Evidence of the Long-Term Persistence of Adults’ Political Predispositions

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The persistence hypothesis holds that core political predispositions tend to be highly stable through the life span. It has rarely been tested directly, given the scarcity of long-term, large-sample longitudinal studies. We address it using the Terman longitudinal study, in which the party identification and ideology of 1,272 respondents were measured on four occasions between 1940 and 1977, from roughly age 30 to retirement age. These partisan attitudes were highly stable over this long period, yielding continuity coefficients of about .80 between each measurement (separated by at least 10 years), and .65 for the full 37-year span. Examination of the trajectories of individual attitudes reveals that the most common pattern was constancy across time. A substantial minority changed in small but consistent ways, but changes from one partisan side to the other were not very common. Surprisingly, early-life racial attitudes had a resurgent effect on partisan attitudes in the 1970s. There was evidence of increasing attitude crystallization through the life span, infusing core predispositions with increasing psychological strength over time. Limitations of the study include the high intelligence of the respondents and the “steady state” of the party system through most of this period.

One common model of political behavior holds that some attitudes become highly crystallized and serve as “predispositions” for responses to new attitude objects. Such predispositions are said to be acquired before the adult is fully mature, to be relatively stable through the life course, to be consistent with related attitudes, and to influence the formation of attitudes toward new attitude objects.

 Portions of this paper were presented at the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association, Washington, D.C., August 11, 1990, and of the Society for Experimental Social Psychology, Sturbridge, MA, October 18, 1996. The data for the “Terman Life Cycle Study of Children with High Ability, 1922–1982” were originally collected by Lewis M. Terman, Robert R. Sears, Lee J. Cronbach, and Pauline S. Sears, and the data utilized in this paper were made available by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Neither the collectors of the original data nor the Consortium bear any responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here. We owe a special debt of thanks to the late Robert R. Sears and to Eleanor Walker, of Stanford University, for their encouragement. We are also indebted to Steven Cole, Ginger Nelson Goff, and Gail Zucker for help at various points in the data analysis, and to Paul Beck, Stanley Feldman, and Donald Green for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of the manuscript.

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such as new issues and political candidates. This generic predispositional model has guided research on voting behavior (Campbell et al. 1960), political socialization (Hyman 1959; D. Sears 1975), political generations (Alwin, Cohen, and Newcomb 1991; Jennings and Niemi 1981), party realignment (Beck 1974), the effects of mass communications and information flows (Zaller 1992), and the origins of intolerance (Aboud 1988; Miller and Sears 1986). It is a cornerstone of the theory of symbolic politics, which asserts that many public responses to political life are consistent with a limited set of long-standing symbolic predispositions (D. Sears 1993).

But the nature and role of these predispositions remain a matter of some debate. Some have questioned the strength of early-acquired attitudes, their stability over the life span, and their influence over adults’ attitudes (e.g., Marsh 1971; Sapiro 1994; Searing, Wright, and Rabinowitz 1976; Vaillancourt 1973; see Alwin 1993 and D. Sears 1989, for reviews). And rational choice models instead often emphasize individuals’ responsiveness to the real merits of current political alternatives. For example, party identification may often be adjusted in a sensible fashion to ongoing political realities rather than being an early-acquired “unmoved mover” (Fiorina 1996; Franklin 1984; Niemi and Jennings 1991).

These views yield contrasting expectations about the long-term stability of basic predispositions. The predispositional model generally incorporates a persistence hypothesis that, in its early incarnations, proposed that such attitudes persist in roughly the same form from original preadult acquisition through adulthood. In later variants it evolved into more sophisticated and complex forms, depicting individuals as more responsive to the political environment than this early version implied. First, observed stability had initially been taken to index underlying attitude crystallization. But even poorly crystallized attitudes may be quite stable if they confront little challenge (Converse 1962; D. Sears 1983; Zaller 1992). So stability must be supplemented with other indexes of an attitude’s crystallization, such as consistency (or “constraint”) with related attitudes and its power over attitudes toward new attitude objects (Converse 1964; Sears and Valentino 1997).

Second, crystallization itself may not inevitably proceed in steady, incremental fashion through preadult life, reaching asymptote by early adulthood. Rather, predispositions may crystallize in stepwise fashion, with periodic leaps forward triggered by information-rich political events (Sears and Valentino 1997). In the absence of such external prodding, major predispositions may often crystallize later in life than once thought. An “impressionable years” variant of the persistence hypothesis suggests that core predispositions continue to crystallize well past adolescence, although at a slowed rate, perhaps reaching an asymptote at the end of early adulthood (Markus 1979; Niemi and Jennings 1991; D. Sears 1989).¹

¹Closely related is the “increasing persistence” hypothesis, suggesting that vulnerability to change decreases gradually through adult life (Alwin 1994). A further logical possibility is the life-stage change or “mid-life stability” hypothesis that predicts maximum attitude stability in the middle years of adulthood (Alwin 1994; D. Sears 1981).
Third, not all attitudes fit the “predisposition” description. If persistence depends on the intensity and direction of information flow, it is likely to vary across attitude domains as well, because they vary a great deal in the amount of public attention they receive (D. Sears 1983; Sears and Valentino 1997). Most relevant research has focused on party identification, with some attention to ideology, because of their importance for voting behavior. However, racial and ethnic prejudices, nationalism, and other group-related attitudes may be psychological equivalents to those partisan attitudes (D. Sears 1983, 1993). There is much convincing evidence of their early acquisition (e.g., Aboud 1988; Lambert and Klineberg 1967), and they seem to be more stable than most other political attitudes, although the direct evidence covers only relatively short time periods (see Converse 1964; Converse and Markus 1979; Kinder and Sanders 1996; D. Sears 1981, 1983). On the other hand, many other political attitudes prove to be rather unstable over even short time spans, especially in domains that usually have low political salience, such as citizenship orientations (Searing, Wright, and Rabinowitz 1976; D. Sears 1983) and complex policy issue areas (Converse 1964; Feldman and Zaller 1992). As a result, we here confine ourselves to those predispositions generally cited as the plausible prospects for long-term persistence: party identification, ideology, and racial and other group-related attitudes (see D. Sears 1975, 1983).

Finally, another variant of the persistence hypothesis suggests that predispositions need to be explicitly primed if they are to influence adults’ attitudes and behavior (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Sears and Huddy 1992). Priming requires both a lasting predisposition and a salient stimulus that can be cognitively linked to it. Here too the political environment is brought back in as a key player, since such priming is likely to occur most often when political events make relevant issues more salient. The priming variant also suggests an indirect test of persistence. The correlations of a predisposition with other relevant attitudes in adulthood should reflect both the persistence of the early-acquired predisposition and (assuming it has been primed) its power over adult attitudes. Searing, Schwartz, and Lind (1973) have described this as the “structuring principle.”

