev. Falwell and his Majority, the intellectual thrusts of the neo-conservatives and the American Enterprise Institute. Conservatives chortle over the victories of Proposition 13, the torpid thought of liberal intellectuals, and electoral advances. But just because everyone says it, does not make it so. While there is a solid element of veracity in the laments and halleluiahs about a conservative tide of the seventies, this notion is really no more than a half-truth.

Looking at the sweep of post World War II history, we find a wide ranging and sustained growth in liberalism. As Table 1 documents, on abortions, race relations, sexual morality, sex roles, tolerance of deviant groups, and other topics public support grew for the liberal position.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Details on the selection and definition of liberalism and of the times series used to measure it are presented in Smith, 1982.

Overall, 59 percent of the time series showed some shift in the liberal direction, 27 percent had a conservative tilt, and the remaining 14 percent were either constant or bounced around showing no net direction. Not only were liberal trends more common than conservative trends, they were also stronger. Liberal trends tended to have stronger linear associations with time (an average  $r^2$  with time of .72 for liberal trends) than conservative trends (average  $r^2 = .54$ ) and the liberal trends were on average of greater magnitude (average slope equals 1.2 percent per annum) than conservative trends (0.8 percent per annum).

Although trends since World War II have been largely in a liberal direction, two factors have contributed to the recent belief in a conservative tide. First, the liberal shift was not universal, nor was the liberal margin uniform across topics. As Table 2 shows, three of eleven areas we analyzed showed net conservative trends (i.e., the proportion of items moving in the conservative direction was greater than the portion shifting in the liberal direction). Religion, abortion, civil liberties, feminism, and race relations all had overwhelming liberal margins. Social welfare, sexual morality, and our miscellaneous category have basic liberal orientations, but many items had either no trend or counter changes in the conservative direction. On crime and violence conservative trends edged out liberal trends. Increased support for judicial punitiveness in dealing with crime was especially prevalent while support for violent responses to social disorder and crime typically decreased or remained constant. The other major area showing a net conservative shift was taxing and spending. While the public tends to be basically liberal (prospending) for social welfare measures (e.g., health care, education, cities), this support has weakened and opposition to taxes has grown. This trend is reflected in the increased sentiment that the government wastes tax dollars

and that government is too powerful. Lower confidence and trust in government also are partly results of this shift (Miller, 1983; Lipset and Schneider, 1983). Thus while the overall trend has been in a liberal direction and most areas show a decided liberal shift crime/violence and taxing/spending (Figure 1) have been decided exceptions to the general liberal movement (see also, Gallup, 1979; Willits, Bealer, and Crider, 1977; Montero, 1978; Smith, 1982).

The second underpinning for the conservative tide hypothesis is the changes in liberal trends that occurred in the 1970s. Looking at the items that had time series with readings both before and after the early seventies (71 trends), we find that 86 percent of items with liberal trends for their entire time series showed less liberal movement in the seventies. At first this shift may seem to confirm the conservative tide hypothesis. However, what occurred was not a shift from liberal trends to conservative (only three liberal trends reversed direction during the seventies from liberal to conservative, one other item made this switch earlier, and one conservative trend reversed direction to liberal during the seventies). Rather, most items either leveled off or slowed their rate of increase around 1973-1975. Instead of a conservative tide, the period since about 1973 can be better described as a liberal plateau (see also Grimes, 1982; Harris, 1982; Entman and Paletz, 1980; Smith and Spinard, 1981). The clearest picture of this pattern comes from the civil liberty and abortion items. As Figure 2 illustrates support for abortion and tolerance of deviants grew for ten to twenty years prior to the early seventies then showed virtually no change during the last decade. On other items liberal trends decreased but did not disappear. For example, in Figure 3 we see that liberal trends on sex education and pornography as an outlet for sexual tensions moved rapidly in the liberal direction before slowing in the early to mid-seventies. This pattern is typical for race

items. Most race items (see examples in Figure 4) had slower growth after 1972 (e.g., school integration, voting for a black for president, and racial intermarriage), although some such as open housing continued as rapidly as before. In brief, while the last decade saw a highly notable shift in attitudes from the post World War II pattern and a significant slowing of the general liberal movement, liberal advancements in public attitudes during the last three decades were not being rolled back.

