Conservative shift or business as usual?
A cross-generational study in levels of social conservatism.

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to study generational differences in social conservatism. The research centered around three questions. Firstly, have levels of political social conservatism increased in the youngest generation as compared to previous. Secondly, does the presidential era a person was brought up in, explain differing levels of social conservatism. And lastly, does the results in the previous questions change when you look within the sub-group of subjects who self-identify as being conservative. To answer these questions, this study will analyse responses to question meant to operationalize social conservatism found in the General Societal Survey(GSS). And compare responses between generational birth-cohorts socialised under different presidents. Generally the results showed a decline in levels of social conservatism between generations and the youngest generation was no exception. The role of a presidential era in determining levels of social conservatism was practically non-existent. The results from questions one and two did not seem to change when looking within the subgroup of self-identifying conservatives.
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1. Introduction.

With the youngest generation, sometimes called Gen Z, now coming of age and starting to make a mark on society, interest in what values this generation holds becomes a topic of great relevance. However, by simple virtue of them being the youngest generation, little research has as of yet been carried out. In this academic vacuum, science falls victim to speculation. Often moulded to reflect preexistent biases.

Indeed differing narratives seem to have emerged around this new generation, with fervour being stoked on opposite ends of the political spectrum. Progressive outlets hail the coming generation as more progressive than any before it (Jukam, 2019; Young, 2019). And why wouldn’t it be? Common understanding would hold to the general adage, that the older a generation is, the more conservative sentiment will be found. Research on conservatism also consistently demonstrates a clear general negative trend as it relates to age (Glenn, 1974; Truett, 1993; Andersen & Fetner, 2008; Hart-Brinson, 2014). Younger people, on average, seem to be far less conservative than their elders.

However, this data doesn’t tell the whole truth. Firstly, defining what constitutes conservatism, or any other “ism” for that matter is deeply contested. As what gets classified as conservative or progressive is heavily dependent upon when and where the classification gets made. Potentially confounding what the actual values under discussion are. Secondly, the causal mechanism behind rates of conservatism being more prominent among the elderly are down to societal ideals of the era one was brought up in. Not a factor of simply ageing (Hart-Brinson, 2014). It thus stands to reason that if the newest generation is currently being socialized in an era, or “zeitgeist”, that can be seen as conservative, rates of conservative could also increase. And thus giving rise to a second narrative. One similarly sparked by yet more speculation. As new polling data out of IFAC and others suggested that younger people favoured a greater focus on their own state, economic libertarianism and being less opposed towards traditional gender roles (IFAC, 2018; Pepin & Cotter, 2017). Prompting some to proclaim that this newer generation, this Gen Z, stands poised to become a far more conservative generation (Arnold, 2018). When viewed through this lens the pieces making up the narrative of a conservative “new wave” begin to fall into place. An influx in right-wing rhetoric does undoubtedly seem to currently sweep through Europe. And at the time when the
new American generation begins to form their political opinions, the sitting president of the USA is a republican and self-proclaimed conservative.

As it stands, we thus have two questions of interest that seem to as yet have gone largely understudied. Have rates of conservatism sentiment increased among the younger generations as compared to previous ones and does the ruling political establishment influence the values of a generation? A third question can also be added to this list, does the results change if you yourself identify as a conservative?

2. Purpose.

This paper aims to answer these three questions. The first question will have a descriptive nature.

1. *Is the younger generation, here classified as 20-25-year-olds, more politically socially conservative than previous generations?*

The second question will seek to be more explanatory. Why is or isn’t the rates of conservatism up, what role does a government play in shaping the conservative values of a generation?

2. *Does being socialized under a liberal versus a conservative government leave markings on rates of political social conservatism?*

A third question will act as a control and look to see if the answers to the first to questions differ when controlling for self-perceived conservatism.

3. *Do the results in question 1 and 2 differ when controlling for a self-perceived conservative identity?*

Two clear delimitations will be made, firstly the study will focus on an American perspective and secondly, the study will only concern conservatism through a social lens. This is done to limit the scope and to have a clearly defined classification of conservatism that can be tied to a specific context. Namely, social conservatism as the preservation of social institutions in the USA, and government as a presidential administration.
To answer the first question the design of this paper will study questions argued to operationalise political social conservatism (PSC) found in the General Societal Survey (GSS). Answers and mean scores to these questions will be compared between birth cohorts and then analysed for potential differences.

To answer the second question, birth cohorts will be divided based on subjects being of a value-impressionable age during different presidential administrations. Maximizing potential imprinting by a given presidential administration so as to highlight their impact on the values retained. In this paper that age will be defined as 20-25 years of age.

To answer the third question a separate subgroup of the given subjects will be extracted. This subgroup will contain those subjects who based on the question of political self-identification within the GSS, described themselves as conservatives. This subgroup will then be compared to the greater population.

As the first chapter acted as an introductory and the second as more clearly defining the greater purpose of the study the subsequent third and fourth chapters will revolve around the two theoretical discussions that form the backbone of the research. Firstly, what constitutes conservatism, how has it been measured and how will this paper measure it. And secondly, how are values formed, retained and differ among generations. The fifth chapter will focus on what shapes an era an argue the case of conservative presidential stimuli. The sixth, the methods used and expand upon the discussion of this chapter. The seventh chapter will present the results of the study and the final, the eighth will feature a discussion on the results found and the structure of this essay.

