

**Political Culture in the Age of Adolescence**

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## Introduction

It is generally agreed that the political culture of the industrialized democracies has undergone considerable transformation in the postwar era. Precisely how it has changed and why are subject to greater debate.

One persuasive and disquieting account appears in Robert Putnam's sweeping analysis of American civic life in *Bowling Alone* (2000). Putnam identifies significant trends of disengagement over the past forty years, citing declining participation in a wide range of national and neighborly activities as evidence of an erosion in community life that is sapping the public spirit of contemporary America. His account of civic decline resonates with the experience of other developed democracies, where key barometers of public engagement, including political ones such as voter turnout and party membership levels, have shown a similar downward trend over time.

Martin Wattenberg's recent book, *Is Voting for Young People?* (2008), similarly traces a secular decline in important forms of democratic engagement. Wattenberg's focus is more narrow than Putnam's, concentrating on political phenomena and in particular changing patterns of attentiveness to politics. Attention to news media, including newspapers and television news, has fallen sharply in the past few decades among citizens of many of the developed democracies. Knowledge of politics has consequently suffered, leaving many citizens, young people in particular, inadequately prepared for participation in political life. The decline in voter turnout seen in many countries is the unfortunate result.

Another signal contribution, inspired by the psychological tradition but with broader social implications, is Jean Twenge's *Generation Me* (2006). Twenge's work shares a certain affinity with *Bowling Alone*, expressing concern at the tendency of today's Americans to focus on their own priorities and interests with faint regard for the opinion or welfare of others. There are important differences, however. Whereas Putnam focuses on what's gone missing – active involvement in our communities – Twenge concentrates on what has taken its place, which is a pervasive ethos of individualism. While the connection between a decline in community and the rise of individualism seems obvious enough, the latter theme is surprisingly underemphasized in Putnam's work. Twenge's work offers a different understanding of the motivational origins of declining involvement, while also pointing to certain positive consequences of individualism (2006, 180-211) that have emerged alongside the many negative ones she identifies.

While Twenge's work focuses largely on the social and cultural consequences of individualism, others have pointed to important political implications. A number of recent works on political participation have suggested that engagement has not diminished in recent times as much as it has been re-channeled into individualistic activities, such as petitions, boycotts, interest group politics and 'political consumerism' (Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti 2005; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley 2004, 275). These observations echo the conclusions of earlier works on post-materialism, which suggested that the changing values of citizens in the postwar era had led to a preference for forms of political activity less dependent on traditional political channels and more individually empowering (Nevitte 1996).

A positive evaluation of postwar trends is also to be found in works that focus less on political involvement and more on respect for democratic principles. In particular, scholars examining the cardinal democratic virtue of tolerance have found ample reason to be optimistic about the state of contemporary democracy (Dalton 2007). For all the negative trends that may have unfolded in the postwar era, there has been a salutary increase in acceptance of diversity and difference. If this tolerance is sometimes tested, as in the aftermath of 9/11, there is little doubt, proponents would contend, that over the long haul countries where prejudice and bigotry were once commonplace have become more accepting and accommodating.

Each of these perspectives on social and political evolution over the past fifty years is backed up by considerable evidence and each resonates with elements of contemporary experience. To say that they differ is not necessarily to say they disagree, for their differences lie partly in the fact that they concentrate on different facets of the postwar experience. At the same time, all can be seen as ambitious attempts to capture the essential spirit of the times and to determine the implications for the future evolution of democratic politics in the developed democracies. That they emphasize different themes and strike different tones should push us to reflect on their affinities and differences, not with the aim of declaring one manifestly superior, but in the spirit of searching for a unifying thread that can help draw these diverse accounts of social and political change closer together.

There is similarly merit in searching for a common denominator across the disparate explanations offered by these theories for the changes in political culture that have marked the postwar period. They do share some minimal common ground: all agree that generational change is the key driving force behind the reconfigurations they identify. This reflects their shared conception that political culture comprises deeply held precepts - attitudes, values, behavioural dispositions, entrenched beliefs - that individuals do not readily abandon (Elkins and Simeon 1979). Hence it is the malleability of rising generations that allows new dispositions and values to emerge. Wattenberg, Putnam, Twenge and Dalton all concur in their assessment that it is distinct attitudes and behaviors on the part of younger postwar cohorts that have gradually reshaped the social and political landscape.

From this common point of departure, these observers of postwar society branch off in different directions in seeking to explain *why* younger generations are different. Wattenberg sees the media environment as quite critical, especially changes of the past thirty years that have greatly expanded the choice of viewing and listening options in the realm of electronic media and eroded attention to politics. Putnam traces generational change further back, and suggests two principal reasons for civic disengagement and the weakening of social connectedness among younger cohorts: the introduction of television and the absence of any unifying external threats since World War II. Studies of individualistic politics often couch their analysis in the context of rising post-materialism, a theory which also points to security, along with material prosperity, as critical factors that have shaped the value priorities of postwar cohorts. Studies of tolerance, on the other hand, are virtually unanimous in attributing the rise in this democratic virtue to the increase in levels of education over time. Persons exposed to higher education “learn about diverse points of view and ways of experiencing life, thus becoming less dogmatic, even if they had a tendency toward close-mindedness before achieving a high level of

education" (Sullivan et al., 1981, 100). Across these different accounts, most of the seismic changes of the postwar period – technological advances, peace and prosperity, a more educated citizenry - are invoked, making for a complex array of possible explanations and raising the question whether there might be some further commonality beyond the mechanics of generational turnover which would help explain assorted dimensions of social, cultural and political change.

Twenge, for her part, does not probe as deeply as the others into the origins of the changes she identifies, but the fragments she offers raise a question worth pursuing further. In accounting for the rise of individualism, the extent of her analysis is to suggest that the baby boom generation, lacking guidance from the past, had to discover individualism for itself, had to “reinvent their way of thinking” (2006, 49), whereas the next generation, Generation Me, “entered a world where things had already changed and...soaked it up like little sponges.” (2006, 191) The argument seems strangely inconsistent in presuming that one generation (or some members thereof) had the presence of mind to consciously fashion a new culture, whereas the subsequent, sponge-like generation simply absorbed what was handed down to them. As an account of socialization processes it is oddly inconsistent. But it does raise the question whether a more satisfactory account of socialization dynamics - the processes whereby extant ideas and beliefs are imparted to new generations - might offer any insight into processes of political culture change.

Other theories likewise do not offer much on this front. Having identified an important development as the key precipitant of change – be it new media technologies, peace and prosperity or education – the analysis typically proceeds to demonstrate that younger cohorts are the ones who have absorbed the effects, while older ones have proven largely resistant. Little is noted about the endogenous dimension of transmission, the imparting of attitudes and behavioral dispositions from older generations to younger ones and how this might alter or mediate externally induced change. At most, it is perhaps implicitly assumed that the socialization process will serve as a brake on change, hence explaining why change emerges only gradually in rising cohorts – a bit of change in one cohort, a bit more in the next – rather than abruptly. But there also seems to be the further presumption that this is ultimately inconsequential as the exogenous forces of change will eventually overcome whatever inertia is imposed by socialization dynamics.

This paper considers more closely the role of socialization processes in inducing and mediating political and social change. The theory is general in its application, addressing changes that in greater or lesser measure appear to have affected all of the developed democracies and which could equally impinge on other countries that experience a similar social evolution. The general approach is to consider changing dynamics of socialization over time and how these have contributed to the evolution of various facets of political culture. The specific argument advanced is that the emergence of adolescence as a discrete stage in the life-cycle in the early years of the twentieth century was a critical development, leading to a marked shift in the relative influence of adults and adolescent peers in the formative years of life. With this shift, adolescent dispositions became more deeply entrenched, gradually diffusing upwards into adult society. Adolescence has thus been an important wellspring of change, planting the seeds of new attitudes and values that have slowly germinated and matured to become established elements of the social and political landscape. The case presented is largely

circumstantial, but rests on plausible assumptions and empirical evidence that point towards its plausibility.

### **Linking life-cycle and cohort effects**

One way of framing this inquiry is as an investigation into changing processes of socialization that have given rise to new ways of thinking and acting in rising generations in the developed democracies. Another way is to conceptualize it as an attempt to rethink the linkages between life-cycle and cohort effects, the technical distinction applied in the analysis of longitudinal data. The conceptual connection lies first in recognizing that socialization research and life-cycle analysis deal with the same subject matter, focusing on developmental processes over the life course. Life-cycle research (in the field of political science at any rate) normally adopts as its starting point age eighteen, the youngest age for inclusion in many survey samples; this is also the point where political socialization research typically takes its leave, bidding godspeed to its young research subjects as they leave adolescence behind to join the adult electorate. That researchers often pass the baton in their study of these matters should not obscure the underlying continuity of the life course processes involved.

