

POLITICAL GENERATIONS AND SHIFTS IN PUBLIC OPINION

By William G. Mayer

How and why does public opinion change? One possibility, of course, is that people change their minds. Acting under the influence of political events or the media or their own experiences, they gradually come to have different views about the Vietnam War or abortion or civil rights. But a second possibility is that mass attitudes are transformed because the "adult population" (the sampling universe for most public opinion polls) gradually comes to consist of a very different set of individuals. An older generation of adults, who hold one set of opinions, gradually die off and are replaced by a different generation, who profess a very different set of ideas. Public opinion might then change in the aggregate even if no one person changed his or her mind. These two explanations are not mutually exclusive, of course.

This second theory of political change has long exercised a particular fascination for observers of American politics. "Among democratic nations," Alexis de Tocqueville declared in *Democracy in America*, "each new generation is a new people." More recently, generational succession has played a pivotal role in analyses of party identification and partisan realignment, in the cyclical theories of Arthur Schlesinger and Frank Klingberg, in studies of how immigrants adapted to their new environment, and in the interpretations of American history developed by Richard Hofstadter and Samuel Huntington.

Yet, for all that, such speculations have rarely been tested on actual survey data. What effect does the entrance of a new generation, or the departure of an old one, have on the state of American public opinion? With the notable exception of party identification, this question has received surprisingly little attention from public opinion scholars.

What Shapes a Generation?

The whole theory rests on one important precondition: that the group of people born during a specific period of time (usually called a "generation" or "cohort") are characterized by some set of attitudes and opinions that differ in systematic and relatively durable ways from those held by their parents and grandparents. Two major explanations are usually given to account for such generational distinctiveness. The first places great emphasis on the processes of political socialization provided by such agencies as the family, schools, peer groups, and the mass media.

The second explanation maintains that a cohort is strongly influenced by the major public events and challenges, such as wars and depressions, that occur when it first becomes politically active and aware. Lacking a strong sense of history and a fund of previous experiences and commitments, young adults, it is argued, exhibit a particularly strong response to their first intense political involvements and ordeals, establishing a set of attitudes and worldviews that guide and shape their political behavior through the rest of their adult lives. In both cases, the core of the argument is that attitudes are characterized by some degree of inertia: that it is easier to create an attitude anew than to change one that has already been established.

Measuring the Effects of Generational Replacement

The process of generational replacement is perhaps easiest to appreciate by considering a detailed example. In both 1972 and 1983, the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago asked a national sample of respondents this question: "If your party nominated a woman for president, would

you vote for her if she were qualified for the job?" As can be seen in the chart on p. 12, during these eleven years the number of Americans who said they *would* vote for a woman candidate increased from 70% to 84%.

When we break these data down by the year in which respondents were born, it quickly becomes apparent that this change came from two distinct sources. On the one hand, of the six cohorts that were part of the adult population in both surveys, all but one show increased support for a woman candidate. (The exception is the cohort born before 1905, but this aberration may be attributable to sampling error: The 1983 figure is based on only 54 cases.) Although popular stereotypes sometimes claim that people become more conservative as they grow older, or that they grow more rigid and resistant to any kind of change, these data (and most of the other data I have examined) paint a different picture: For those born between 1935 and 1944, for example, acceptance of a woman candidate jumped from 73% to 87%. For the 1915-1924 cohort, the increase was smaller (from 69% to 78%), but still significant. Some Americans, in other words, *did* change their minds about this issue.

Yet, even after these changes have been taken into account, younger Americans were still considerably more positive about a woman candidate than were older Americans. In 1983, 89% of those born between 1955 and 1965 were ready to vote for a woman candidate, as compared to 78% of those born between 1915 and 1924, and only 50% of those born before 1905. Of equal importance, the relative sizes of these groups had changed considerably over eleven years. The youngest cohort in the chart grew from 0% to 23% of the survey sample, while the two oldest cohorts declined from 25% to 11%. Clearly, the replacement of older Ameri-

cans by younger Americans would have exerted a sizeable impact on public opinion even if no individuals had actually changed their opinions.

So both generational replacement and intracohort change were contributing to the total change in American attitudes about a woman presidential candidate. But, of the total change in public opinion between 1972 and 1983, how much was due to generational succession, and how much would have occurred without any population turnover?