3. Theoretical framework on conservatism.

This chapter will set out to discuss what conservatism means, how it has been measured in the past, how it relates to an American context and how it will be defined in this paper.

3.1. What is conservatism?

In trying to define, and more importantly for the purposes of this paper quantify, conservatism, a number of different challenges seem to emege. To be a conservative in the most basic of forms is to at some extent seek to preserve something. However, dependant
upon context, labeling something or someone as conservative can have wildly different implications. Even within the same field of study, one cannot escape some amount of confusion about the intended meaning of the word. In the field of political science, conservatism can primarily be understood to mean one of two things. Firstly as a political ideology going back hundreds of years, inspired by thinkers such as Edmund Burke (Cohen & Newcomb, 1992 p.90) or as a general unwillingness to accept change whether in society at large or in one’s own political opinions.

However, both definitions elicit further questions. As will be expanded upon later in this chapter during the introductory section to conservative political thought, conservatism as a political doctrine broadly seeks to preserve already existing political institutions or traditions of a given country. The frustrating implication thus becomes obvious, different or even directly opposing political policies can potentially, under this broad definition, be classified as conservative depending on where said conservative reside.

If conservatism itself is seen by the latter definition, as a reluctance to change, values and attitudes one would intuitively attributed to a conservative ideology become wholly esoteric. As pointed out by Norval D. Glenn, long-standing liberal ideas would under this definition have to be classified as conservative. The liberals of yesteryears would thus become the conservatives of today (1974 pp.178-179). Rendering any analysis on political value-change between generations effectively meaningless, making this definition especially poor. If we then are content with using the still somewhat problematic first definition, how would one go about measuring it?

3.2. Measuring conservatism.

Appeals to authority on the subject won't provide much satisfaction, as previous research on attitudinal differences in conservatism isn't always consistent. In fact there seems to be no universally recognized standard of measurement, with many studies using similar yet distinct methods. Somewhat of an issue, for our purposes at least.

Some have used a specific question, like the attitudes towards the admission of red china in the U.N as a proxy for conservatism (Glenn, 1974). More common however in research surrounding the topic is to employ some form of index scoring (Eaves, et.al., 1997;

This particular method centres around compiling subjects responses to words and phrases into an index score of conservatism. The c-scale was seen as an innovation in the field and seem to offer a number of advantages, yet it has been criticized over the years for its perceived inconsistent reliability. For a full discussion see (Ray, 1974). Subsequent models devised to address these issues have been made with one example resulting in the twelve item social and economic conservatism scale(SECSS) (Everett, 2013). With a noteworthy contribution being the separation between social and economic conservatism into distinct categories.

Another use of a modified c-scale on the specific topic of conservatism between age groups, can be seen in a study by K. R. Truett. Taken as a whole, the study shows, a positive correlation between ageing and mean conservatism scores (1993). The results of this study and the others using the c-scale should, however, be taken with a grain of salt. As the scale includes such variables as, attitudes towards astrology and x-rated movies, which can’t be seen as indicators of political doctrine, potentially skewing the results (Ibid, 1992, p.406).

3.2.1. Index-measurement.

In the opinion of this papers author, this points to a larger problem with the usage of index-scoring in general, at least as it pertains to the measuring of political conservatism. Even if views on x-rated movies and astrology could be argued to be indicators of conservatism, if not as fitting as others. And even if weighed appropriately to account for their inferior relevancy, the potential for misrepresentation is still an issue. Furthermore, compiling different questions into an index has the added problem of blinding the researcher to potential question-specific trends.

Because of the problems mentioned with the use of index scoring and because there doesn't seem to be a unified standard of measuring conservatism, this essay will not be using any index-scoring scales. Instead the study will focus on a series of individual questions. These questions are meant to encapsulate a given definition of conservatism. The following section will set out to define in great detail what that definition of political social conservatism will be. We are however still left with the issue of context dependency. As this essay will base its research on a American survey, the context will thusly be that of the USA.
3.3. Social and economic conservatism.

To limit the scope, this paper’s research will concern itself with strictly social conservatism. One justification beyond simply making the research more manageable could be that modern-day economic conservatism can be seen to draw more from neoliberalism than classical conservative thought (Heywood, 2017 pp.126-128).

An argument could still be made that the two aspects are so closely interconnected in contemporary conservatism so as to warrant analysis were one is discarded defunct. Although research on the topic has been able to isolate two separate strands of contemporary American conservatism, dubbing them cultural and economical respectively (Zumbrunnen & Gangl, 2008). The researcher’s working definition of cultural conservatism isn’t an exact proxy for the variables in this paper but they likewise seek to operationalize the same things (Ibid, p.212). Moreover subsequent research into political alignment has also classified social conservatism separately, giving one the confidence in making such a distinction going forward (Smith, 2014, p.101).

3.4. Introduction to political social conservatism.

Entire books have and will be written listing all the different thinkers and strands of thought associated with conservatism throughout the ages. In the interest of time and the purpose of this paper, attention will mainly be put on areas of broad convergence. With that caveat out of the way, an uncontroversial starting point for conservatism as a political philosophy can undoubtedly be the work of Edmund Burke, with more than one scholar noting the 18th-century thinker’s contributions in shaping the conservative school of thought (Heywood, 2017 p.103; Murray, 1955 pp. 96-97).