Given that the last decade can be best described as a liberal plateau, what caused this slowing of American liberalism?<sup>2</sup> Certainly many specific explanations can be given for the shift: Vietnam's draining of energies from domestic concerns, a reaction to sixties' extremists such as SDS and the Black Panthers, failures of the Great Society, declines in the civil rights movement, rising crime, and stagflation. All these, as well as others unmentioned undoubtedly contributed to the slowing of liberalism. There is solid evidence for example that the upsurge in crime was the major factor behind the preponderance of conservative trends in this area. It is intriguing to go beyond these specific causes however, to consider a cyclical model of American history that posits that periods of reform are naturally and inevitably followed by periods of reaction (see Smith, 1982; Schlesinger, 1980). During these periods of conservative ascendancy reforms enacted during the preceding liberal surge are consolidated. Some of the more avant garde proposals may be rolled back while other reforms modestly progress, but basically these periods preserve liberal gains rather than either advancing or repealing them. The mechanism underpinning the cyclic nature of these alternating periods of reform and reacton are not well understood. Reform movement seem to lose

<sup>2</sup>Reasons for the general liberal movement are offered in Smith, 1982.

momentum because (1) major goals have been achieved, (2) the leadership tires or becomes part of the establishment, (3) society reacts to the continual changes and seeks stability and order, and (4) enacted reforms must be made to work. Without understanding the mechanism that triggers the cyclic changes we can not be sure that we have a true self-sustaining cycle rather than a series of historical coincidents. It does seem however that this cyclical explanation may help to explain the liberal plateau of the last decade.

If we are atop a liberal plateau, then how did the notion of a great conservative tide come about? Four explanations seem important: (1) the conservative trends in taxing and crime have been overgeneralized to liberalism as a whole, (2) the liberal loss of momentum has been misinterpreted as reversal of direction, (3) the political gains in 1978 and 1980 of out-of-office conservative challengers against liberal incumbents has been interpreted as an ideological revolt rather than essentially a "throw the bums out" reaction to uncontrolled stagflation, and (4) the gains of conservatives in new political techniques (PACs, direct mailing) and intellectual dialogue have been often rashly seen as reflecting changes in public sentiments. In brief, changes in limited (but important) areas of public opinion and in areas outside of mass public opinion (e.g., group activity and intellectual exchanges) have been wrongly used to confirm a conservative tide in mass attitudes.

Liberalism has not drowned in a conservative tide. Liberal progress on many issues (race relations, feminism, civil liberties, social welfare, religion, and sexual morality) slowed or even stopped growing during the seventies, but few items shifted to a conservative direction. Two topics did show basic conservative movement. Support for firmer measures towards crime have been increasing since the mid-sixties (well before the alleged

conservative tide of the seventies). Also, support for spending for social welfare, while still leaning in a liberal direction (i.e., more favoring increased spending than decreased spending), weakened during the seventies. This partial shift contributed to the dramatic rise in the mid-seventies of what Terry Clark has called the New Fiscal Populists on many American cities. At the same time defense spending increased from 1971 to 1978 before soaring in 1980 during the immediate aftermath of Afghanistan. By 1982 however, support for military spending had fallen back to 1978 levels. In sum, the seventies saw notable shifts from the general liberal movement of the post World War II period, but these shifts were typically into neutral and not reverse.