Our primary goal in this paper is to test empirically the stability of core political predispositions across the full adult life span. A longitudinal study is the most straightforward methodological vehicle because it most directly tracks the individual’s attitudes over time. The ideal study would meet five criteria; it would (1) span the adult life course, using a sample that (2) is sufficiently large to provide reliable estimates (3) is representative of the population in question, (4) is composed of multiple cohorts interviewed at different periods, to help

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2 Krospinck (1991) offers an explanation for these differences in terms of measurement reliability.

3 Other methodological strategies can also usefully address the question of persistence, such as retrospective accounts, cohort analyses, the power of personal adult experiences to override long-standing predispositions, or natural experiments such as exposure to changed social norms or persuasive mass communication. For an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of these various approaches, see D. Sears 1989.
disentangle period, cohort, and aging effects, and (5) suffers only minimal and unbiased attrition.

These are ideal criteria, of course, and it is unlikely that any study would meet all five. Indeed only two long-term studies have been extensively explored in the existing literature, the Jennings-Niemi study of high school seniors and their parents, interviewed in 1965, 1973, and 1982, and Newcomb’s study of Bennington College students tested in the late 1930s, 1960, and 1984. Both report considerable persistence of basic partisanship after early adulthood. In the former case, the parents’ party identifications were highly stable through both intervals \( r = .78 \) and \( .83 \), as were the offsprings’ in the second interval (after age 25, \( r = .66 \); see Jennings and Markus 1984).4 The Bennington alumnae displayed extraordinarily stable partisan attitudes across a period spanning about 50 years, with stability coefficients adjusted for measurement error of .91 and .86 in its two intervals (Alwin, Cohen, and Newcomb 1991, 159). Both studies also yield some findings consistent with the impressionable years hypothesis that underlying attitude crystallization increases with age. Jennings and Markus (1984) found that their youth sample’s party identifications were markedly more stable in adulthood than in late adolescence, and the attitudes of the Bennington alumnae were markedly more stable in adulthood than during their college years (Alwin, Cohen, and Newcomb 1991).

These two studies have obvious strengths, but some methodological limitations as well. The first had a large sample drawn from two separate cohorts, and the youth sample was not far from being representative of its cohort. However, that cohort itself was unusual, drawn from a generation marked by extraordinary youth protest and alienation (see Jennings 1987); the parent sample was further from being representative; and the later waves suffered the substantial levels of attrition typical of even the most carefully conducted long-term panel studies. The Bennington study spanned nearly all of its participants’ adulthoods, but the sample was relatively small, drawn from a single and politically unusual college, and limited to one cohort.

The persistence hypothesis has also been tested with the National Election Studies panel studies, based on large, representative samples in three historical eras. But they too have limitations, spanning quite short periods (of two to four years) and suffering the usual substantial sample attrition. As Alwin (1992, 1993) has indicated, it is possible to extrapolate from observed stability across such short spans to estimates of stability for longer segments of the human lifetime by carefully analyzing propensities to change in each age group, but doing so runs the risk that even small errors will have very large consequences downstream. And any such extrapolations necessarily remain speculative in the absence of

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4 When adjusted for measurement error, these coefficients rise to .93, .98, and .89, respectively, though the authors offer some thoughtful cautions about taking either the uncorrected or corrected coefficients too literally (see Jennings and Markus 1984, 1004–5).
long-term studies of actual individual life histories. Inevitably, long-term longitudinal data will be required if we are to achieve secure estimates. However, to be realistic, any study is likely to have its own limitations, and those of any one study are best overcome through triangulation with other studies with different limitations.5

This paper presents evidence from a third long-term longitudinal study whose data have not heretofore been utilized to test the persistence hypothesis. The Terman longitudinal study of gifted children, with over 1,500 respondents, includes measures of party identification and ideology collected at four intervals over a 37-year time span, beginning when most respondents were about 30 years old. Its strengths for this purpose include its very long time span, large sample, and minimal sample attrition, while its clearest limitations are that its respondents were unusually intelligent and were mainly drawn from a single cohort.

We have four primary goals. The first is to describe the relevance and general contours of the Terman longitudinal study for the study of political behavior, in terms of its sample, its timing, and the political attitudes measured within it. The second is to test the long-term stability of party identification and ideology through adulthood, in terms of aggregate-level change, test–retest correlations, and the trajectory of individual attitudes over time. The third is to assess the long-term impact of early-acquired racial and gender attitudes that were later primed more intensively by the political environment. Finally, we test the impressionable years hypothesis.

The Terman Longitudinal Study

The Terman longitudinal study began in the period from 1921 to 1923 when Lewis M. Terman, a psychologist at Stanford University, identified and tested 1,470 “gifted children” (defined as having an IQ of 135 or higher) from the larger public school systems in California. Another 58, younger siblings of the original sample, were added in 1928, for a grand total of 1,528. The sample was concentrated largely within a single cohort; their median birth date was 1911, 80% were born between 1906 and 1915, and almost all (98%) were born between 1904 and 1920. Boys made up 56%, deviating for unknown reasons from the sex ratio in the California public schools. Nearly all the children were Anglos, overrepresenting Jewish children (10%), underrepresenting the small African-American and Mexican-American public school populations of the day, and not including Chinese-Americans (who generally did not then attend the

5Several other long-term studies have used reinterviews with civil rights activists of the 1960s (Braungart and Braungart 1990; Fendrich and Lovoy 1988; McAdam 1989; Marwell, Aiken, and Deemerath 1987; Whalen and Flacks 1984). They have generally found that their respondents remained on the same ideological side of the American political spectrum over that period. However, they are based on relatively small samples, and attitude stability is difficult to compare across studies due to varying analytic approaches.
public schools; for a history of minority children in California public schools, see Wollenberg 1976). Their families were disproportionately middle class and professional.

Data were collected from these children, their parents, and their teachers on a wide variety of psychological dimensions in the early years. As adults they responded to mail questionnaires at repeated intervals. Like their parents they proved, not surprisingly, to be unusually well educated (71% of the men, and 67% of the women, received college degrees) and of high occupational status (a majority were professionals in the top classification of the Census Bureau’s occupational codes). They also proved to be more politically active than the average citizen: 81% reported voting in 1940 (when actual turnout as a percent of eligible voters was 70% in California). Many of these individuals became identified with the purposes of the study, and so the attrition rate was unusually low considering the long time period it spanned. In 1983, after more than 60 years, 56% were still in contact with the study, 2% had voluntarily withdrawn from it, 27% were known to be dead, and the status of the remaining 15% was unknown. For further descriptions of the full study, see Holohan and R. Sears (1995), R. Sears (1977, 1984), and Terman and Oden (1959).

