Have Americans' Social Attitudes Become More Polarized?[1]

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Many observers have asserted with little evidence that Americans' social opinions have become polarized. Using General Social Survey and National Election Survey social attitude items that have been repeated regularly over 20 years, the authors ask (1) Have Americans' opinions become more dispersed (higher variance)? (2) Have distributions become flatter or more bimodal (declining kurtosis)? (3) Have opinions become more ideologically constrained within and across opinion domains? (4) Have paired social groups become more different in their opinions? The authors find little evidence of polarization over the past two decades, with attitudes toward abortion and opinion differences between Republican and Democratic party identifiers the exceptional cases.

Polarization, fragmentation, and division have become familiar themes in American political discourse. A leading newsweekly entitles a special issue "Divided We Stand" (*U.S. News and World Report,* July 10, 1995). The editor of the *Columbia Journalism Review*'s special "culture wars" issue asserts flatly, "There is increasing polarization in American society" (Berry 1993). Some social scientists share these perceptions, writing of "deep and abiding cultural fragmentation" (Hunter 1994, p. vii), "the cultural chasm that has opened up in American society since the sixties" (Guinness 1993, p. 167), the trend "toward ideological polarization in domestic and social concerns" (Wyszomirski 1994, p. 37), or "the sharpening cultural polarization of U.S. society after the mid-1970s" (Ellison and Musick 1993, p. 379).

[1] For helpful discussion and advice, we are grateful to Larry Bartels, Jennifer Hochschild, Jill Kiecolt, Ellen Messer-Davidow, Victor Nee, Tom Smith, Paul Starr, Howard Taylor, Bruce Western, two *AJS* reviewers, and those in attendance at presentations at the Russell Sage Foundation, the 1995 American Sociological Association meetings (Session on Public Opinion), Bryn Mawr College, Smith College, the Princeton Sociology Department's Culture and Inequality Workshop, and the Eastern Sociological Society's 1996 meetings. Support for data analyses from Princeton University is gratefully acknowledged. Direct correspondence to Paul DiMaggio, Department of Sociology, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey 08544.

0002-9602/97/10203-0002$01.50

These views are echoed by much of the general public: in June 1995, 86% agreed that "there was a time when people in this country felt they had more in common and shared more values than Americans do today."[2]

Yet despite widespread claims and perceptions, little systematic research bears on ideological polarization per se. The impressive body of recent scholarship on aggregate opinion change (Page and Shapiro 1982, 1992; Chafetz and Ebaugh 1983; Smith 1990*b;* Davis 1992; Hochschild 1995; but see Yang and Demerath 1996) has focused on central tendencies, addressing polarization only in the important but limited sense of differences between particular social groups.

Opinion polarization is interesting because of its potential causal relationship to such phenomena as political conflict and social volatility. But too often the presence of polarization is inferred from the political conflict or volatility it is presumed to cause. Noting increased partisanship in Congress in summer 1995, retired Senator Warren Rudman (R-N.H.) worried: "We may be seeing in Congress a microcosm of what's happening out in the country. . . . What we are seeing is a polarization out there in the country, and what is happening in Congress is a reflection of that."[3]

To assume, as Senator Rudman did, that the political surface reflects a deeper collective condition is natural, reasonable—and potentially misleading. We shall ask if Senator Rudman, and the many others who believe the American public has become more polarized, are right. To do so, we analyze 20 years of data from the General Social Survey (GSS) and National Election Study (NES) to see if Americans' opinions on domestic social issues have indeed become more polarized in recent decades and to identify the extent, nature, and locus of such polarization as may have occurred.

This article has a second purpose: The empirical puzzle provides an occasion to reopen a neglected topic—polarization (and, more broadly, distributional properties of public opinion)—the significance of which transcends contemporary political debate. We develop a multidimensional definition of attitude polarization and suggest that research on distributional properties of public opinion may illuminate significant issues in the study of politics and intergroup relations.

The notion that distributional properties of individual attitudes have

[2] Princeton Survey Research Associates, Newsweek Poll, released June 28, 1995, recovered through Public Opinion Online, Roper Center at the University of Connecticut (question identification, USPSRNEW.062895, R03). We are grateful to Herbert Abelson of Princeton's Survey Research Center for providing this information.

[3] Former senator Warren Rudman, interviewed by Daniel Schorr on National Public Radio, broadcast on Saturday, August 12.

social effects is familiar to sociologists. Simmel ([1908] 1955, p. 15) argued that the degree of consensus and disagreement is a fundamental property of human groups: social units, he wrote, "need some quantitative ratio of harmony and disharmony" in order to persist (see also Coser 1956). Blau (1977) formalized Simmel's insights in pioneering work on the analysis of distributions of social and demographic attributes. Aside from Rossi and Berk (1985) and Granovetter and Soong (1988), however, the implications of Simmel's ideas for the study of political opinions have not been developed.

Similarly, public opinion originally was understood as a collective property (Herbst 1993; Noelle-Neumann [1980] 1993), but contemporary public-opinion researchers tend to portray it as the aggregate of individual attitudes. Notable exceptions are Page and Shapiro (1982, 1992), who explore the paradoxical stability of aggregate opinion compared to instability in individual opinions, and Noelle-Neumann (1993), whose work on the "spiral of silence" (the reticence of persons to express political opinions to others they believe disagree with them, and the biasing effects on political debate of systematic variations in reticence) calls attention to the impact of distributional factors, which receive explicit attention in efforts to formalize Noelle-Neumann's ideas (Granovetter and Soong 1988; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1988; and Kuran 1995*b*).

We believe that distributional properties of public opinion may have important consequences for political conflict and change. In the conclusion to this article, we speculate that the degree and nature of opinion polarization interact with institutional factors to condition the outcome of two-party competition as depicted in median-voter theories and to influence the likelihood of preference falsification, the shape of spiral-of-silence dynamics, the extent of political volatility, and the character of interest-group formation.

WHAT IS POLARIZATION?

Given polarization's prominence in contemporary political discourse, the literature provides strikingly little guidance in defining it.[4] Perhaps the best place to begin is with what polarization is *not*. Polarization is not noisy incivility in political exchange: although the two things may (or may not) be associated empirically, polarization refers to the extent of disagreement, not to the ways in which disagreement is expressed. Nor is polariza-

[4] Empirical studies of opinion polarization reduce it to between-group differences. Students of economic inequality have done useful work (see, esp., Esteban and Ray [1994] on income polarization), though their solutions are incomplete and not entirely transferable to opinion polarization.

tion reducible to the balance of responses between agreement and disagreement with survey items (except in the limiting case of two-point scales). It is in the extremity of and distance between responses, not in their substantive content, that polarization inheres.[5]

Polarization is both a state and a process. Polarization as a state refers to the extent to which opinions on an issue are opposed in relation to some theoretical maximum. Polarization as a process refers to the increase in such opposition over time. We focus here on polarization in the latter sense.

To analyze change in the degree of polarization, we must be able to measure it. In order to measure it, we must be able to define it. And to define polarization, we must be clear about why we are interested in it. Our premise is that, other things being equal, attitude polarization militates against social and political stability by reducing the probability of group formation at the center of the opinion distribution and by increasing the likelihood of the formation of groups with distinctive, irreconcilable policy preferences.

Given that premise, we need a theory of, or at least some intuitions about, opinion aggregation as a foundation for measurement. We have four such intuitions. (They are testable in principle, but it is beyond the scope of this article to do so.)

Two of these intuitions refer to properties of single distributions:

1. Other things being equal, the more dispersed opinion becomes, the more difficult it will be for the political system to establish and maintain centrist political consensus (the *dispersion principle*).

2. Other things being equal, the greater the extent to which opinions move toward separate modes (and the more separate those modes become), the more likely it is that social conflict will ensue (the *bimodality principle;* see Esteban and Ray 1994).

Two other intuitions refer to relationships *among* distributions:

3. Other things being equal, the more closely associated different social attitudes become (both within and across opinion domains), the greater the likelihood of implacable conflict (the *constraint principle;* see Converse 1964).

4. Other things being equal, the greater the extent to which social attitudes become correlated with salient individual characteristics or identities, the more likely it is that they will become the foci of social conflict (the *consolidation principle;* see Blau 1977).

Thus polarization is multidimensional in character. Each of our four

[5] Such balance, when it is observed, is as likely to reflect question framing (including effective efforts by item designers to maximize response variance) as polarization (Schuman and Presser 1981; Schuman 1986; Sigelman and Presser 1988, p. 336).

principles suggests a distinct dimension, and a distinct measure, of polarization.

Dispersion.—Public opinion on an issue can be characterized as polarized to the extent that opinions are diverse, "far apart" in content, and relatively balanced between ends of the opinion spectrum. The natural measure of opinion spread is the *variance,* with polarization entailing increased variance over time. The variance represents the extent to which any two randomly selected respondents are likely to differ in their opinions; it is also affected by the proportion of extreme responses. When opinion becomes more polarized, variance increases. The formula for variance is

$$s^2 = \sum (x - \bar{x})^2/N - 1,$$

Bimodality.—Public opinion is also polarized insofar as people with different positions on an issue cluster into separate camps, with locations between the two modal positions sparsely occupied. Note that bimodality is analytically distinct from the *distance* between positions. Because actors in middle positions can often broker between extremes, the extent to which opinion variation leads to conflict is likely to depend on the extent to which occupants of polar stances are isolated from one another. (Polarization could, of course, manifest itself in clustering around three or more modes. Although this possibility is of theoretical interest, this form of polarization appears neither in our data nor in the contemporary rhetoric of polarization, and thus is beyond the scope of this discussion.)

If variance represents the spread of opinion, *kurtosis* serves to tap bimodality (Walter and Lev 1969, chap. 4; Chissom 1970; Darlington 1970; Smith 1991). Kurtosis is ordinarily used diagnostically, but here we focus on its substantive implications. If a distribution is peaked (indicating a high level of consensus), kurtosis is positive. If it is flatter than the normal distribution, kurtosis is negative; as it reaches bimodality, kurtosis approaches -2. The formula for kurtosis (k) is

$$k = \{[\sum (X - m)^4 \div N]/s^4\} - 3,$$

where m is the mean, s the standard deviation, and subtracting "3" ensures that the normal distribution takes the value "0."

Because kurtosis may be unfamiliar to some readers, we provide examples of different kinds of distributions in figure 1. The top row of figure 1 demonstrates the independence of kurtosis from skewness. If responses are concentrated, indicating opinion consensus, kurtosis will be positive whether or not attitudes peak at the center of the distribution or at one of the poles. The next four panels of figure 1 demonstrate that kurtosis

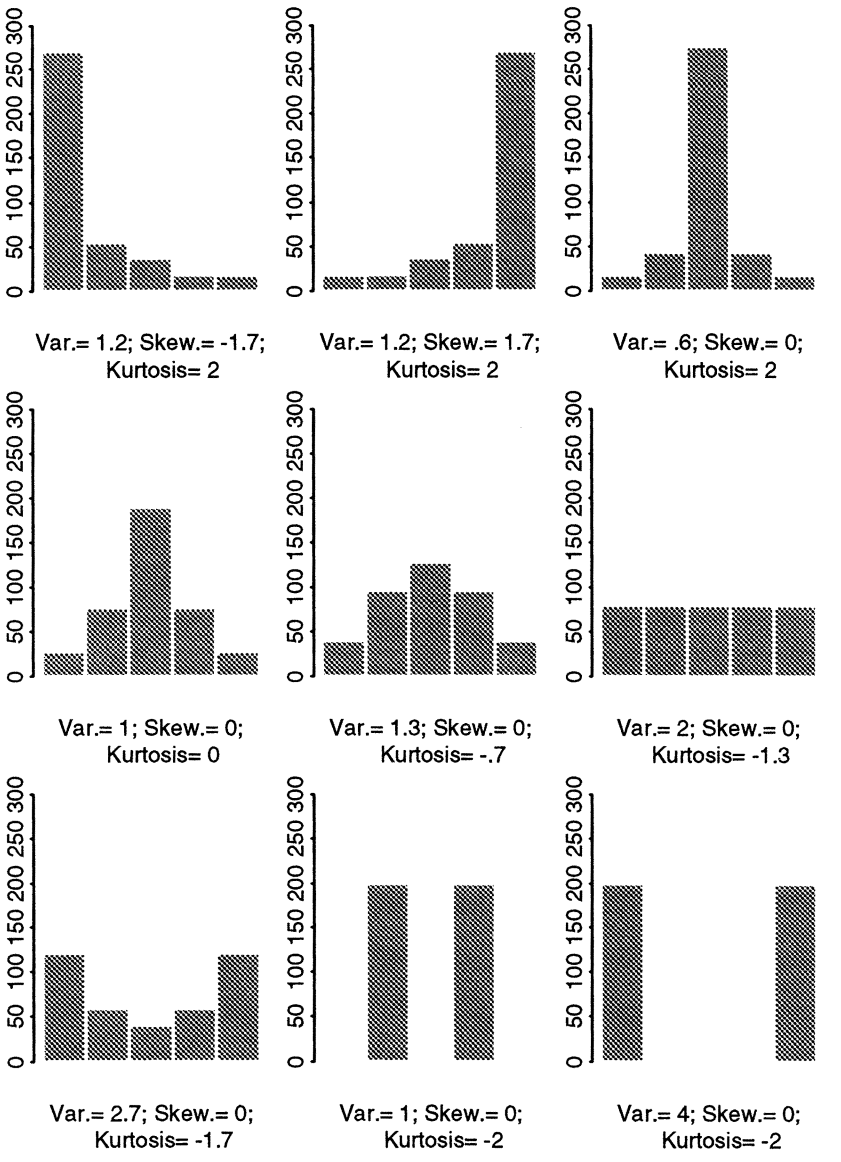

FIG. 1.—Kurtosis values for selected distributions (simulated data), $N = 400$

becomes negative as distributions flatten out and even more negative as they become bimodal.

The final two panels illustrate the difference between kurtosis and variance. Dispersion and bimodality are analytically and empirically distinct: one may find much bimodality within a relatively narrow range of opinion or a flat distribution of persons across a very wide range of opinion. (Dispersion and bimodality are most interdependent at extreme consensus, as variance approaches zero and kurtosis approaches infinity.) The final two panels depict sharply bimodal distributions, but the modes of the second panel are farther apart than are those of the first. This larger gap is reflected in the higher variance of the second panel, whereas the equivalent degrees of bimodality are reflected in equal kurtosis in the two panels.

The value of kurtosis as a measure of polarization can be seen by comparing it to the alternatives. If one simply adds the proportion of extreme responses to a question, one cannot distinguish between bimodal polarization and consensus around a single pole. Variance, as we have seen, is a good measure of dispersion, but it provides less information about a distribution's shape. Skewness reflects the *direction* in which a distribution is biased from normality but is insensitive to differences between normal and polarized distributions with means at their center. Only kurtosis is sensitive to the proportion of extreme responses *and* capable of distinguishing between a sharp skew to either side on the one hand and movement of responses from the center to *both* ends of the distribution on the other. A disadvantage of kurtosis—its sensitivity to scale effects, especially the length of a distribution's tails—does not affect the analyses reported here because we compare only scales and items with constant numbers of response categories over time.

Constraint.—By opinion constraint, we refer to the extent to which opinions on any one item in an opinion domain (a set of thematically related issues) are associated with opinions on any other. Following Converse (1964), we view constraint as an indicator of ideological cohesion that varies in degree and scope: political opinions are coherent insofar as they are mutually constrained (e.g., knowing my opinion about premarital sex enables you to predict my views on abortion) and insofar as constraint is *extensive* in scope (e.g., knowing my opinion about premarital sex also helps you predict my views on issues—like school prayer—not related to sexual behavior). The most extensive ideologies provide overarching narratives that lend coherence to opinions on many logically distinct issues. Because constraint and scope are analytically independent, we analyze constraint within particular issue domains and also across multiple issue domains.

Although constraint may seem peripheral to polarization, it is central to any approach that finds attitude polarization interesting for its potential

impact on group formation and political mobilization.[6] To see why this is the case, imagine a world in which all survey respondents choose extreme positions on all attitude items, but decide *which* extreme position to choose on each by flipping a coin. On any given attitude item, polarization is maximally dispersed and bimodal. But would such a condition capture what we mean when we speak of political polarization? We think not. Politics in such a world might be tiresomely disputatious; but because attitudes on different issues would be uncorrelated, political organization around anything but narrow, special issue campaigns would be impossible. Gridlock, not civil strife, would result.

Coleman (1957, p. 10) argued that cross-issue contagion is part of the natural history of political polarization. Implicit in most accounts of polarization and explicit in ones that employ the imagery of "culture war" (Hunter 1991; Guinness 1993) is the assertion that formerly unrelated opinions are now bound up in a narrative—a "crowning posture" (Converse 1964) or "master frame" (Snow and Benford 1992)—that much of the public finds compelling. Thus we view opinion constraint as a necessary but insufficient condition for a sociologically interesting definition of polarization.

Our measure of constraint is Cronbach's alpha,[7] which is ordinarily used as a measure of scale reliability but here represents the degree of association (ranging from 0 to 1) among all items in a scale equal to "the proportion of the total variance among [the] items that is due to the latent variable" underlying them (DeVellis 1991, p. 30; see also Norusis 1990, p. B-1990).[8] The formula for alpha is

$$\alpha = (k/k - 1)\,[1 - (\sum \sigma_i^2)/\sigma_{yi}^2],$$

where k is the number of items in the scale, σ_i^2 is the diagonal covariance for the ith item, and σ_{yi}^2 is the sum of the diagonal and off-diagonal covari-

[6] Esteban and Ray (1994) omit constraint from their definition of polarization (which focuses on spread and bimodality) because their empirical discussion employs a single variable, income. Their implicit inclusion of constraint is apparent, however, in their observation that an ideal measure of polarization would be based upon all attributes relevant "for creating differences or similarities between persons" (p. 823), for which they use income as a proxy, as well as in references to multiple correlated dimensions.

[7] We initially used both alpha and the first principal component from a factor analytic solution (Kim and Mueller 1978). The two measures yielded very similar results, so we used only the former in the work reported here.

[8] Because alpha is sensitive to the number of items in a domain, we cannot compare alphas across domains. But because the number of items in each domain remains constant over time in our data, this does not affect our analyses, which rely on comparisons over time of the same sets of items.

ances for all items. If political polarization is driving Americans into opposing camps (and not just splitting opinion different ways on different issues), alpha will increase.

Consolidation.—The public-opinion literature ordinarily views opinion polarization as difference in response to attitude items by members of groups defined on the basis of nominal (e.g., gender, race, occupation) or graduated (e.g., age, income, years of schooling) parameters (see, e.g., Shapiro and Mahajan 1986; Page and Shapiro 1992, chap. 7; Brint 1994, pp. 110–21). The greater the differences across multiple indicators, the greater the degree of opinion polarization between two groups.

Drawing on Blau (1977), we regard the consolidation of parameters as increasing the likely ratio of within-group to between-group interaction (in proportion to the parameters' salience) and the likelihood of group mobilization. We extend Blau's framework by treating social attitudes, as well as sociodemographic characteristics, as parameters. The constraint and consolidation principles are formally similar: the former represents associations among opinions (i.e., *ideological polarization*), the latter, consolidation of opinion parameters and structural parameters (i.e., *identity-based polarization*).