To examine changing processes of socialization and how these have contributed to a changing political culture among postwar generations is, then, to consider changes in life-cycle patterns and how these might have given rise to distinct attitudes and behaviors among rising birth cohorts. This represents a modification of the typical strategy in cohort analysis. The standard approach, particularly in quantitative studies where simplifying assumptions must be made, is to assume an unchanging life-cycle trajectory over time. This has the merit of allowing for the unencumbered specification of cohort effects, which are typically the subject of greatest interest (since these are what produce aggregate change over time). But this method of proceeding also precludes more complex ways of thinking about the relationship between life-cycle and cohort effects.

An example of a more nuanced approach can be found in Mark Franklin's work on declining voter participation (2004). It is not the specifics of his argument, but rather the manner of conceptualizing cohort effects that is relevant for present purposes. Franklin takes his lead from Eric Plutzer's innovative approach to studying voter participation. In brief, Plutzer argues that voting in elections is a stable behavior once established, so to understand why some people vote more than others we must examine processes that lead to the development of the voting habit, which lie in the developmental stages of early adulthood (2002). Whereas Plutzer applies this developmental model to analyze individual-level variation in voter participation, Franklin uses it to explain long-term aggregate change in voter participation rates. In brief, Franklin suggests that the developmental process that leads people to become (or fail to become) habitual voters was significantly *altered* when the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18. The change, innocent enough in its conception, had significant repercussions. One feature of life course patterns is that the typical 18-year-old is at a more unsettled stage of life than the typical 21-year-old and for this reason less likely to vote at their first opportunity. In turn, failing to vote at the first opportunity (or first three, to be precise) hinders development of the voting habit; so those who came of age after the reduction in voting age were less likely to become habitual voters. Thus a small perturbation in the life-cycle pattern of

political development, induced by the reduction in voting age, gave rise to a substantial and enduring pattern of behavior among new cohorts of voters. The result has been consistently lower levels of voter turnout among younger cohorts in a number of established democracies.

This is an insightful way of thinking about the origins of cohort effects which has wider application. For there most certainly have been *other* significant changes in life course dynamics over time that could have altered the development of behaviors and attitudes that subsequently exhibit considerable persistence. This includes not only life course developments from age 18 on, but also the earlier stages that have traditionally fallen within the purview of political socialization research. The general conclusion we can take from Franklin's research is the importance of an expansive consideration of the formative influences that could potentially give rise to cohort effects. These can include not only the overt influences that shape different generations and which are most commonly cited – new technologies, social change (e.g. education), historical events (e.g. war or its absence), or the usually nebulous (and often tautological) “spirit of the times” – but also the more subtle impact of distinctive life course patterns that guide particular generations down different paths on the road to mature adulthood. It is from this conceptual starting point that we turn to consider the impact of adolescence on the long-term evolution of political culture in the developed democracies.

### **The impact of adolescence**

The most significant change in life course patterns over the past one hundred years has been the consolidation of adolescence as a distinct life stage, a feature of modern, industrial society that is historically unprecedented. The critical consequence of this development for the current argument is that it has enhanced peer influence relative to adult influence at a critical juncture in the life course. Political science has long recognized the importance of social context for individual political behavior, a theme that has received renewed emphasis in recent years (Beck et al 2002; Zuckerman 2005). In light of this recognition, changes to the social context of youth produced by the consolidation of the adolescent stage of life are potentially of great significance.

The importance of adolescence as a feature of modern life is remarked upon in various contexts and numerous disciplines, most notably psychology and sociology. There are two general characteristics of the treatment of adolescence in these literatures. The first is that they focus on the impact of adolescence on adolescents. Less often considered is the impact of adolescence on adults – that is to say, on the adults that adolescents eventually become. The second general feature is the considerable emphasis given to the problems and pathologies associated with wayward adolescents (e.g. drug use, juvenile delinquency) rather than the more benign and universal tendencies of this stage of life. The theory offered here is atypical on both counts, considering how immersion in the social context of adolescence affects people beyond their adolescent years, and focusing on traits typical of the adolescent character that have relevance to the changing political culture of the developed democracies. To the extent adolescent attitudes are distinct from those of adults, and to the extent adolescence is an impressionable period in which many basic attitudes and behavioral dispositions take shape, a shift towards heightened peer influence in adolescence will represent an

important change in the formative experiences of young people likely to give rise to eventual change in the adult population.

If this is a novel way of conceptualizing the origins of culture change in the developed democracies, there is a more specific articulation of the argument that is commonplace which can be summed up in the phrase “the ‘60s generation.” It is widely held that those who came of age in the 1960s, a time when youth were numerically preponderant and youth culture was especially vibrant, became a distinctive group as a result of their early experiences and have remained so as they have aged (Fendrich and Lovoy, 1988; Marwell, Aiken, Demerath, 1987). If the idealism and hedonism that marked the decade of their formation have been muted over time, a residue of these qualities has remained with them even as they have aged. Their youth experience remains an abiding influence that continues to affect both their conduct in their personal lives and their political inclinations.

The ‘60s generation’ example invites further clarification of the more broadly gauged argument we are seeking to make. First, the youthful foment of the 1960s encompassed not just adolescents but young adults as well, in their early twenties or older still. The inclusion of a wider range of ages in the adolescent category is certainly a reasonable amendment for this period. Adolescence is meant to be a flexible term designating those who have moved beyond childhood to a more independent stage of life but who have not yet fully entered or embraced the adult world. The ages bracketing this period are not fixed and stable, but are subject to change over time. At an early point, however, back in the day when the typical life path involved entry into the workforce directly from high school, the period of heightened peer influence would have been adolescence proper, that is to say ages 14 to 18 (approximately) spent in the high school setting. A second point of clarification also arises from consideration of the 1960s example, as this period can give the misleading impression that in order for young people to be shaped by their peers there must be a vibrant and manifest youth culture that conditions their outlook. The literature on social context suggests that the influence of others can be more personal and subtle, yet potent nonetheless, operating through the casual and intimate contacts an individual has on a day to day basis with those in their immediate surroundings (Dey 1997, Klofstad 2005). This type of peer influence, of individual youth on individual youth, would certainly have been in play prior to the 1960s and would have continued to shape the adolescent experience subsequent to that colorful decade. In short, the youth movement of the 1960s is just one manifestation, albeit a relatively prominent and transparent one, of a more subtle and longstanding process of heightened peer influence for those coming of age in the age of adolescence.

Specifying a precise starting point for this process is impossible, but the key development, to which we have alluded already, would have been the expansion of secondary education that started to take place around the turn of the twentieth century and culminated in near-universal enrollment by the 1950s, or in some countries, the 1960s. Rather than leaving school at age 12 or 13 to join the adult workforce or help work the fields, young people now continued for several more years in the company of peers. As the proportion attending secondary school increased over the decades, so too did the significance of the adolescent stage of life for the socialization process. Other structural changes were relevant as well - urbanization, for example, not only facilitated regular attendance at school but also allowed for greater socializing among teenagers outside the

school setting – but for those who subscribe to the notion that adolescence is an invention of the modern age, extension of the period of full-time education is typically seen as the critical development (Fasick 1994).

Many have recognized that the impact of this development on the life of adolescents was profound. A classic sociological study of the 1920s, *Middletown*, conveys the essential features of the distinctive social setting provided by secondary education in a small American town: “The high school, with its athletics, clubs, sororities and fraternities, dances and parties, and other ‘extracurricular activities,’ is a fairly complete social cosmos in itself, and about this city within a city the social life of the intermediate generation centers... The school is taking over more and more of the child’s waking life... [it] is becoming not a place to which children go from their homes for a few hours daily but a place from which they go home to eat and sleep” (Lynd and Lynd 1929, 211). The potentially negative consequences of this development later came to be recognized by perceptive observers such as sociologist James Coleman, who recognized the isolating effects of the adolescent’s social setting: “the child of high-school age... is ‘cut off’ from the rest of society, forced inward toward his own age group, made to carry out his whole social life with others his own age. With his fellows, he comes to constitute a small society, one that has most of its important interactions within itself, and maintains only a few threads of connection with the outside adult world” (1961, 3).

Some would say that postwar developments have deepened and extended the adolescent stage of life. Again, the principal reason for the change has been expanded opportunities to remain longer in full-time education, now at the post-secondary level. This development is identified as one of the key factors responsible for the crystallization of a stage of life sometimes labeled “emerging adulthood,” referring to the period from roughly ages 18 to 25 when young people continue to live somewhat insular lives disconnected from the adult world (Arnett 2004, 2005). Others, of the view that this new stage of delayed development may have more in common with adolescence than adulthood, might prefer the term “extended adolescence.” Regardless, there is general agreement that the period of life in which young people are embedded in social settings where peer influence is substantial has become longer in the past forty years; though the effects of this postwar extension are more uncertain, as it does not apply to young people universally and would depend on whether (and in what ways) peers in one’s twenties provide a social context markedly different from that which would be encountered in “adult” society.