The data we report come from the four mail questionnaires distributed in 1940, 1950, 1960, and 1977. All four included measures of party identification and political ideology, while some other attitude items were included only in the 1940 questionnaire. We here consider only the 1,272 respondents (83% of the original sample) who responded to two or more of these four questionnaires. Of this group, 94% responded in 1940, 97% in 1950, and 88% in 1960. Not surprisingly, participation fell most in 1977, to 63%, when almost all those still living were in their 60s. It should be noted that attrition seems not to have been politically selective, and so should not materially bias the results: the respondents who continued to 1960 had been just 1% more Republican or ideologically conservative than the full sample in 1950, and those who continued to 1977 had been just 2% less Democratic and 1% more left of center than the full sample in 1960.

The party identification item used in 1940 simply asked, “What are your political leanings?” in open-ended fashion. Table 1 shows that the yield was diverse indeed, from two self-identified Communists and 15 “radicals” to 51 “conservatives.” In 1950 and 1960, identical closed-ended questions were used: “On national issues, which of the political parties most nearly represents your leanings? Democrat, Republican, Socialist, Communist, Other (specify)?” In 1977, an open-ended item was again used: “On national issues, which political party most represents your leanings?” This procedure yielded nothing like the disper-

\*6 The “liberal” category is actually labeled “liberal-non-partisan” in the codebook. However, only 2 of the 130 cases in this category described themselves as “non-partisan”; all the others were “liberals.” Therefore, we have assigned all of them to the “liberal” category. We are indebted to Eleanor Walker for conducting this scan.
Eviden ce of the Long-Term Persistence of Adults’ Political Predispositions

TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communist</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Deal</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>36.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>10.9</td>
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<td>None</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>52.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>1,002</td>
<td>1,213</td>
<td>1,053</td>
<td>740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1,190</td>
<td>1,235</td>
<td>1,115</td>
<td>804</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

sion that the 1940 open-ended item had produced. Rather, the marginal frequencies in these latter three years were very similar, about 36% Democratic and somewhat over 50% Republican, suggesting that the reversion to an open-ended question in 1977 made little difference.

A closed-ended question on political ideology was used in all four years. In 1940, the item read, “Rate yourself on the following scale as regards your political and social viewpoints: (1) Extremely radical, (3) tend to be radical, (5) average, (7) tend to be conservative, (9) very conservative.” The intermediate points were numbered but unlabeled, providing a nine-point scale. The same scale was used in 1950 and 1960, except that the last point in each case was labeled “extremely conservative” rather than “very conservative.” Table 2 suggests that this change made very little difference, since relatively few respondents used points 8 or 9 in any case (about 6%), and the frequency varied by only about 1% across the three surveys. The scale was changed from 1960 to 1977, both in the category labels and the number of points, to “(1) radical, (2) very liberal, (3) tend to be liberal, (4) middle-of-the-road, (5) tend to be conservative, (6) quite conservative, (7) strongly conservative.”

Two of these item wording changes were substantial enough to be concerned about. More than one-third of the sample gave responses on the 1940 open-ended “party leanings” item that were not included in the conventional alternatives offered in the 1950 closed-ended party identification item, so their
### TABLE 2

**Political Ideology: Frequencies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1940</th>
<th>1950</th>
<th>1960</th>
<th>1977</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>1 Radical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>2 Very liberal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>3 Tend to be liberal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>4 Middle-of-the-road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>5 Tend to be conservative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>6 Quite conservative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>7 Strongly conservative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>99.9%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1,149</td>
<td>1,207</td>
<td>1,088</td>
<td>784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1,190</td>
<td>1,235</td>
<td>1,115</td>
<td>804</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a“Very” conservative in 1940; “extremely” conservative in 1950 and 1960.

1940 and 1950 attitudes cannot be compared exactly. And the nine-point ideology scale used in 1940, 1950, and 1960 was changed in 1977 to a seven-point scale with somewhat different value labels. Changing the number of points within this range would not seem particularly important for the purpose of assessing stability. But adding “liberal” as a value label when only “radical” had been available on the left of center earlier would seem more consequential. Not surprisingly, more respondents placed themselves left of center in 1977 (34%) than had done so in 1960 (26%).

Do these two substantial item wording changes compromise our efforts to estimate long-term attitude stability? Presumably, any wording change should artificially lower estimates of stability, if anything. But we can estimate the magnitude of any bias they introduce more precisely. One strategy capitalizes on the fact that the party identification and ideology item wording changed at different times, and so treats them as replicates of each other. If the stability estimates for the two items paralleled each other from 1950 to 1960 when neither changed wording much, but diverged in the 1940 to 1950 and 1960 to 1977 spans, when one or the other item changed substantially, the wording changes might well be held responsible. Fortunately, as will be seen, the two items do operate largely in parallel through all phases of the study, considerably easing our concerns about the possible impact of these wording changes.

Our second strategy addressed the 1940 party identification item. We created two versions of it: a “narrow version,” which excluded the 1940 responses that were not represented in the 1950 item, and an “expanded version,” which in-
cluded them through reclassification into the conventional categories of Demo-
crat, Independent, and Republican. Each version has its pros and cons. The
narrow version provides fully comparable response categories across all four
waves and prevents any possible miscategorization, but it reduces sample size
substantially and generates a very large number of missing cases by selecting on
a central dependent variable. The expanded version maintains the full available
sample size by retaining many interesting cases otherwise lost, but risks possibly
unjustified inferences about the respondents’ true party identifications. As a re-
result, we conducted our key analyses with both versions. Fortunately, as will be
seen, they yield almost identical estimates of attitude stability. Therefore, we
assume the two versions are equivalent, and will present the results for the
“expanded” version throughout to maintain the larger sample base.

The 1940 questionnaire also included a number of items relevant to group-
related attitudes that were not repeated in later waves. Among them were evaluations
of 10 social groups, each on a three-point scale: “like,” “indifferent,” or “dislike.”
A principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation yielded a three-
factor solution. We interpret the first factor as reflecting personal conservatism,
attitudes about styles of personal comportment rather than political ideology (fact-
or loadings are in parentheses): “conservative people” (.67), “cautious people”
(.73), “methodical people” (.69), and “teetotallers” (.60), yielding a four-item ad-
ditive scale (alpha = .62). The second factor seems to represent general ethnoco-
centrism: “Negroes” (.75), “people with hooked noses” (presumably under-
stood to refer to Jews, .68), “women cleverer than you are” (.42), and “very old
people” (.40). This yielded a scale of relatively low reliability (alpha = .42), so we
used the individual items. The third factor had two items, “emotional people”
(.65) and “fortune tellers” (presumably gypsies, .82). With two exceptions, none of
the items had loadings above .30 on any of the other factors (the “very old” loaded
.33 on the first factor, and the “cleverer women” loaded .31 on the third factor).