Studies of intergroup agreement and disagreement typically use one of two measures: the difference in means or the proportion of each group responding in a certain manner (e.g., agreeing somewhat or agreeing very much with a given position). Although either measure is adequate for many purposes, each suppresses some information relevant to understanding intergroup differences. Focusing on the mean reveals nothing about the shape of the distribution. Focusing on the proportion at one end of the scale withholds information about the pattern of response in the rest of the scale.

We have argued that within-population polarization is a function of both *dispersion* and *bimodality*. Similarly, we contend that *between-population* polarization depends on both the spread between sample means and the peakedness of opinion within each sample. The intuition behind this assertion is that political conflict between groups is a function of both between-group polarization, which increases the likelihood of conflict, and within-group polarization, which reduces it (by making it difficult for advocates of any position to claim to speak for the group as a whole). Therefore, we regard two groups as polarized in a manner likely to lead to intergroup conflict only to the extent that (*a*) between-group differences are substantial *and* (*b*) within-group polarization is minimal.

To capture both facets of polarization we must use two measures. We inspect difference of means over time to see if between-group differences have become greater or smaller. But we add to this an analysis of change over time in kurtosis for each group. In some cases, taking account of

change in within-group kurtosis leads to different conclusions than would examining changing means alone.[9]

Each of our four principles, and the measure that derives from it, taps a distinct dimension of opinion polarization. Polarization can be said without qualification to increase only when opinion distributions become more (1) dispersed, (2) flat or bimodal, (3) closely associated, and (4) closely linked to salient social identities. Increases on different dimensions indicate polarization of different kinds, with potentially different consequences. Polarization can be said *not* to occur only absent increases in dispersion, bimodality, and consolidation (interitem constraint being a necessary but insufficient condition).

DATA, MEASURES, AND ANALYTIC STRATEGY

To map change over time in Americans' attitudes requires high-quality national sample surveys that ask the same questions on a regular basis and also collect data on a wide range of background variables. We rely on the two leading sources of such items, the General Social Survey (GSS) and the National Election Study (NES).

The NES is a personal-interview sample survey conducted by the University of Michigan Center for Political Studies in presidential and midterm election years. The GSS is a regularly administered, personal-interview sample survey of U.S. households conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago (Davis and Smith 1991, 1992).

Because we are interested in attitude constraint, as well as in the spread and bimodality of particular attitudes, we identify several issue domains upon which to focus. Most assertions that opinion polarization has increased refer to social or cultural issues. Few observers discern growing polarization of opinion on economic or foreign policy. Therefore, we use data on opinions about social issues (e.g., abortion, race, gender roles, sexuality, and crime) over which polarization is most likely to be observed.

The NES fields longer surveys with more opinion items in presidential election years. (Before 1972, the NES was a much smaller survey, with few attitude questions.) When we could, we used items repeated in off-year surveys. Other items were asked only in presidential election years from 1972 to 1992. We used relevant GSS items for each year they were

[9] Inspecting both variance and kurtosis for each group would create overwhelming problems of data presentation. Given the need to choose between them, we chose kurtosis because we believe it to reflect better than variance factors related to interest-group mobilization. Whether we are correct, of course, is an empirical question beyond the scope of this article.

asked from 1974 through 1994. Items from both surveys were rescaled as required to assign conservative answers higher scores.

Cases coded "don't know" and "not applicable" were treated as missing. Although some researchers have treated "don't know" responses as centrist or moderate, recoding them at scale midpoints, we rejected this option on the grounds that lack of knowledge (or interest) does not moderate views. (Conceivably, the ignorant can be induced to take extreme stands on many issues more easily than the well-informed.)

If, however, we are wrong, *and* if "don't know" responses have increased markedly over the past two decades, this decision *could* bias our results in this way: If "don't knows" have increased in frequency—in effect reflecting a migration of persons with moderate views from moderate to "don't know" responses and thus out of our effective sample—then polarization could be overestimated. If "don't knows" have declined, this could lead us to underestimate the degree of polarizing change. To guard against this possibility, we examined time trends in "don't know" responses to the 35 attitudes scales (or component items of scales) used in the analyses that follow by regressing the proportion of "don't know" answers against survey year. Of the 35 coefficients this procedure generated, only six were significant at $P \leq .05$ and, of these, five were positive and only one was negative. This means that, if one accepts the premise that "don't know" respondents have moderate views, polarization might be overestimated in a few cases. These tests then increase our confidence in our findings (reported below) of little evidence that polarization has occurred.[10]

Variables

NES.—Means, standard deviations, and N's for NES variables are given in table 1. Several items report respondents' self-location on 97-point "feeling thermometers" that gauge the "warmth" of respondents' feelings toward particular groups. We analyzed attitudes toward blacks, poor people, liberals, and conservatives. (Although liberals and conserva-

[10] No variable from the NES displayed a trend in the proportion of "don't knows." In the GSS, positive trends were observed in the proportion of "don't know" responses to questions about the permissibility of abortion in cases where there was fear of birth defects or threats to the mother's health, mother's participation in the workforce, racial intermarriage, and busing for school desegregation. A negative trend was observed in "don't know" responses to a question about attitudes toward the courts' treatment of criminals.

TABLE 1

VARIABLES FROM THE NES

Variable	Label	Range	Mean	SD	*N*
Year of study	V4	72–92	82.02	6.58	22,802
Female	V104	0–1	.56	.50	22,802
Age:					
Under 30 years old	V101	0–1	.25	.43	22,711
Under 35 years old	V101	0–1	.36	.48	22,711
Over 45 years old	V101	0–1	.44	.50	22,711
Race:					
White	V105	0–1	.88	.32	22,802
Black	V105	0–1	.12	.32	22,802
Education:					
College degree	V140	0–1	.17	.38	22,575
High school or less	V140	0–1	.52	.50	22,575
South	V112	0–1	.35	.48	22,802
Liberal	V803	0–1	.25	.43	15,531
Conservative	V803	0–1	.40	.49	15,531
Democrat	V301	0–1	.40	.49	22,283
Republican	V301	0–1	.25	.43	22,283
Voted in the last presidential election?	V702	0–1	.64	.48	21,036
Politically active*		0–1	.12	.32	20,779
Omnibus scale*		48–587	311.13	78.23	8,927
Government aid to minorities	V830	1–7	4.39	1.82	19,314
Abortion attitudes:					
Before 1980	V837	1–4	2.42	.99	6,628
1980	(V837 + V838)/2	1–4	2.28	.95	1,320
After 1980	V838	1–4	2.16	1.08	11,984
Women's roles	V834	1–7	2.92	2.02	17,691
Feeling thermometer:					
Blacks	V206	0–97	32.75	20.57	17,828
Poor people	V233	0–97	24.49	18.04	16,528
Liberals	V211	0–97	44.41	20.75	16,446
Conservatives	V212	0–97	59.19	19.17	16,583

NOTE.—The second column gives the NES label of the variable on which measure was based. Values were recoded to scale conservative responses higher. *N* refers to valid responses from survey years 1972–92 (inclusive).

*Respondents were classified "politically active" if they reported doing three or more of the following: voting, trying to influence the votes of others, attending political meetings, working for a party of candidate, wearing a partisan sticker or button, or donating money to a candidate's political party (V702 and V717–721). The omnibus scale is a summed scale of all of the attitude items, rescaled to be of equal weight.

tives are not social issues, we included these items as measures of polarization in affective responses to alternative political identities.)[11]

Three other NES attitude items were used. A seven-point item on attitudes toward government assistance for minorities (with "7" marking the most negative) ranged from "government should help minority groups" to "minority groups should help themselves."[12] A seven-point scale tapped views on gender equality (1 = women and men should have an equal role; 7 = a women's place is in the home). A four-point abortion scale ranged from support for an unlimited right to abortion (1 = never be forbidden) to the view that abortion should never be permitted (with the value "4").[13]

In addition to the opinion items, we used several NES measures to identify subsamples. A six-point education scale was used to identify respondents with college degrees or with no formal education beyond the final year of high school. Age, gender, and region were recorded in the usual manner. Political philosophy was tapped with a seven-point self-identification scale ranging from extremely to slightly liberal (1–3) to extremely to slightly conservative (5–7). Voting is by self-report for that year's presidential election. Party identification and race are by self-report. Political activism is a six-point scale (ACTIVE) based on questions on voting, efforts to influence the votes of others, attending candidate rallies, displaying candidate buttons or stickers, donating money to a political

[11] Variables derived from the GSS are scales. Those derived from the NES—except for the omnibus scale—are single items. Therefore, alphas (which measure association among items on a scale) are reported for GSS but not for NES variables. All variables are scaled so that the more conservative or rightist position receives a higher rating. This policy has one unfortunate consequence—that the NES feeling thermometers for attitudes toward liberals, blacks, and poor people are rescaled to make "100" into "0" and vice versa, whereas the feeling thermometer for conservatives, by contrast, retains its scale. Although we recognize that this treatment of the thermometer variables is potentially confusing and potentially unfair (nothing in most versions of conservatism dictates racial antipathy), we consider these evils subordinate to the good of retaining a single ideological direction for all measures.

[12] At the beginning of the time series the introduction to the question referred to "blacks and other minority groups"; after 1988, it referred only to "blacks." In 1980, the term "even if it means giving them preferential treatment" was added, but after 1980 it was removed.

[13] The two middle categories of the abortion question were altered in 1980. Before 1980, the options were to permit an abortion "if the life or health of the mother is threatened" and to permit an abortion "if the mother will find it difficult to care for the child." From 1980 on the second option has been "only in case of rape, incest, or when the woman's life is in danger" and the third became "only in case of rape, incest, or danger to the woman's life, but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established." Furthermore, beginning in 1980, the question was reworded to underscore that the options were about the treatment of abortion by law, rather than by custom or informal norms. In 1980 both versions of the question were asked and the new version was found to increase slightly the polarization of responses.

party or (1980 and thereafter) candidate, or volunteering for a party or candidate. "Activists" are those who scored "3" or higher.

GSS.—The GSS posed two challenges. First, the GSS adopted a split ballot design between 1988 and 1993; therefore, most questions of interest were asked of only some respondents in those years. Thus we could not scale some attractive items together because they appeared on different ballots.[14] Second, many relevant GSS items were dichotomous and thus ill-suited to recording changes in polarization, except for between-group differences. As shown in table 2, six simple additive scales were constructed that combined items tapping attitudes on related issues.[15] First, views on abortion are tapped by an additive scale of seven items, each specifying a condition under which "it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion." Second, a racism scale is based on answers to 12 questions tapping attitudes toward African-Americans (or, for African-American respondents, white Americans).[16] The questions asked about acceptance of varying degrees of racial integration in schools, willingness to vote for African-American (white) presidential candidates, attitudes toward busing, toward residential segregation, and toward antimiscegenation laws and segregated social clubs, and attributions of responsibility for African-Americans' economic disadvantage. A third scale sums responses to three items about women's participation in the public sphere. A fourth is based on four items, with responses ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" on a four-point scale, about women's family role. Fifth, a sexuality scale is based on three items eliciting attitudes toward premarital sex, extramarital sex, and homosexuality, with four-point scales ranging from "always wrong" to "not wrong at all." And, finally, a crime-and-justice scale combines responses to questions

[14] The split ballot resulted in very low N's for some subgroups for the omnibus and racism scales, which could only be tallied for one of three ballots. Consequently, getting adequate samples of college graduates, religious conservatives, and African-Americans on these two scales required pooling the 1988 and 1989 samples and the 1990 and 1991 samples.

[15] This enables us to chart change in polarization over time, but at the cost of moderately confounding the measurement of opinion spread and bimodality with within-domain attitude constraint.

[16] African-American respondents are not included among respondents with valid values in the racial attitudes scales in 1977 because in that year they were only asked the question on busing, but none of the others. After 1977, all questions were asked African-Americans as well as others. We omit from our list of significant trends three subgroup race-relations trends that are artifactually significant due to the absence of African-Americans on this variable in 1977. These include declines in differences in attitudes toward race between southeasterners and others and between fundamentalists and religious liberals, and increased differences between Republicans and Democrats.

TABLE 2

VARIABLES FROM THE GSS

Variable	Label	Range	Mean	SD	*N*
Year of study	YEAR	74–94	84.53	6.36	28,556
Female	SEX	0–1	.57	.50	28,450
Age:					
Under 30 years old	AGE	0–1	.23	.42	28,450
Under 35 years old	AGE	0–1	.35	.48	28,450
Over 45 years old	AGE	0–1	.44	.50	28,450
Race:					
White	RACE	0–1	.86	.35	28,556
Black	RACE	0–1	.11	.32	28,556
Education:					
College degree	DEGREE	0–1	.18	.38	28,479
High school or less	DEGREE	0–1	.60	.49	28,479
South	REGION	0–1	.34	.47	28,556
Liberal	POLVIEWS	0–1	.29	.46	27,229
Conservative	POLVIEWS	0–1	.33	.47	27,229
Democrat	PARTYID	0–1	.39	.49	28,105
Republican	PARTYID	0–1	.27	.44	28,105
Voted in the last presidential election?	VOTE72–92	0–1	.70	.46	25,972
Religiously conservative	RELIGION	0–1	.25	.43	27,579
Religiously liberal	RELIGION	0–1	.23	.42	27,579
Omnibus scale	Sum of all	55–122	87.06	11.77	3,616
Abortion attitude scale*		7–14	9.59	2.38	16,557
Women's public roles scale†		3–6	3.73	1.01	15,918
Family gender roles scale‡		4–16	9.34	2.64	10,706
Sexuality attitudes scale§		3–12	9.29	2.42	8,772
Racism scale‖		8–16	11.11	1.97	5,099
Crime and justice scale#		3–6	4.92	.69	16,618
Sex education	SEXEDUC	1–2	1.15	.36	17,044
School prayer	PRAYER	1–2	1.61	.49	15,568
Divorce law	DIVLAW	1–3	2.23	.86	19,535

NOTE.—The second column reports the GSS label of the variable on which the measure was based. Values were recoded to scale conservative responses higher. See n. 25 below for explanation of coding religious conservatism/liberalism. In constructing the various scales, where necessary, items were rescaled so that each contributed equally to the scale in which it was included.

*Abortion attitude scale = sum of responses to ABDEFECT, ABNOMORE, ABHLTH, ABPOOR, ABRAPE, and ABSINGLE (higher values indicate more restrictive responses).

†Women's public roles scale = sum of responses to FEHOME, FEPRES, and FEPOL (more restrictive responses are scaled higher).

‡Family gender roles scale = sum of responses to FECHLD, FEHELP, FEPRESCH, FEFAM (support for traditional roles are scaled higher).

§Sexuality attitudes scale = sum of responses to PREMARSX, HOMOSEX, and XMARSEX (conservative responses are scaled higher).

‖Racism scale = responses to BUSING, RACMAR, RACSEG, RACPRES, RACFEW, RACHAF, RACMOST, RACDIF1, RACDIF2, RACDIF3, and RACDIF4.

#Crime and justice scale = sum of responses to CAPPUN, GUNLAW, and COURTS.

about capital punishment, gun control, and courts' treatment of criminals. The all-domain constraint and between-group difference analyses also employed dichotomous items on school prayer, sex education, and divorce law. All items were rescaled as needed to assign conservative views higher values.

We used a question about educational attainment to identify college graduates and those with high school–level education or less. Age, gender, and region were measured in the usual manner. "Voters" are respondents who report voting in the most recent presidential election. Race was coded by the interviewer except for cases in which interviewers were in doubt. Questions on liberal/conservative self-identification and party affiliation are similar to those in the NES. We classified as religious conservatives Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants who attended church nearly every week or more. Religious liberals include mainstream Protestants and Jews and respondents without religious affiliation. (Our classifications of evangelical Protestants and mainstream Protestants and Jews follow Smith [1990*a*]).

Strategy of Exposition

Because we calculated several measures of polarization using data on 13 scales representing several dozen items over more than 20 years for full samples and several subsamples, we face a striking data-reduction challenge. We rely on graphic means to reduce the welter of statistics to a form that the reader can grasp.

We begin by asking if polarization has increased among all Americans with respect to the full range of social attitudes in both surveys. We illustrate results for each opinion variable with four graphs (see fig. 2). The horizontal axis of each represents time and ranges from 1972 to 1994 for all graphs for ease of comparison. The results of plotting means across time ("Mean") replicate and extend in time findings reported in other studies (e.g. Page and Shapiro 1992). We include them for the assistance they offer in interpreting more central results.

The crucial findings appear in the second, third, and fourth graphs in each row. The second reports variance (dispersion, y-axis) over time (x-axis). The third reports kurtosis (peakedness/bimodality) over time. The fourth (for multi-item scales only) reports change over time in Chronbach's alpha (constraint). Each graph includes point observations. a linear regression line of the y-axis against year, and a smoothed loess (locally weighted regression) line depicting change in slope.[17] Slopes and *P*-values

[17] The loess line is valuable because it illustrates deviations from linearity in the relationship between time and the y-axis variable. In all of the examples used here, the smoothness parameter that determines the breadth of the bands over which changes

from linear regressions appear as text on each graph.[18] (Because y-axis metrics are unstandardized, slopes cannot be compared across items, but they can be compared across groups within items.) We then use the same procedure to report results for specific issue domains: racial attitudes, attitudes about women's roles, crime, abortion and sexual behavior, and feelings toward the poor, liberals, and conservatives. (All analyses entail comparison among items or scales with constant ranges over time. One cannot compare variance, kurtosis, or alpha across items of differing range.)

We next explore change over time in variance, kurtosis, and alpha on the same scales and items for several subgroups—college graduates, voters, the politically active, and people under 30—to see if polarization has occurred more within "attentive publics" (Arnold 1990) and the young than within the population at large. These analyses are reported in the manner described above. In order to conserve space, particular results are presented only when (*a*) they differ from those for the sample as a whole and (*b*) at least one measure of polarization exhibits a significant time trend. (A complete set of coefficients is reported in appendix tables A1 and A2 below.)

Finally, we ask if specific pairs of groups have become more polarized in relation to one another over time (the consolidation principle). Comparisons are between groups based on age (younger than 35 years old vs. older than 45 years old); gender (women vs. men); race (African-Americans vs. whites); educational level (college graduates vs. people with no formal education beyond high school); faith tradition (religious conservatives vs. religious liberals); ideology (conservative vs. liberal); region (South vs. other); and party affiliation (Republican vs. Democrat).[19] For each comparison we present two sets of lines in a single panel, the horizontal axis of which represents time. The thicker set of lines within each panel plots the means for each group over time. The slope of a regression of the absolute intergroup difference against time, and the time coefficient's *P*-value, are reported at the top of the panel to test for trends. The left y-axis indicates the mean values. A second, thinner, pair of lines depict change over time in kurtosis for each group, as well as (at the bottom of the panel) the slope (and *P*-value) of kurtosis plotted against time for each group. The right y-axis reports kurtosis values. We attend to trends that are significant at $P \leq .10$, a generous rule of thumb chosen because each series has

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in slope are observed and smoothed, was set at .667, a moderate level (Cleveland 1979; 1994, pp. 169–80).

[18] We report *P* for its heuristic value, even though significance tests are not strictly applicable.

[19] South is a combination of the South Atlantic, East South Central and West South Central census regions.