That these changes in the life course have been gradual developments is one reason why the impact of adolescence on adult attitudes has been slow to materialize. A second reason lies in the intrinsic inertia of the political socialization process. The field after all is largely built on the assumption that the weight of existing opinion and disposition, exerted by various socialization agents in the adult world, is considerable, steering young people, in the absence of any countervailing force, towards acceptance of existing norms. Considered in the abstract, it is possible to imagine periods when the weight from above would be sufficient to forestall any change whatsoever on the part of rising generations. In such periods of stability, adolescents might well differ from adults, but socialization pressures combined with natural maturation processes would result in their eventually becoming just like the adults who preceded them – from there taking their turn to steer the next generation of adolescents towards the same outcome.



The emergence of adolescence as a distinct stage of life, assuming greater significance in the formative experiences of young people, would upset this state of equilibrium but only gradually. The first cohort of adolescents to experience adolescence – an abstract rather than empirically identifiable group – would display small, subtle changes, as socialization pressures from the adult world would continue to exert considerable influence, mitigating the effects of enhanced peer influence. The initial impact would be minimal, the distinctiveness of the first cohort consisting perhaps less in an explicit commitment to adolescent ideals and more in a mild ambivalence towards adult norms. This faint residue, however, would be sufficient to set the stage for further change, as the first cohort, once part of the adult world, would alter the socialization context of the next cohort of adolescents, rendering it more amenable to adolescent predilections and enabling the subsequent cohort to take the process of change one step further, tilting more strongly in favor of adolescent norms. The influence of adolescence on the adult world would thus occur in gradual waves, manifesting itself in changing attitudes and behavioral tendencies among rising birth cohorts over a long period of time.

In a nutshell, then, the argument is that there are certain deep and abiding tendencies of adolescence that historically were stifled by the socialization pressures of the adult world and which have gradually been permitted freer expression in the age of adolescence. Presumably the process of social change implied by the theory could eventually exhaust itself. Successive waves of change producing adults ever more reflective of adolescent tendencies might at some point generate a new equilibrium where vertical socialization pressures and horizontal peer influences would balance out, leading once again to simple reproduction of extant norms in rising generations. The differences between adolescents and adults in this end stage would necessarily be smaller than they were at the onset of the process, as the relative weight of adult socialization influence would be smaller relative to the impact of peer influence in adolescence. Whether we have already arrived at this point is difficult to say, though certainly there is anecdotal evidence of a convergence of adolescent and adult sensibilities, due principally to changes in adult norms, that has rendered parent-teen differences less trenchant than at points in the past (Von Hahn 2007).

To sum up: the emergence of adolescence as a distinct life stage, first and foremost a consequence of extended time in full-time education, has generated a gradual process of social change, which we will argue below is a significant factor underwriting a wide range of political culture developments that have unfolded in the developed democracies. In the twentieth century, young people increasingly found themselves in a social context where peer influence was considerable, but the effects of the change were slow to appear. The principal structural change giving rise to this development, expanded educational participation of greater duration, came into effect gradually; equally drawn out were the changes in socialization outcomes echoing from this development. Over the long haul, however, major changes have occurred and can be seen in some of the basic dispositions and behavioral tendencies prevalent in modern society that have important implications for the political realm.

## Making the case

The central prediction flowing from this argument is that with the entrenchment of adolescence, traits distinctive of the adolescent character will become more prominent in the adult population over time. When this will happen is difficult to predict with any precision, first because there is no single point at which adolescence became a discrete stage of life, and second because the effects will have appeared incrementally over multiple generations. Eventually, however, persistent life course patterns associated with adolescence will generate cohort effects that see adolescent predilections becoming more prevalent in rising cohorts.

Embedded in this account are three separate claims in need of verification to substantiate the argument:

- 1) The influence of peers in the adolescent stage of life – as gauged by factors such as the amount of time spent in their company and exposure and receptiveness to their ideas and values – has increased over time.
- 2) Adolescents differ from adults in ways relevant to political culture: core ideas, values and behavioral dispositions broadly of relevance to politics. Propositions 1 and 2 together entail that adolescents, in the age of adolescence, have been exposed to distinct ideas and patterns of behavior, thus altering their formative experiences compared to those who came before.
- 3) This element of people's formative experiences, though not the sole influence on adult outcomes, nonetheless has had a lasting effect that is evident in identifiable cohort patterns that have gradually emerged over time and which have reshaped the political culture of the developed democracies.

Making a watertight case in support of all three propositions is not possible. The first is the most challenging to verify empirically. From the account offered above, it would follow that the greatest changes in peer influence for youth would have come with the full-scale introduction of compulsory secondary education, since this was a development affecting the core of the adolescent years that was universal in its impact. Assessing the change in peer influence attendant upon this development would require comparable measurements prior to and after the change, a tall order to fill. For this reason, a rigorous assessment is unlikely. Changes in the degree of peer influence in more recent decades, for which data might be more readily available, are apt to be less dramatic. It is not obvious, for example, that the teenager of the 1990s would be subject to significantly greater peer influence than the teenager of the 1950s. But then again dramatic changes in recent decades are not required by the current theory, which posits that the repercussions of enhanced peer influence in adolescence will continue to echo through a process of gradual inter-generational change long after the initial perturbation has occurred.

That said, the idea that there would have been a sharp increase in peer influence with the onset of the age of adolescence seems incontrovertible. It is hard to imagine that young people spending the bulk of their days in educational settings surrounded by peers would not be subject to greater peer influence than young people who had left school behind to take their place manning the plough, running the household, or toiling in the factories, mines and offices of the adult world. Robert Epstein, whose recent book *The*

*Case Against Adolescence* rails against the extended period of social confinement that is modern adolescence, estimates that American teenagers probably spend 60 hours a week more time together than teens in preindustrial society (2007, 92). Other academic research confirms that the intensity of peer bonds grows stronger in the adolescent years as the influence of parents and other adult figures wanes (Andersson 1979). Such observations are consistent with the common wisdom that the social environment of the modern adolescent is heavily tilted towards peer influence.

There is likewise no investigation undertaken of the third claim, the proposition that adolescent characteristics have appeared in adult society in the form of gradually emerging cohort effects which have reshaped the political culture of the developed democracies. For this proposition, existing research provides ample evidence for at least the second part of the statement (that cohort effects have reshaped political culture) if not the first (that these represent a manifestation of adolescent tendencies). Whether it is Wattenberg on political attentiveness, Putnam on social capital, Twenge on individualism or Dalton on tolerance, there is an abundance of evidence that various facets of the political culture of the developed democracies have been slowly reconfigured by processes of generational change.

It is, then, the second proposition that claims our full attention: that there are abiding differences between adolescents and adults that can help explain these cohort-driven changes in political culture. Naturally, in seeking to build this case, the outcome to be explained orientates the investigation, so that the objective becomes to identify distinctive tendencies of adolescence that correspond to the various elements of cohort-driven change in social and political values and dispositions. One approach to identifying such adolescent tendencies is to draw on the insights of theoretical models of life course development, drawn principally from works of developmental psychology. Another method involves empirical assessment of adolescent-adult differences on relevant measures. Both are used below.

For the empirical method, the age span examined should not be too great, otherwise the standard difficulty arises of distinguishing life-cycle from cohort effects. Of course, the theory posited here anticipates the presence of both – that life course patterns associated with adolescence will have generated identifiable cohort effects - but for verification purposes, the two must be considered separately. One simple way to isolate the life course pattern is to focus on a relatively narrow age span: to look for differences not just between adolescents and adults but between adolescents and young adults. As we will see below, the differences thus identified are typically too large to plausibly represent emergent cohort effects. When 15-year olds differ substantially from 20-year olds, it is unlikely to be a reflection of anything distinctive about those born a mere five years apart. A more likely explanation is that this age range represents a section of the life-cycle marked by significant change.

By the reasoning of the current theory, the time period examined is not a critical variable, as the life course effects giving rise to cohort change are conceptualized as abiding differences between adolescents and adults. Such differences would exist in a period of equilibrium, when socialization pressures and maturation processes are sufficient to bring adolescents in line with existing adult norms as they age; such differences would also exist at a time of emergent cohort effects, as adolescents would continue to change as they aged, but would simply not finish up at quite the same point as

those who went before them. Of course, evidence of the persistence of adolescent-adult differences over time is desirable, and where available is provided below. At other points, however, this consistency is simply assumed, thereby justifying the use of a slightly unorthodox procedure: cross-sectional surveys from different points in time are aggregated and treated as a single cross-sectional swath as a means of bringing together sufficient numbers of cases to accurately capture the trajectory of attitudes and dispositions over short spans of the life-cycle.<sup>1</sup>

The sections that follow examine different elements of adolescent-adult differences, concentrating on a few that are most fundamental: political inattentiveness, individualism and tolerance. In each case, the distinctiveness of adolescents lends credence to the notion that adolescence is a likely wellspring – not the only source, but certainly a significant one - of long-term inter-generational change in attitudes and dispositions of considerable consequence to the political culture of the developed democracies.

### **Political inattentiveness**

To establish that the adolescent years are marked by distinctly low levels of political attentiveness, the Eurobarometer dataset combining all studies from 1970 to 2002 is used. The value of this dataset is twofold: the use of consistent questions has generated an exceptionally large N for certain measures when multiplied across the various EU countries and the numerous years the questions have been administered; and the surveys include respondents as young as 15, the minimum age of eligibility for the surveys. These two features allow for close scrutiny of differences between adolescents and young adults that would be impossible to capture with most datasets.