Burke’s philosophy can be summarized as more of a general cautionary approach to societal change than a full-fledge political ideology. Burke’s concern didn’t lay so much in the party politics of the day, opting instead to advocate for the fundamental importance of tradition and principles as mechanisms for ensuring the survival of the British constitution, in particular, and communities at large, in general (Murray, 1955 pp. 97-98).

Burke saw the state as more than just a man-made machine but rather as a complicated ever-evolving organism, to grand, for any one person to fully comprehend it’s inner workings. As the outcome of any political decision will be difficult or impossible to
fully comprehend ahead of time, Burke argues, change must come slowly and decision-makers should exercise restraint so as to not run the risk of conflicting with a community’s fundamental interests (Ibid, 1955 p.97).

Perhaps somewhat ironically an almost Darwinian view of societal institutions. If an institution has stood the test of time, that institution has inherent value, otherwise, it wouldn’t still exist. Some have categorized conservatism as simply looking to the past for answers to the questions of today (Christman, 2002 p.128). However, Burke puts it more eloquently as a “partnership between those who are living, those who are dead and those who are to be born” (Heywood, 2017 p.107). The demos of today owe a debt to the demos of yesterday and have to consider the interests of the one yet to come when making decisions in the present.

As a general focus of political conservatism centers around the importance of tradition, social conservatism lays its focus on the particular topic of maintaining social institutions. How this aspect of conservatism expresses itself in an American context will be the focus of the following section of this chapter.

3.5. Social conservatism in the USA.

Detailing the full history of American, political social conservatism(PSC) is simply far too massive of a task to be undertaken within the confines of this paper. As trends can be seen to build upon or react to their formers and in light of the aforementioned limited capacity, it serves little purpose to discuss conservative trends beyond the latter part of the 20th-century.

Thusly, our starting point will be with the advent of the so-called New Right. The New Right grew out of the nineteen seventies as a new wave of conservative thinking. Sweeping over most of the Western world and having a particular impact in the USA. As described by Andrew Heywood, the term can broadly be described as the fusion of two seemingly incompatible ideological traditions. Economical libertarianism, with its free-market values and critique of governmental regulatory oversight, and neoconservative social theory on moral cohesion (2017 pp.126-127).

Leaving the economical aspects to the side, neoconservatism can be seen as a reaction to the rise in social liberalisation of the previous decade, blaming it for rising crime rates and a perceived general growth of moral delinquency. This moral relativism is seen as threatful on many levels. On the one hand, having the freedom to choose your own views and not have
them rooted in tradition is seen as dangerous, because with moral freedom comes the possibility of moral rejection. Rejecting what is good and embracing evil. Quickly side-stepping around a lengthy discussion on what actually constitutes good and evil, a general uncontroversial interpretation from an American lens is its base in religiosity, in particular, Christianity.

Moral pluralism is also threatening as it’s seen to fundamentally eroded societal unity (Ibid, 2014 pp.124-126). Here the focus isn't in regard to the substance of morality but rather a belief in the ability of a unified moral standard to act as a societal glue.

We can here start to see an internal logic emerge. Social institutions are important to protect. Not only as they have stood the test of time as argued previously but also because the partial breakdown of which is to blame for many societal woes. Mechanistically, as newly erected ones will be inferior at worst and destabilizing at best.

### 3.6. Social institutions chosen.

What exactly these social institutions are remains, rather infuriatingly, still unclear. As there isn't a clear definition for what constitutes a social institution, much less a traditional one. The variables chosen here aim to be as uncontroversially recognizable representations of traditional social institutions as possible. Based on this and variables used in previous scales such as the SCCESS and Wilson-Patterson c-scales. The traditional institutions are, religion in public life, marriage and traditional gender-roles in the household. These variables, meant to encapsulate traditional social institutions is perhaps an area of this paper that can be called into question. However, going down the rabbit hole on why/why not the definitions are valid, when the very nature of what an institution is, isn't clear, seems pointless.

All variables chosen, have to one extent or another been used before, as they appear in the scales mentioned either directly or in a variation. Furthermore, it has to be seen as fairly reasonable to view these variables as traditional social institutions, when the American presidential stimuli selected and argued for as conservative, seem to use them as well.
3.7. Social conservatism and authoritarianism.

A case that sometimes gets made is that a key aspect of social conservatism is authoritarianism (Heywood, 2017). We must, however, be careful before making this assessment oursefls.

A study by Crowson and colleagues demonstrated a strong correlation between conservative traditional values and authoritarianism, yet clearly saw that the two were very much distinct from one another (Crowson, Thoma & Hestevold, 2005). Similarly, research by Robert B. Smith shows that the two views share some indicators but that they are not synonymous (Smith, 2014 p.125).

I would hazard to go a step further and argue that both authoritarianism and a general adoration for authority are poor indicators of PSC, at the very least as it relates to purposes of this study. Authoritarian sentiment can arise independently of any particular ideology as the enforcement of internally held group ideals on society at large can be moulded on to any preexisting political or philosophical scaffolding. Barring those explicitly antithetical to authority.