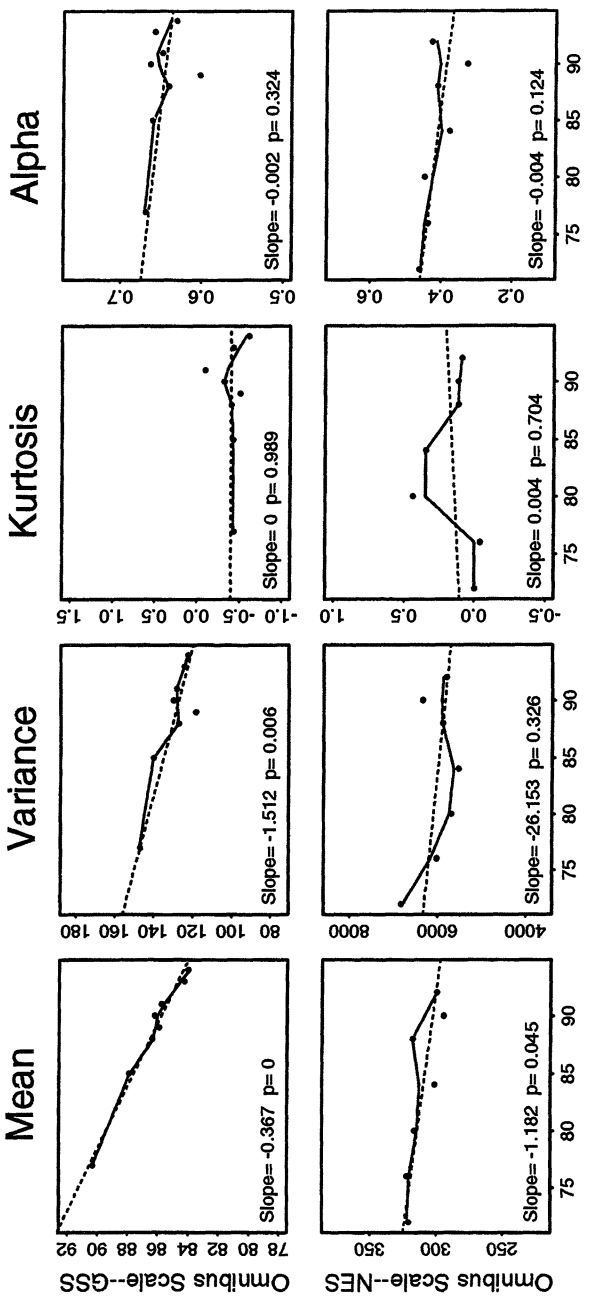

FIG. 2.—Within-population polarization, full sample; GSS 1974–94 and NES 1972–94 omnibus scales; x-axis = year

few observations (6–15) and to ensure that we do not underestimate the degree to which polarization has occurred.

RESULTS

We begin with the full samples, first analyzing scales based on many social attitudes and then looking at specific issue domains. We next search for polarization within particular subsamples and conclude with an analysis of polarization between groups.

Within-Group Polarization in the Population as a Whole

To test the proposition that contemporary U.S. opinion is characterized by increasing interdomain constraint and polarization (Hunter 1991; Bennett 1992; Guinness 1993), we begin by analyzing omnibus scales, which are a combination of all opinion scales and items described in tables 1 and 2, respectively.[20] Whether social conservatism is a homogeneous ideological entity is of course an empirical matter. Existing studies suggest that constraint is greater among social attitudes than between them and opinions on economic or foreign policy, but report that some social attitudes (e.g., toward crime and toward gender) have moved in different directions during the years in question (Smith 1990*b;* Davis 1992; Page and Shapiro 1992). So these analyses test only the most strongly framed assertions of growing polarization across a unidimensional divide.

Have public attitudes on a wide range of social issues scaled together become more polarized? Apparently not (see fig. 2). A significant decline in variance on the GSS omnibus scale indicates less polarization, while NES scale variance was stable. Kurtosis (bimodality) did not change, although NES data show a partial depolarizing trend reversed in the mid-1980s. Ideological constraint is unchanged on both scales.

The omnibus scales are blunt measures. They effectively demonstrate the absence of polarization on a wide sociocultural front—an important corrective to the rhetoric of "culture war" and the dire warnings of many political commentators. But perhaps polarization *has* occurred with respect to a *subset* of social and cultural issues.

The reader may find it helpful to inspect three-dimensional graphic presentations of two scales that illustrate very different patterns. In the first case, attitudes toward women's family roles, we witness a shift from sharp

[20] Each item was rescaled to an equivalent range to avoid arbitrary inconsistencies in the weight of each scale component. The alternative, normalization, was rejected because its point is to standardize variables with respect to precisely the distributional properties that are the foci of this study.

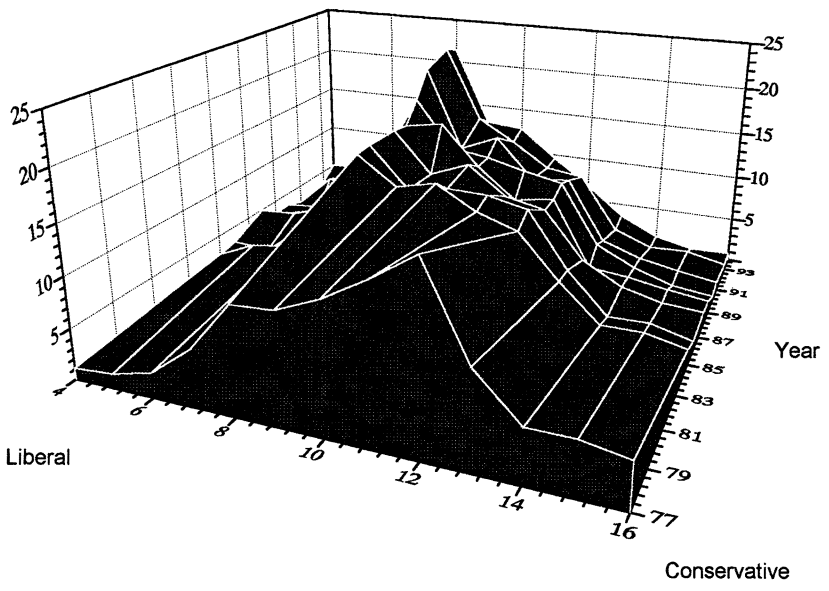

FIG. 3.—Distributions by year, attitudes toward family gender roles, full sample, GSS 1977–94.

dissensus to emergent consensus. The second case, attitudes toward abortion, became significantly more polarized.

Figure 3 plots positions on the 16-point family-role scale against the percentage (0%–25%) of respondents in each position and survey year (1977–94). Relatively high polarization (a gradual slope on the liberal side and a long tail to the right) in 1977 shifts to a more peaked distribution indicating emerging liberal consensus in 1994. During this period, variance fell from 6.88 to 6.12 and kurtosis rose (indicating *less* polarization) from −.32 to −.10. (Note that the *lower* the kurtosis, the greater the polarization: when opinion polarization *declines,* kurtosis *increases* in magnitude.)[21]

[21] It is possible, of course, that concentration of opinion to the left of the scale may conceal new forms of opinion diversity. That is, opinion can bunch up to the left of an existing scale either because most people gravitate to the same point or because the underlying distribution moves to the left, placing large numbers of people at positions to the left of those that can be registered by the measurement instrument. This is clearly not the case in fig. 3, where opinion drops off very sharply from 6 to 5 (the next most liberal alternative), nor do we have reason to believe that a liberal/radical gulf has replaced conservative/liberal divisions in other domains, discussed below, where questions asked over many years reveal attitude convergence.

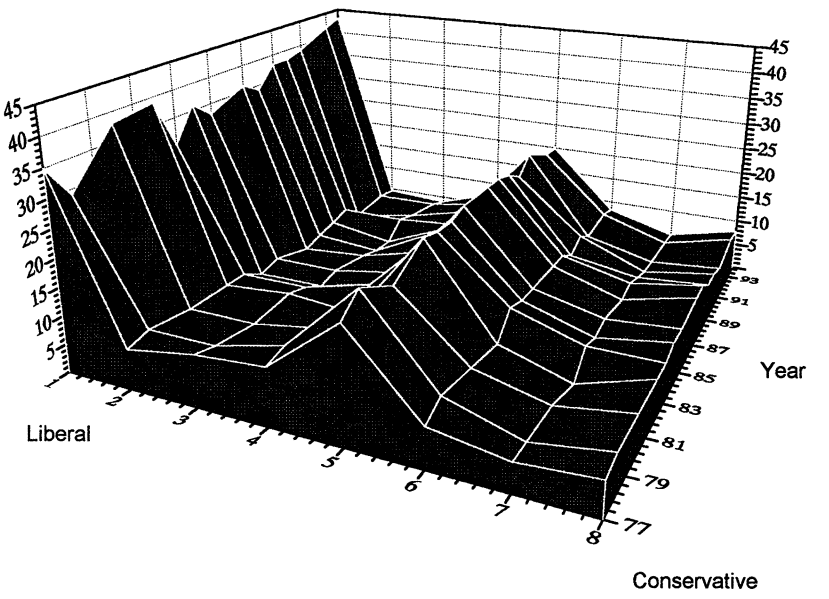

FIG. 4.—Distributions by year, attitudes toward abortion, full sample, GSS 1977–94.

Figure 4 illustrates change over time in the GSS abortion scale. Americans were sharply divided on abortion at the series' onset in 1977, with separate modes at the far left and center points of the scale. Opinion polarized further after 1977, with variance increasing throughout the period (from 5.19 to 5.96 in 1994) and bimodality starting at −1.08, peaking at −1.32 in 1984, and remaining stable thereafter. We turn now to results for specific issue domains (see figs. 5–11).

Race and poverty.—The GSS racial-attitudes scale demonstrates a trend toward *less* polarized (and more liberal) racial attitudes, with variance down and kurtosis up (fig. 5). But, consistent with past research (Jackman and Muha 1984; Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo 1985), broad endorsement of racial integration does not imply support for policies that help minorities or sympathy for poor people. Although variance in response to the NES aid-to-minorities question declined through the early 1980s, it increased after that (fig. 6). Kurtosis behaves similarly, rising (less polarization) until the mid-1980s, then declining. Feelings toward poor people polarized by *both* measures over this period (fig. 6). Thus, despite emerging consensus favoring racial integration, views of the poor, and, after 1984, of government assistance for minorities became more polarized.

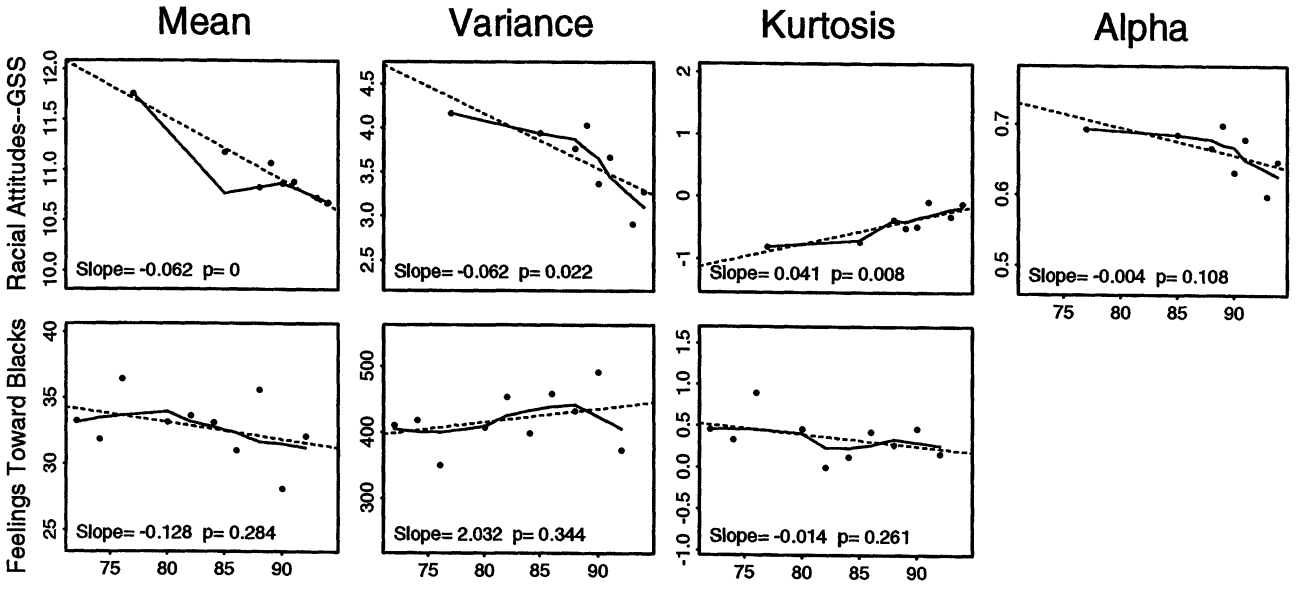

FIG. 5.—Within-population polarization, full sample, GSS 1977–94, NES 1972—94, feelings toward blacks and racial attitudes; x-axis = year.

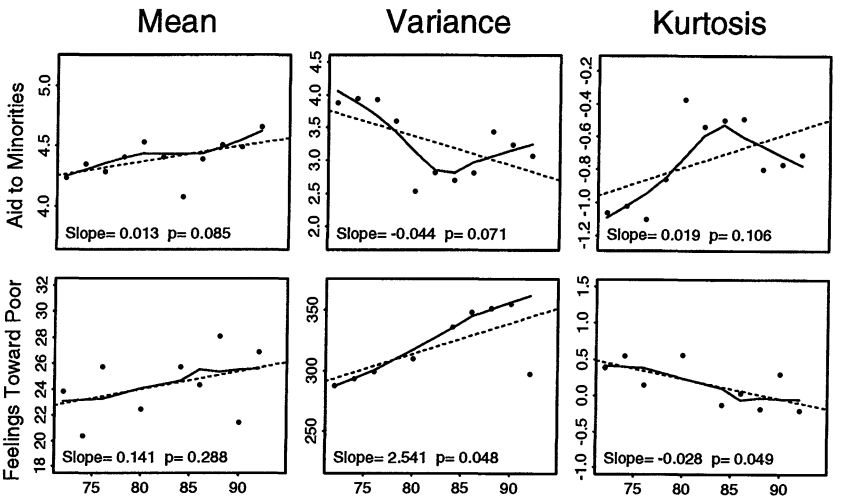

FIG. 6.—Within-population polarization, full sample, NES 1972–94, attitudes toward aid to minorities and feelings toward poor people; x-axis = year.

Gender.—Public attitudes on gender issues have become both more liberal and *less* polarized over time (fig. 7). Variance in all three gender-attitude measures (two GSS scales and an NES item) declined significantly from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s. For both measures tapping acceptance of women's occupancy of public roles, bimodality also declined, as did ideological constraint for the GSS public-roles scale.

Crime and justice.—Crime is perceived as a "wedge" issue in political campaigns. But public attitudes on crime and justice have become *less* polarized since the 1970s, with linear decline in variance and alpha and linear rise in kurtosis (fig. 8).[22]

Attitudes toward liberals and conservatives.—Even if Americans' views on substantive issues have not polarized sharply, perhaps they have become more divided in their affective reaction to political labels, as tapped by the NES feeling thermometers (fig. 8). Apparently not. Only a

[22] Because we rescaled on the basis of ideological valence, support for gun control (a tough-on-crime position) receives a lower score than opposition to gun control, whereas support for capital punishment and criticism of judicial softness on crime receive high ratings. That is why the first panel above the "crime and justice" legend does not show the familiar conservative trend in views on these issues. Because we are interested in testing the contention that polarization is both wide in scope and structured on right/left lines, we prefer this scaling to one based on a "toughness/softness" dimension.

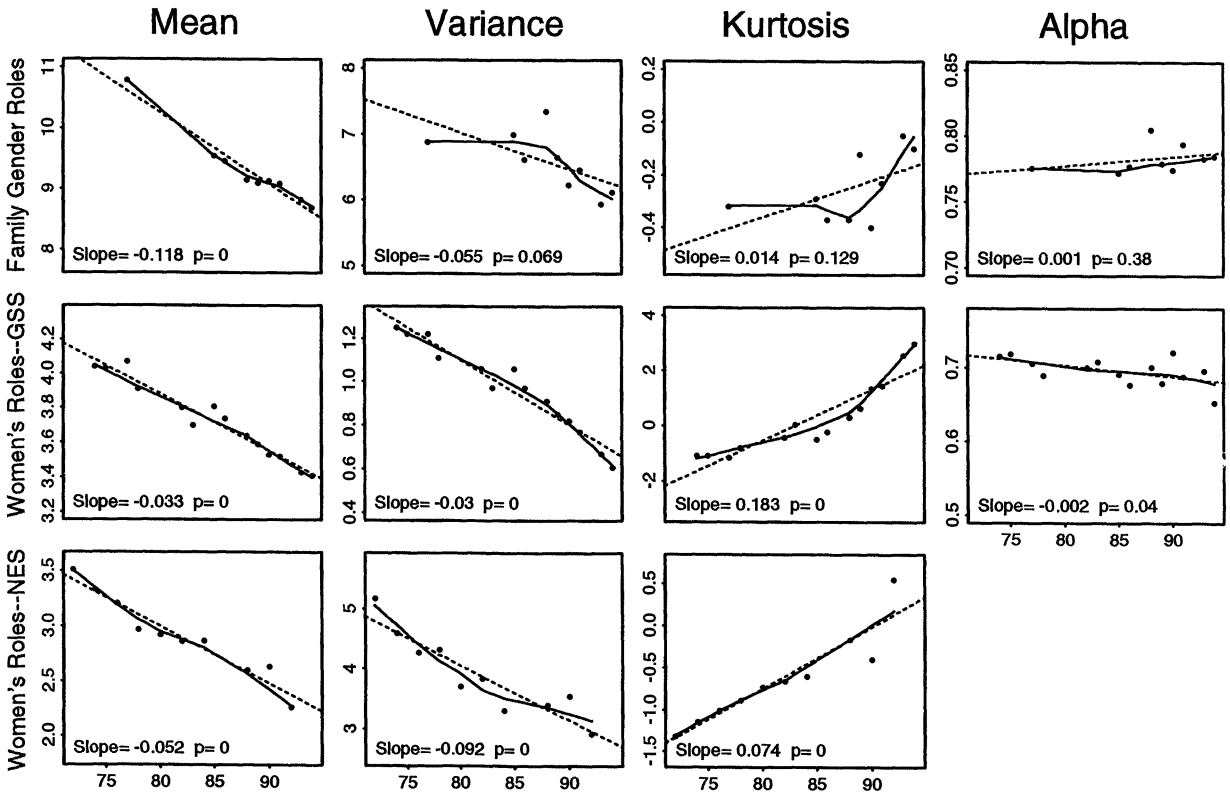

FIG. 7.—Within-population polarization, full sample, GSS 1974–94 and NES 1972–94, women's roles; x-axis = year

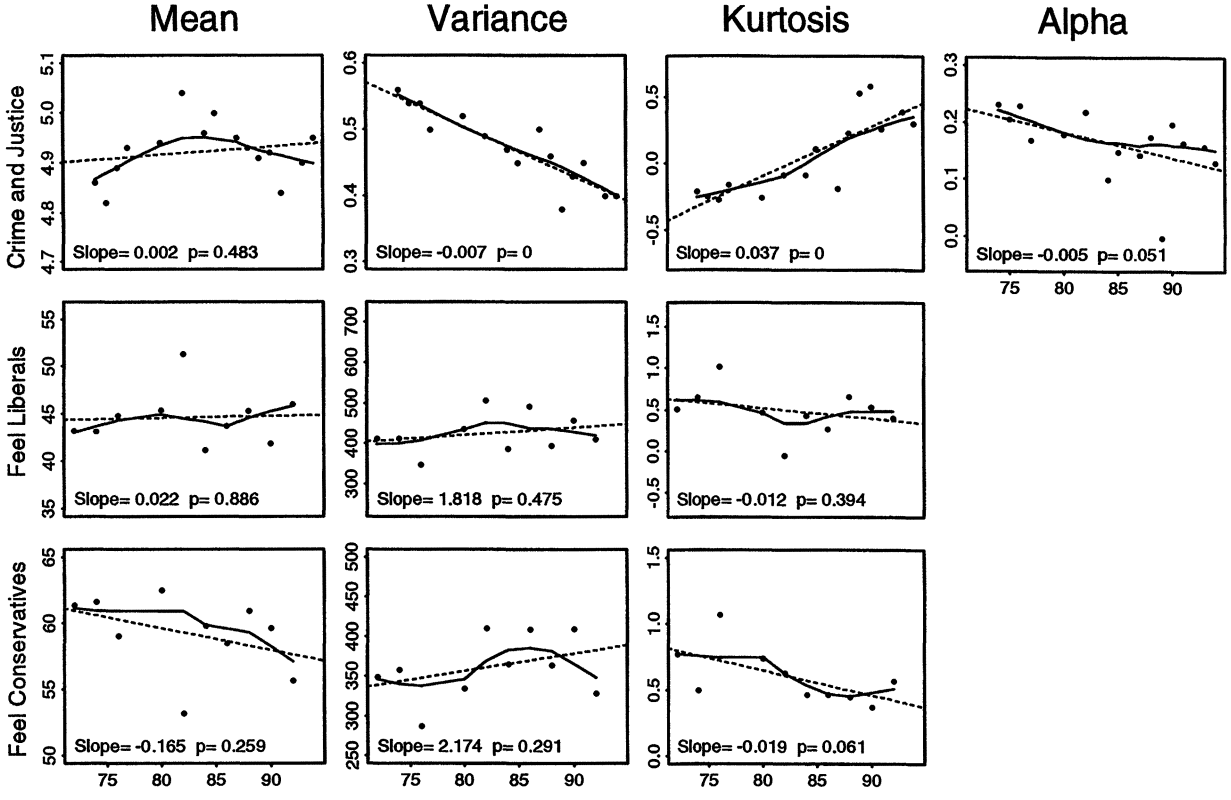

FIG. 8.—Within-population polarization, full sample, GSS 1974–94 and NES 1972–94, crime and justice scale and feelings toward liberals and conservatives; x-axis = year.

decline in kurtosis for feelings toward conservatives demonstrates polarization, and the positive k value indicates that substantial agreement remains.