TABLE 1  
(continued)  
SUMMARY OF TRENDS<sup>a</sup>

Item <sup>b</sup>	Liberal Response	Years	Number of Points	Trend (change per annum)			Direction
				Liberal Direction	Conservative Constant	Nonlinear	
Police hitting	No	1968-1980	6			X	
Party identification	Democratic	1956-1982	21			X	
Police hit assailant	No	1968-1980	6			X	
Pornography informs	Agree	1970-1980	6			X	
Extramarital sex	Not always wrong	1970-1982	8			X	
Spending for welfare	Too little	1971-1982	11			X	
Spending for crime control	Too much	1971-1982	11				-.0081
Pornography attacks morals	Disagree	1970-1980	6				-.0035
Communism	Not worst government	1973-1982	6				-.0167
Hitting	Disapprove	1968-1980	6				-.0093
Hit robber	Disapprove	1968-1980	6				-.0078
Spending for arms	Too much	1971-1982	11				-.0124
Spending for cities	Too little	1971-1982	11				-.0084
Spending for drug addiction	Too little	1971-1982	11				-.0035
Spending for environment	Too little	1971-1982	11				-.0077
Spending for health	Too little	1971-1982	11				-.0026
Spending for blacks	Too little	1973-1982	8				-.0061
Spending for space	Too much	1971-1982	11				-.0111
Capital punishment	Oppose	1953-1982	23				-.0073
Pistol	Doesn't own	1959-1982	13				-.0043
Pornography causes rape	No	1970-1980	6				-.0068
Taxes	Not too high	1947-1982	24				-.0028
X-rated movie	Seen	1973-1980	5				-.0125
Hit women beater	No	1968-1980	6				-.0099
Hit demonstrator	No	1968-1980	6				-.0014
Courts	Not tougher	1965-1982	14				-.0189
United Nations	Remain in	1951-1982	15				-.0027
<b>SRC Election Items</b>							
Women's rights	Equal roles	1972-1978	4	.0109			
Urban unrest	Solve cause	1968-1976	5	.0142			
Government guarantee							
jobs for all (5 points)	Yes	1956-1973	4	.0077			
jobs for all (agree/disagree)	Agree	1964-1973	3	.0195			
jobs for all (7 points)	Yes	1972-1980	7				-.0095
Government Medical Care (5 points)	Yes	1956-1973	3	.0132			
Government Medical Care (agree/disagree)	Agree	1964-1973	3	.0265			
Government Medical Care (7 points)	Yes	1970-1978	6	.0040			
Government help blacks (5 points)	Agree	1956-1973	4				-.0040
Government help blacks (agree/disagree)	Agree	1964-1973	3	.0184			
Government help blacks (7 points)	Yes	1970-1978	7			X	
Desegregation vs. segregation	Desegregation	1964-1978	6	.0107			
Open housing	Yes	1964-1976	5	.0195			
Government help desegregate							
hotels/restaurants	Yes	1964-1972	4	.0230			
Busing	Favor	1972-1980	4	.0167			
Abortions	Never forbidden	1972-1980	4			X	
Federal aid to schools (5 points)	Yes	1956-1973	4				-.0046
Federal aid to schools (agree/disagree)	Agree	1964-1973	3			X	
Rights of criminals	Protect	1970-1978	5				-.0082
Keep utilities/housing private	Disagree	1956-1973	4				-.0053
Government too powerful	No	1964-1980	8				-.0194
Federal government help school integration	Yes	1964-1978	7				-.0126

<sup>a</sup>For details see Smith, 1982.