In simple terms, I have estimated the effects of cohort replacement by asking what public opinion would have looked like in its absence.¹ That is to say, how much opinion change would have taken place if the composition of the population by cohort were held constant, but attitudes within each cohort were allowed to change. Specifically: in column A of the chart I show the population distribution by cohort as it existed in 1972; in column

B, I enter the cohort attitude levels from 1983. In column C, I multiply cohort distribution by cohort attitude, and then sum across all cohorts. This sum is my estimate of what public opinion would have looked like in 1983 if no generational replacement at all had occurred since 1972. By subtracting this figure from the actual population attitude at Time 2, I obtain an estimate of the effects of population turnover. In this instance, of the 14-point increase in support for a women presidential candidate, about 6 points is due to generational replacement, and 8 points can be attributed to intracohort changes.

Generational Replacement Seems Most Important on Social Issues

Using this same method, I have estimated the effects of population turnover on the responses to 25 other survey questions, which, together, measure some of the most significant changes in American public opinion over the last three decades.

A sample of these estimates is shown in the table on p. 14.

Generational replacement has proven to be a major source of opinion change for social and cultural issues. From the early 1960s to the late 1980s, population turnover usually accounted for at least 25%—and often a great deal more than that—of the total change in public attitudes on race relations, sexual mores, and the role of women, as well as on school prayer and marijuana legalization. But cohort replacement had very little effect on responses to the questions I have examined concerning foreign policy and the economy, and concerning two other issues that are often thought of as social issues, abortion and crime. Of course, few champions of generational replacement theory would claim that the hypothesis accounts for all or even most of opinion change. But it is worth noting that for all the talk about generation gaps and baby boomers, cohort replacement has had a small impact on many areas of public opinion.

Estimating the Effects of Generational Replacement: An Example

Question: If your party nominated a woman for president, would you vote for her if she were qualified for the job?

Cohort	1972			1983		
	% saying Yes	% of Sample	N of Cases	% saying Yes	% of Sample	N of Cases
1 1955-1965	—	.00	—	89%	.23	370
2 1945-1954	78%	.20	325	89%	.24	379
3 1935-1944	73%	.19	307	87%	.15	233
4 1925-1934	70%	.17	268	84%	.14	218
5 1915-1924	69%	.18	296	78%	.13	202
6 1905-1914	64%	.13	216	74%	.08	132
7 1904 or before	60%	.12	194	50%	.03	54
Total	70%	1.00	1606	84%	1.00	1588

Cohort	A	B	C (=AXB)
1	.00	89	.00
2	.20	89	17.80
3	.19	87	16.53
4	.17	84	14.28
5	.18	78	14.04
6	.13	74	9.62
7	.12	50	6.00
Total			78.27

Total change = 84-70 = 14; change due to generational replacement = 84-78.27 = 5.73; percentage change due to generational replacement = 5.73/14 = 40.9%; change due to intracohort change = 14 - 5.73 = 8.27; percentage change due to intracohort change = 8.27/14 = 59.1%.

Foreign Affairs

The estimates in the bottom half of the table do not necessarily mean that there was no relationship between age and attitude on any of these issues. In fact, I did find consistent and significant differences between older and younger cohorts in their opinions about defense spending and relations with the Soviet Union. The crucial point, however, is that these differences play almost no role at all in explaining why public opinion changes. Particularly in foreign policy, which has been characterized by several large swings in opinion over the last three decades, the clear pattern is that attitudes change because all generations respond to real-world events and conditions in very similar ways, regardless of their past histories and experiences.

Economic Issues

As for the economic attitudes I have examined, most of them are not very strongly correlated with age or generational membership. In general, younger cohorts are slightly more liberal on most economic issues than older cohorts, but the differences are seldom very large. Though the baby boom cohorts were first acclaimed for having transcended material values, then castigated for their selfish and narrow ambitions, neither charge holds up very well, at least in the kind of broad economic policy issues I have analyzed.

A partial exception to this statement can be found in an NORC question about environmental spending, where, much as Ronald Inglehart has predicted in his work on "Post-Materialism," younger generations are considerably more committed to environmental protection. Yet, even here, it was changes *within* cohorts that clearly accounted for the largest part of the total shifts in public opinion. During the energy crises and economic stagnation of the 1970s, all cohorts, including the very youngest, became less supportive of environmental spending. When the national

economic picture brightened in the 1980s, the greater enthusiasm for environmental protection was similarly shared by respondents of all ages.

Where Are We Headed?

What does all this mean for the future of American politics? One way of reading these results is that they forecast increasing liberalism on a number of important cultural issues, including race relations, the role of women (though not, it might be noted, abortion), sexual mores, and school prayer. For all of these issues, the momentum of generational replacement would seem to favor what we generally think of as liberal values in the years ahead.