Abortion and sexuality.—No issue represents contemporary social conflict as vividly as does abortion, the struggle over which has become symbolic of the so-called culture wars (Hunter 1994). This reputation is deserved. Of all the measures we analyzed, only the GSS abortion scale evinces polarization in all three senses: increased dispersion, bimodality (though this peaked in the mid-1980s), and (within-domain) ideological constraint (fig. 9; see also Hout 1995). By contrast, we find no polarization of attitudes on sexual morality, and a small but significant decline in constraint.

Conclusion.—We find little support for the widely held belief that Americans have become sharply polarized on a wide range of social and cultural opinions in the past two decades. Instead we find a variety of trends on specific issues. Americans have become more united in their views on women's role in the public sphere, in their acceptance of racial integration, and in their opinions on matters related to crime and justice. These trends represent movement toward consensus on liberal views on racial integration and gender and on tougher positions on crime. By contrast, Americans have become more divided in their attitudes toward abortion and, less dramatically, in their feelings toward the poor. The fact that division on these latter issues has increased without large directional change in central tendencies confirms the importance of inspecting change in distributions as well as in means.[23]

Within-Group Polarization in Subgroups

Focusing upon the public as a whole may obscure trends toward polarization within particular subgroups. We look at a several such groups below: voters, the politically active, college graduates, and the young. A finding of polarizing trends among these groups would be consequential because the first three play a disproportionately important political role, and changes among the young may presage longer-term shifts. (Figs. 10 and 11 depict results for only those variables where the subgroup evinced sig-

[23] To be sure, one can find evidence of liberalization of attitudes toward abortion during this period, e.g., in responses to the NES abortion question. On the other hand, one can find evidence of fluctuation in views, for example in responses to the GSS-derived scale. We suspect that the relatively unusual vulnerability to question frame and wording reflected in responses to GSS and NES abortion items indicates the sophistication or uncertainty of many people's views on this unsettled (and unsettling) topic.

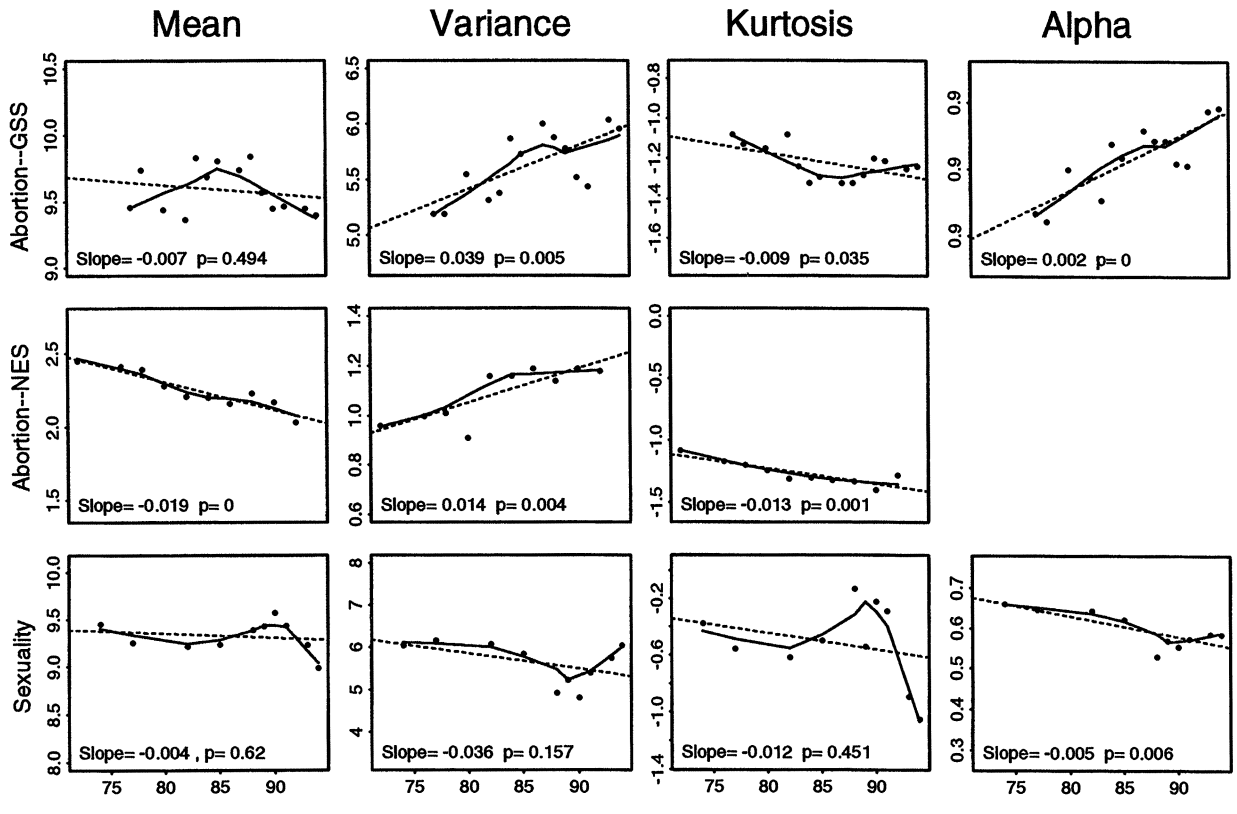

FIG. 9.—Within-population polarization, full sample, GSS 1974–94 and NES 1972–94, abortion and sexuality; x-axis = year

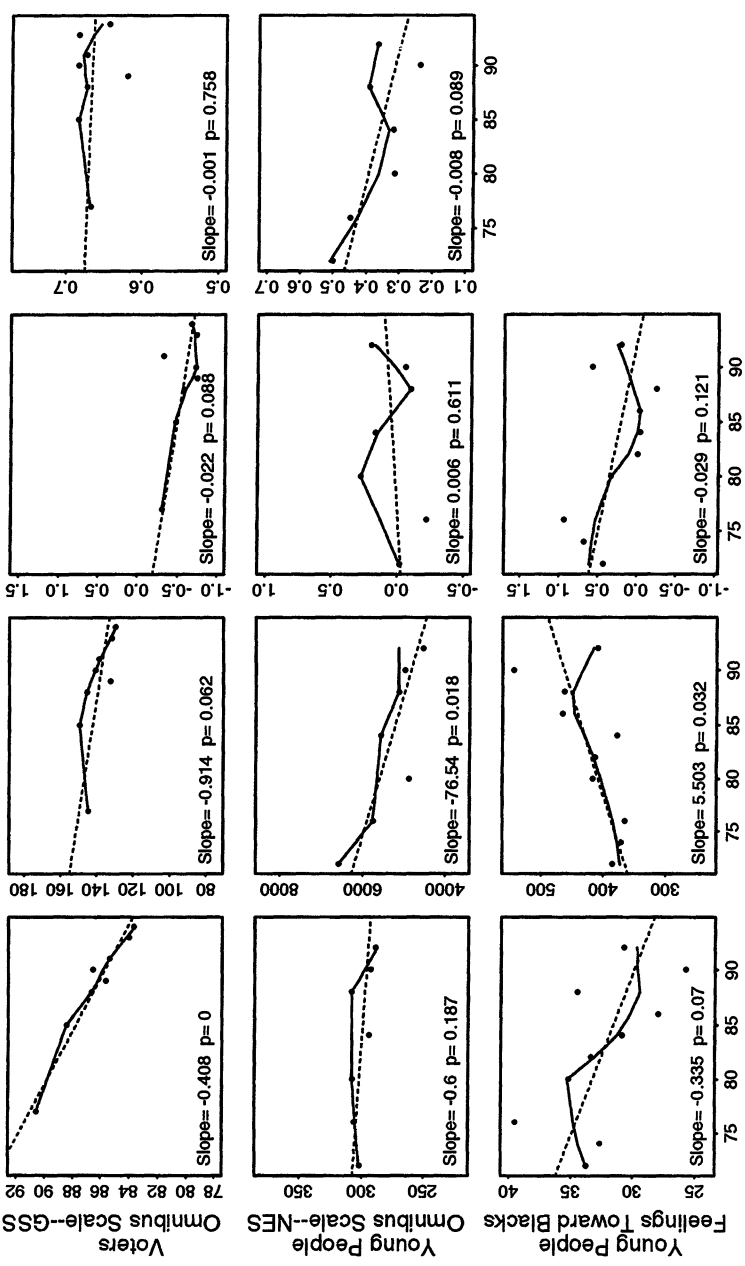

FIG. 10.—Within-population polarization, voters and young people, GSS 1974–94 and NES 1972–94, omnibus scales and feelings toward blacks; x-axis = year.

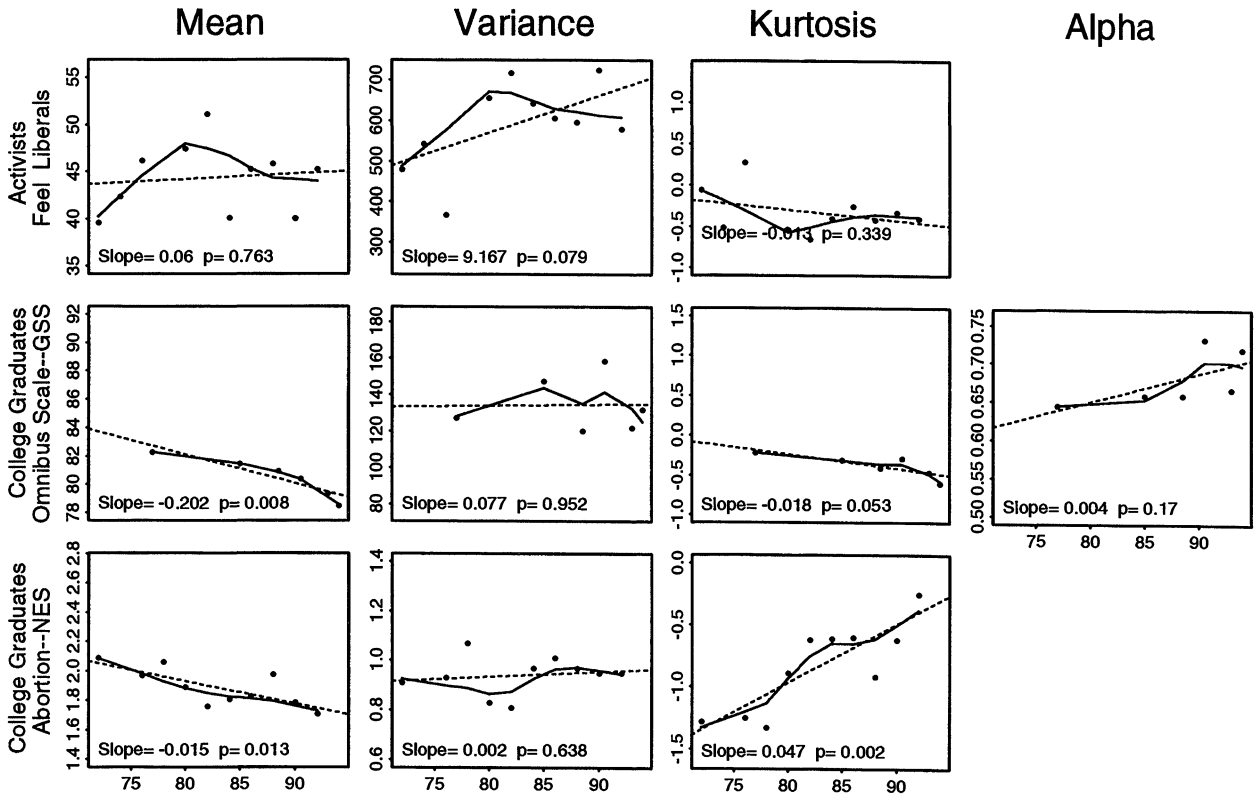

FIG. 11.—Within-population polarization, activists and college graduates, GSS 1974–94 and NES 1972–94, feelings toward liberals, omnibus scale and attitudes toward abortion; x-axis = year.

nificant polarization by at least one criterion *and* where the general population did not. For other results described in text see appendix tables A1 and A2.)

Participants in the political system.—The politically active are known to be unrepresentative of the general population in numerous ways (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), and it is possible that, as attentive observers of political debates, their views have also become more polarized. We focus here upon voters in the most recent election (GSS and NES) and on people who had scores of three or more on the NES activism scale. If political volatility reflects opinion polarization, such polarization should appear first among the most politically engaged.

Voters differed from the public at large in only two respects (fig. 10). First, as for the general public, voters' GSS omnibus scales became less dispersed; but, unlike the public as a whole, they became modestly flatter. This result demonstrates the utility of viewing polarization multidimensionally: variance in opinion declined at the same time that voters migrated slightly away from the center of a narrowing range. Second, constraint on crime and justice issues remained unchanged among voters, although it declined for the general public (not shown).

Only the NES included measures of political activism, restricting analyses to NES opinion items (fig. 11). Activists experienced less polarization than the general public in their attitudes toward poor people (no significant change, although signs of greater bimodality appear toward the series' end; not shown). Only in their feelings toward liberals (which increased in variance during the conservative mobilization of the late 1970s and early 1980s) did activists display more polarization than the general public.

College graduates.—Many public-opinion scholars believe that because well-educated people attend to news media and value logical consistency among beliefs more highly, they exhibit greater ideological constraint in response to opinion surveys (Converse 1964). It follows that college graduates may participate in political trends such as polarization more actively than less attentive publics. Although this view is controversial (Judd and Milburn 1980; Kiecolt 1988) and the views of well-educated persons grew more similar to those of other Americans by the early 1970s (Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976), we look at college graduates separately to ensure giving polarization a fair test.

Because they are politically attentive, college graduates should be especially subject to polarization. One might also expect to find greater dispersion of opinion among college graduates because, due to the rapid expansion of higher education, that group became composed of persons from increasingly diverse backgrounds through the 1970s and 1980s.

Results for college graduates are similar to those for the general public,

with a few differences (see fig. 11). Unlike the general public, college graduates display no decline in variance on the GSS omnibus scale (in fact, kurtosis declines) or in attitudes toward racial integration or women's family roles; there is also no increase in kurtosis for racial attitudes, nor any decline in alphas for attitudes toward women's public roles. These differences reflect the fact that the general public has gravitated toward a liberal consensus on racial integration and gender that college graduates had already reached at the onset of the time series. By contrast, college graduates' feelings toward poor people did not increase in variance over the period, though, as for the full sample, kurtosis declined, indicating movement toward bimodality. (We were surprised to find that college graduates' responses to the NES abortion measure became *less* bimodal, though no less dispersed.)[24]

Young people.—Perhaps a polarizing trend, like an earlier trend toward liberalism (Davis 1992), may be found in cohort succession, the force of which is felt only as members of younger cohorts replace their elders. To test this possibility, we look for opinion polarization among people who were between the ages of 18 and 29 at the time of each survey administration. The question here is whether there has been a trend toward greater polarization among successive cohorts of men and women entering adulthood between the early 1970s and the early 1990s.

Differences between young people and the general public are numerous but inconclusive (see fig. 10). Responses of men and women under 30 do not display the reduced variance in the GSS omnibus scale found in the full sample, but they *do* exhibit declining dispersion and constraint in the NES omnibus scale. Signs of polarization visible in the general public's attitudes toward conservatives and toward the poor, and increased variance and constraint on the GSS abortion scale, are absent from data on younger respondents. Other indicators, however, point to somewhat *more*

[24] We also used the GSS data to look at change in the distribution of opinion among people with high occupational prestige (56 and greater on the Duncan scale) as an additional test, with the expectation that exacerbated divisions between business persons and professionals on race and gender issues that Brint (1994, pp. 119–21) found in the 1980s might be visible in these data. Results showed few notable differences between the occupationally prestigious and the general public. Unlike the general public, this group showed no decline in variance on the GSS omnibus scale; but unlike college graduates, they evinced no increase in bimodality in that measure. Unlike the general public (and consistent with Brint's findings), they did not become less divided in their racial attitudes, nor did they become less ideologically constrained on crime and justice issues. On the other hand, their views on abortion did not become any more bimodal, though, like the rest of the public's, they increased in variance and ideological constraint. These results reinforce our findings for college graduates, in that there is little evidence of increasing division but some evidence that trends toward consensus have been less marked among high-SES Americans.

polarization among young people. Responses (which, unlike those of older Americans, grew more negative) to the African-American feeling thermometer among young people became more dispersed. Also in contrast to the general public, young people displayed no decline in variance in attitudes toward aid to minorities, no trend toward peakedness in racial attitudes, and no significant decline in constraint in views on women's public roles and crime.