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
<b>GSS Items</b>						
Abortions for defects	Allow	1962-1982	14	.0161		
Abortions for mother's health	Allow	1962-1982	13	.0085		
Abortions for unwanted pregnancy	Allow	1965-1982	11	.0179		
Abortions for poor	Allow	1962-1982	13	.0222		
Abortions for raped	Allow	1965-1982	10	.0123		
Abortions for unmarried	Allow	1965-1982	10	.0174		
Church attendance	Infrequent	1964-1982	10	.0124		
Housing of elderly	In children's home	1957-1982	6	.0075		
Ideal number of children	Fewer	1936-1982	24	.0061		
Communist teach college	Yes	1954-1982	8	.0149		
Atheist teach college	Yes	1954-1982	8	.0133		
Divorce laws	Easier	1968-1982	7	.0038		
Vote for woman president	Yes	1937-1982	17	.0103		
Woman working	Approve	1938-1982	11	.0128		
Marijuana	Legalize	1969-1980	11	.0146		
Hunting	Don't hunt	1959-1982	6	.0059		
Euthanasia	Approve	1947-1982	6	.0071		
Atheist book in library	Allow	1954-1982	9	.0105		
Communist book in library	Allow	1954-1982	9	.0129		
Gun ownership	No	1959-1982	13	.0023		
Birth control information	Permit	1959-1982	10	.0093		
Police hit abusive	No	1968-1980	6	.0042		
Pornography an outlet	Yes	1970-1980	6	.0261		
After-life	None	1944-1980	10	.0017		
Ban on school prayers	Support	1971-1982	5	.0094		
Premarital sex	Not always wrong	1972-1982	7	.0103		
Having black to dinner	Yes	1963-1982	11	.0141		
Object to school with a few blacks	No	1958-1982	17	.0087		
Object to school half black	No	1958-1982	17	.0131		
Object to school mostly black	No	1958-1982	17	.0045		
Neighborhood integrated	Yes	1966-1982	22	.0163		
Miscegenation laws	No	1963-1982	11	.0171		
Vote for black president	Yes	1958-1982	14	.0176		
Blacks shouldn't push	Disagree	1963-1982	12	.0080		
School integration	Yes	1942-1982	17	.0157		
Neighborhood segregation	Disagree	1963-1982	9	.0131		
Russia	Not dislike	1953-1982	13	.0066		
Sex education	Approve	1970-1982	5	.0191		
Atheist speak	Allow	1954-1982	9	.0112		
Communist speak	Allow	1954-1982	9	.0125		
Birth control information for teenagers	Allow	1974-1982	4	.0127		
Wiretapping	Disapprove	1969-1982	6	.0192		
Homosexual teach college	Allow	1973-1982	6	.0076		
Educational spending	Too little	1971-1982	11	.0092		
Black to home	Have had	1973-1982	6	.0077		
Open housing	Favor	1973-1980	5	.0074		
Homosexual to speak	Allow	1973-1982	6	.0050		
Spending for foreign aid	Too little	1971-1982	11	.0019		
School busing	Favor	1970-1982	10	.0022		
Women not suited for politics	Disagree	1974-1982	6	.0105		
Women should stay home	Disagree	1974-1982	5	.0123		
Gun registration	Favor	1959-1982	18	.0011		
Homosexual relations	Not always wrong	1973-1982	6			X
Homosexual book in library	Allow	1973-1982	6			X
Police hit murderer	No	1968-1980	6			X
Police hit escapee	No	1968-1980	6			X
Pornography	For adults	1973-1980	5			X
Getting Ahead	Luck/other	1973-1982	6			X

TABLE 2  
DISTRIBUTION OF TRENDS BY TOPICAL AREA

Topics	Liberal-	Trends				N
	Conservative Index <sup>a</sup>	Liberal Direction	Constant	Nonlinear	Conservative Direction	
Religion	1.000	1.000	0.0	0.0	0.0	(3)
Feminism	1.000	1.000	0.0	0.0	0.0	(5)
Civil Liberties	.889	.889	0.0	.111	0.0	(9)
Abortion	.857	.857	.143	0.0	0.0	(7)
Race Relations	.762	.857	0.0	.048	.095	(21)
Social Welfare	.444	.667	0.0	.111	.222	(9)
Miscellaneous	.334	.556	.111	.111	.222	(9)
Sexual Morality	.167	.417	.167	.167	.250	(12)
Crime/Violence	-.294	.235	.118	.118	.529	(17)
International	-.334	.334	0.0	0.0	.667	(3)
Taxes/Spending	-.580	.167	0.0	.083	.750	(12)
ALL	.318	.589	.065	.075	.271	(107)

<sup>a</sup>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  $0.235 - 0.529 = -0.294$ .