We also developed an index of sex-typing in values and interests based on the
1940 questionnaire from 53 Bernreuter items on “personality and temperament,”
nine strong occupational interest items, 15 activity interest items, and the 10
group evaluations just cited. A discriminant analysis determined the weights that
would best discriminate men from women, yielding a femininity scale. Finally,
two depression-era 1940 items were used, “the present social order is so unjust

7 Specifically, the “narrow” version included as “Democrats” in 1940 only those who described
themselves as “Democrat” or as “New Deal,” and as “Independents” or “Republicans” only those
who used those terms explicitly. The “expanded” version reassigned “Communists,” “Radicals,” “So-
cialists,” “Progressives,” and “Liberals” to the “Democratic” category; “None” to the “Independent”
category; and “Conservatives” to the “Republican” category.

8 Note that this is the more conservative alternative with respect to the persistence hypothesis,
since any misclassification of nonstandard responses should reduce obtained estimates of stability.

9 The two key items evaluated “Negroes” (25% like, 64% indifferent, and 10% dislike) and “peo-
ple with hooked noses” (8% like, 79% indifferent, and 13% dislike).
that revolution is necessary” (4% agreed, 87% disagreed, and 8% didn’t know) and “most religions do as much harm as good” (27% agreed, 62% disagreed, and 11% didn’t know), forming a resulting social radicalism scale of relatively low reliability (alpha = .38), perhaps partly due to the items’ skewness.

The Persistence of Political Predispositions

Our first test of the persistence hypothesis considers attitude change in the aggregate. In 1940, the left and right were about equally numerous. In party identification, 47% were on the left and 42% described themselves as Republican or Conservative, as shown in Table 1. In ideology, 38% placed themselves left of center and 37% right of center, as shown in Table 2. Even these very slight tilts to the left are noteworthy given both the relatively advantaged class background of the respondents and the strong correlation between SES and partisan attitudes in that era (Campbell et al. 1960; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948). The sample swung fairly strongly to the right over the next 20 years as the depression was replaced by the Cold War. By 1950, Republicans had a 13% lead, and conservatives a 19% lead. By the end of the Eisenhower era in 1960, the Republican edge had increased to 22%, and the conservative margin to 23%.

At first glance this might seem to be a simple case of the common life-cycle hypothesis that aging increases conservatism. However, a second substantial aggregate attitude change occurred from 1960 to 1977, back toward the left, just as the respondents approached retirement age. The Republicans’ lead over the Democrats was cut by about one-third, from 22% to 16%, and the conservatives’ advantage over the liberals was cut by over half, from 23% to 10%. Contrary to the life-cycle hypothesis, then, there was a visible change back toward the left in later middle age, in a period of resurgent left-wing political activism.10

A second approach to testing for persistence uses test–retest correlation coefficients to assess individual-level attitude stability. For purposes of comparability, we recoded all responses to three-point scales before the correlations were calculated. The results are shown in Table 3. The dominant pattern is one of substantial stability. The coefficients for party identification range from .74 across the 1950s to .50 for the entire period of 1940 to 1977. The stability of political ideology was slightly lower but still substantial, ranging from .71 across the 1950s to .43 for the full period between 1940 and 1977. Both to increase reliability and to simplify later analyses, we also created a composite left–right

10 These two aggregate-level changes are not merely artifacts of changes in item wording. From 1940 to 1950 the conservative shift was exactly as large on the ideology item, which did not change, as it was on the party identification item, which did change. From 1950 to 1960, neither wording changed, and again the swing was almost identical on the two items. From 1960 to 1977, the change in party identification is probably the more trustworthy estimate, since the “liberal” option had meantime been added to the ideology item, no doubt easing a left-of-center placement. But even the leftward change in ideology is probably not solely artifactual: explicitly “conservative” self-descriptions dropped by 6% with no major wording change on that side of center.
TABLE 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1950</th>
<th>1960</th>
<th>1977</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Party Identification</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>1950</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composite Left–Right Orientation</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

orientation scale for each year, combining party identification and ideology by standardizing each measure and adding them. The stability coefficients for this composite measure are somewhat higher than for the individual items, presumably because of reduced measurement error. The period of greatest stability is again the 1950s (r = .79); stability was quite high (r = .54) for the entire period.

To some extent the test–retest correlations for even the composite still confound true attitude change with unreliability of measurement, however (Alwin, Cohen, and Newcomb 1991; Green and Palmquist 1990; Krosnick 1991). So we used structural equations models to estimate stability free of random measurement error, treating party identification and ideology as indicators of a latent left–right factor at each time point. Measurement disturbances were assumed to be uncorrelated over time except for those between party identification measures. To maximize sample size, we wanted to include respondents who were missing data in 1977, the year with most attrition, as well as respondents with no missing data. Before using this multiple group method, we checked that these two latter subsamples could be treated as members of the same population (following Muthen, Kaplan, and Hollis 1987), and confirmed that they could be.11

The final model is shown in Figure 1, and the overall stability estimates are also presented in Table 4. Left–right orientation is extremely stable over time. From 1940 to 1950, the coefficient is .81. Through the politically quieter 1950s,

11 A model with every estimated parameter in the group with missing data from 1977 was constrained to be equal across the two groups. This model yielded a chi-square of 60.18 with 38 df (p = .012) and a comparative fit index of .994. This represents a good fit of the data to the theoretical model. Only one of the equality constraints was statistically significant (pid60, v999) and therefore unlikely to hold across the two groups. We can be confident, then, that the hypothesis that the two groups have the same factor structure and come from the same population is tenable.
Entries are standardized parameter estimates. All coefficients are statistically significant at
$p < .05$. Error terms between party identification variables for all pairs of years were also allowed to
covary. PID, LC, and LR indicate party identification, liberal–conservative ideology, and left–right
orientation, respectively.

it rises to .91. But even through the longer and more politically tumultuous pe-
riod of the 1960s and 1970s (to 1977), it is .88. For the entire period, spanning
virtually all of the respondents’ adult life spans, it is .65. This would seem to be
an impressive demonstration of the long-term stability of fundamental political
predispositions.

A third approach to persistence is to analyze the trajectories of such attitudes
within each individual’s life history. To do so, we created a comprehensive ty-
topology to describe the pattern of stability and change for each attitude over time.
To make the analysis manageable, we simplified the typology in two ways. First,
we ignored the 1950 wave, since the 1940 to 1950 and 1950 to 1960 periods
showed similar amounts of both conservatizing aggregate change and individual-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predicting from:</th>
<th>Predicting to:</th>
<th>1950</th>
<th>1960</th>
<th>1977</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>.810</td>
<td>.739</td>
<td>.651</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>.912</td>
<td>.803</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>.881</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE 5

Trajectory of Individual Attitudes across 1940, 1960, and 1977

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Party Identification</th>
<th>Ideology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant position</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change, inconsistent direction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returned to original position</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Into or out of center</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change, consistent direction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Into or out of center</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed sides</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>680</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The entries reflect stability and change in terms of trichotomized attitude scales. For party identification, the three categories were Democrat-Independent-Republican. For ideology, they were left of the ideology scale midpoint, the midpoint, or right of the midpoint.

level stability. We also recoded each dimension into just three categories: Democrat, Independent, and Republican for party identification; and Left, Center (scale midpoint only), and Right for ideology. The respondents were then classified into types according to their attitudes over 1940, 1960, and 1977. This typology is summarized in Table 5. The first category includes respondents who held the same position on all three occasions (e.g., Left-Left-Left). Next are those who changed in an inconsistent, back-and-forth pattern, subdivided into those who ultimately returned to the same position (e.g., Left-Center-Left) and those who did not (e.g., Left-Right-Center). The last category consists of those who changed in a consistent direction, subdivided into those who moved into or out of the Center (e.g., Left-Center-Center or Center-Right-Right) and those who changed from one side to the other (e.g., Left-Center-Right).