Summary.—Lacking evidence of substantial polarization in the general public's social attitudes from the early 1970s to the middle 1990s, we analyzed separately data from voters, political activists, college graduates and young people, to see if polarization was more marked among attentive publics or the young. This exercise revealed intriguing patterns, but identified no group that had experienced substantially greater polarization than the public at large. Overall, results reinforce the conclusion drawn from analyses of the full sample: increased unity with respect to gender roles, support for racial integration, and the control and punishment of crime; polarization with respect to abortion and, to a lesser extent, feelings toward the poor; and no systematic change with respect to other issues.

Polarization as Between-Group Difference

Could it be that perceptions of societal polarization reflect a deepening gulf between one or more highly visible pairs of social groups? Does our malaise reflect a situation in which "the social groups into which the society is dividing are less and less capable of understanding and talking to one another" (Piore 1995, p. 8)? In this section we explore change over time in opinion dissensus associated with gender, race, age, educational level, religion, self-defined political ideology, party affiliation, and region.

For each pair of contrasting groups, we plot the mean value over time of each group's response to each opinion scale or item. We then regress the absolute value of the difference in means against time (year) to establish a slope and test for trends. We regard a positive slope combined with a coefficient for year significant at $P \leq .10$ as evidence of increasing between-group polarization. Figures are presented only for variables for which intergroup differences displayed a significant trend (figs. 12–19; complete results are presented in tabular form in appendix tables A3 and A4.)

This comparison is just one part of the story, however. Polarization is of interest because of its potential impact on intergroup conflict and opportunities for political mobilization. Therefore we must also attend to the distribution of opinion *within* each group. Even if differences between two groups have increased, the likelihood that such differences will lead to conflict, as opposed to inaction or to the subordination of one group to

the other, depends on each group's capacity to mobilize (Simmel 1955). One part of this capacity is the degree of unity within the group, as indicated by *kurtosis*. Effective intergroup polarization represents both a deepening of dissensus *between* two groups and a strengthening of consensus *within* each group.[25]

Page and Shapiro (1992) document the phenomenon of "parallel publics": subgroup opinions on most issues change in the same direction over time as members of each group assimilate the same new information and ideas, a process that leads to generally stable group differences (reflecting variation in interests or values) across changing levels of mean response. We shall ask, first, if significant change in some between-group differences has occurred within this overall context of stability; and, second, if parallelism characterizes internal consensus (as tapped by *kurtosis*), as well as substantive opinion.

Age.—We compared the attitudes of men and women less than 35 years old to those of respondents more than 45 years old. This classification permits the onset of the series to capture the most celebrated generational divide—the counterposition of the 1960s generation and their elders—while the end of the series distinguishes adequately between the baby boomers (and surviving pre-boomers) and their successors.

In the wake of the 1960s, some observers expected age to become a defining axis of political conflict in postindustrial societies (see, e.g., Gorz 1973, on youth as a class). But Davis's work (1992) reports a decline in the association of youth with liberalism in the 1980s (see also Page and Shapiro 1992, p. 304), so we expected to find declining age polarization, and indeed we did (figs. 12a–12b). Difference in means between age groups increased for no measures and declined significantly for 12 of 18. (There was no decline in differences for the feeling thermometers for liberals and blacks or for the NES omnibus scale, NES gender roles, and GSS abortion and school prayer measures. Of these, notable age differences existed at the series' start only for NES gender roles.)

Educational attainment.—Conservative polemicists, from Dan Quayle to William Bennett (1992), have dwelt on a supposed gulf in values between the "intellectual elite" and everyone else. Bloom (1987) locates the origins of this divide in higher-educational reforms of the 1960s. If he is right, then attitudes of college graduates and others should diverge, as graduates who attended college after the 1960s reforms replace their more conservative predecessors.

One finds more substantial warrant within sociology to expect that the

[25] Presentations for between-group differences in attitudes toward sex education, school prayer, and divorce laws contain no kurtosis measures because the kurtosis statistic is not meaningful for dichotomous variables.

educational divide might increasingly structure opinion. New-class theory (Gouldner 1979) viewed higher education as a major determinant of political orientation. Collins (1979) argued that college graduates are an important status group, possessing shared interests and a common culture. Evidence for education's increasing salience can be found in research on marital selection, which finds educational homogamy increasing as other bases of spousal choice decline (Kalmijn 1991).

Surprisingly, then, significant trends toward opinion *convergence* between college graduates and people with no more than a high school education were observed for nine of 18 measures, with divergence on none (figs. 13a–13b). Between the 1970s and the early 1990s, opinions of college graduates and the less schooled became more similar with respect to the GSS omnibus scale, feelings toward conservatives, and attitudes toward women's roles (NES and GSS), abortion (GSS only), race, sex education, and legal restrictions on divorce. Like the "generation gap," then, the "education gap" (at least in attitudes toward social issues) seems to have reflected the peculiar social and demographic configuration of the 1970s rather than an emergent trend.

Gender.—Political observers have noted a growing "gender gap" in electoral behavior since 1980. Do differences in voting patterns reflect divergence in social attitudes as well? Previous research has demonstrated gender differences in many values and attitudes (Beutel and Marini 1995). Shapiro and Mahajan (1986, p. 42), using data from the 1960s to the mid-1980s, report growth in gender differences in evaluations of "policies involving the use of force" and, to a lesser extent, in attitudes toward "regulation and public protection, matters of compassion, and traditional values."

We find slim evidence of a growing gender gap (fig. 14). Men's and women's scores on the NES omnibus scale diverge significantly; but the actual increase is tiny and the result was not repeated for any of the scale components. By contrast, we observed convergence (largely complete by 1985) in opinions on crime and justice and sex education, and persistence of moderate, stable gender differences in other social attitudes.

Race.—Racial divisions in social attitudes, as in other matters, are well established. Hochschild (1995) and Page and Shapiro (1992, p. 298) document striking differences, though the latter note some convergence in attitudes toward racial and moral issues in the 1980s. Extending analyses through the mid-1990s, we find a notable decline in racial polarization, with significant convergent trends in feelings toward liberals, conservatives, and the poor; views on aid for minorities, on crime and justice, and on abortion (GSS only); and scores on the NES omnibus scale. On no scale or item did black/white differences increase (fig. 15a–15b).

This convergence is consistent with Wilson's expectation (1978) that

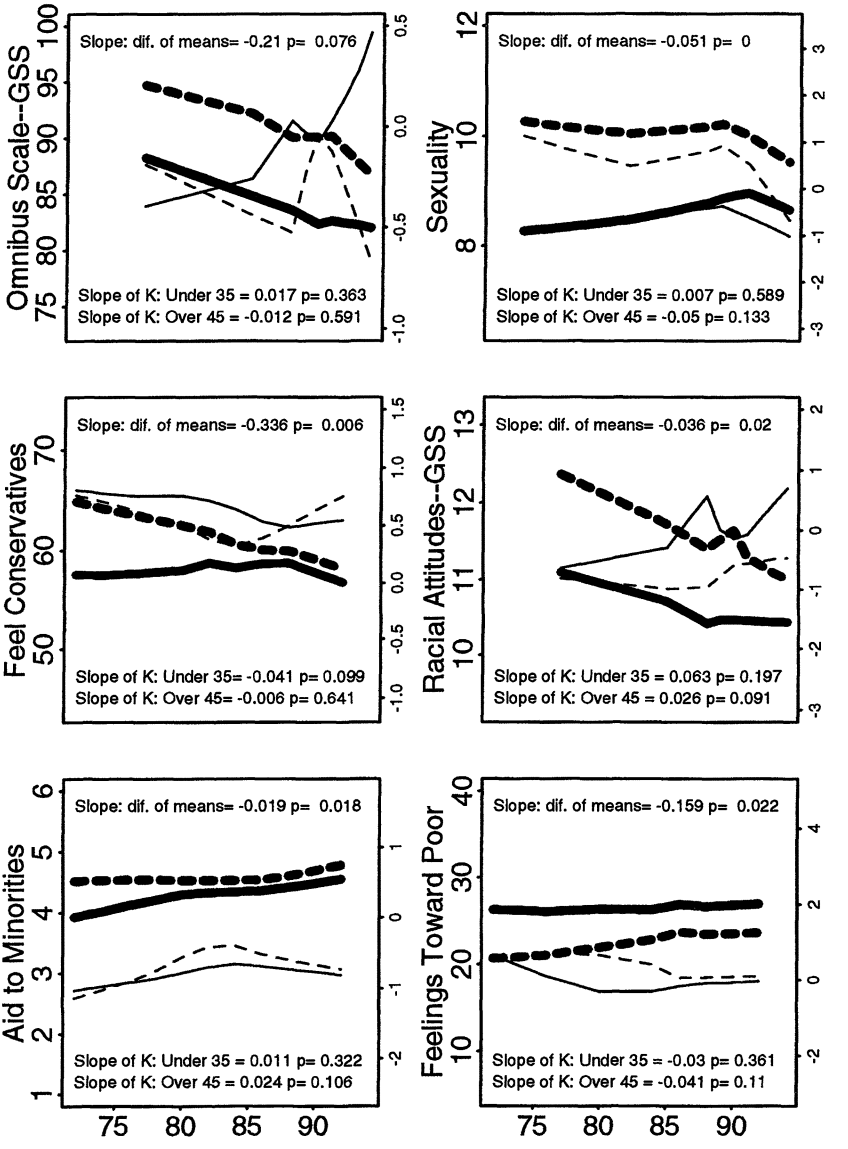

FIG. 12a.—Between-group polarization, age; x-axis = year. Thick lines and large numbers are means, thin lines and small numbers are kurtosis. Solid line indicates respondents under 35 years old; broken line indicates respondents over 45 years old.

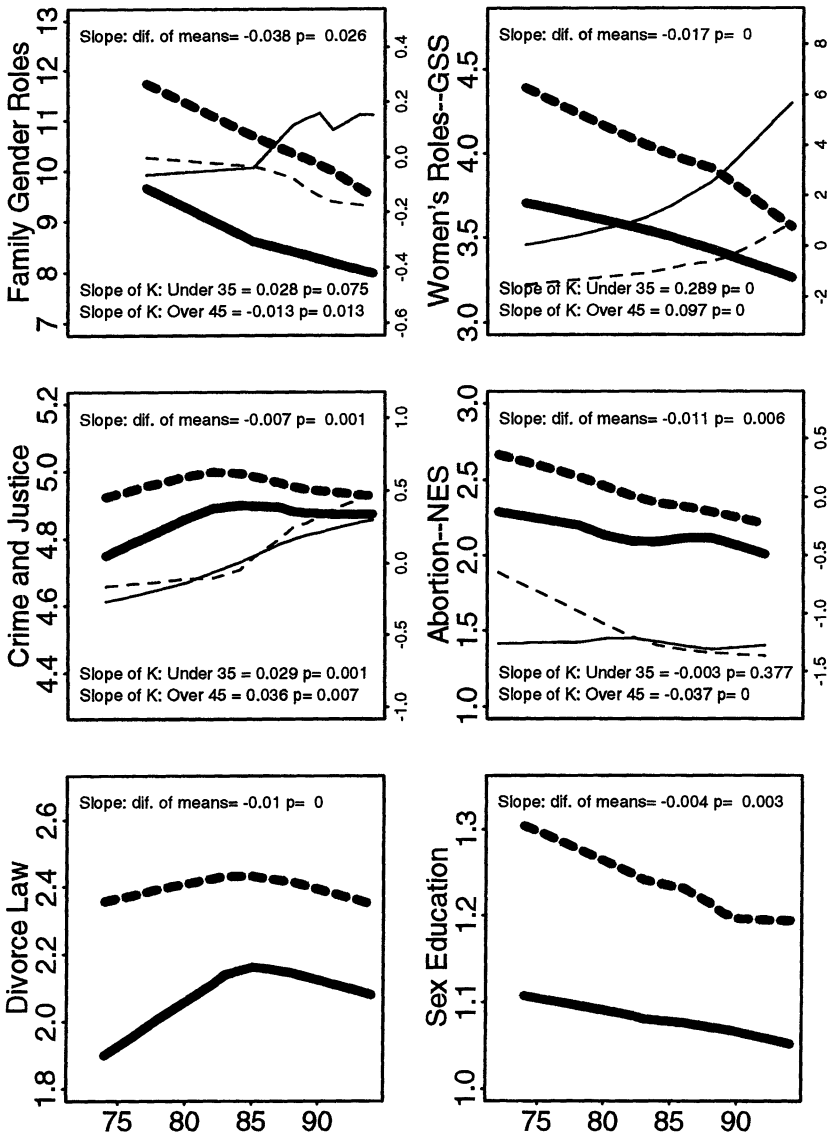

FIG. 12b.—Between-group polarization, age; x-axis = year. Thick lines and large numbers are means, thin lines and small numbers are kurtosis. Solid line indicates respondents under 35 years old; broken line indicates respondents over 45 years old.

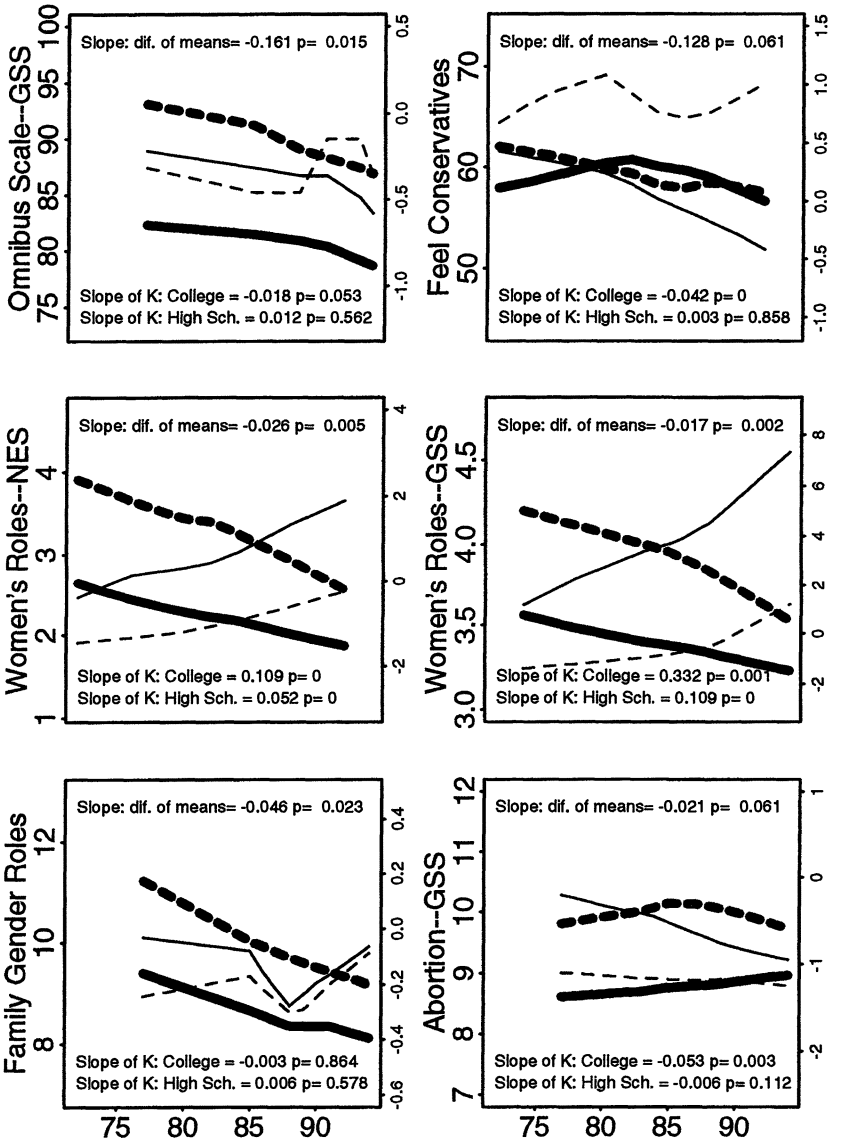

FIG. 13a.—Between-group polarization, education; x-axis = year. Thick lines and large numbers are means, thin lines and small numbers are kurtosis. Solid line indicates college graduates, broken line indicates those with high school–level education or less.

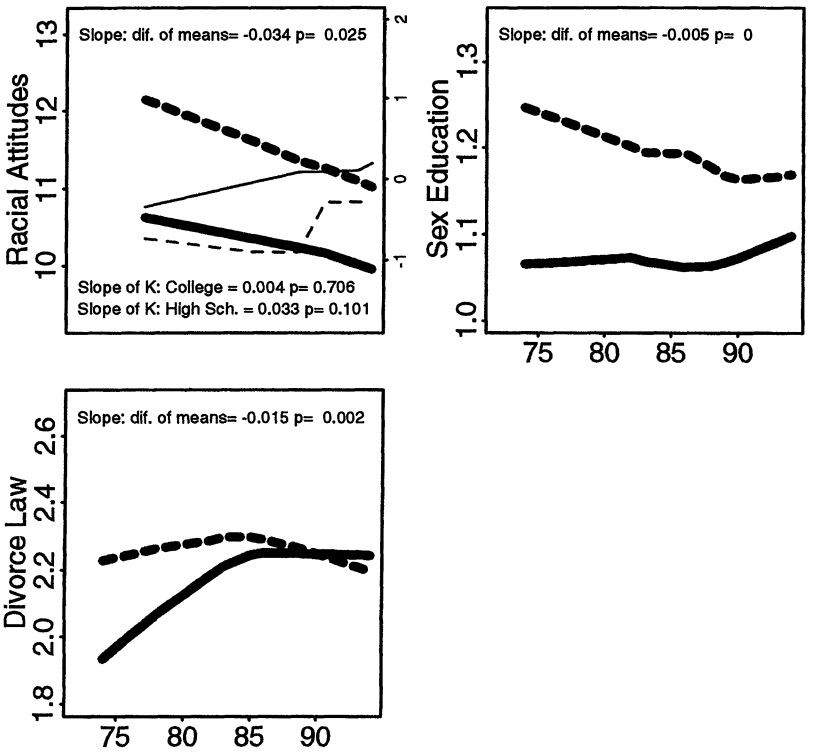

FIG. 13b.—Between-group polarization, education; x-axis = year. Thick lines and large numbers are means, thin lines and small numbers are kurtosis. Solid line indicates college graduates, broken line indicates those with high school–level education or less.

growth in the African-American middle class would increase similarity between African-Americans and whites and expand diversity within the black population. Indeed, on issues related to race and class, opinion diversity among African-Americans has grown substantially, even as group means have moved in the same direction as those of whites. We find marked declines in kurtosis in feeling thermometers for blacks and the poor and for attitudes toward government assistance to minorities.[26] Polarization *within* the African-American community may make it more dif-

[26] As noted, only variables for which differences in intergroup means trended significantly appear in figs. 15a–15b. Results for other variables are reported in appendix tables A3 and A4.