3.8. Summary.

In summary, political conservatism as a whole see intrinsic value in lasting traditional institutions and hold a cynical view of change. With political social conservatism highlighting the importance of long standing social institutions and see the partial breakdown of these as the cause of a whole host of societal problems. The cure for which being a return to traditional values for ensuring moral cohesion in society.

In this paper those institutions will be, traditional values concerning the family, religion and gender-roles and this will be the working definition of PSC going forward.
4. Theoretical framework on value formation and rigidity.

As this paper aims to study the potential impact of differing presidential administrations on subjects values, understanding the mechanisms behind the formation of values and how these leave marks on a generation becomes vital.

4.1. Political socialization.

An often held assumption of the political opinions of others and perhaps especially of one’s own is that they are merely rational assertions made by interpreting facts through a set of values. However, the idea that was seemingly impervious to even great thinkers such as Plato was that these values can be seen as nothing more than preferences determined by one’s environment (Steintrager, 1968 p.111). Is it a coincidence that most (all though not all) citizens of Western democracy hold said democratic institutions sacred? It’s self-evident that people's political frame of reference will by some modicum be defined by the time in life, place and political paradigm they happen to reside in. However the extent of which isn't always as clear.

4.2. Age-stability hypothesizes.

The major hypothesizes on value formation used in this paper all fall under the so called age-stability hypothesizes (Sears, 1983).

The hypothesis centers around the notion that, as it pertains to value formation, certain parts of the life cycle are more important than others. The importance comes not just from a belief in early life moldability but also from the presupposition that the window of moldability closes as people progress through life (Ibid, 1983). Essentially, values primarily form early, before crystallizing and remaining resistant to new impressions.

There are slight variations to this basic formula, one of these being the impressionable years hypothesis. Under this hypothesis special value is put on a set of early years where attitudes and values are seen as being extra susceptible to new impressions. After these years a general value-crystallization occurs where further attitude change from new stimuli drops of
exponentially (Cutler, 1974; Dennis, 1973; Easton & Dennis, 1969; Sears, 1982). If there is agreement among proponents on the vital role of early life there is less consensus on exactly which years are the most impressionable. Most point to between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five years (Newcomb, 1943; Newcomb, et al., 1967). Yet with others highlighting socialization gains occurring even as early as adolescence (Sears & Valentino, 1997).

Another variation on the age-stability hypothesis can also be seen in, what's sometimes called, the increasing persistence hypothesis. The view similarly states the importance of the early years, yet puts more emphasis on the ability for humans to remain malleable throughout the life-cycle, also again, in a continuously lessening capacity (Glenn, 1974; Glenn, 1980).

An important point to make clear here is that neither hypothesizes claims that people are immune to change. New stimuli can affect attitudes, yet will have less of an effect the older you get. Ergo, your values can change even later in life, they’re just less likely to and will change to a smaller extent than those younger than you.

4.3. Mechanism behind attitude-rigidity.

The mechanism behind this build up of attitude-rigidity can be plentiful and are still up for debate. This can, to a degree, be the cause of an apparent lack of interest as very few researchers have made direct attempts at studying the phenomena (Visser and Krosnick, 1998 p.1403). Perhaps opting instead to consider the effects more worthy of attention than the actual mechanistic structures behind them (Bartels & Jackman, 2014 p. 10). From the literature that does exist one can formulate different yet still intertwined possible explanations.

From a biological standpoint, the cause can simply be down to age-related cognitive degradation. As when people get older, memory capacity (Saltheuse, 1996 p.404) and the speed at which information can be processed declines (Saltheuse, 1991 chap.2). Leading to later life attitude revision becoming more challenging. (Wang and Chen, 2006)

Psychologically, it stands to reason that young people, in general, lack the cognitive resources and experience to deal with any event, when compared to their elders. Thus in effect making any alteration in one’s environment more impactful. Alterations that can also be argued to happen more frequently as careers, partners and living arrangements will be in a
greater state of fluctuation at the early stages of life. As pointed out by Krosnick & Alwin it
can simply be that more attitude-altering-stimuli occurs early in life. Essentially attributing
no special biological significance to early life yet still having it act as a time of great

Another explanation can be found in a two-part study by Wendy Wood. The papers
first experiment concluded that, when confronted with new information on a given topic,
subjects with past experience of a said topic were less likely to alter their original attitudes,
vis-à-vis, those without prior experiences (Wood, 1982). The longer a person lives the more
experiences will be accumulated, putting the younger part of the population in a constant
experience deficit. This would in turn explain early life attitude-elasticity and later life
attitude-rigidity. It should be noted that the subjects used were university-level students
meaning they were likely still, under the impressionable years hypothesis, moldable (Ibid,
1982 p.800). Potentially underrepresenting the true effects of experience accumulation,
compared to a study using older subjects.

Through a more sociological lens, attitude-rigidity, can be seen as a mere expression
of a general social-rigidity. One’s political opinions tend to usually only be shared with
people who hold the same beliefs, with the counterpart acting as reinforcer and validator
(Visser and Krosnick, 1998). Furthermore, as people progress through life the number of
one’s close social contacts, i.e friends, decline (Cumming and Henry 1961). Effectively this
means that the friends you do discuss politics with, most likely share your already established
views and the chances of you encountering new, challenging opinions will continuously
diminish. Leaving older generations in more heavily reinforced value bubbles.