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FIGURE 1

Conservative Trends

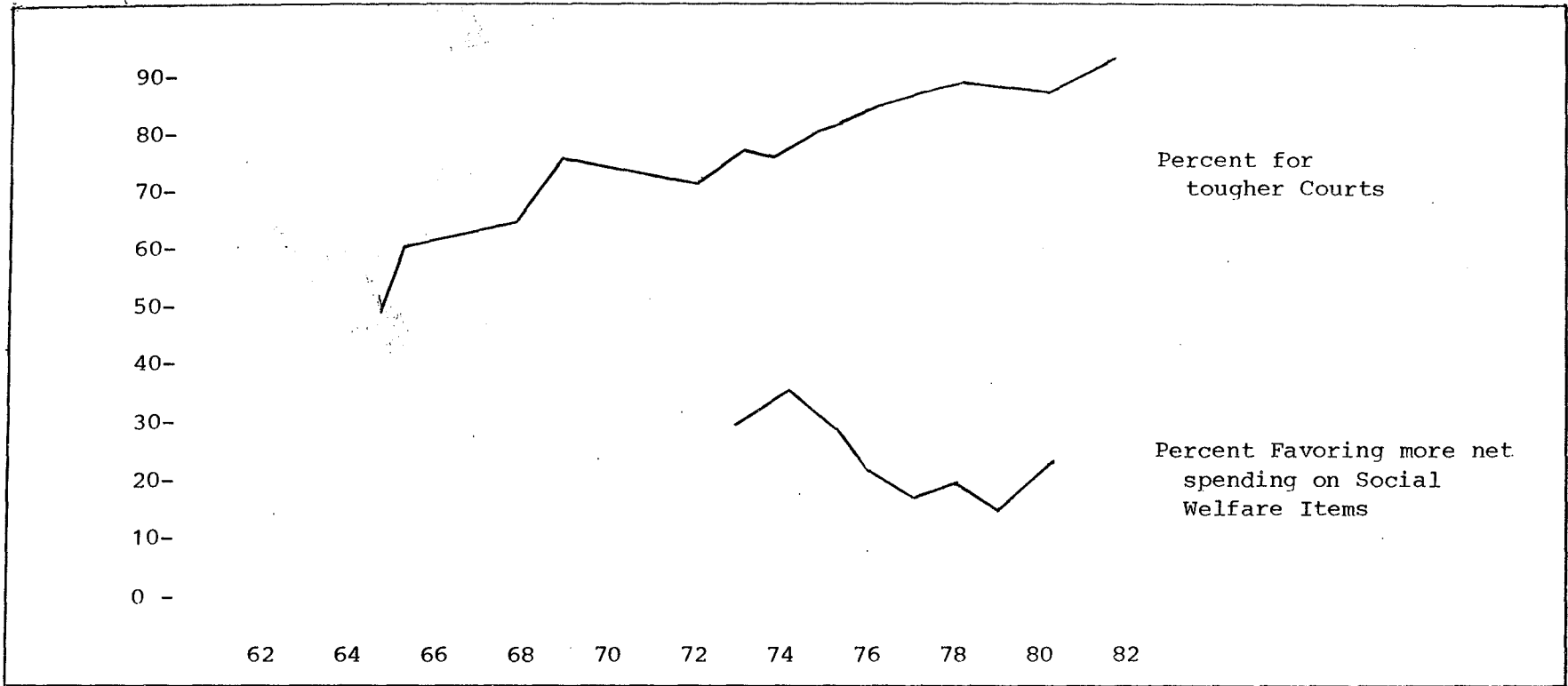