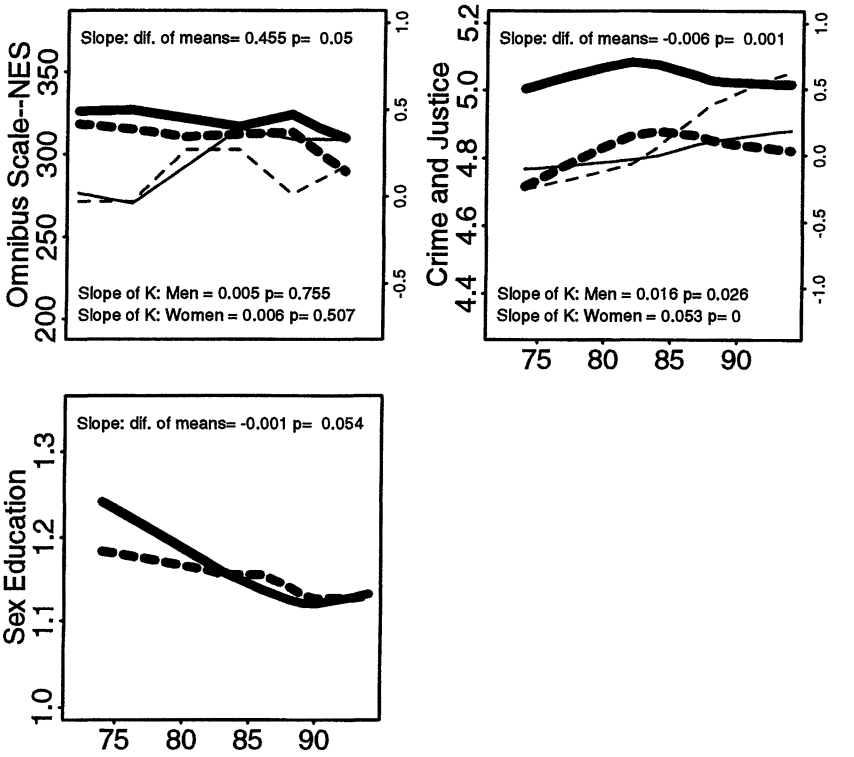

FIG. 14.—Between-group polarization, gender; x-axis = year. Thick lines and large numbers are means, thin lines and small numbers are kurtosis. Solid line indicates men; broken line indicates women.

ficult for blacks to maintain united fronts in political struggles, as those on either end of the opinion spectrum can credibly defy efforts to present any position as representing the group as a whole.

These findings are notable for three reasons. First, they provide circumstantial support for our contention that information on *intra*group polarization is useful in assessing the political implications of *inter*group differences in opinion: one can argue impressionistically that African-Americans have had more difficulty mobilizing politically during the 1990s, in part due to the internal division reflected in these data. Second, these findings suggest that the "parallelism" visible in directional opinion change may not always characterize change in intragroup distributions. Third, they make us more cautious than we might otherwise be in interpreting polarization in the general population's attitudes toward the poor

and toward government assistance for minorities as a simple displacement of conflict over racial integration (on which opinions have now converged) by a homologous division of opinion over symbolic racial issues.

Religion.—Few bases of political opposition have received as much recent attention as the clash between the religious right—politically oriented evangelical Protestants perceived to be allied on many issues with conservative Roman Catholics and Orthodox Jews—and the secular and liberal religious worlds (Evans 1996; Wuthnow 1988). Although research on congregations (Ammerman 1987) has demonstrated much attitude heterogeneity among conservative Protestants, it remains to be seen whether the political mobilization of conservative faith communities has increased polarization between their members and other Americans, as reflected in public opinion data.

We compared members of conservative Protestant denominations and Roman Catholics who reported attending services almost weekly or more to members of religiously liberal Protestant denominations, Jews, and the religiously unaffiliated.[27] (Because NES did not collect detailed data on religion until 1992, we used only GSS measures.) Remarkably, given a frequent equation of conservative faith communities with "the religious right," differences between religious conservatives and religious liberals *declined* during the 1970s and 1980s, with significant convergence on seven of nine attitude measures (figs. 16a–16b). The groups' opinions became more similar not just on such issues as women's roles, on which polarization declined more generally, but also on such "hot-button" moral issues as abortion, sexual conduct, sex education, and legal restrictions on divorce. Only attitudes toward crime, where a tiny difference vanished by 1980, and school prayer, where a large difference persisted, evaded this trend. (Convergence also occurred on racial attitudes, but as indicated in n. 16 above, we cannot exclude the possibility that this finding is artifactual.)

The attitudes of religious conservatives and liberals on women's roles converged dramatically. On most other issues, very large differences be-

[27] Conservative Protestant denominations were identified on the basis described in Smith (1990*a*); Catholics were included because of previous work indicating that observant Catholics are similar to conservative Protestants in their social views (Smith 1990*a*). Because the GSS did not distinguish among Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews before 1988 and because the number of Orthodox Jews in GSS samples thereafter is negligible, Jewish respondents are coded as "liberal" (again following Smith 1990*a*). We excluded members of what Smith (1990*a*) calls the "Protestant moderate" denominations in order to sharpen the contrast between the two groups and thus provide the polarization hypothesis with a fairer test. In initial analyses, we compared religious conservatives to everyone else. Surprised by the absence of evidence of polarization, we then conducted the analyses reported here (comparing them only to religious liberals and the nonreligious), but we still found no polarization.

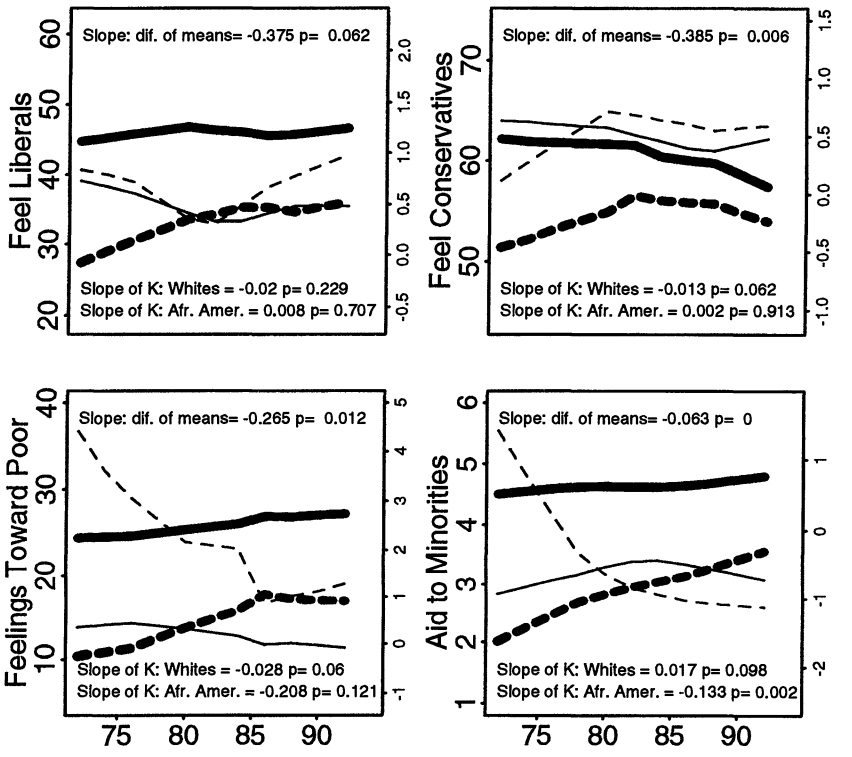

FIG. 15a.—Between-group polarization, race; x-axis = year. Thick lines and large numbers are means, thin lines and small numbers are kurtosis. Solid line indicates whites; broken line indicates African-Americans.

came modestly, but significantly, smaller. On sex education, for example, the views of religious conservatives became more liberal. On abortion and sexual conduct, convergence reflected a shift of religious liberals toward more conservative positions—accompanied, in the case of abortion, by significant internal polarization.

We also separated church-attending members of evangelical Protestant denominations from churchgoing Roman Catholics and replicated the comparison to religious liberals for each. The major conclusion was confirmed: in no case (either group, any variable) did a divergent trend appear. Significant convergence appeared between both groups and religious liberals in attitudes toward women's public roles, sex education, and divorce law. Catholics became more similar to religious liberals in their views on abortion, family gender roles, and sexuality. Evangelicals and

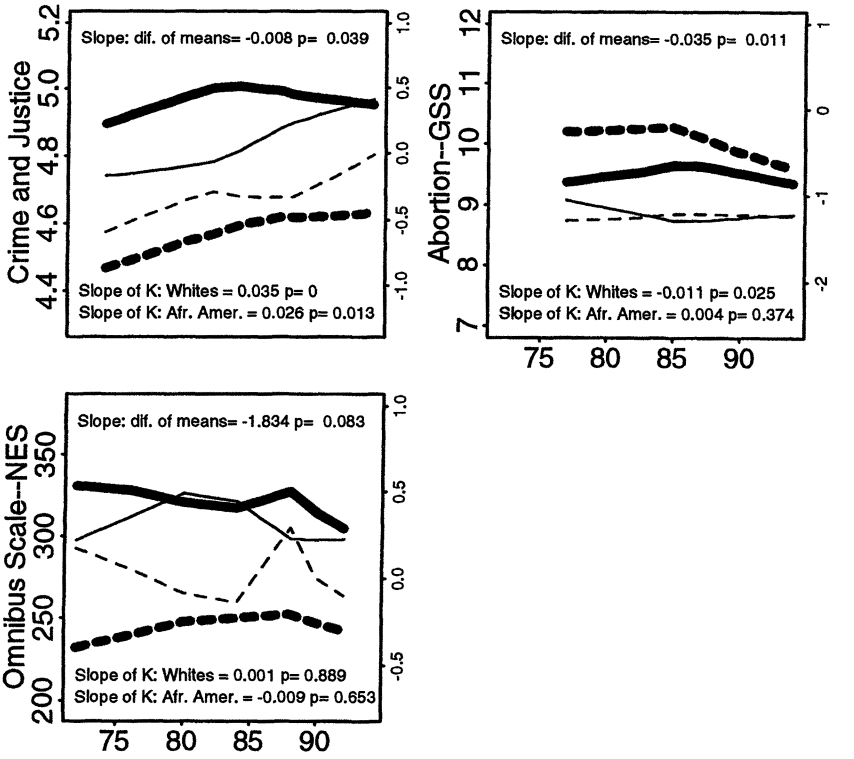

FIG. 15b.—Between-group polarization, race; x-axis = year. Thick lines and large numbers are means, thin lines and small numbers are kurtosis. Solid line indicates whites; broken line indicates African-Americans.

religious liberals became more similar in their scores on the GSS omnibus scale (figures available on request).

Given the prevailing political wisdom, how can we explain these results? Although liberal Protestants remain more highly educated than members of other faith communities, college attendance increased during the past several decades among religiously conservative Protestants and Roman Catholics, which might be expected to moderate differences on issues such as racial tolerance to which education is central (Hunter 1987; Wuthnow 1988). Moreover, evangelical denominations have attracted new members in recent years: it may be that these converts share traditional views on such issues as abortion and school prayer, but not the conservative views on race and gender that characterized religious conservatives at the beginning of our time series.

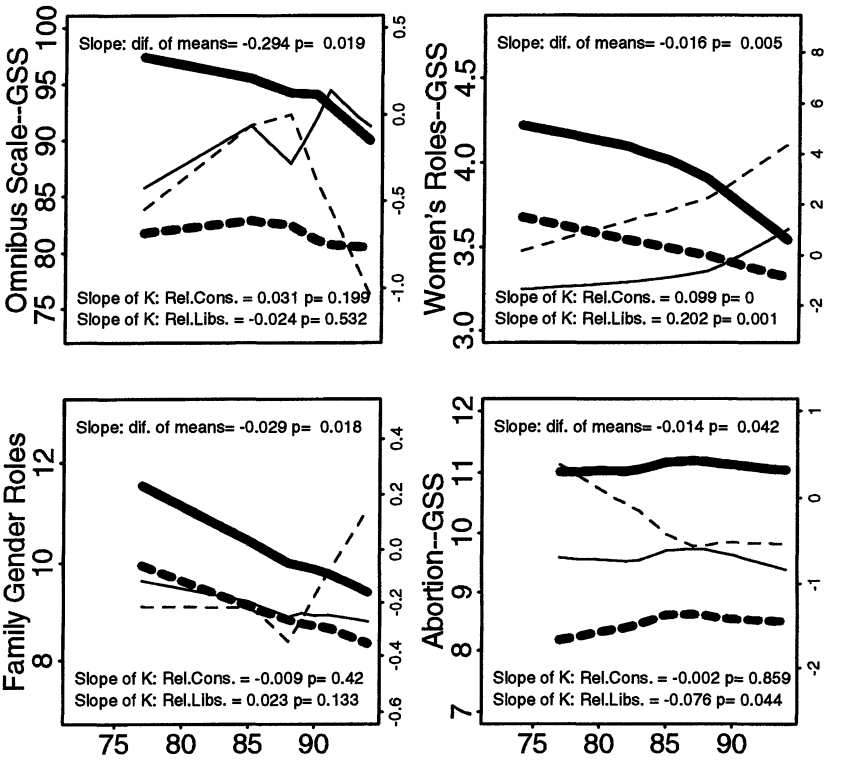

FIG. 16a.—Between-group polarization, religion; x-axis = year. Thick lines and large numbers are means, thin lines and small numbers are kurtosis. Solid line indicates religious conservatives; broken line indicates religious liberals.

Region.—The effects of southern residence on opinion are well documented (Ellison and Musick 1993). Although evidence points to a decline in southern racial intolerance, the emergence of a strongly Republican "solid South" in presidential (and, increasingly, statewide) politics suggests that regional differences in other attitudes may have increased. We found no evidence of regional polarization in our data, however (fig. 17). Differences between Southerners and other Americans declined with respect to the NES omnibus scale and attitudes toward women's public roles (GSS), government aid to minorities, and sex education, and fluctuated or remained stable for other measures.[28]

[28] A significant decline in differences in racial attitudes is not reported, as it may be artifactual (see n. 16 above). Similar comparisons of easterners and westerners, respectively, to persons from other sections also failed to find any instances of opinion polarization (results available upon request).

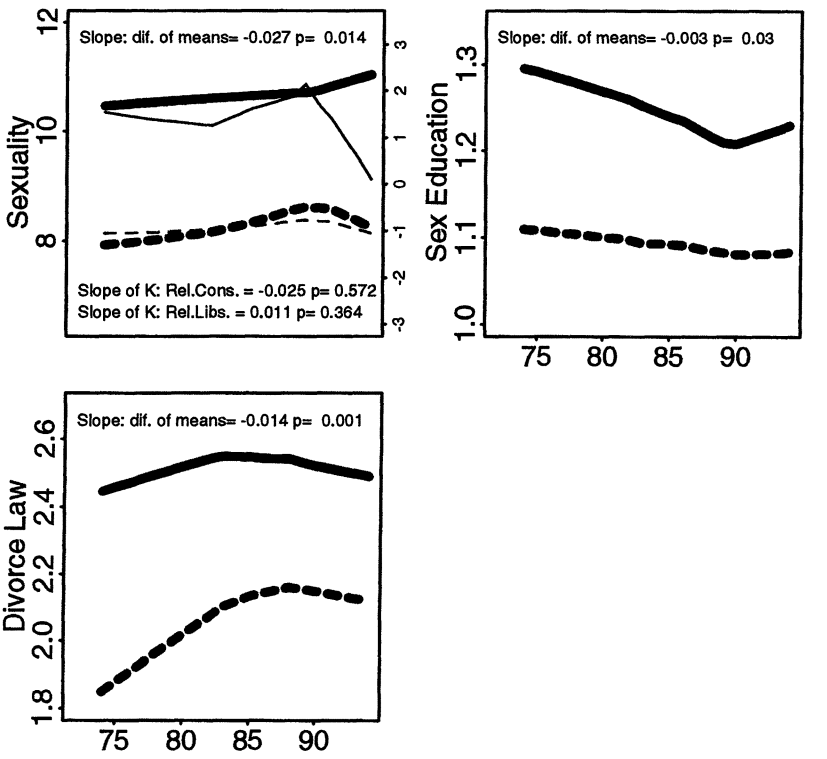

FIG. 16b.—Between-group polarization, religion; x-axis = year. Thick lines and large numbers are means, thin lines and small numbers are kurtosis. Solid line indicates religious conservatives; broken line indicates religious liberals.

Ideology.—Polarization may appear to increase if political identities become linked to more distinctive social attitudes: for example, if liberal identifiers move to the left as conservative identifiers move to the right. To see if this is the case, we compare respondents who describe themselves as "liberal" or to those who say they are "conservative."

With one exception, we find no polarization (fig. 18). Throughout our time series, consistent with the notion of "parallel publics," the social opinions of conservative and liberal identifiers moved in tandem, actually becoming more similar on feelings toward the poor, government aid to minorities, and women's public roles.

The exception, once again, is abortion, on which liberal and conservative opinion has diverged according to both GSS and NES measures. The pattern is striking: no change (NES) or modest pro-life change (GSS)

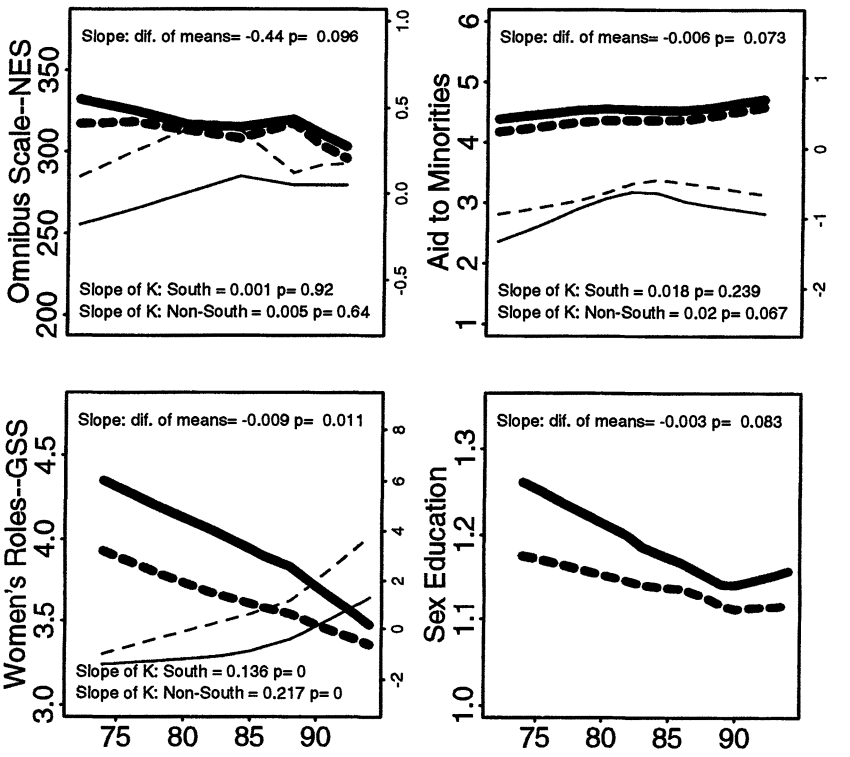

FIG. 17.—Between-group polarization, region; x-axis = year. Thick lines and large numbers are means, thin lines and small numbers are kurtosis. Solid line indicates South; broken line indicates other region.

among conservatives; larger pro-choice movement among liberal identifiers (see also Hout 1995). During this process, liberal opinion (about as divided as that of conservatives in 1977) became increasingly unified (higher k), while conservative opinion grew more internally polarized.

Party identification.—Finally, we compare the social attitudes of people who call themselves Republicans to those who say they are Democrats. Evidence of increased political partisanship in congressional voting (*Congressional Quarterly* 1994) may reflect increased divergence among party identifiers. Yet the moderating effects of parties' efforts to build electoral coalitions (see Mueller [1983] on median-voter theory) should prevent their members from drifting too far apart.