One problem with such predictions, of course, is that they overlook the very important role that intracohort changes have played in all of these issues. But an even greater problem, in my judgment, is the tendency to regard a pattern like the one shown in the chart as somehow representing an inexorable process of history. It is a major mistake, I think, to believe that there is something inherent in the process of bringing up and socializing children which necessarily leads them to be more liberal than their parents about such issues as race relations, foreign policy, or sexual mores. The attitudes of entering cohorts depend on a lot of choices that parents and the larger society make, about such matters as the moral standards we teach our children, the behavior they observe in their elders, the content of the educational curriculum, and the messages in the mass media. If the curriculum in most American elementary and secondary schools now tries to avoid crude gender stereotypes, and exposes children to a variety of different role models, a long list of women's rights groups and educational watchdogs would testify that there was nothing "natural" or inevitable about that outcome.

Those who would attempt to forecast the future might pay particular attention

to the recent history of American attitudes toward marijuana. Between 1969 and 1978, the percentage of Americans who wanted to legalize marijuana increased from 12% to 30%, with generational replacement accounting for about 50% of the change. Had I written this article in 1978, someone who had seen these figures might have argued that public opinion was growing inexorably more favorable toward marijuana, and that opponents of that change could do nothing to stop it.

But the next ten years tell a very different story. Scientific evidence on the harms of marijuana smoking gradually started to accumulate; and in the early 1980s, a major public education campaign against drug usage was launched. Whatever its other limitations, that campaign has scored a major success in its effect on attitudes toward legalization. Between 1978 and 1988, support for legalizing marijuana fell by 14 percentage points, to the point where public opinion on this issue in the late 1980s began to look increasingly like it had back in 1969.

Nothing I have learned from this analysis suggests that mass attitudes are easy to change—but neither are we totally helpless. An appropriate starting point, perhaps, is to recognize that maybe Vice President Dan Quayle had a valid point, and that we ought to pay considerably more attention to the moral values portrayed in our popular culture.

Endnote

¹For a more detailed description of this method, including a discussion of why the pattern shown in the example in the chart is due to generational rather than life-cycle factors, see William G. Mayer, *The Changing American Mind: How and Why American Public Opinion Changed Between 1960 and 1988* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, forthcoming August, 1992), chapter 7.

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The Effects of Generational Replacement

<u>Survey Question</u>	<u>Time Period</u>	<u>Total Change</u>	<u>% of Total Change Due to Generational Replacement</u>	<u>% of total Change Occuring Within Cohorts</u>
NORC: (whites only)	1963-1968	4	38%	62%
Say whites do not have the right to keep blacks out of their neighborhoods	1968-1972	13	33	67
	1972-1980	9	41	59
	1980-1987	8	33	67
NORC: (whites only)	1963-1968	7	26%	74%
Oppose laws that would forbid interracial marriages	1968-1972	16	31	69
	1972-1980	8	62	38
	1980-1987	5	85	15
AIPO: Believe premarital sex is not wrong	1972-1973	22	25%	75%
NORC: Believe premarital sex is wrong only sometimes or not at all	1972-1977	9	52%	48%
	1977-1986	4	201	-101
AIPO/NORC: Would vote for a woman presidential candidate	1969-1975	25	15%	85%
	1975-1986	6	61	39
NORC: Approve of married woman who works even if her husband can support her	1972-1975	6	43%	57%
	1975-1986	7	89	11
NORC: Support legal abortion if family cannot afford more children	1965-1973	31	7%	93%
	1977-1988	-12	-14	114
AIPO/NORC: Favor death penalty for persons convicted of murder	1960-1966	-11	7%	93%
	1966-1969	9	-16	116
	1969-1973	9	-33	133
	1973-1983	13	8	92
AIPO: Believe too much is spent on defense	1960-1969	33	1%	99%
NORC: Believe too little is spent on defense	1973-1980	45	-4%	104%
	1980-1985	-42	0	100
AIPO/NORC: Give Russia highly unfavorable rating on a ten-point scale	1960-1966	-16	2%	98%
	1966-1974	-22	13	87
	1974-1982	23	-16	116
	1982-1988	-23	3	97
AIPO/NORC: Say the federal income tax is too high	1961-1969	23	1%	99%
	1982-1988	-14	-8	108
CPS: Think the federal government has grown too powerful	1970-1980	17	-19%	119%
	1980-1984	-16	10	90
NORC: Say too much is being spent on welfare	1974-1978	16	-6%	106%
	1978-1986	-18	5	95
NORC: Say too little is being spent on the environment	1973-1980	-13	-37%	137%
	1980-1988	17	19	81