For both attitudes, the most common pattern was to hold the same position at all three time points. Most (59%) were perfectly stable in party identification, and another 6% had returned to their original position by the end, so that 65% wound up where they had started. For ideology, combining the 42% who were at the same position at all three time points with the 12% who defected briefly yielded a total of 54% winding up where they had started. So the most common individual trajectory for either party identification or ideology was to hold the same basic preference at both the beginning and end of adulthood, notwithstanding the fact that a few had some sojourn elsewhere. At the other extreme, relatively few actually changed from one political side to the other. As shown in Table 5, 19% of the sample changed parties over the period of the study, and 13% changed ideological sides.

12 At least one respondent fell into 21 of the possible 27 types for party identification, and into all 27 for ideology.
Nevertheless, a substantial minority did show some consistent change away from their original positions. To examine how substantial such changes were, we relied on the more sensitive multipoint ideology measures, subdividing individuals into “extreme ideologues,” “moderates,” or “centrists” (scale midpoint only) at each time point. Most common were small changes around the middle of the road: 15% of the full sample started in the Center and ultimately moved to one side or the other, and 13% started on the Left or Right but wound up in the Center. Even those who changed sides generally only changed modestly, moving only from one “moderate” preference to the other “moderate” preference (8%). Another 1% were initially strong ideologues who became moderates on the other side. Very few converted from being a moderate on one side to becoming a strong ideologue on the other side (fewer than 1%). The pure convert was the rarest bird of all: only 2 respondents changed from being a strong ideologue on one side to being a strong ideologue on the opposite side. To be sure, both of these individuals did move from the extreme left to the extreme right, fulfilling the classic romantic French dream: “He who is not a revolutionary at age 20 has no heart; he who is one at age 40 has no head.” In short, the individual trajectories match the story told by the aggregate-level change data and the correlational data: the dominant pattern is stability, with some change mixed in, but almost all the change is quite moderate in degree.

## Priming Early-Acquired Attitudes in Later Life

However, this describes change rather than explaining it. The priming variant of the persistence hypothesis suggests that predispositions can change as old issues drop off the political agenda and new issues become more salient. Many have suggested that over this period the most salient partisan issues changed from the economic and class divisions of the 1930s to the racial and gender issues of the 1960s and 1970s (see, among others, Carmines and Stimson 1989; Klein 1984). Early New Deal–style economic attitudes should therefore have had a diminished impact on partisan preferences over time. But if early-acquired racial and gender attitudes were themselves quite persistent, their impact on partisanship should have been increased over time by this shift in issue salience.

To test this contrast, we regressed economic, racial, and gender attitudes, measured only in 1940, on left–right orientation as measured at each of our four time points. The results are shown in Table 6. Everything else being equal, the association of any earlier-life attitude with later-life attitudes should decline as the interval between the two measurements increases. Indeed, the role of 1940 New Deal–era attitudes—“personal conservatism” and “social radicalism”—did decline over time, although both continued to have significant effects throughout.

---

13“Extreme” included points 1, 2, 8, or 9 in 1940 and 1960, and points 1, 2, 6, or 7 in 1977; “moderate” included points 3, 4, 6, or 7 in 1940 and 1960, and points 3 and 5 in 1977; and “center” included point 5 in 1940 and 1960, and point 4 in 1977.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1940</th>
<th>1950</th>
<th>1960</th>
<th>1977</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negroes</td>
<td>.55 (.10)**</td>
<td>.50 (.09)**</td>
<td>.46 (.10)**</td>
<td>.69 (.12)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People with Hooked Noses</td>
<td>.22 (.13)</td>
<td>.27 (.12)*</td>
<td>.27 (.13)*</td>
<td>.46 (.16)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Femininity</td>
<td>.04 (.04)</td>
<td>.06 (.04)</td>
<td>.05 (.04)</td>
<td>.13 (.05)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Radicalism</td>
<td>.57 (.13)**</td>
<td>.45 (.12)*</td>
<td>.56 (.13)**</td>
<td>.39 (.16)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Conservatism</td>
<td>.29 (.03)**</td>
<td>.23 (.03)**</td>
<td>.19 (.03)**</td>
<td>.23 (.04)**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R² 16.9 11.7 9.9 15.3
Minimum N 917 1,061 924 648

*Note:* Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Pairwise deletion is employed. All items are keyed so that high is conservative. All significance tests are two-tailed.

*p < .05; **p < .001

The effect of attitudes toward blacks also dropped steadily from 1940 to 1960, in a period of relative neglect of racial issues. But their effect surged considerably in 1977, and actually became somewhat *more* predictive of left–right orientation than in 1940, when originally measured. We interpret this surge as due to the reemergence of race as a central political issue in the 1960s, stimulated by the civil rights movement, ghetto riots, the rise of militancy, and protests over busing. Femininity (also as measured in 1940) showed a similar but smaller increase: it was dormant from 1940 through 1960, and then suddenly emerged with a significant effect in 1977. We interpret this spike as due to the resurfacing of the women’s movement in the 1960s. Remarkably enough, 1940 attitudes as a set actually explained left–right orientation *better* in 1977 than they had in 1960. The variance they explained had declined from 16.9% in 1940 to 9.9% in 1960, but then surged back in 1977 to 15.3%.

The increased role of antiblack affect raises a further question. A “black exceptionalism” theory suggests that attitudes toward blacks are especially crystallized and politically powerful, because of the long history of antiblack socialization in the United States and the political centrality of racial issues in recent years (Sears and van Laar 1998). This would lead us to expect a surge in political impact that would be specific to antiblack antagonism. On the other hand, a generalized ethnocentrism hypothesis might view such an effect as resulting from more diffuse anti-outgroup attitudes. Even anti-Semitism might

---

14 The changes in regression coefficients are mirrored in the bivariate correlations of these 1940 attitudes with left–right orientation. They actually rose for antiblack affect and for femininity from 1940 to 1977—from .20 to .27, and from .07 to .18, respectively. However, for personal conservatism and social radicalism they fell—from r = .32 to .23, and from r = .24 to .17, respectively.