During the past two decades, the mechanisms that attract parties to the political center appear to have broken down. In striking contrast to other groups, Republicans and Democrats display significant polarizing trends

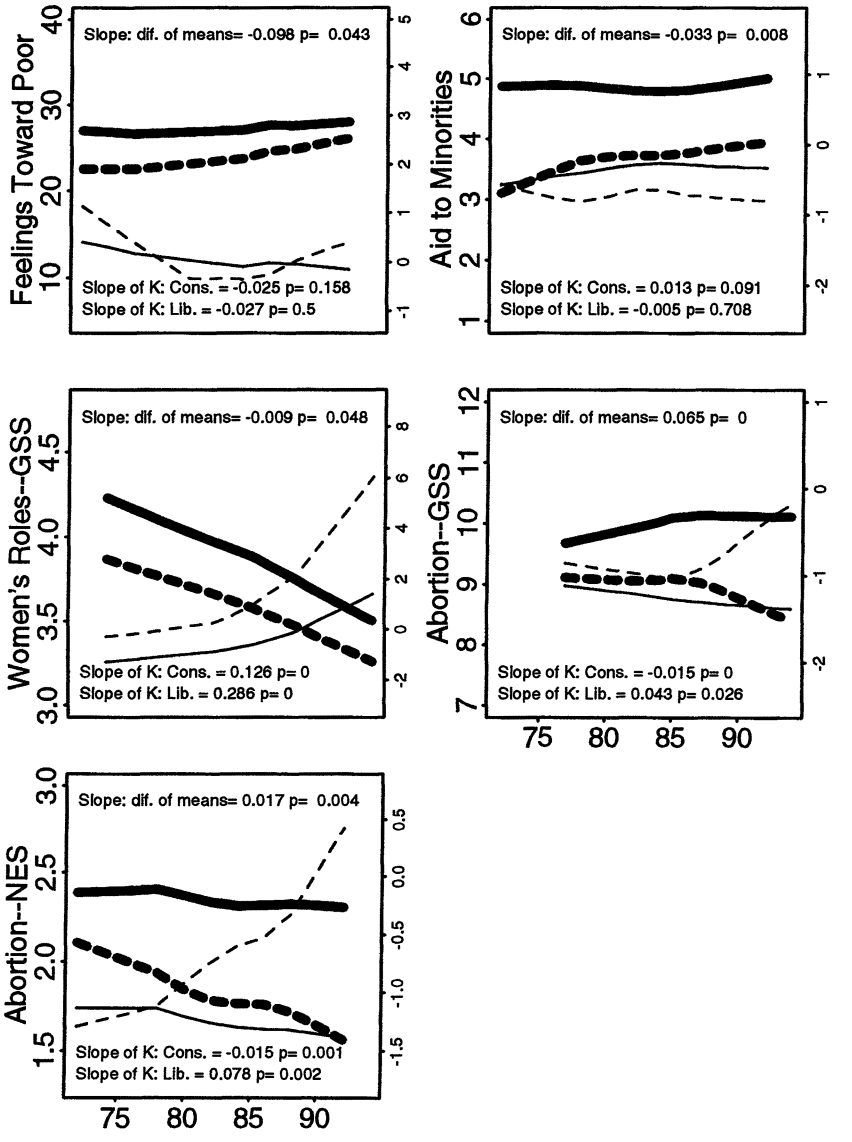

FIG. 18.—Between-group polarization, ideology; x-axis = year. Thick lines and large numbers are means, thin lines and small numbers are kurtosis. Solid line indicates political conservatives; broken line indicates political liberals.

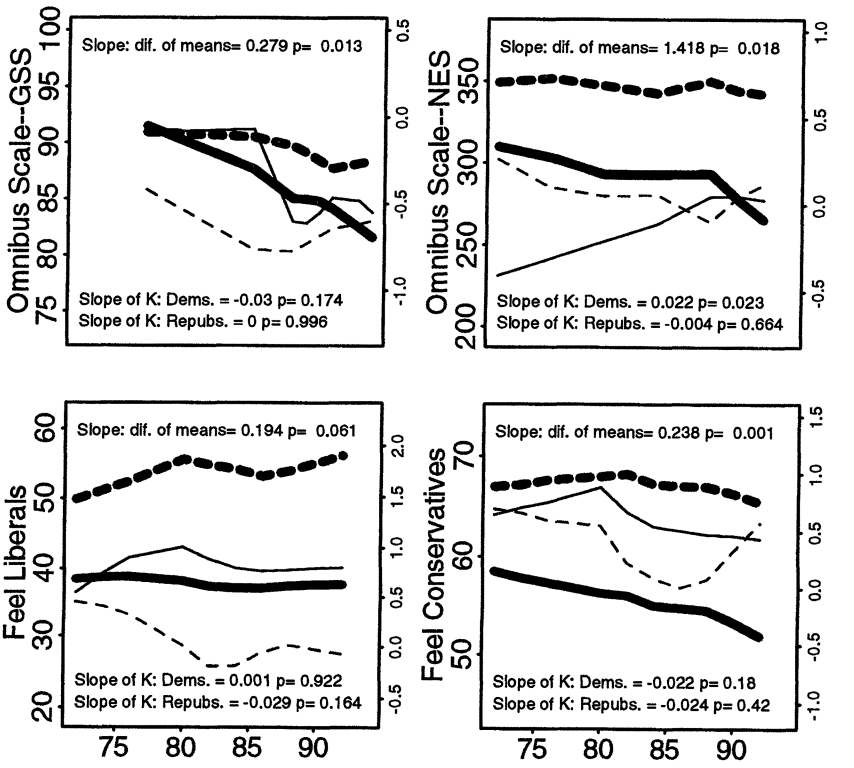

FIG. 19a.—Between-group polarization, party identification; x-axis = year. Thick lines and large numbers are means, thin lines and small numbers are kurtosis. Solid line indicates Democrats; broken line indicates Republicans.

with respect to attitudes on eight of 17 social issues (see n. 16 above and figs. 19a–19b). Democrats' and Republicans' views diverged on both the GSS and the NES omnibus scales. Polarization on feeling thermometers toward liberals, conservatives, and the poor, and on attitudes toward crime and justice, suggest that Republican use of wedge issues may have had an effect. Increased divergence on attitudes toward abortion and divorce law may reflect the movement of conservative Roman Catholics and southern evangelicals from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party.

Democrat and Republican opinions on most issues changed in parallel: divergence occurred when the *rate* of change was greater for one party than for the other. For example, both groups' scores on the GSS omnibus scale grew more liberal, but Democrats' did so at a faster rate.

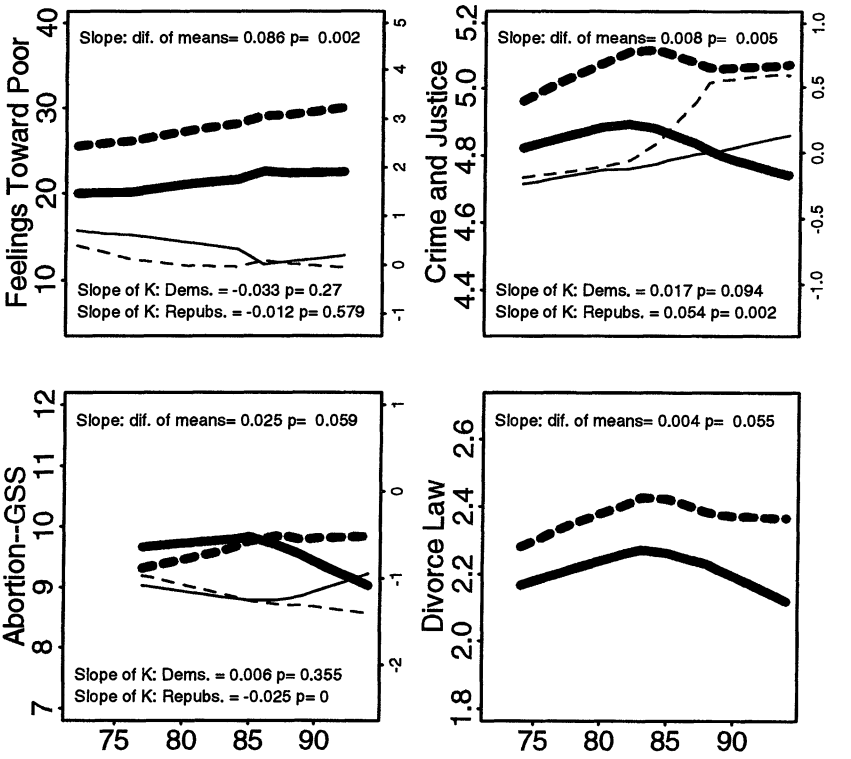

FIG. 19b.—Between-group polarization, party identification; x-axis = year. Thick lines and large numbers are means, thin lines and small numbers are kurtosis. Solid line indicates Democrats; broken line indicates Republicans.

There were only two deviations from parallelism. Democrats' views on crime and justice became a bit more liberal while Republicans' remained conservative. As usual, however, abortion attitudes deviated most dramatically from the norm. Whereas in the 1970s Republicans were less opposed to abortion than Democrats, the groups moved in opposite directions, crossing in the mid-1980s and diverging thereafter. At the same time, Republicans divided more sharply over abortion (as indicated by declining *k;* patterns are similar for the GSS and the NES items but only significant for the GSS).

Conclusions.—Having found little evidence of polarization in distributions of opinion of the public or selected subsamples, we examined trends in social-attitude differences between paired subgroups. Evidence of intergroup polarization was strikingly absent with one exception. Between

the 1970s and 1990s opinions of Americans of different ages and educational levels converged markedly, as did views on many issues of blacks and whites and of religious conservatives and religious liberals. Differences between men and women were largely stable. Attitudes of liberals and conservatives grew more similar on three items, but diverged on attitudes toward abortion. The two abortion items and the anomalous male/female trend in the NES omnibus scale were the *only* cases of significant divergence in our comparisons of attitudes of groups based on age, education, gender, race, religion, region, and political ideology. By contrast, we found *46 instances of significant convergent trends.* The evidence, then, points to dramatic *depolarization* in intergroup differences.

Only when we turn to political party divisions do we find evidence of polarization: striking divergence of attitudes between Democrats and Republicans. In traditional pluralist theory, social conflict emerges from struggles between groups in civil society. Political parties, seeking support from the vital center, take the rough edges off of such conflicts. Our findings—that the social attitudes of groups in civil society have converged at the same time that attitudes of party identifiers have polarized—raise troubling questions about the role of political parties in a pluralistic society.

These results also confirm the utility of looking together at *inter*group differences and *intra*group polarization. Certain patterns of change in the latter (e.g., the greater bimodality of opinions of African-Americans on aid to minorities and feelings toward the poor, and in conservative and Republican views on abortion) suggest that the phenomenon of parallel publics, supported for central tendencies, may not hold for change in within-group distributions. When intergroup differences mask intragroup division, attention to the latter suggests why divided groups may have trouble mobilizing around issues (like abortion for Republicans) that seem to separate them from others.

Summary of Findings

1. We find no support for the proposition that the United States has experienced dramatic polarization in public opinion on social issues since the 1970s. Variance in most attitudes has not increased; neither has bimodality of response. Nor have most attitudes grown more constrained by ideology or (except for party affiliation) group identity.

2. If attitude polarization entails increased variance, increased bimodality, and increased opinion constraint, then only attitudes toward abortion have become more polarized in the past 20 years, both in the public at large and within most subgroups. Abortion attitude measures behave

differently than measures of opinion on any other issue, underscoring the exceptional character of the abortion debate. To generalize from the abortion controversy to other issues, or to view it as evidence of more deep-seated polarization, is profoundly misleading.

3. Partial polarization (in some measures but not others) has occurred in a GSS omnibus scale (bimodality only for voters and college graduates); in attitudes toward conservatives (bimodality for the general public, voters, college graduates, and political activists) and liberals (dispersion for activists); and in feelings toward the poor (dispersion and bimodality for the general public and voters, increased dispersion for people under 30 and increased bimodality for college graduates) and toward African-Americans (greater dispersion for people under 30). Despite an overwhelming trend toward convergence in support of racial integration, these results indicate some polarization on issues imbued with racial symbolism (see Jackman 1994).

4. Most scales and items display no increase in any measure of polarization for any subgroup. Americans have become more unified in their attitudes toward racial integration, crime and justice, and, especially, women's roles. Dispersion and bimodality in attitudes toward sexuality and feelings toward African-Americans and liberals have remained largely stable.

5. Between-group differences in social attitudes have steadily declined. Although many remain great in absolute terms, social-attitude polarization by age, education, race, religious faith, region, and (except for abortion) political ideology, declined between the 1970s and the 1990s. Only the gap between Republicans and Democrats grew, suggesting that the party system, which has conventionally been expected to moderate social divisions, has been exacerbating them.

6. Polarization is measurable, multidimensional, and interesting. The findings that the public has polarized around the abortion issue and (to a lesser extent) in its views of the poor, but has become more unified in support for racial integration, the rights of women to participate in public life, and tough stands on crime and justice are intuitively plausible. The fact that measures of spread, bimodality, and constraint do not move in tandem (and in some cases move in opposite directions) indicates that polarization is multidimensional.

CONCLUSIONS

We present two sets of conclusions. The first reflects our empirical findings. The second addresses theoretical implications of analyzing distributions of public opinion.

Why Do We Perceive More Polarization than There Is?

How do we explain the sharp gulf between *perceived* polarization in public discourse and *observed* stability (or convergence) in distributions of public opinion? One set of explanations might revolve around problems of survey method. For example, Converse (1992) suggested that there are "liberal" items and "conservative" items (survey questions on issues about which one or the other side feels strongly) and that surveys that overrepresent one side will fail to pick up movement on the other. Because our measure addressed many issues of interest to both sides of the political spectrum, we doubt that this influenced our findings.

It is also possible that surveys adapt too late to changing political currents to capture polarization. Surveys often try to probe attitudes about timely issues on which there is reason to expect opinion to vary, and items with low variance are more likely than those with high variance to be dropped. Thus focusing only on questions that have been asked for many years (as one must to study change) may introduce two kinds of bias: *over*estimation of polarization, when items on which polarization declines are dropped and those with high variance are retained, and *under*estimation, because our items do not tap opinions on issues that became politicized in the late 1980s (e.g., public support for the arts). The stability of the GSS series through 1994, and the fact that NES and GSS measures tell the same story, make us doubt that these factors affected our results.

It is, of course, entirely possible that people perceive polarization that has not, in fact, occurred. This could be the case for many different reasons:

1. Perhaps change has occurred not in what people believe but in the intensity with which they believe it. The GSS and NES items effectively tap cognitive diversity in opinion, but, except for the feeling thermometers, they are less useful for measuring intensity of affect (Schuman and Presser 1981, chap. 9; Krosnick and Abelson 1994).

2. Perceptions of greater conflict may reflect a historical amnesia that perceives the past as less divided than it was. Moreover, our time series may begin at the conclusion of a period of political polarization, from the early 1960s to the early 1970s (Nie et al. 1976, p. 143; Page and Shapiro, p. 9; but Glenn [1974] reports no change from the early 1950s to the late 1960s). In any case, to say that the U.S. public is not *more* polarized than it was in the 1970s is not to say that it is particularly united.

3. Views expressed in the media may have become polarized. Hunter (1994, p. vii) points to this when he writes of polarization of "institutionalized and articulated moral visions" rather than of public opinion itself. The extent to which conservative views are included in public debate, and the range of permissible right-wing opinion, appears to have increased

in the 1980s, with the emergence of conservative policy institutes, talk radio, and conservative religious media (Messer-Davidow 1993).[29]

4. Polarization may be *perceived* to increase even when it does not, if public positions are taken in a harsher, more disputatious manner. An evident decline in many aspects of cultural authority (DiMaggio and Bryson 1995) may be reflected in weakened inhibitions on public utterances of many kinds.

5. Normative consensus may coexist with factual disagreement. For example, social attitudes of African-Americans and whites have converged; but when one looks not at what blacks and whites believe to be *just and appropriate,* but rather at what they believe to be *factually true,* one sees sharp divisions (Hochschild 1995).

6. Heightened partisanship and electoral volatility may reflect moral or affective dissensus. Large declines in confidence in institutions (Lipset and Schneider 1987) and in other measures of social cohesion (Putnam 1995) may increase perceived polarization even if confidence is not polarized, a topic about which we know little (but see Fox and Firebaugh [1992] on trends in gender differences in confidence in science).

7. Apparent polarization may reflect changes in resources available for mobilization by different groups. For example, a decline in mobilization of trade unionists and an increase in mobilization of religious conservatives may alter political agendas without shifting underlying sentiments.

8. Changes in the level at which actors mobilize may also alter perceptions. Local communities have long been sites of acrimonious controversy over race, schools, and morality (Coleman 1957), but conflicts over such issues that are organized nationally may receive more attention.

9. Shifts in the relative importance of forms of political participation that tend to increase the extent of "representation bias" (Converse, Clausen, and Miller 1965; Verba et al. 1995)—that is, a decline in the importance of voting or letter writing and an increase in the importance of cash contributions or protest—may render political conflict more apparent.

10. Increased partisanship may reflect institutional changes that reduce party organizations' discipline over divisive candidates and officeholders (Polsby 1983). Or divisive social rhetoric may reflect strategies of the parties themselves.

11. If citizens vote on the basis of identities that are only loosely coupled to policy preferences—for example, race, religion, region—they may support candidates on the basis of shrill symbolic appeals without sharing such candidates' polarized issue preferences.

[29] We are indebted to Robert K. Merton for this suggestion.

12. Political volatility may reflect not shifting opinions, but shifting issue frames (Gamson 1992; Schuman and Presser 1981; Sniderman et al. 1993). Shifting frames can alter political agendas by altering the relative salience of differing attitudes even when the attitudes themselves remain stably distributed.

This discussion raises more questions than it resolves. Our purpose is to suggest directions of inquiry that might explain the paradox of widespread belief that social-issue politics have become more polarized even though opinion data demonstrate that social attitudes have not.

Theoretical Implications

If our empirical contribution has been to answer the question of whether the social opinions of Americans have polarized, our theoretical purpose is to suggest that polarization is an aspect of public opinion worthy of research attention. To this end, we distinguished four dimensions of polarization—dispersion, bimodality, constraint, and consolidation—and developed serviceable means of operationalizing them. The empirical results demonstrated both face validity and the partial independence of the dimensions.[30] We now suggest that the study of opinion polarization may be germane to several problems in social and political theory.

Preference falsification and the spiral of silence.—Several scholars have developed Noelle-Neumann's (1993) insight that perceptions of public opinion are influenced by variation in the willingness of persons holding different opinions to disclose their views to others who may not share them. Granovetter and Soong's model (1988) demonstrates that, given certain distributions of tolerance of disagreement, minority opinions can appear to be majority views.[31] Kuran (1995*a*) distinguishes opinions that are privately held from those that are publicly expressed and discusses factors that lead to the rapid revelation of previously concealed opinions.[32] Be-

[30] The methodological challenge is to develop measures capable of comparing dispersion on items and scales with different ranges, a problem we did not face.

[31] Some support for this comes from Huckfeldt and Sprague's (1988, pp. 477–78) study of voters in a small midwestern city, which found that majority voters in a given neighborhood were more willing to disclose their views to a member of the opposition than were those who perceive themselves to be in a minority.