FIGURE 2

Liberal Trends: Plateaus

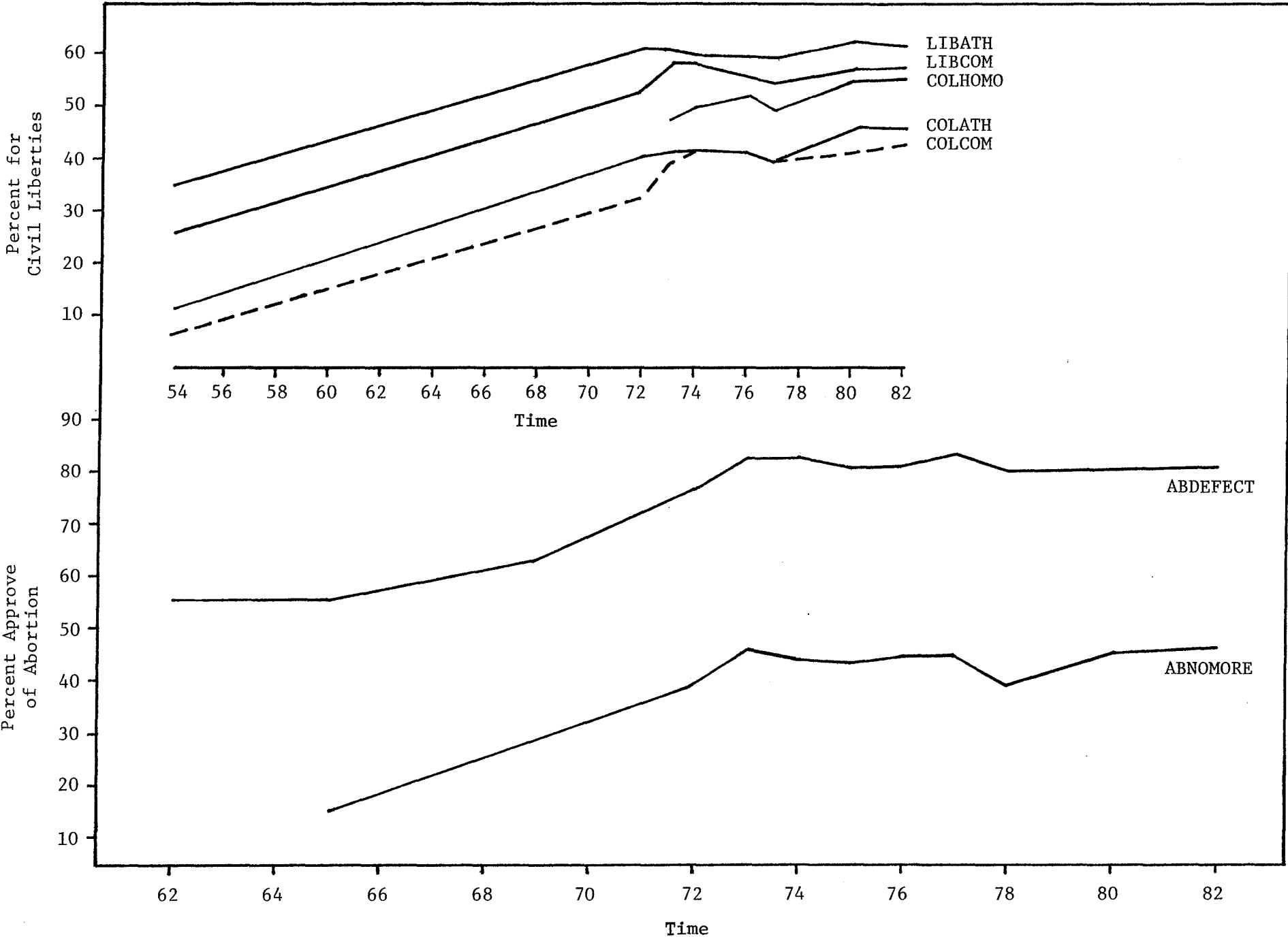


FIGURE 3