Two measures of political attentiveness are considered: political interest and political discussion. Figures 1 and 2, derived from the combined Eurobarometer 1970-2002 dataset, demonstrate the distinctiveness of adolescents by displaying age trends with respect to political interest and political discussion, controlling for other relevant variables. The figures are based on OLS regression models. For those under age 30, each specific age in years was captured by a dummy variable with those 30 years old serving as the excluded comparison category. Those over age 30 were grouped into ten-year intervals, the results plotted at the mid-point of those intervals. Models were run with and without an education control (based on age at time of finishing full-time education); in all models, controls were in place for country and survey year (coded continuously).<sup>2</sup> Using these results, the graphs present the level of political interest/discussion for the ‘average’

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<sup>1</sup> This has the additional benefit of breaking down the perfect collinearity of age and birth year in pure cross-sectional data.

<sup>2</sup> For political discussion, birth year (coded continuously) is also controlled because this set of surveys spans a thirty-year period, making it feasible to separate out life-cycle and cohort effects with some measure of confidence. Thus these results represent a purer reflection of the life-cycle pattern alone, whereas the political interest results may conflate life-cycle and cohort patterns. To reiterate, however, when focusing on a narrow age span over which significant change occurs, e.g. adolescence to young adulthood, cohort effects are unlikely to be of any great significance.

30 year old (average with respect to other variables – year, country and education),<sup>3</sup> alongside estimates for other ages comparable in other respects to this average 30 year old. In other words, the graphs present adjusted figures that take into account potential confounding factors to isolate the early life course trajectory for measures of political attentiveness.

As a preliminary observation, the results first reveal that the education control can have a substantial effect on the age-attentiveness relationship, reducing the differences between adolescents and young adults – not surprising given that political attentiveness (especially political interest) rises sharply with education level and adolescents naturally tend to have fewer years of formal education under their belts than young adults. What to make of this depends on the merits of controlling for education, which in turn hinges on one's interpretation of the education-attentiveness relationship: whether further years of education actually serve to foster political attentiveness, or whether the pursuit of further education is simply indicative of certain qualities – intelligence, ambition, privileged socio-economic background and so on - that engender political attentiveness and which would already be present among young people still in high school (Hillygus 2005; Kam 2006). The first interpretation would suggest that controlling for education is necessary and reasonable in seeking to isolate age differences: the youngest respondents are at a disadvantage by virtue of not having reached the end of their years of full-time education. The second would suggest that the education control is unnecessary, indeed misleading: changes in political attentiveness from adolescence to early adulthood reflect aging and maturing processes not the impact of further education. But even if the first is closer to the truth and education controls do reduce the gap between adolescents and young adults, it does not really undermine the essential point. Educational controls may help explain *why* adolescents are less politically attentive but do not alter the fact that they are less attentive.

The gaps separating adolescents and young adults on the Eurobarometer measures are considerable. For example, without the education control, political interest (those interested 'a great deal' or 'to some extent' in politics) sits at a mere 20% among those 15 years of age but climbs sharply to 40% by age 21, after which it levels out and increases at a much slower pace.<sup>4</sup> In the case of political discussion, the adolescent gap is equally dramatic, the trend line smoother (due to the exceptionally large N): without education controls, the incidence of political discussion (frequent or occasional) is 32% among 15-year olds but 60% among 21-year olds. In both cases, education controls reduce some of the distinctiveness of adolescents but significant gaps remain, suggesting there is more to these patterns than education alone.

That there are differences of this magnitude in levels of political attentiveness across this short section of the life cycle has not been well documented. This is partly due to how life course patterns have been studied in political science. While political socialization research has examined patterns of development across both childhood and

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<sup>3</sup> To be more specific, the characteristics of the average 30 year old are: living in France (the country closest to the EU average on these measures), in the year 1988, born in 1958, who finished full-time schooling at 17 ¼ years.

<sup>4</sup> Evidence that this pattern is not unique to the period or countries considered can be found in Hyman's classic work on political socialization, which references two studies from the early 1950s, one American, the other German,. Both reveal sharp increases in political interest from adolescence through early adulthood (1959, 41-42).

adolescence, early influential studies suggested there was much more change in the former stage than the latter, leading some to conclude that adolescence was probably best conceptualized as the starting point of a long adult period involving only gradual change (Hess and Torney 1968, 10-11; Greenstein 1969). Others queried this assumption, but tended to pick up their investigation at the tail end of adolescence, including some working in the political socialization tradition (Jennings and Niemi, chapter 10) and others in the political behavior field. The latter, with its particular emphasis on voting behavior, tended to produce datasets and consequently analysis including only eligible voters 18 and over (or 21 and over before the change in voting age). While such studies have consistently identified moderate change in political engagement through the adult years, by virtue of their starting point they have failed to detect the more striking changes occurring between mid-adolescence and early adulthood. More recent calls to concentrate attention on the adolescent to young adult period (Niemi and Hepburn 1995) have yet to yield much empirical work documenting development over this period.<sup>5</sup>

The rapid changes in political attentiveness between adolescence and early adulthood are the obvious trend that pops out in Figures 1 and 2, but it is important not to lose sight of the larger argument the analysis is intended to support. After all, in the absence of further commentary, these results could simply be taken as demonstrating the ephemeral and inconsequential nature of adolescent indifference to politics. The aim, it will be recalled, is not simply to highlight an important life course pattern, but to reflect on the implication of that pattern for the political attitudes and behaviors that exhibit cohort-driven change over time. From that perspective, the key observation is that adolescents differ greatly from adults in their levels of political attentiveness and it therefore is eminently plausible that the enhanced peer influence characteristic of modern adolescence – consisting, in this case, of inattentiveness to politics - would have some impact on the attitudes and behaviors that young people carry forward to the adult world. Clearly that impact is far from determinative; politically indifferent adolescents do still go on to become more attentive and engaged adults. But given all we know about the importance of social context, that adolescence might leave a residual effect, an adolescent imprint that would gradually manifest itself in a slow and steady ebbing of attentiveness among successive birth cohorts, is a plausible conjecture.

## **Individualism**

The same method of analysis can be applied to individualism, leading to the same result and conclusion: adolescence is a period of life in which individualism is especially pronounced, consequently the consolidation of this stage of life helps to account for ascendant individualism over time. Arriving at that conclusion is a bit more involved, however, because individualism is a more complex concept to consider.

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<sup>5</sup> The IEA Civic Education Study has examined and compared younger and older adolescents on a variety of civic engagement measures and found some evidence of significant change occurring through adolescence. One concern with these surveys, however, is the bias introduced by those who drop out of high school: samples of younger students represent virtually the entire population in that age category, but samples of older students represent only the subset that has remained in school. The Eurobarometer polls do not have this problem as they survey the general population, not just students.

The dimensions of individualism that are most salient can be teased out of the numerous examples provided in Twenge's *Generation Me*. On the one hand, Twenge highlights how the ethos of individualism sanctions *self-regarding* attitudes and behaviors. A focus on the self rather than others is a rather fundamental disposition with a wide array of potential implications for civic engagement and political life more generally. In a more positive vein, Twenge also offers examples of individualism that involve heightened emphasis on *self-direction and self-expression*, qualities which could clearly affect whether and in what ways people choose to be involved politically. These same qualities also have implications, Twenge suggests, for attitudes of social and political tolerance. Those inclined to pursue their own path in life and express themselves openly are more apt to look favourably upon difference and diversity. Thus, if individualism has had pernicious effects in some respects, greater tolerance is the silver lining. The sections that follow offer evidence in support of the case that adolescence has contributed to all these varied manifestations of individualism.

### **i) Self-regard**

That adolescents are exceptionally self-regarding is a common theme in the developmental psychology literature. One influential writer on the subject forthrightly states: 'Now it is well known that the young adolescent...is primarily concerned with himself' (Elkind, 94). The crux of this egocentrism, in Elkind's view, is that adolescents suffer from the illusion that others are preoccupied with them as much as they are with themselves, a cognitive limitation that generates any number of acknowledged proclivities of adolescence (e.g self-consciousness). Jeffrey Arnett, a leading scholar of emerging adulthood, likewise emphasizes how greatly teens differ in their understanding and appreciation of others from those just a few years older. In his interviews of adolescents and emerging adults (those 18 to 25), Arnett reports being 'struck by how much less egocentric emerging adults are, compared with adolescents. Emerging adults are more considerate of other people's feelings and better at understanding others' point of view.'" (Arnett 2005, 10)

Empirical evidence that allows for assessment of these differences on a broader scale is harder to locate. Devising questions that ask directly about self-regard on survey questionnaires is challenging, since the trait is generally seen as socially undesirable. It is more common to encounter survey items where self-regard is implied but is not the direct focus of inquiry. A handful of questions fitting this description have appeared on surveys conducted by the Canadian survey firm CROP since the early 1980s to investigate the social values of Canadians (used by Michael Adams in book-length treatments of the subject: 1998, 2003). These surveys also have other important merits: relatively large sample sizes, the inclusion of respondents as young as 15 and availability for secondary analysis. Relevant items that speak to self-regard (while also tapping into materialistic values) are as follows:

- To make more money and be better off than most people around me (how important)
- To spend, to buy myself something new, is for me one of the greatest pleasures in life (agree/disagree)
- To take advantage without restraint of the good things in life (how important).