15 Although only the results for left–right orientation are shown in Table 6, the results for party identification and ideology were quite similar to each other.
### TABLE 7
Predicting to 1977 Political Predispositions: Full Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Party Identification</th>
<th></th>
<th>Ideology</th>
<th></th>
<th>Left–Right Orientation</th>
<th></th>
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<td></td>
<td>Correlation</td>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>Correlation</td>
<td>Regression</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Identification</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.11 (0.03)**</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.07 (0.03)*</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left–Right Orientation</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.05 (0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negroes</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.17 (0.05)***</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.21 (0.06)***</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.34 (0.09)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hooked Noses</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.09 (0.06)</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.22 (0.08)**</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.26 (0.11)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Femininity</td>
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<td>.16</td>
<td>.07 (0.02)**</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.09 (0.03)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radicalism</td>
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<td>.15</td>
<td>.00 (0.08)</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.03 (0.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Conservatism</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.03 (0.02)*</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.05 (0.02)**</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.08 (0.03)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Identification</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>.60 (0.03)***</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.47 (0.03)***</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left–Right Orientation</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.70 (0.03)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Minimum n</td>
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<td>641</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>593</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Entries in regression column are unstandardized regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Pairwise deletion is employed. All items are keyed so that high is conservative. All significance tests are two-tailed.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001
show a resurgent political role, despite the fact that it would seem to have had little political resonance in its own right by then (Sniderman and Piazza 1993).

The evidence tilts somewhat, but not unequivocally, toward the black exceptionalism perspective. Of the various group evaluations included in Table 6, 1940 affect toward Negroes consistently had the strongest political effect on left–right orientation, and it had a considerably stronger political effect than did anti-Semitism when both are considered simultaneously. Still, evaluations of all four groups central to the ethnocentrism factor showed somewhat higher correlations with left–right orientation in 1977 than they did in 1940.\textsuperscript{16} Antiblack and anti-Semitic affect were significantly, if only modestly, correlated in 1940 (r = .26). And as shown in Table 6, anti-Semitism did have a significant impact on left–right orientation in each wave, even with evaluations of Negroes controlled. Nevertheless, these data suggest that the effects of 1940 group evaluations on political attitudes nearly four decades later mainly reflected a reawakening of specifically antiblack feeling, presumably triggered by the racial controversies of the 1960s and 1970s.

All these findings are summarized in the final models predicting to 1977 political attitudes, shown in Table 7. Three points should be noted. First, these models have quite considerable explanatory power, accounting for 55% of the variance in party identification, and 46% in ideology. This by itself indicates a high degree of long-term attitude stability, since no predictor had been measured less than 17 years earlier, and some dated 37 years back, and it holds despite some wording changes for both items. Second, relatively few respondents responded to the major political changes of the 1960s by renouncing their prior preferences. Their final partisan attitudes were best predicted by their most recent prior preferences: 1960 party identifications and ideologies dominated 1977 partisanship, with relatively little additional residual effect of 1940 partisan attitudes. Third, racial and gender attitudes measured in 1940 had significant influences over 1977 party identification and ideology. The residues of early-acquired antiblack sentiment had a particularly enduring effect, giving evidence of a unique role of racial attitudes in partisan political preferences during the civil rights era and its aftermath.

**Increased Attitude Crystallization across the Life Course?**

Does underlying attitude crystallization increase across the life cycle, as would be expected from the impressionable years hypothesis? Age effects are, of course, inherently confounded with cohort and period effects in the Terman

\textsuperscript{16}“Women cleverer than you are” and “very old people” correlated .06 and −.10 with left–right orientation in 1940, and .08 and −.03 in 1977. However, in regressions on left–right orientation that included those two items taken one at a time, along with 1960 left–right orientation, neither had a significant effect (betas = .02, .00, respectively).
study (Mason et al. 1973). However, stability estimates from the 1970s NES panel studies were quite similar to those from the late 1950s (Converse and Markus 1979), suggesting that period effects did not strongly influence short-term attitude stability through that part of our historical span. Moreover, age differences in stability were about the same in those two panel studies, suggesting an absence of cohort differences across the two eras (Alwin 1992, 1993; D. Sears 1981). So we will proceed as if any changes over time could be ascribed to age effects, though recognizing the somewhat spongy terrain we have ventured upon.

Attitude stability is one standard indicator of crystallization. However, everything else being equal, shorter periods should yield higher stability coefficients, so to compare stability coefficients across different ages we need to hold constant the length of time between survey waves.\textsuperscript{17} Operating within this limitation, we find that stability does indeed rise with age. The least stable attitudes are those initially measured in early adulthood, in 1940. As shown in Table 3, the 1940 to 1950 stability coefficients of .62 and .61 are lower than those of .74 and .71 for the equivalently long period from 1950 to 1960.

A second indicator of crystallization is attitude consistency. This can be indexed by the correlation between party identification and ideology at each time point. Consistency also tends to rise with age, although not as dramatically as did stability: $r = .63$ in 1940, .62 in 1950, .67 in 1960, and .70 in 1977. Both findings, then, give some support for the hypothesis that these two partisan attitudes continued to crystallize somewhat with age through the mature adult years.\textsuperscript{18}

Methodological Questions

A number of potential methodological pitfalls have been mentioned above. How might they limit the validity and generalizability of our main findings? Let us begin with the sample. Terman originally selected California public school children for his study who scored especially high on the Stanford-Binet intelligence test in the early 1920s. They were then recontacted periodically for over half a century. This sampling process introduced four sources of potential bias: the adult respondents were almost all white Californians, of unusually high intelligence, drawn mainly from one particular birth cohort, and the long time spanned by the study made it especially vulnerable to attrition.

Two of these biases would seem in practice not to limit the generalizability of the results very much. Most cross-sectional data indicate that only two major population groupings showed substantial partisan realignment during the period

\textsuperscript{17} Alwin (1994), using the more evenly spaced NES panel interviews, provides stability estimates described as “molar stability” for each age group across standardized periods of time.

\textsuperscript{18} This finding fits an increasing persistence model better than it does a strict impressionable years one (see Alwin 1994).
in question: African-Americans and white southerners (Miller and Shanks 1996). But most Americans in that era were white nonsoutherners, and we can think of no compelling reason for the stability of white Californians’ political attitudes to have differed substantially from the stability of other white nonsoutherners’ attitudes. Second, selective attrition in panel studies of political attitudes always threatens estimates of indicators that are correlated with political interest, because the most apolitical respondents tend to drop out disproportionately. As indicated earlier, attrition in this study was relatively low considering its long duration. For example, 12% were lost over the first 20 years of the period we have analyzed, considerably lower than the rate typical in even the most careful panel studies (e.g., 32% were lost from the Michigan Socialization youth panel over its first 17 years). As a result, the relatively low level of attrition would seem likely to have produced relatively conservative estimates of attitude stability.