4.4. Evidence for the hypothesizes.

When looking at support for the hypothesizes we first turn to studies analysing panel data.
This method involves analysing one or several birth-cohorts over several measuring points.
With cohort meaning group and birth-cohort being the cluster of a specific year or years of
birth of the subjects under study.

The method is costly and time consuming and comes with a ever present danger of
subject drop off by each measuring point. One of the more noteworthy and long running such
studies is the three-wave Bennington study (Newcomb, 1943; Newcomb, et. al., 1967; Alwin
et. al., 1991). Where social and political opinions of a single female birth cohort were measured. The women were all raised conservative, yet the longer they attended the bennington college the more liberal they seemed to become. (Newcomb et. al., 1967) After a 25 year period the women were subsequently re-interviewed with the liberal views they had previously attained remaining (Alwin et. al., 1991). Indicating support for the impressionable years hypothesis.

Somewhat less reliable aggregate-level studies seem to also corroborated these findings, as they show larger attitudes shift present in younger cohorts (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989 p.417). Panel and cohort data showing support for the other hypothesis can however also be seen. With some panel data (Tyler & Schuller, 1991) and cohort analysis (Glenn, 1974; Nunn, Crockett & Williams, 1978) favouring the increasing persistence hypothesis.

In a nineteen eighty-nine literary summation on studies testing the hypotheses, Krosnick & Alwin found that the studies tended to show support for both hypotheses (1989 p.417). Also noting flaws in the methodological approaches used in past research mentioned. The authors carried out their own analysis employing improved equation models on several national election panel studies and concluded strong support for the impressionable years hypothesis (Ibid, 1989 pp. 418 421). Taken as a whole the nature of value-change and possible resiliency is not a matter that’s been completely laid to rest. However, there are several ways to logical argue why it would make sense and from empirical testing that has been done, evidence seems to point in the direction that values are primarily formed during a specific early adult time-frame.

4.5 Age-stability and generational differences.

The explanation for generational differences in values, under the age-stability hypothesis goes as follow. As early-adulthood socialization leaves a lasting impression on the individual. So to must, the effects of broader, collectively-felt-stimuli, hereafter referred to as zeitgeist or era, leave visible marks on an entire generation. A generation who spent their formative years under a specific zeitgeist, should, under the hypothesis, carry with them a residual impression of their unique era, making them distinct from other generations. Thus explaining why we would expect to see attitude-shifts in society in the first place. If each new generation is
moulded by the unique time they grew up in, changes in society will give way to changes in attitudes. This is also of course contingent upon the assertion that there has been a societal change, that there are differing zeitgeists. For as if no societal change occurs, similarly, under the hypothesis, no differences should be visible.

4.6 Summary.

Even if there isn't complete consensus on the nature of value formation and rigidness, there does seem to exist enough evidence to support the notion of era-specific effect on generations. There also seems to be a specific age-span when people are more susceptible to the stimuli of their era.

5. Presidential impact on value formation.

Part of the purpose of this paper is to study a particular form of stimuli, the stimuli provided by a government, specifically, American presidential administrations. It can be argued that an American president has greater opportunity to shape an era than any other individual during a given time and to an extent shape public discourse. At the very least as it relates to an American setting. A president can also be seen as a product of their time granting insight into the general mood of an era. This would in effect make the study valuable both in terms of displaying differences in opinion between more liberal or conservative eras and, if generational cohorts are divided with this fact in mind, the degree to which a president has an impact on value formation within an era.

Previous research in a similar vein seem to suggest, that a Obama generation held distinctly different racial attitudes than previous generations. With the election of president Obama acting as the catalyst of this change (Nteta & Greenlee, 2013). Can these findings be replicated in levels of PSC? Does living your formative years under a conservative president make a difference?
5.1 Conservative presidential eras.

The presidential generations featured in this paper will be in historical order divided by the following presidents:


With the conservative stimuli believed to occur in the eras of:


The decision to classify conservative presidential eras as only those presidents representing the republican party comes at a cost, as it can be argued that conservative stimuli has occurred in the others. Yet the assumption, however large, is that the stimuli would have occurred more frequently and certainly more explicitly under the aforementioned republican presidents. This decision is made on the count of time spent discussing conservative stimuli and because it would, in effect, make the “control” for conservative stimuli, a democratic president. Although it has to regrettably be pointed to as a potential weakness in the design of this research.

5.2 Examples of conservative stimuli in conservative eras.

What follows will be examples of political social conservative stimuli as defined in chapter 3.

5.2.1 Ronald Reagan.

Examples of conservative stimuli, especially as it pertains to the definition used in this paper can be seen in an meta-examination of state of the union address made by the president. The results showed that although much time wasn't spent discussing the questions of abortion, school prayer and traditional values. They were brought up in nearly every speech and can have made a significant contribution to mainstreaming these issues (Moen, 1990). As it relates to the variables in this study, the 1982 address can be pointed to be of particular note. As directed references towards the ban on school prayer was brought up, going as far as suggesting that an amendment revoking the earlier decision should be passed (The New York Times, 1982).
It can also be argued that Reagan was directly or indirectly hostile towards gay rights and the gay community at large. Making references on a campaign trail to gay rights as not advocating rights but condoning a lifestyle that, society and himself could not (Scheer, 2006, p.154).