All three questions appeared together on the 1989 CROP survey, the first two on the 1996 survey. Using these questions, respondents from these two years are classified according to their score on a simple additive index (based on three and two questions respectively) and categorized by whether they fall in the upper tier of this index. Displayed in Figure 3 is the percentage in each age group in this upper range (four-year groupings are now used to ensure adequate sample sizes). The distinctiveness of adolescents is abundantly clear: the tendency to concur with self-regarding propositions is sharply elevated among those 15 to 18 and drops rapidly through early adulthood until stabilizing in the late twenties. As with political attentiveness, the distinctiveness of adolescents can partly be attributed to their lower education levels (those with more education tend to be less self-regarding), but the net impact of controlling for education is relatively small (with education controlled, the incidence of marked self-regard among those 15 to 18 drops from 56.5% to 54.2%).

Evidence bearing more directly on the self-regard and egocentrism in the realm of politics comes from a 1966 study that sought to evaluate how adolescents' "sense of community" influences their thinking on political matters and how this influence varies between younger adolescents and those on the cusp of adulthood. Seeking to capture deep-seated patterns of thinking rather than specific issue preferences, Adelson and O'Neil devised an abstract situation (one thousand men and women finding themselves on an island in the Pacific seek to establish a new government and laws) that provided the backdrop for a number of concrete scenarios pitting individual rights and preferences against the community interest. Questions designed to elicit reactions to these scenarios were posed to 120 adolescents ranging from age 11 to 18. The results reinforce the notion that these early years of life are marked by an intractable self-regard that rapidly diminishes with maturation. The youngest students, age 11, were decidedly "egocentric" in their responses and could not "transcend a purely personal approach to matters which require a sociocentric perspective" (1966, 297). When confronted with conflicts between individuals and their island society, they exhibited "a failure to understand that political decisions have social as well as personal consequences, and that the political realm encompasses not merely the individual citizen, but the community as a whole" (1966, 297). This tendency steadily diminished across the four ages included in the study (11, 13, 15 and 18), as older adolescents revealed themselves to be "increasingly sensitive to the fact of community and its claims upon the citizen" (1966, 301). The trend captured in this study across the adolescent years is similar to the pattern found above. If it can safely be assumed that sensitivity towards the "community and its claims upon the citizen" remains intact beyond age 18, perhaps continuing to climb (if at a slower pace), it follows that adolescence on the whole represents a phase of life where self-regard is significantly elevated.

The dominant interpretation of such patterns in the psychology literature is that egocentrism is an intrinsic developmental feature of adolescence that diminishes in a predictable manner with age and maturation – in other words, is a life course pattern only. But as Twenge forcefully argues self-regard can equally be seen as a social or cultural phenomenon, subject to change and variation over time and place, which has increased in prominence and prevalence over the years. Linking these interpretations involves hypothesizing that intrinsic qualities of adolescence, when allowed relatively



unfettered expression, can be carried forward to adulthood, albeit in modified form (and perhaps relabeled as ‘values’ or ‘attitudes’ rather than personality traits). In the age of adolescence, teenagers have been immersed in social settings where their own tendency towards egocentrism is reflected in the self-regarding propensities of those around them, leading to validation and reinforcement of the attitude and attendant behaviors. As one study of adolescent development suggests, ‘feedback from friendships and the peer group provides not only support but also a mirror for the self’ (Kroger 2007, 78). Self-regard in this setting appears as a normal and unobjectionable manner of thinking and behaving. As adolescents become adults, developmental processes mitigate this egocentrism, but the experience of the formative years leaves a lingering residue, which slowly accumulates in society at large to appear most prominently in aggregate social change down the generations.

Now contrary to these thoughts, one of the conclusions of other investigations into evolving social values is that self-regard, if somewhat more pronounced among younger generations, is not the dominant manifestation of individualism. Michael Adams, based on a fuller analysis of the CROP survey items (2003, 35-45), has suggested that the norm in Western democracies, the United States excepted, is for rising individualism among younger generations to lean towards the ‘fulfillment’ end of the spectrum (akin to self-direction and self-expression) rather than the ‘survival’ pole (closer to self-regard). That self-regard has not emerged as a stronger force may reflect the countervailing impact of another important influence on self-regarding propensities: education. On the items used above in Figure 3, those with higher education levels do tend to be less self-regarding, though the differences on these particular items are relatively modest (about a ten percentage point difference between those with less than high school and those with a university degree). Elsewhere, I have analyzed statements that are more patent in their espousal of self-regard and found that these tend to produce stronger differences across education levels. For example, when asked whether they agree with two separate statements, “Generally speaking, I tend to focus on my own concerns and not worry too much about other people” and “In today’s society it is reasonable for people to look out mainly for themselves,” 42% of those who failed to finish high school agree with both compared to only 11% of those with a graduate or professional degree.<sup>6</sup> Since education levels increased steadily from the start to the end of the twentieth century to the present day, the same period in which adolescence came into full force, the dampening effects of education on self-regard could have served to hold in check the amplifying influence of adolescent disposition. The need to consider the joint effects of adolescence and education is an important proviso to bear in mind and something we return to at later points.

## **ii) Self-direction and self-expression**

Another dimension of individualism emphasized in the adolescent years is self-direction and the closely allied quality, self-expression. Like self-regard, this can be conceptualized as a fundamental feature of the adolescent character reflecting intrinsic developmental processes. A classic statement consistent with this proposition comes again from the developmental psychology literature. Erik Erikson’s seminal work on

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<sup>6</sup> These results come from a Canadian telephone survey conducted by the author in 2007-8 (N=1926), another element of the larger project of which this paper is one part.

adolescent development identified the search for an independent identity as a critical priority of this stage of life, as the young person leaves childhood behind and engages in a process of exploration in attempting to forge his or her own personal identity (1968). This ‘search for something and somebody to be true to’ inevitably entails ‘shifting devotion’ and ‘test[ing] extremes’ (1968, 235), that is to say, a strong emphasis on personal exploration and self-direction.

Other psychologists have identified a particular cluster of personality traits that one would expect to appear among those for whom self-discovery is an overarching priority: openness to experience. Openness to experience refers to both amenability to external encounters – the opportunity to explore new experiences and ideas – as well a penchant for inner exploration – getting in touch with one’s own feelings and ideas. Previous research in this area is fairly extensive and has, among other things, examined how different dimensions of personality such as openness to experience evolve over the life cycle. The finding, replicated across a number of countries, has been that young adults tend to score higher on measures of openness to experience than older ones (McCrae et al 1999). While typically interpreted exclusively as evidence of life-course patterns in the evolution of personality – the default assumption of developmental psychology - a social psychologist like Twenge less wedded to invariant developmental models would presumably look at these results and query whether such age differences might partly represent generational change in the societies concerned. For present purposes, the question also arises whether extending this life course research to the pre-adult years might reveal particularly acute differences in the adolescent personality – potentially, by the light of the current theory, an important source of generational change.

The battery of questions used by psychologists to measure openness to experience and other dimensions of personality is extensive – the long version has over 300 questions, the short version 60 (Costa and McCrae 1992) – and it therefore tends to be deployed only in research contexts where the main focus is personality evaluation. I am not aware of any datasets resulting from such research that would allow for examination of changes over the adolescent-young adult span and which are available for secondary analysis. However, a handful of cognate measures, similar in wording to those normally used to measure openness to experience, have appeared on the CROP social values surveys. Three relevant items appearing consistently on the surveys from 1992 to 1996 are as follows:

- As soon as I see an opportunity to try something new I do it
- I like being able to explore aspects of my personality that I don't usually express in everyday life
- I should like to experience new emotions every day

A simple additive index of ‘openness to experience’ was created based on these three items, respondents categorized according to whether they fell in the upper tier of this scale. The resulting age pattern (Figure 4) is very similar to that for self-regard: adolescents and those in their early twenties score exceptionally high on this scale, with a sharp decline taking place until stabilization occurs in the late twenties.

Unlike prior results, education shows no relationship to openness to experience, a slightly surprising result with a couple of implications. First there is no reason to control

for education in assessing life course change from adolescence to early adulthood: the age pattern is unaltered by education controls and can simply stand on its own. Secondly, the growth of openness to experience and a preference for self-direction over the long haul has not been abetted by rising education levels over time, but neither has it been inhibited. In other words, unlike self-regard, an adolescent infusion of self-direction and self-expression has not been held in check by countervailing effects of increased education levels. This perhaps helps explain Michael Adams' observation that the more dominant strain of rising individualism over time in the developed democracies has been an increased emphasis on what he terms fulfillment – akin to self-expression and self-direction - rather than survival.