However, like the other two major extant long-term longitudinal studies of political attitudes, this was conducted during one particular historical period and the sample was drawn from a relatively narrow birth cohort. The respondents were members of, roughly, the “New Deal generation,” and so spent much of their mature adulthoods in a “steady state” era for the party system (Converse 1976). This is not to say that they were wholly protected from political challenge, since the period included the largest war in world history, two frustrating smaller wars, the assassination or resignation in humiliation of several national leaders, several recessions, and numerous major social changes. The period was not totally devoid of partisan change either—e.g., the number of Independents rose considerably (Miller and Shanks 1996). And most of the Terman respondents themselves were exposed to unusually high levels of political information and lived complex and interesting lives. But the relative stability of the party system over this period could be considered as one limiting condition of the study. Moreover, we have no way of assessing the effects of still more severe exogenous shocks, such as a foreign invasion, the presence or withdrawal of an oppressive occupying power, a civil war, or catastrophic inflations or depressions, all of which occurred in many other countries in that era.

The most consequential bias, perhaps, concerns the respondents’ selection for high intelligence in childhood. This led to some predictable later deviations from the average life circumstances of the general population, such as higher levels of education, income, and occupational prestige, better health and longevity, more stable marital and job histories, and greater life satisfaction (Holohan and Sears 1995). High intelligence is not a factor whose consequences for political attitudes have been studied extensively. However, the consequences of this sampling bias might be addressed by examining the effects of its close correlate, educational level, which is both politically important and much investigated. There is considerable variability within the sample in educational level, but attitude stability was very high even for respondents who most resembled the average
American of that era. Stability for respondents with "some college" averaged .71, and for "high school graduate or less" .64, as shown in Table 8. Moreover, education itself has no clear systematic effect in this sample. Both stability and constraint vary within a relatively narrow range across educational levels, with the possible exception of somewhat lower crystallization among those with no college education in the earliest period. Similarly, the increase in crystallization with age holds at all educational levels. It would be possible to analyze these patterns further, given the size of the sample, but it would take us too far afield for the present purpose.

Where does this leave us? Converse (1964) and many others have shown that more education improves information processing, and therefore increases attitude consistency and ideological thinking. But past data on the effects of education on attitude stability have been inconsistent. In most studies it has not been associated with more stable partisanship (e.g., Converse 1975; Jennings 1993; Jennings and Niemi 1981). On the other hand, in the NES panel study in the 1970s, education was associated with considerably more stability of racial at-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High School Graduate or Less</th>
<th>Some College</th>
<th>Bachelor Degree</th>
<th>Some Postgraduate</th>
<th>Advanced Degree</th>
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Note: All entries are Pearson correlations. "Advanced degrees" include doctorate, M.D., L.L.M., or L.L.B. Educational level is taken from the 1960 wave to best reflect maximum educational accomplishment.
titudes (D. Sears 1981). Still, it is evident that we should not unthinkingly generalize from this sample to the general population. And even if the findings of the study were generalized only to the better-educated members of the society, they would by no means be trivial, since that is the pool of advantaged Americans from which elites are drawn. It is noteworthy that their early-acquired political predispositions show particularly high levels of persistence through their full adult life spans. The findings therefore provide a look at an important segment of the public over an unusually long and politically interesting period in American history.

The changes in item wording over time constitute a second category of potential pitfalls. A standard dilemma facing any longitudinal study is whether to disrupt a time series by modernizing dated items, or maintain it by repeating increasingly antiquated items. In this study the two most consequential changes in item wording were in party identification from 1940 to 1950 and in ideology from 1960 to 1977. Our major strategy is to treat these two items as replicates of each other, since these changes occurred at different times, allowing for the uncontaminated assessment of stability on at least one item in every period of the study. Fortunately, through these two periods the two items yield quite parallel data. Their aggregate-level changes and stability coefficients from 1940 to 1950 are almost exactly the same (see Tables 1–3).\textsuperscript{19} Similarly, all stability estimates involving the 1977 ideology item are very similar to those for party identification.

Other checks also fail to turn up major biasing effects of these two wording changes on attitude stability. Test–retest correlations from 1940 to 1950 for the “expanded” and “narrow” versions of party identification are essentially identical.\textsuperscript{20} The stability coefficient for ideology in the 1960–77 period (when item wording changed) is very similar to that for the 1950–60 period (when it did not). And constraint of the two attitudes within the 1977 wave is very similar to constraint within the 1960 wave.

Since none of these checks on the effects of item wording changes reveals any major biases, we believe that they do not threaten our central findings. Indeed, since these wording changes probably increased measurement error, true persistence might be somewhat underestimated. We should, however, reiterate our general view that any longitudinal study is bound to have some limitations, and so its results must be considered in conjunction with the results from other studies with somewhat different limitations.

\textsuperscript{19} Bearing in mind that here, as elsewhere, we use the “expanded” version of 1940 party identification; see Tables 1 and 2.

\textsuperscript{20} Specifically, the test–retest correlations for the “narrow” and “expanded” versions of party identification did not differ by more than \( r = .01 \) in any case other than the 1940 to 1950 period itself, when they were .66 and .62, respectively. In Table 3 and elsewhere, left–right orientation is based on the “expanded” version, but using the “narrow” version changes none of the estimates by more than \( r = .02 \).
Conclusions

The primary goal of this paper was to assess the lifetime persistence of central partisan predispositions, using a long-term, large sample study, the Terman longitudinal study of gifted children mainly born in the decade before World War I. As adults their party identifications and political ideologies were remarkably stable over four widely spaced intervals between 1940 and 1977. The test–retest correlation coefficients averaged .68 across interwave periods that spanned at least 10 years each, and the stability coefficients for composite left–right orientation averaged .87 for each interwave period and reached .65 for the full 37 years. These stability levels are particularly impressive given the unusually long time period investigated here, spanning most of the adult life course, and despite some changes in the meanings of basic partisan terms over time.

The strong persistence of party identification parallels findings from two other long-term longitudinal studies of adults, the Bennington (Alwin, Cohen, and Newcomb 1991) and Michigan Socialization Panel (Jennings and Markus 1984) studies, as well as the short-term NES panel studies (Converse and Markus 1979). The persistence of political ideology is perhaps more surprising, both because it is widely thought to be poorly understood and crystallized in the American public (Converse 1964; Kinder and Sears 1985) and because its issue basis presumably changed substantially through this period, from the economic, class-oriented issues of the New Deal to the lifestyle, moral, gender, and racial issues of the 1960s and 1970s. And finally, the seeming persistence of racial predispositions also parallels earlier findings from short-term panel studies (Converse and Markus 1979; Kinder and Sanders 1996; D. Sears 1981, 1983). Of course, our data do not speak to the persistence of other kinds of political attitudes, which often have proven to be less stable in those other studies.