5.2.2 George W. Bush.
George W. Bush made reference to traditional and family values under numerous times during his presidency. However for more tangible examples we can begin by looking at the question of abortion. The president adopted a noticeable negative view on abortion and signing into law more than one piece of anti-abortion legislation (Strode, 2003; The White House, 2002).

On the issue of homosexual marriage, the president was clearly not a supporter. Aido not signing any legislation into law, the president publicly endorsed and campaigned for a federal bill designed to make the legal definition of marriage, that between one man and one woman (Draper, 2007 pp. 377–379).

The Bush presidency also made several noteworthy so-called “faith-based initiatives” designed to support religious organizations, one example being the establishment of the agency of faith-based and community initiatives (Executive Order, No. 13,198, 2001). Pointing perhaps to a general uptake of religious fervour during this time.

5.3.3 Donald Trump.
The conservative stimuli under the presidency of Donald Trump is trickier to argue for than other conservative presidents. Other than expressing, as the previous mentioned presidents, general support for traditional values, traditionalism hasn't been a focal point of the administration to date.

On the one hand the president has appointed notably conservative judges to the supreme court as well as saying he would strongly consider the matter of overturning a past decision federally recognizing homosexual marriage. On the other hand the president later walked back these comments stating that the matter was settled.

On abortion the president has been more negative, supporting a repeal of federal protections (Blake, 2016).
On religious and family matters, the president has in a speech stressed the importance of church and the family unit as vital for creating strong and loving communities (Taylor, 2017). Columminating in the expansion of the agency of faith-based and community initiatives (Gryboski, 2018).


The aim of this paper as already laid out in the 2nd chapter are as follows.

1. *Is the younger generation, here classified as 20-25-year-olds, more politically socially conservative than previous generations?*

2. *Does being socialized under a liberal versus a conservative government leave markings on rates of political social conservatism?*

3. *Do the results in question 1 and 2 differ when controlling for a self-perceived conservative identity?*

6.1. Choice of data.

To answer these hypotheses this paper will make use of survey data collected by the national opinion research centres, general social survey(GSS) of 2018 and compare answers to questions of political social conservatism(PSC) between birth-cohorts.

6.2. Birth-cohorts.

The generational birth-cohorts under study will be divided by presidential eras. In this paper these will be classified as the Ronald Reagan-era the Bill Clinton-era, the George W. Bush-era, the Barack Obama-era and the Donald Trump-era.

In order to see the effects of a certain era, birth cohorts will be selected based on their susceptibility to said era. As previously discussed the formative period of attitudes extend to the mid-to-late 20s.

To maximize era-specific imprinting and minimize imprints from eras beyond the one they’ve been assigned to, the birth-cohorts chosen for this paper will be subjects who were
20-25 years old at the advent of each generational era. The subjects will be at a time in their life when great socialization occurs and will be no older than 28 at the start of a new generational era. A time when most attitude-resiliency will have already set in. As touched on in the introductory section of this paper the label given to the latest generation is sometimes, generation z. With some classifying this generation as starting with those born in nineteen-ninety seven (Dimock, 2019). This makes for an arbitrary classifications, at least as it relates to this study, as they are generations defined by age and not era. However, by making the start of the Trump era (the youngest era) be two years into the presidency, the study will encompass subjects born in the years 1995 up to 1998. Making the results more generalisable to this classification of generation z. Thus to ensure validity each previous era will also be categorized as beginning two years into each of the other aforementioned president’s first terms.

The noticeable exclusion of president George H. W. Bush has been made for a methodological reason. As H. W. Bush only served one term in office, and as birth cohorts are to be 20-25 years of age a significant overlap would occur. With the youngest years in such a cohort still being within the stated age-range at the advent of the defined Clinton-era. Thus to ensure separation between cohorts, the presidency of George H. W. Bush was removed. However, this can be seen to affect the validity of the Clinton-era as a liberal control as significant socialization by a conservative president could have occurred.

The exact birth years for the cohorts are:

- **Gen.Clinton-** 1969-1974

### 6.3. Social conservative variables.

As discussed in the chapter on conservatism, SPC will be defined as traditional views concerning family, gender roles and religion. The social conservative variables chosen to operationalize these will be as follows.
6.3.1. Women’s right to an abortion for any reason she chooses.

Being against abortion can be seen to, on the one hand, championing traditional values of the family and of chastity. Yet the strongest correlation to a traditional value has be that of religion. As defined by most religions, birth starts at conception, and aborting a fetus will by this logic the same as murder. As murder is a sin, so to is having a abortion commensurate with sin. Being anti-abortion can thus be seen as wanting to uphold the place of God in society, and encapsulates the traditional value of religious morality. Beyond this we see that in practise there also seem to be a strong overlap between espousing traditional values, especially christian values, and being against abortion, as seen in the section on conservative stimuli. By choosing the variable of a right to an abortion for any reason instead of a more conditional variable we should elicit starker differences, as the clear progressive stance is that the choice is with the womb-bearer and no one else. Thus making it easier to spot deviations from a clear progressive point of view

6.3.2. Disagreement towards homosexual marriage.

This variable will operationalize the traditional values of the family unit and religion in society. As the clear norm-family in American society has been for a long time hetrosexual marriage, the concept of homosexual marriage is in of itself a break with a general tradition of what constitutes a family. Furthermore, marriage from a christian view is defined as a union of one man and one woman, also making the concept a break from religious tradition.