Liberal Trends: Deaccelerations

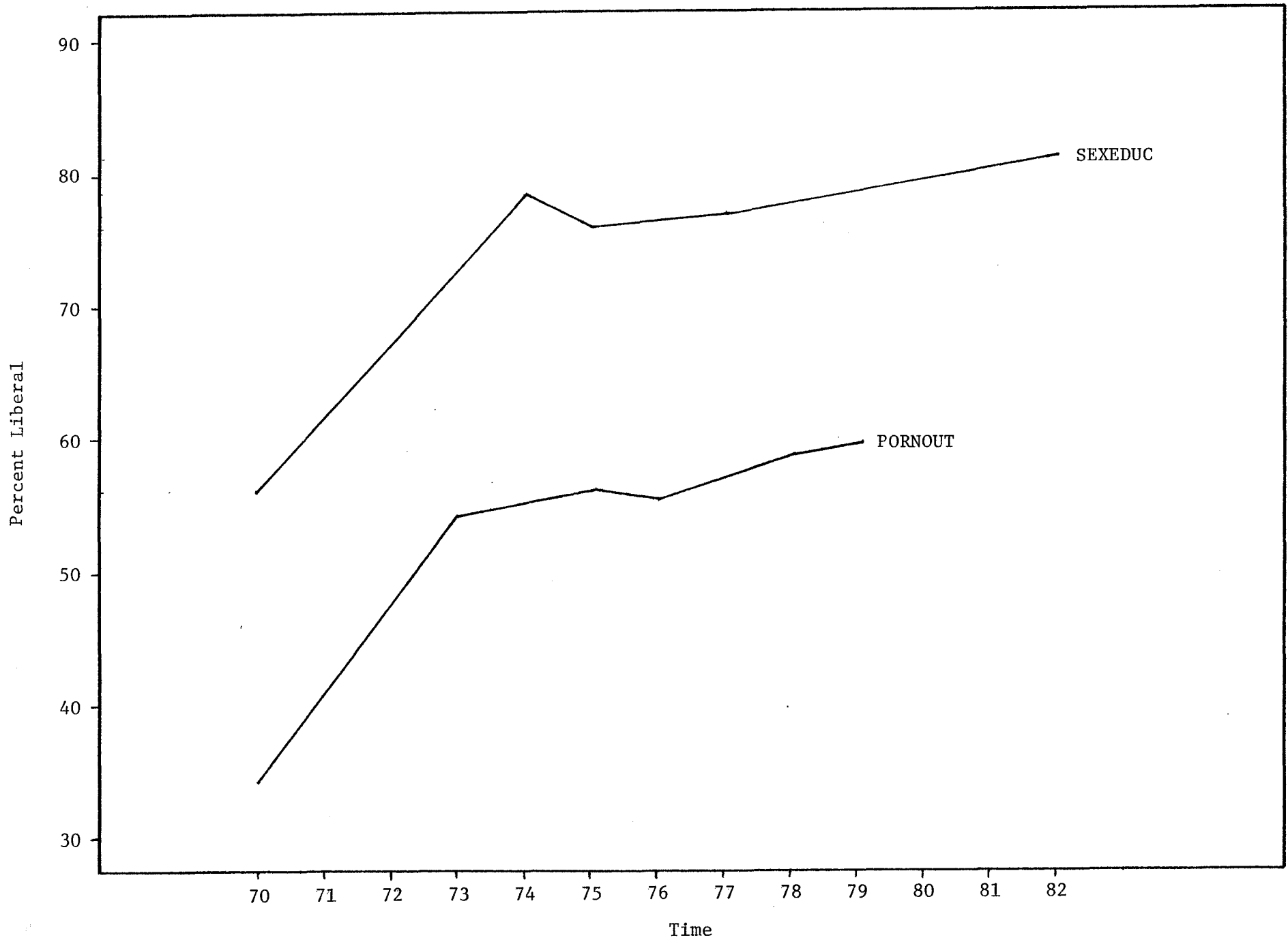


FIGURE 4

Liberal Trends: Race Relations