Despite this evidence of individual-level stability, two modest aggregate attitude changes were identified, toward the political right from 1940 to 1960, and then back toward the left from 1960 to 1977. Examination of the trajectories of individual attitudes helped refine our description of this mixture of individual-level stability and aggregate change. Most common was to hold the same party or ideological preference throughout this long period. But there was evidence of some relatively small adjustments of basic predispositions.

Were these changes politically meaningful, as opposed to being unsystematic and possibly due merely to measurement error? One answer is suggested from Figure 1 and Table 4. Even when measurement error is controlled to some degree, these attitudes fell short of perfect stability over time, suggesting some meaningful change. Similarly, the most common trajectory of individual change was movement in a consistent direction throughout the study period, as shown in Table 5. In party identification, 32% changed in a consistent direction across the three points in time, as opposed to the 8% changing in an inconsistent pattern; in ideology, 41% changed in a consistent direction, and 17% in an inconsistent
pattern. The logic of Converse's (1970) "black and white" criterion for real attitudes, it will be remembered, falls back on just such an excess of consistent change. But the political meaningfulness of these changes can be better ascertained if they can be related to measured political forces. That has been done in two ways above. The fact that 1960 partisanship dominated 1940 partisanship in predicting to 1977 attitudes indicates that the 1940 to 1960 changes were real and systematic, however small in magnitude. And the impact of 1940 racial and gender attitudes on 1977 partisanship, even controlling on 1960 partisanship, suggests that the 1960 to 1977 changes also were real and systematic.\textsuperscript{21}

Why might these shifts occur? The priming hypothesis offers one explanation. Exactly which predisposition gets primed in adulthood depends on which issues are most salient in the later political context (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Sears and Huddy 1992). Apparent attitude changes might therefore reflect change in issue salience rather than changes in the predispositions themselves, reflecting, in Asch's (1948) terms, "changes in the attitude object" rather than "changes in attitude." The relevant evidence is the resurgent power of youthful racial and gender attitudes over party identifications and ideologies as the Terman respondents reached retirement age. We have a two-step interpretation of this finding: their early-acquired racial and gender attitudes persisted throughout most of their adult lives, and when such issues became more politically salient, in the 1960s and 1970s, those predispositions were primed more frequently, increasing their influence over the individual's partisan attitudes (though of course the 1977 versions of these early-acquired racial and gender attitudes, and presumably the proximal vehicles for their influence on 1977 partisanship, were unmeasured).

The long-term impact of early socialization is therefore not a psychological given, but depends on several facilitating conditions that are themselves much influenced by the ongoing political environment. One is that early-life experiences must yield crystallized attitudes, which should be most likely when exogenous events stimulate high levels of relevant communication. This occurs routinely for partisanship as part of the regular electoral cycle (Sears and Valentino 1997; Valentino and Sears 1998). Extraordinary events such as the Kennedy assassination, the Watergate scandal, the protests of the 1960s, or the Great Depression have also left lasting traces on both the memory and political attitudes of entire generations (Andersen 1979; Beck and Jennings 1991; Elder 1974; Jennings 1987; Schuman and Scott 1989).

\textsuperscript{21}Another example might be a "life cycle" effect such as that aging conservatizes. This cannot be tested rigorously here, because aging is confounded with period. Still, the aggregate-level data, like numerous cohort analyses (see also Alwin 1992; Glenn 1980; D. Sears 1975), indicate little support for it: the respondents did shift toward the Republicans and conservatism from 1940 to 1960, but then moved somewhat away from conservative Republicanism in 1977. However, we do find a little support for a life-cycle effect in the individual trajectory data. From start to finish, 69% of the consistent changers moved toward the Republicans in party identification and 31% toward the Democrats, while 57% moved to the right in ideology and 43% to the left.
A second requirement may be frequent reinforcement of basic predispositions by the social and political environment later in the life course (D. Sears 1983). For example, the long-term stability of the Bennington graduates’ attitudes was facilitated by the development and maintenance of networks of social support (Alwin, Cohen, and Newcomb 1991). In contrast, sharp changes in the partisan complexion of one’s immediate social environment can lead to substantial change, as did the Bennington students’ college experiences (Alwin, Cohen, and Newcomb 1991) or as have geographical or social mobility (Brown 1988; Glaser and Gilens 1997; Miller and Sears 1986).

Third, strong information flows may be required in adulthood if long-standing predispositions are to have major political impact (Zaller 1992). Elites also need to frame political issues such that ordinary citizens can link them cognitively to relevant predispositions (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Sears and Huddy 1992). Of course, alternate frames may evoke different predispositions, so elites must compete to secure the most favorable framing. Such competition over the public agenda may advantage the partisan camp that succeeds in focusing attention on issues it “owns” (Petrock 1996).

The evidence is consistent, then, with a modified persistence hypothesis that allows for continuing minor changes in the context of high overall levels of stability. Some of these changes appear to be small and idiosyncratic. Others appear to be responses to national forces, but also to be small and statistically consistent with the persistence hypothesis, as when individuals shift in correlated fashion, preserving their relative ranking (Green and Palmquist 1994). 22 For example, the individual-trajectory data show that the inconsistent changers tended most often to follow a pattern matching the overall aggregate change of the sample—i.e., changing toward the right by 1960, and then somewhat back to the left in 1977 (these data are not shown in Table 5). 23 The considerable individual-level stability shown earlier does therefore contain within it enough shifting around to allow for some systematic and meaningful aggregate-level change over time, allowing some ebb and flow in the short-term fortunes of each partisan camp. This view departs somewhat in emphasis, but perhaps not far in actual prediction, from retrospective voting and other revisionist models that find “rational” but usually not very dramatic individual changes in party identification in response to politically meaningful events (see Fiorina 1996; Franklin 1992).

In closing we might reiterate that this study also provides some perhaps surprising evidence of the long-term persistence of, and political importance of, basic racial prejudices. Antiblack affect measured with a single crude three-point

22 The extreme case is perhaps the evaluations of Richard Nixon from before to after Watergate: while his mean evaluation tumbled from 65 to 31 on the 100-point feeling thermometer, the test–retest continuity coefficients were considerably higher than those toward many other political objects (Converse and Markus 1979).

23 7% versus 2% for party identification, and 14% versus 3% for ideology.
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item before World War II proved to have substantial and significant effects on party identification and ideology after the Vietnam War. Indeed its effects actually increased over the many years of the study. Perhaps most remarkably, this long-delayed effect of prewar racial attitudes on 1977 partisan attitudes held up even with controls on 1960 partisanship itself. This is quite a striking effect on fundamental political predispositions of antiblack attitudes acquired nearly four decades earlier. It testifies to the staying power of racial prejudice in our society, and to its resurgent political importance in the modern era.

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References


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