6.3.3. Disapproval of the ban on bible prayers in American public schools.

This variable can be seen to further encapsulate the traditional role of religion in public life. As being in favor of the ban means a downplaying of the role of religion.

6.3.4. Level of agreement on the husband being the family provider.

The variable on agreement towards the husband being the family provider is meant to encapsulate views on traditional gender-roles. Even though the view that a women should stay at home can seem rather antiquated in today's society, it is no doubt a long standing
gender-role. And previous research mentioned in the introductory chapter of this essay seem to suggest a return, however modest, towards this view on gender.

In order to study the third research question of this paper, a separated variable on self-perceived levels of conservatism will also be included. The exact codification of the variables listed will now be provided below.

### 6.4. Codification of variables understudy.

What follows will be codification of the variables under study and how the exact question was featured in the GSS. Note- the only responses included in the research will be those featured below. Non-responses and the like have been excluded.

**Abortion.**
Views on abortion as defined by the survey question, *please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if the woman wants it for any reason?* With responses being coded as, Yes or No.

**Homosexual marriage.**
Level of disagreement towards homosexual marriage as defined by the survey question. *Do you agree or disagree, homosexual couples should have the right to marry one another?* With responses here coded as 0=Strongly agree. 1=Agree. 2=Disagree. 3=Strongly disagree.

**Bible prayers in public schools.**
Views on bible prayers in public school as defined by the survey question. The United States Supreme Court has ruled that no state or local government may require the reading of the Lord's Prayer or Bible verses in public schools. *What are your views on this--do you approve or disapprove of the court ruling?* With responses coded as, Approve or Disapprove.

**Husbands role as a provider.**
Level of agreement on the husband being the family provider as defined by the survey question. *Do you agree or disagree, a husband's job is to earn money; a wife's job is to look after the home and family?* With responses here coded as 0=Strongly disagree. 1= Disagree. 2=Neither agree nor disagree. 3=Agree. 4=Strongly agree.
Self-perceived conservatism.
Levels of self-perceived conservatism as defined by the survey question. *We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. I'm going to show you a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal--point 0--to extremely conservative--point 6. Where would you place yourself on this scale?* With responses here coded as 0=Extremely liberal. 1=Liberal. 2=Slightly liberal. 3=Moderate. 4=Slightly conservative. 5=Conservative. 6=Extremely conservative.

6.5. Validity and reliability
This section will discuss the validity and reliability of the research design and method described above. The internal validity relates to the research actually studying what it intends to study, meaning the absence of confiding factors that could skew the results. External validity relates to the generalizability of the results found, how applicable they are to the real world.

To ensure validity in question 1 different birth cohorts would have to be constructed so as to measure responses to the same variables and be selected for on a clearly defined basis. As birth cohorts have all been selected for using the same analytical framework and as no birth year can exist in more than one birth cohort internal validity has here been achieved.

When it comes to question 2, measuring potential imprinting by conservative presidential stimuli there is more cause for concern. Firstly there is the general problem of drawing conclusions about the specific role of the argued conservative stimuli, as there is no control variables, other than self perceived conservatism, used. Any conclusions made has to bare this fact in mind. As it relates to birth cohorts there is the previously mentioned issue of potential conservative stimuli within the liberal control of the Clinton generation.

Furthermore, it should also be noted that other overlap of imprint can with this design still be argued to exist. As the youngest of the first two eras will be twenty-six as the subsequent eras president takes office. The majority of all the subjects formative years will still be spent during their assigned era. Nonetheless, this should be noted as a flaw in the design of this paper and can be seen to hurt its validity.

The external validity of this research hinges on whether or not the variables discussed are accepted as good gages for support of traditional institutions in society. And if traditional
institutions themself is a valid operationalization of social conservatism. As political (social) conservatism doesn't have a clearly accepted academic method of study. As the definitions made have been argued for, it falls upon the reader to make this assessment.

Reliability refers to the degree to which the results found can be accurately replicated in subsequent studies. The variables used in this study have been presented and the birth-cohorts well defined. As the General Social Survey is also open to the public, barring any miscalculation on the part of the author, the reliability of this study should be sound.

7. Results.

The results will be segmented by individual questions. The subgroup of self-identifying conservatives, will here be defined as a score of self-perceived conservatism of 4 or higher, meaning slightly conservative to extremely conservative.

Multivariable-questions will be first shown in tables highlighting mean scores as well as inter-cohort-differences. Then illustrated in timelines of cohort mean values, and finally as charts, outlining intra-cohort-variance. Bivariable-questions will be shown in frequency tables of percentage distribution.

Level of disagreement towards homosexual marriage.