[32] Do responses to "public-opinion" surveys represent "public" or "private" opinion? The literature is ambiguous on this score. If the former, as Noelle-Neumann (1993) implies, then they are useful proxies for the perceived range of preferences, but poor indicators of underlying preferences. If the latter, then they are inadequate measures of sentiments that are publicly expressed, but adequate indicators of underlying opinion. If the test of "publicness" is whether what survey respondents tell interviewers differs from what they might reveal to intimates, then there is evidence that surveys tap "public" preferences (though the extent of the difference and of the influence on it of issue salience, strength of conviction, and interview and interviewer characteris-

cause, as Granovetter argues, spiral-of-silence processes can lead to minority domination of public discourse, and because, as Kuran argues, preference revelation is often central to disjunctive social change, these issues are important for political sociologists.

Opinion revelation in spiral processes is a probabilistic function of individual conflict averseness, the availability of discussion partners with differing opinions, and the probability that actors accurately identify the preferences of those with whom they come into contact (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1988). Polarization, in the sense of bimodality and constraint, will enter into this process in three ways.

First, because opinions are rarely dichotomous, reticence to disclose one's opinion is likely to vary positively with opinion distance between actor and potential discussant. The less bimodal the opinion structure, the greater the likelihood of political discussion between people who disagree somewhat, and the greater the number of discussants likely to discuss their views with persons who would not reveal theirs to one another. Thus opinion bimodality limits the extent of open political discussion among persons with different views and the two-step flow of opinion across ideological lines.

Second, the availability of accurate information about opinion distributions is a positive function of the proportion of errors made in predicting others' opinions. Errors frustrate efforts by actors to falsify (or withhold information about) preferences that they fear discussion partners may find unacceptable. Because prediction is easier when categories are divided by empty spaces, greater opinion bimodality enables actors more effectively to predict the views of those with whom they interact, thus increasing disparities between perceived and real distributions of opinion.

Third, increased opinion constraint intensifies spirals in two ways. Because discussion about one policy issue leads to discussions of others, the

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tics is little understood). If the test of "publicness" is whether what survey respondents tell interviewers is closer to their "private" opinions than what they might say, e.g., in a room full of potential business associates about whom they have little advance information, then survey responses are almost certainly *not* public in Noelle-Neumann's sense. Although the matter requires empirical resolution we are inclined to view survey responses in politically open societies as more "private" than "public," for three reasons: the "relationship" with the interviewer is ephemeral, making the cost of displeasing him or her minimal; the institutional framing of the interview authorizes the expression of potentially disagreeable opinions and prohibits the interviewer from expressing disapproval, likewise reducing the interviewee's risk; and, finally, whereas the most common form of preference falsification in everyday life is *failure* to reveal an opinion, the survey respondent bent on preference falsification must endorse an opinion with which he or she actively disagrees. If we are correct, then public opinion surveys may represent an institutional means of counteracting the effects of preference falsification in everyday life.

greater the level of opinion constraint, the less likely discussion partners are to disagree about issues subsequent to the one on which the discussion was based and the more likely they are to reveal their opinions intensely (Coleman 1957, p. 14). In addition, the greater the opinion constraint, the easier it is to predict the views of a potential discussion partner in advance. (This is a fortiori true of intergroup polarization.)

Median-voter models.—The celebrated Hotelling-Downs model in public-choice theory predicts that in two-party democracies with winner-take-all elections (as opposed to proportional representation) legislative deliberations represent the views of the "median voter" at the center of the voting public's opinion distribution (Downs 1957). Political entrepreneurs change their positions to maximize votes, positioning themselves on the left or right to capture nominations, but then migrating centerward during general elections. (Absent a third party, their ideological supporters will stick with them, having nowhere else to turn.)

This model applies well to polities in which opinions are normally distributed on a single dimension. But as public-choice theorists have observed (Mueller 1983, pp. 180–96), it works less well when opinion distributions are flat or bimodal. Once the median is no longer the mode, majorities may form around either mode. If bimodality is great and the issue salient, rational candidates may embrace extreme positions in order to prevent a sit-out by purists or a third-party challenge.

Effects of bimodality may be compounded by dispersion and constraint. Realistic median-voter models place special weight on the views of "attentive publics" (Arnold 1990), whose votes are more likely to be influenced by a candidate's record. Because voters who take extreme positions are more attentive than those who take moderate ones (Converse 1992), the more dispersed the opinion, the greater the size of attentive publics and the accountability of politicians to them. Similarly, increased constraint, entailing more interdependence among issues, may make it harder for politicians to satisfy mobilized voters by logrolling.[33] Thus we hypothesize: the greater the bimodality, the less elected officials' views resemble those of the median voter, with this divergence increasing as dispersion and constraint increase.

Parallel publics.—Page and Shapiro (1992) argue that different group views move in tandem because members of each group receive the same policy-relevant information and consequently change their opinions in the same direction at more or less the same rate, while differences in opinion

[33] When voter preferences are normally distributed, constraint should exert the opposite effect—reinforcing median-voter dynamics—by reducing multidimensionality in the opinion space.

that reflect real differences in material or ideal interests tend to remain stable. Our results on between-group mean differences are consistent with this. Changes in within-group polarization, however, do not always move in tandem.

How can we explain the paradox of parallel intergroup differences in central tendency, but inconsistent shifts in within-group distributions of opinion? We hypothesize that increasing within-group polarization reflects one of two processes. For groups based on ascribed identities, it reflects a decline in the correlations of the focal identity with other identities or attributes (Blau 1977), which increases within-group heterogeneity of interest and perspective. One may speculate that this factor, as exemplified in the growth of the African-American middle class, may explain diversification in African-American opinion after 1980. For groups in which membership is optional, diversity reflects migration of persons into that category. For example, bimodality of opinion on several issues grew among conservatives as their numbers increased, but not among liberals, as theirs declined.

Discussion.—These are but three examples of the potential relevance of opinion polarization to the explanation of political phenomena. Other examples could be drawn from theories of group formation and movement effectiveness, which are based on the familiar principle that mobilization is most likely when groups (*a*) hold very different opinions and (*b*) are internally unified. By developing a theoretically grounded set of operational definitions, applying that approach to the substantively important issue of distributional changes in U.S. social attitudes between the early 1970s and the mid-1990s, and suggesting theoretical applications, this discussion may inspire further research on the measurement and consequences of distributional properties of public opinion.

APPENDIX

TABLE A1

OLS Regression Coefficients for Time Trend (Year): Within-Group Statistics, NES

	Mean	Variance	Kurtosis	α
Omnibus scale (n = 6):				
Full sample	−1.182**	−26.153	.004	−.004
College graduates	−1.026	35.589	−.001	.001
Voters	−1.210*	−.188	−.001	−.002
Under 30	−.600	−76.540**	.006	−.008*
Politically active	−.858	16.814	.012	−.005

TABLE A1 (*Continued*)

	Mean	Variance	Kurtosis	α
Feelings thermometer:				
Blacks (n = 10):				
Full sample	−.128	2.032	−.014	
College graduates	−.327*	2.721	−.026	
Voters	−.162	1.132	−.017	
Under 30	−.335*	5.503**	−.029	
Politically active	−.302**	.788	−.005	
Poor (n = 9):				
Full sample	.141	2.541**	−.028**	
College graduates	.075	1.399	−.055*	
Voters	.149	2.107*	−.026**	
Under 30	.013	4.631*	−.005	
Politically active	.149	1.230	−.031	
Liberals (n = 10):				
Full sample	.022	1.818	−.012	
College graduates	−.048	3.470	.005	
Voters	.043	3.146	−.017	
Under 30	.069	1.997	−.010	
Politically active	.060	9.167*	−.013	
Conservatives (n = 10):				
Full sample	−.165	2.174	−.019*	
College graduates	−.020	3.411	−.042***	
Voters	−.155	2.708	−.021**	
Under 30	.054	4.451	−.022	
Politically active	−.078	2.767	−.031*	
Aid to minorities (n = 11):				
Full sample	.013*	−.044*	.019	
College graduates	.020**	−.021	.004	
Voters	.011	.043**	.019	
Under 30	.033**	−.014	.007	
Politically active	.013	−.043*	.014	
Women's roles (n = 6):				
Full sample	−.052***	−.092***	.074***	
College graduates	−.035***	−.054**	.109***	
Voters	−.051***	−.088***	.075***	
Under 30	−.041***	−.096***	.092**	
Politically active	−.045***	−.079***	.068***	
Abortion (n = 10):				
Full sample	−.019***	.014**	−.013***	
College graduates	−.015**	.002	.047**	
Voters	−.021***	.010**	−.004	
Under 30	−.009*	.013**	−.005	
Politically active	−.011*	.009**	.019*	

*$P < .10$.
**$P < .05$.
***$P < .001$.

TABLE A2

OLS Regression Coefficients for Time Trend (Year): Within-Group Statistics, GSS

	Mean	Variance	Kurtosis	α
Omnibus scale:				
Full sample (n = 8)	−.367***	−1.512**	.000	−.002
College graduates (n = 6)	−.202**	.077	−.018*	.004
Voters (n = 8)	−.408***	−.914*	−.022*	−.001
Under 30 (n = 6)	−.212*	−1.289	.042	−.003
Abortion (n = 14):				
Full sample	−.007	.039**	−.009**	.002***
College graduates	.021**	.084***	−.053**	.002***
Voters	−.007	.049***	−.010**	.002***
Under 30	.003	.020	−.016**	.001
Family gender roles (n = 9):				
Full sample	−.118***	−.055*	.014	.001
College graduates	−.071**	−.012	−.003	.002
Voters	−.124***	−.053	.010	.000
Under 30	−.095***	−.055**	.014	.002
Women's public roles (n = 14):				
Full sample	−.033***	−.030***	.183***	−.002**
College graduates	−.016***	−.015***	.332***	.003
Voters	−.032***	−.028***	.200***	.000
Under 30	−.020***	−.022***	.259***	−.004
Sexuality (n = 10):				
Full sample	−.004	−.036	−.012	−.005**
College graduates	.012	−.061*	.007	−.005*
Voters	−.011	−.022	−.021	−.005**
Under 30	.044**	−.068*	.006	−.009*
Crime and justice (n = 15):				
Full sample	.002	−.007***	.037**	−.005*
College graduates	.001	−.011***	.028**	−.008**
Voters	.000	−.006***	.025***	−.003
Under 30	.007*	−.009***	.039**	−.005
Racial attitudes:				
Full sample (n = 8)	−.062***	−.062**	.041**	−.004
College graduates (n = 6)	−.032**	−.035	.004	−.002
Voters (n = 8)	−.064***	−.055*	.039**	−.003
Under 30 (n = 6)	−.043**	−.063*	.086	−.007

*$P < .10$.
**$P < .05$.
***$P < .001$.

TABLE A3

OLS Regression Coefficients for Time Trend (Year): Between-Group Comparisons, NES

	Absolute Difference in Means	Kurtosis	
		Group A	Group B
Omnibus scale (n = 6):			
A. Over 45/B. under 35	−.388	.000	.003
A. Conservative/B. liberal	−.476	−.002*	−.008
A. Women/B. men	.455**	.006	.005
A. African-American/B. white	−1.834*	−.009	.001
A. College degree/B. high school or less	−.365	−.001	−.004
A. Democrat/B. Republican	1.418**	.022**	−.004
A. South/B. other	−.440*	.001	.005
Feeling thermometer:			
Blacks (n = 10):			
A. Over 45/B. under 35	.007	.001	−.034*
A. Conservative/B. liberal	−.138	−.027	.020
A. Women/B. men	.029	−.023	−.002
A. African-American/B. white	−.404	−.230*	−.014
A. College degree/B. high school only	.064	−.026	−.014
A. Democrat/B. Republican	.040	.003	−.022
A. South/B. other	.038	−.018	−.003
Poor (n = 9):			
A. Over 45/B. under 35	−.159**	−.041	−.030
A. Conservative/B. liberal	−.098**	−.025	−.027
A. Women/B. men	.041	−.027	−.025
A. African-American/B. white	−.265**	−.208	−.028**
A. College degree/B. high school or less	−.093	−.055*	−.017
A. Democrat/B. Republican	.086**	−.033	−.012
A. South/B. other	.019	−.008	−.039**
Liberals (n = 10):			
A. Over 45/B. under 35	.095	−.015	−.015
A. Conservative/B. liberal	−.211	−.007	−.029
A. Women/B. men	.049	−.018	−.005
A. African-American/B. white	−.375**	.008	−.020
A. College degree/B. high school or less	.058	.005	−.013
A. Democrat/B. Republican	.194*	.001	−.029
A. South/B. other	−.044	−.001	−.016
Conservatives (n = 10):			
A. Over 45/B. under 35	−.336**	−.006	−.041*
A. Conservative/B. liberal	−.065	−.029	−.038*
A. Women/B. men	.013	−.016*	−.018
A. African-American/B. white	−.385**	.002	−.013*
A. College degree/B. high school or less	−.128*	−.042***	.003
A. Democrat/B. Republican	.238**	−.022	−.024
A. South/B. other	−.049	−.009	−.024*

TABLE A3 (*Continued*)

	Absolute Difference in Means	Kurtosis	
		Group A	Group B
Aid to minorities (n = 11):			
A. Over 45/B. under 35	−.019**	.024	.011
A. Conservative/B. liberal	−.033**	.013*	−.005
A. Women/B. men	.004	.019	.019*
A. African-American/B. white	−.063***	−.133**	.017*
A. College degree/B. high school or less	−.010	.004	.021*
A. Democrat/B. Republican	.007	.020*	.025*
A. South/B. other	−.006*	.018	.020*
Women's roles (n = 6):			
A. Over 45/B. under 35	−.003	.045***	.093**
A. Conservative/B. liberal	−.018	.043***	.185**
A. Women/B. men	−.004	.074***	.070***
A. African-American/B. white	−.009	.058**	.074***
A. College degree/B. high school or less	−.026**	.109***	.052***
A. Democrat/B. Republican	.007	.009***	.047***
A. South/B. other	−.004	.064***	.079***
Abortion (n = 10):			
A. Over 45/B. under 35	−.011**	−.037***	.003
A. Conservative/B. liberal	.017**	−.015***	.078**
A. Women/B. men	−.001	−.008**	−.017**
A. African-American/B. white	−.004	−.041**	−.008**
A. College degree/B. high school or less	−.005	.047**	−.045***
A. Democrat/B. Republican	.002	−.022**	−.017***
A. South/B. other	.003	−.044***	.002

*$P < .10$.
**$P < .05$.
***$P < .001$.

TABLE A4

OLS Regression Coefficients for Time Trend (Year): Between-Group Comparisons, GSS

	Absolute Difference in Means	Kurtosis	
		Group A	Group B
Omnibus scale (n = 8):			
A. Over 45/B. under 35	−.210*	−.012	.017
A. Conservative/B. liberal	.026	.009	.013
A. Women/B. men	.028	.012	−.015
A. African-American/B. white	−.271	−.037*	−.015
A. Religious liberals/B. conservatives	−.294**	−.024	.031
A. College degree/B. high school or less	−.161**	−.018*	.012
A. Democrat/B. Republican	.279**	−.030	.00
A. South/B. other	.033	.025	−.003
Abortion (n = 14):			
A. Over 45/B. under 35	−.004	−.013***	−.012**
A. Conservative/B. liberal	.065***	−.015***	.043**
A. Women/B. men	.010	−.011**	−.004
A. African-American/B. white	−.035**	.004	−.011**
A. Religious liberals/B. conservatives	−.014**	−.076**	−.002
A. College degree/B. high school or less	−.021*	−.053**	−.006
A. Democrat/B. Republican	.025*	.006	−.025***
A. South/B. other	−.012	−.009**	−.010
Family gender roles (n = 9):			
A. Over 45/B. under 35	−.038**	−.013***	.028*
A. Conservative/B. liberal	−.007	.002	.033*
A. Women/B. men	.013	.016	.021
A. African-American/B. white	−.019	.005	.018
A. Religious liberals/B. conservatives	−.029**	.023	−.009
A. College degree/B. high school or less	−.046**	−.003	.006
A. Democrat/B. Republican	.017	.012	−.016
A. South/B. other	−.001	.011	.020
Women's public roles (n = 14):			
A. Over 45/B. under 35	−.017***	.097***	.289***
A. Conservative/B. liberal	−.009**	.126***	.286***
A. Women/B. men	−.001	.205***	.157***
A. African-American/B. white	−.001	.173***	.191***
A. Religious liberals/B. conservatives	−.016**	.202***	.099***
A. College degree/B. high school or less	−.017**	.332***	.109***
A. Democrat/B. Republican	−.003	.207***	.138***
A. South/B. other	−.009**	.136***	.217***

TABLE A4 (*Continued*)

	Absolute Difference in Means	Kurtosis	
		Group A	Group B
Sexuality (n = 10):			
A. Over 45/B. under 35	−.051***	−.050	.007
A. Conservative/B. liberal	.002	−.001	.005
A. Women/B. men	−.009	−.020	.001
A. African-American/B. white	−.010	.036*	−.019
A. Religious liberals/B. conservatives	−.027**	.011	−.025
A. College degree/B. high school or less	−.011	.007	−.011
A. Democrat/B. Republican	.016	−.041**	−.032**
A. South/B. other	−.005	−.013	−.012
Crime and justice (n = 15):			
A. Over 45/B. under 35	−.007***	.036**	.029***
A. Conservative/B. liberal	−.002	.031**	.027***
A. Women/B. men	−.006***	.053***	.016**
A. African/American/B. white	−.008**	.026***	.035***
A. Religious liberals/B. conservatives	−.004	.044***	.038**
A. College degree/B. high school or less	.002	.028**	.044***
A. Democrat/B. Republican	.008**	.017*	.054**
A. South/B. other	.000	.038**	.037***
Racial attitudes (n = 8):			
A. Over 45/B. under 35	−.036**	.026*	.063
A. Conservative/B. liberal	−.013	.039*	.034
A. Women/B. men	−.004	.038**	.043**
A. African-American/B. white	−.018	−.120	.064**
A. Religious liberals/B. conservatives	−.047**	.031	.054**
A. College degree/B. high school or less	−.034**	.004	.033
A. Democrat/B. Republican	.037**	.045	.048*
A. South/B. other	−.026**	.050**	.033**
Sex education (n = 15):			
A. Over 45/B. under 35	−.004***		
A. Conservative/B. liberal	.001		
A. Women/B. men	−.001*		
A. African-American/B. white	−.001		
A. Religious liberals/B. conservatives	−.003**		
A. College degree/B. high school or less	−.005***		
A. Democrat/B. Republican	−.001		
A. South/B. other	−.003*		
School prayer (n = 8):			
A. Over 45/B. under 35	.001		
A. Conservative/B. liberal	.002		
A. Women/B. men	.002		
A. African-American/B. white	.002		
A. Religious liberals/B. conservatives	.001		
A. College degree/B. high school or less	.003		
A. Democrat/B. Republican	.000		
A. South/B. other	.003		

TABLE A4 (*Continued*)

	Absolute Difference in Means	Kurtosis	
		Group A	Group B
Divorce law (n = 8):			
A. Over 45/B. under 35	−.010***		
A. Conservative/B. liberal	−.004		
A. Women/B. men	−.001		
A. African-American/B. white	−.001		
A. Religious liberals/B. conservatives	−.014***		
A. College degree/B. high school or less	−.015***		
A. Democrat/B. Republican	.004*		
A. South/B. other	−.001		

*$P < .10$.
**$P < .05$.
***$P < .001$.

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