### **iii) Tolerance**

The final dimension of political culture change subject to the gradual influence of adolescence on adult disposition is social and political tolerance, a generally desirable quality that many argue must not be overlooked in taking stock of the state of democratic engagement in the developed democracies. To demonstrate that adolescence has contributed to rising tolerance over the years is partly just a matter of pointing to the strong linkage that has been established between openness to expression and attitudes of social and political tolerance. This finding has emerged from different quarters, as psychologists whose main focus is the measurement of personality have observed that openness to experience is the dimension of personality most strongly linked to social and political phenomena such as aversion to authoritarianism (McCrae 1996), while political scientists whose principal focus is the wellsprings of tolerance have identified openness to experience as one of the more powerful predispositions conducive to tolerant attitudes (Marcus et al, 1995, 164-177).

Further analysis of the CROP studies on social values bear out these prior findings. Scores on the three-item index of openness to experience (running from 3 to 12) show strong connections to attitudes reflective of social and political tolerance. One question probes tolerance on a personal and immediate level, asking respondents whether they 'prefer people who act like everybody else, without trying to stand out or people who do not always feel obliged to be like everybody else and who show some originality in their dress or behaviour.' A second reflects socially liberal attitudes, asking whether 'society should regard people who live together without being married as being a family.' A third question probes one of the more salient areas of social tolerance in recent times, gay rights, asking whether 'society should regard people of the same sex who live together as being the same as a married couple.' In all three cases, tolerance rises steadily with increasing openness to experience (Figure 5). To the extent adolescence has contributed to aggregate change in openness to experience, it has by extension contributed to rising levels of tolerance.

Yet despite this, adolescent respondents on the CROP surveys are not exceptionally tolerant or liberal on these same measures. This is not to say they are exceptionally intolerant either, but simply that their sharp distinctiveness vis à vis young adults vanishes when queried directly about personal conformity, common law relationships and gay marriage (Figure 6). In other words, taking into account their elevated levels of openness to experience, adolescents display less tolerant attitudes than would be anticipated.

There are a couple of reasons for this. One is the influence of education, cited in most accounts as the single most critical factor engendering rising levels of tolerance over time. With education controlled, adolescents do look more tolerant, especially in the case of preferring originality in others, though the gap separating the youngest respondents from young adults remains less substantial than might be anticipated. A second factor that likely hinders the translation of openness to experience into tolerance among the youngest respondents comes from an earlier result: the self-regarding proclivities of adolescents. For tolerance does not follow directly from openness to experience: instead it requires that a personal preference for new experiences and free development of the self be applied to others in an even-handed manner, granting them the same latitude coveted for oneself. Until the egocentricity of adolescence starts to be transcended, this application of personal preference to others is less likely to occur. Thus the passage from adolescence to early adulthood contributes to tolerance in two ways, one through maturation processes that diminish egocentricity, the other through educational experiences that extend understanding of democratic values and enhance awareness of diversity.

These further observations serve simply to establish that the overarching thesis is not compromised by the unexceptional levels of tolerance displayed by adolescents: adolescence, by virtue of the stress placed on openness to experience during those years, has contributed to rising tolerance over time just as it has helped produce other long-term changes in political culture. This contribution is slightly obscured, however, by other features of the adolescent period that suppress the fullest expression of the tolerance associated with openness to experience.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The case has been made that political inattentiveness, individualism and tolerance, salient elements of the current social and political landscape in Canada and other established democracies, are of a piece, representing different facets of the adolescent character that have insinuated their way into the broader culture through a gradual process of altered formative experiences and inter-generational change. The case is circumstantial, but draws on a blend of reasoned assumptions and empirical evidence that suggest its plausibility.

To identify a common wellspring for these changes is not to discount the influence of factors highlighted in other theories of long-term social and political change. The evolution of political culture can hardly be reduced to a single determining factor; those emphasized by other observers, including peace, prosperity and new technologies, have surely influenced the assumptions and behavioral tendencies that shape political attitudes and behaviour today. Moreover, there would likely be value in investigating interactions between these factors and the social dynamics of the age of adolescence – the effects of television on people's attitudes and behaviors, for example, are likely influenced by a social structure that affords adolescents the opportunity to develop in relative isolation from adult society. The main aim has been to identify an important explanatory strand that has hitherto been overlooked.

The other factor that we have been most sensitive to is education. This has taken two forms: treating education as a control factor, since explaining life course changes

from the mid-teens to young adulthood entails controlling for this important variable that changes markedly over this stage of the life span; but also considering education as a contributing factor in its own right to political culture change over the long haul. Recognizing the intertwining of adolescent development and educational experience, it is helpful to step back and review the broader consequences of their joint effects on the long-term evolution of different facets of political culture. In seeking to understand any given pattern, it is necessary to take full account of the twin processes that unfolded simultaneously over the course of the twentieth century: the infusion of adolescent sensibilities associated with the age of adolescence and vast increases in education levels over the same period. In the case of attitudes and dispositions where the effects of education work *in concert with* adolescent influence, the direction of change will be predictable and the degree of change considerable. The evolution of tolerance conforms to this scenario, as the two factors have jointly served to generate more tolerant attitudes in new generations over time: adolescent disposition providing the emphasis on self-direction and openness to experience, education providing additional benefits such as appreciation of democratic values and enhanced awareness of difference and diversity. Where education promotes change *counter* to adolescent influence, it is uncertain which factor will prove more influential and what the overall direction and magnitude of change will be. Political attentiveness is one important example here, as enhanced adolescent influence would have served to counter the positive effects of increasing education levels over time – eventually, we would contend, overwhelming those positive effects, thus contributing to the decline in political attentiveness and engagement evident in any number of countries over the past three or four decades. Self-regard can also perhaps be seen in this light, a negative outcome held in check by education for a long while, but perhaps starting to manifest itself more fully in changing attitudes and norms of the past twenty-five years (in the rise of neoconservative values and so forth).

This interpretation provides responses to a couple of puzzles about the general evolution of political culture others have pondered. First, this reading offers a different account from others (most notably Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Berry 1996) of the seemingly inconsistent effects of enhanced education in the postwar period, why tolerance has increased surely and steadily as one would expect in a more educated populace, whereas engagement in politics has not. The impact of adolescent influence, aiding and abetting the first development while undermining the second, helps explain this conundrum. This resolution of the puzzle also points to a considerable irony, for it is not simply the case that higher education levels and enhanced adolescent influence happen to have emerged contemporaneously, but rather that extended time in full-time education is the *principal reason behind* the entrenchment of the adolescent stage of life. In this sense, with respect to political engagement at least, the vast expansion of educational opportunity in the twentieth century has generated two distinct effects that have been working at cross purposes.<sup>7</sup> It is all the more ironic considering that part of the rationale for expanding

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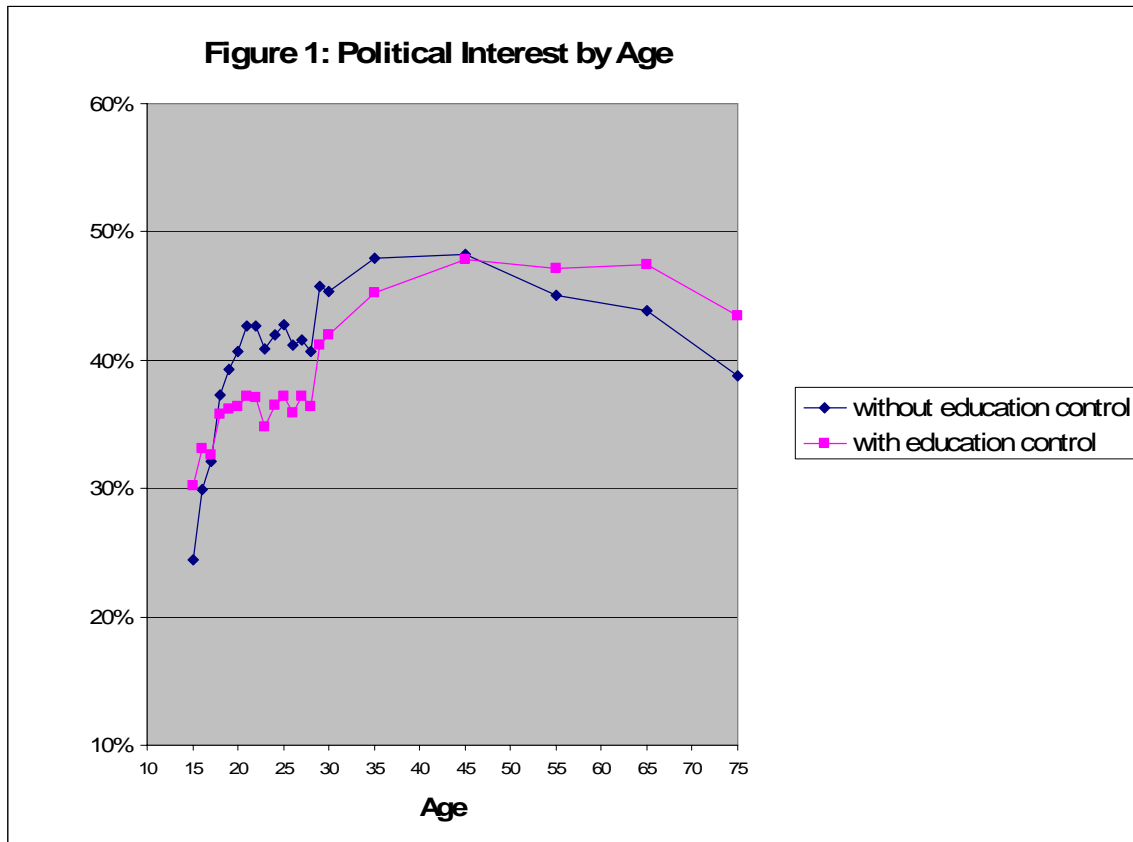
<sup>7</sup> The argument of Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Berry, on the other hand, draws on the distinction between absolute and relative levels of education. In brief, they suggest absolute levels of education influence support for democratic principles, principally tolerance, whereas relative levels of education influence engagement and participation – and since absolute levels of education have increased over time, but relative levels have not, this explains why tolerance and engagement have followed different trajectories.

educational opportunity was to enable citizens to participate in democracy on an equal footing.

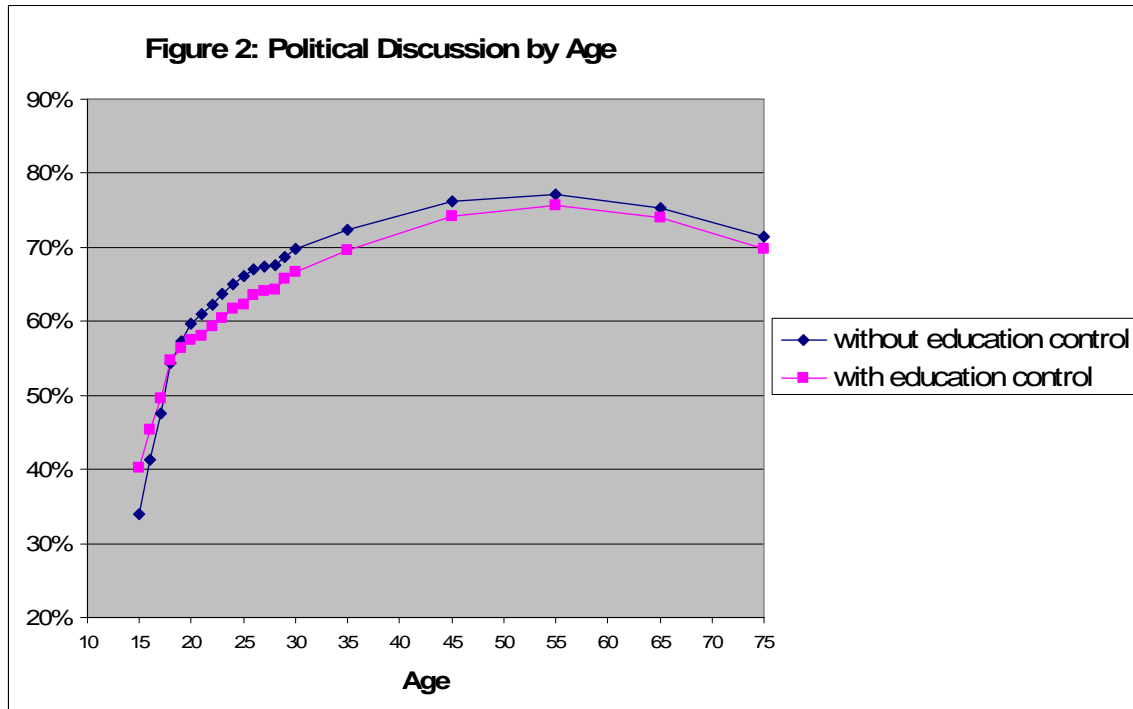
The interplay of adolescent influence and education effects also offers a response to a puzzle raised by Putnam. In the course of arguing against the view that tolerance and civic disengagement can be seen as different sides of the same coin – with an eye to refuting the idea that tolerance might be seen as the silver lining in civic disengagement – Putnam points out that the timing of developments is inconsistent with this proposition, since increases in levels of tolerance clearly predate the decline in civic engagement. Citing the generational patterns that have given rise to change over time, he notes “Something in the *first* half of the twentieth century made successive cohorts of Americans more tolerant...By contrast, something happened in America in the *second* half of the twentieth century to make people less civically engaged” (2000, 357). The ‘something’ of the postwar period that led to declining civic engagement is, of course, at the core of Putnam’s analysis, the key factors in his view television and the absence of war. But the mysterious something of the first half of the century remains unidentified. The current theory suggests a different resolution of the mystery, suggesting first that tolerance and civic disengagement are more closely linked than Putnam allows, at least in their common origins in the predilections of adolescents, and secondly, providing a reason why, despite this common origin, a rise in tolerance would have occurred earlier than a decline in civic engagement. Where education and adolescent influence work in concert to produce change in the same direction, change will come more rapidly and therefore earlier – in the case of tolerance, prior to WWII. Where educational effects and adolescent influence are at odds, the direction of change is uncertain and it will almost certainly take longer to appear – in the case of civic disengagement, well into the postwar era.

In short, recognition of the importance of the adolescent stage of life, combined with prior insights, can provide a deeper understanding of the evolution of different social and political trends relevant to understanding the democratic dispositions of contemporary society. Curiously enough, that recognition, if largely absent from theoretical accounts, is often present (at least implicitly) in practical efforts undertaken to tackle those elements of contemporary political culture considered undesirable. A consistent theme in that regard is the importance of engaging young people in their formative years by drawing them out of adolescent enclaves to interact with the larger society – for example, in the emphasis and high hopes placed on community service as a means of catalyzing civic engagement and instilling values of empathy and concern for others. This emphasis likely emerges from recognition that the external factors implicated in political culture change lie beyond our control (there is no turning back the clock on television, for example) and/or offer considerable benefits that outweigh any negative effects (the absence of war). Appropriate guidance and direction for adolescents as they develop into adults, however, is something that can be formulated through conscious design and promises more uniformly positive effects in the political realm and others areas of social life. Further scholarly inquiry and experimentation with practical initiatives are needed then in order to deepen our understanding of such processes and how they can best be structured to engender civic virtue – however, we might choose to define it - on the part of the citizens of tomorrow.

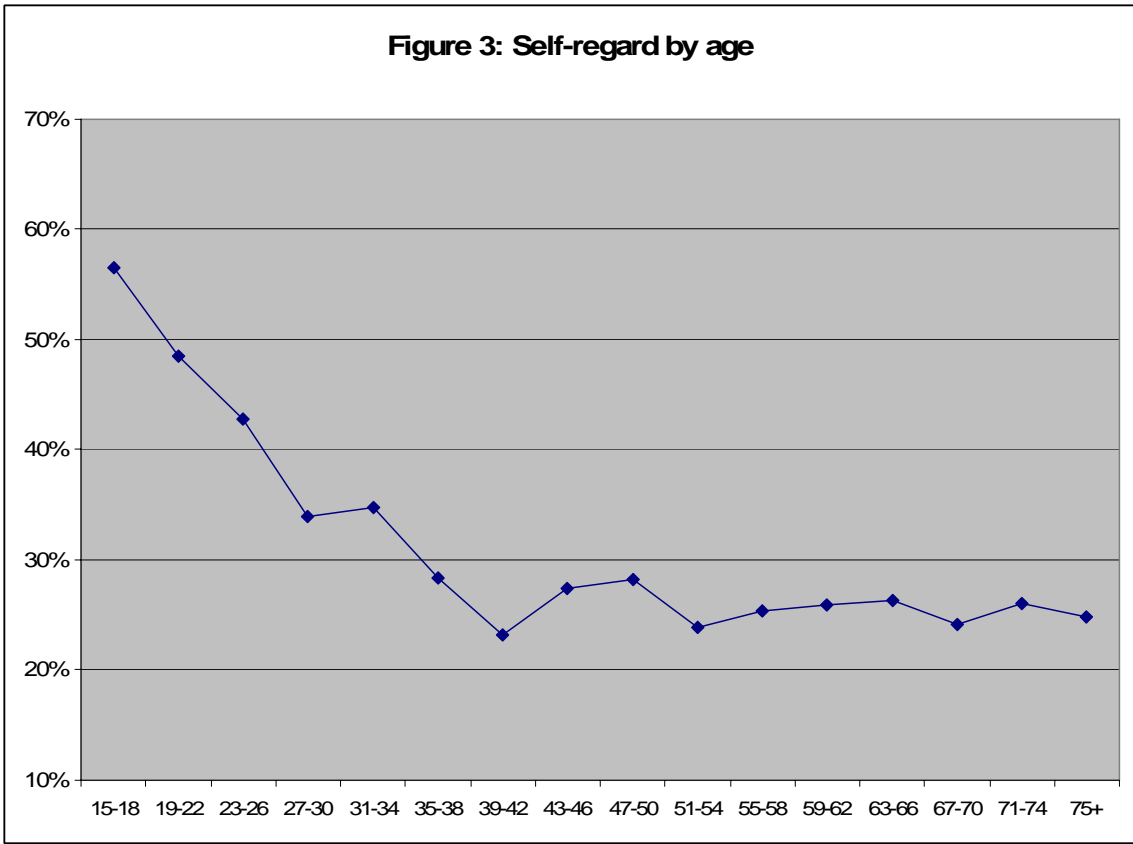
## Figures



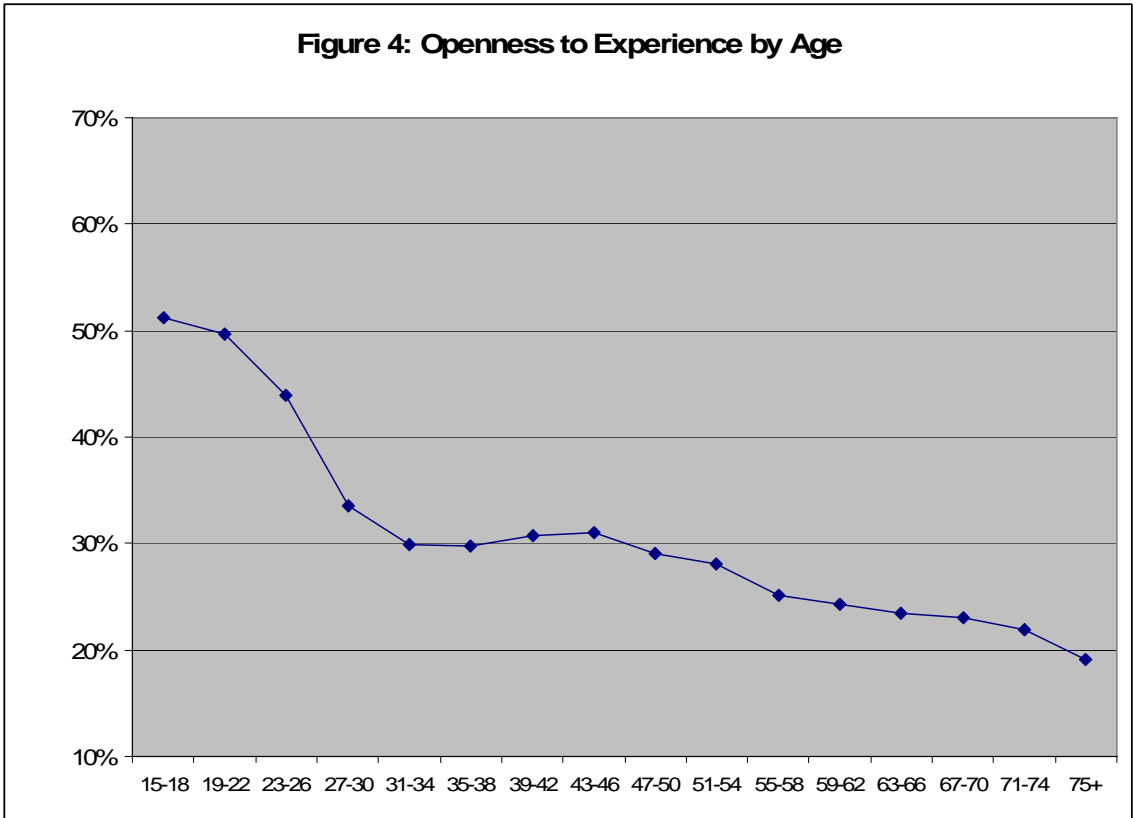
Percentage interested in politics 'a great deal' or to 'some extent' based on OLS regression estimates.  
*Source:* Mannheim Eurobarometer Trend File, 1970-2002. N=106,150 (seven surveys between 1983 and 1994).



Percentage who discuss politics frequently or occasionally based on OLS regression estimates  
*Source:* Mannheim Eurobarometer Trend File, 1970-2002. N = 768,363 (sixty-three surveys between 1973 and 2002).

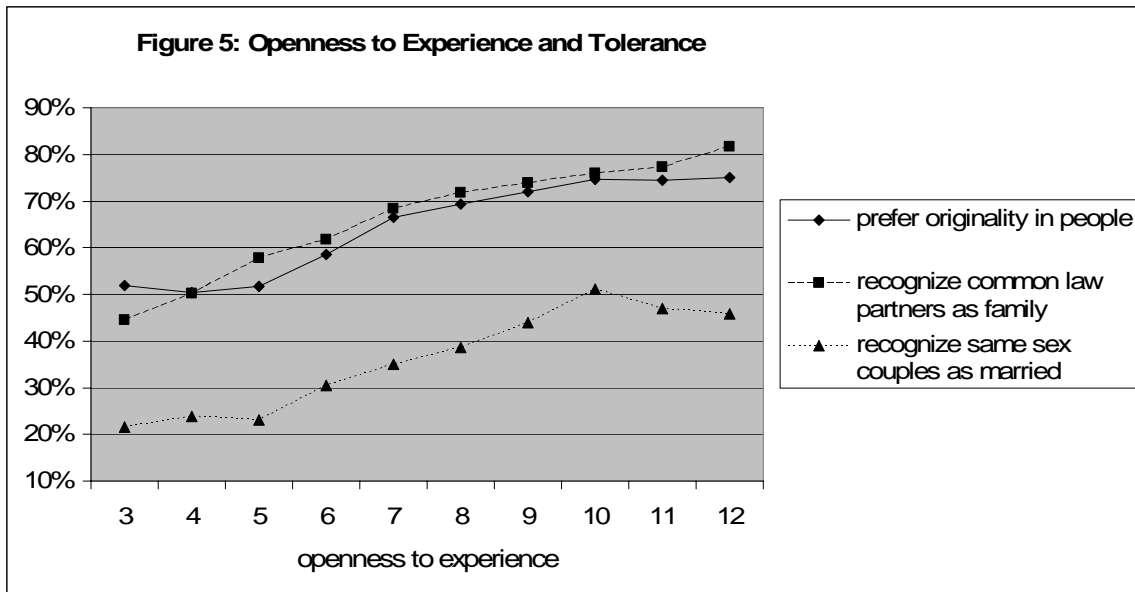


Percentage in upper tier on self-regard index.  
 Source: 1989 and 1996 CROP Socio-Cultural Surveys. N=5,419.

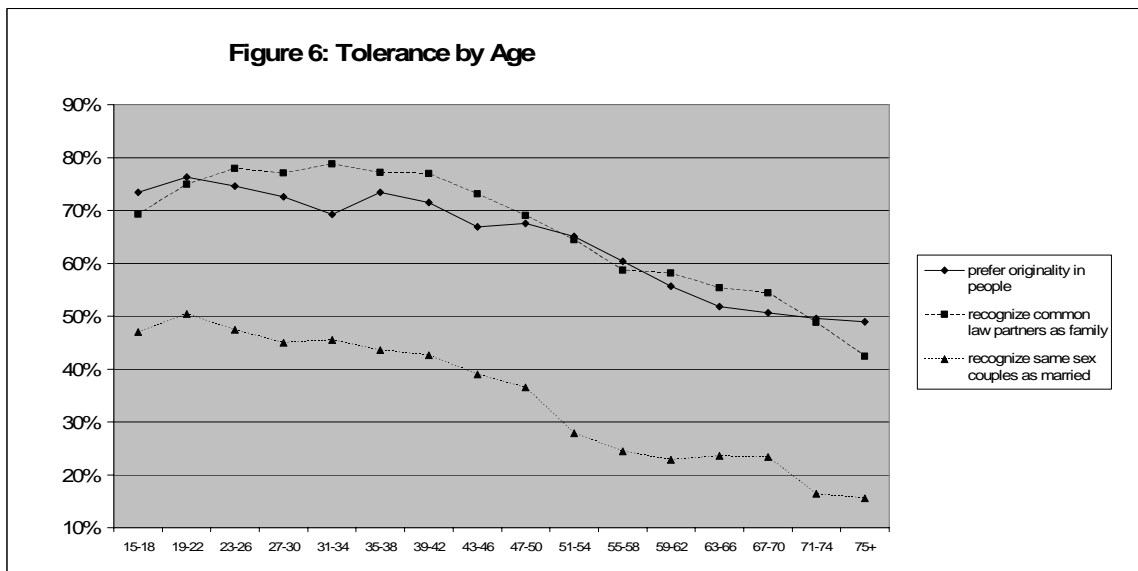


Percentage in upper tier of openness to experience index  
 Source: 1992 - 1996 CROP Socio-Cultural Surveys. N=13,270.





Source: 1992 - 1996 CROP Socio-Cultural Surveys. Minimum N=12,995.



Source: 1992 - 1996 CROP Socio-Cultural Surveys. Minimum N=12,980.

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