If we start by turning our attention towards table 1. We can first conclude the starting mean score for the total Reagan generation is surprisingly low with a value of around 2. With a score of 2 corresponding with the statement, neither agree nor disagree, essentially indicating ambivalence towards the question of homosexual marriage. As the Reagan generation is the first birth-cohort in this analysis it becomes difficult to discern what potential impact conservative stimuli from this era might have been. However, as mean scores drop consistently regardless of whether or not the sitting president is conservative, it becomes difficult to argue that socialization based on any presidential era having tangible effect. It should be noted that the only statistically significant drops in mean score occurred between the generations of Bush, Obama and Trump. Yet again, mean score drops were consistent, regardless of the president. If we look within the subgroup of self-identifying conservatives a similar trend is visible, mean value drops between all generations and with the only
significant drop occurring from the Obama to the Trump generation. This mean drop was by far the biggest with an incremental shift of 0.6.

Table 1. Mean responses to homosexual marriage by birth cohort within total population and the subgroup of conservatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth cohort</th>
<th>Total pop</th>
<th>Self identifying conservative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen.Reagan</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>555</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen.Clinton</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>584</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.24***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen.Obama</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.14*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen.Trump</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>438</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significance: *** p < 0.01; ** p < 0.05; * p < 0.10

Note.-High scores indicate greater opposition towards homosexual marriage

If we look at Figure 1 illustrating the results in a timeline. The general trend can be seen in both groups with seemingly a converging occurring in the Trump generation, as the distances between the total population and the subgroup of conservatives closing.
Figure 1. Timeline of mean responses on homosexual marriage by birth cohort within total population and the subgroup of conservatives

Note.- High scores indicate greater opposition towards homosexual marriage

Mean scores do only tell part of the story, for a more nuanced picture of intra-cohort variances we turn to charts 1 and 2. Within the total population, the question of homosexual marriage appears far more polarized, with the biggest clusters being at the edges, 0 and 4, strong agreement/disagreement respectively. It's also within the extremes that the biggest generational shifts take place being almost mirror images of one another. The intra and inter-cohort variance within the subgroup of conservatives are more uniform with the majority of subjects responses giving the response 4, strong disagreement. The obvious outlier seems to be the Trump generation were the most common answer, in contrast to the others, is the responses of 0 and 1, indicating larger support for homosexual marriage. A potential compiling factor of note is the smaller pool of conservatives among the Trump generation. Thus fewer people within the Trump generation self-identify as conservatives and those that do seem to more inclined to support the idea of homosexual marriage.
Chart 1. Frequency distribution of responses to homosexual marriage by birth cohort within the total population

Note.-Each lateral step indicate greater opposition towards homosexual marriage

Chart 2. Frequency distribution of responses to homosexual marriage by birth cohort within the subgroup of self-identifying conservatives

Note.-Each lateral step indicate greater opposition towards homosexual marriage
Husband as the household provider.

By looking at table 2 we can see a similar picture emerge, regardless of the sitting president Mean scores have been steadily decreasing. With the Trump generation again having the lowest mean score. Further dismissing the idea that conservative stimuli had any effect on the issue is that mean scores drops were higher under a conservative president than vice-versa. If anything the effect could perhaps be a stronger rejection of conservative messaging during conservative presidents. However, as mean scores drop weren't big nor statistically significant and constantly hovering around 1, meaning disagreement, and not 0, strong disagreement, this also seems unlikely.

Table 2. Mean responses to the husband being the provider by birth cohort within total population and the subgroup of conservatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth cohort</th>
<th>Total pop</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Self identifying conservative</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>Birth cohort</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gen.Clinton</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen.Clinton</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>584</td>
<td>Gen.Clinton</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gen.BushJr</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>587</td>
<td>Gen.BushJr</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gen.Obama</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen.Obama</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>636</td>
<td>Gen.Obama</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gen.Trump</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen.Trump</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>438</td>
<td>Gen.Trump</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Significance:** *** p < 0,01; ** p < 0,05; * p < 0,10

*Note.*-High scores indicate greater support of the husband being the provider

Chart 3 illuminates this point further, strong clustering around disagreement and no strong changes of note. Looking at chart 4 we see that among self-identifying conservatives, the same pattern exists, with Trump generation seeming, however tentatively, being in greatest opposition to having the husband as the provider.
**Chart 3.** Frequency distribution of responses of the husband being the provider by birth cohort within the total population

*Note.*-Each lateral step indicate greater support towards the husband being the provider

**Chart 4.** Frequency distribution of responses to the husband being the provider by birth cohort within the subgroup of conservatives

*Note.*-Each lateral step indicate greater support towards the husband being the provider
Figure 2, demonstrates this point further, showing again a convergencs occurring in mean scores between groups within the Trump generation.

![Figure 2. Timeline of mean responses on the husband being the provider by birth cohort within total population and the subgroup of conservatives](image)

Note.-High scores indicate support of the husband being the provider

**Negative attitude towards abortion.**

The results on the issue of abortion are far more complex than previous questions analysed. To begin with, looking at table 3 no clear trend seems to be discernible, other than self-identifying conservatives showing more negative sentiment overall, as disapproval of abortion fluctuates heavily between generation. Within the total population, somewhat surprisingly, the greatest disapproval of abortion seems to come from the youngest generation. With the opposite being true for conservatives. Indicating as with other questions a greater convergence among the Trump generation. Looking at conservatives specifically, it can be argued that the impact of a conservative president may have played a role, as negative sentiment is at its greatest in the Reagan and Bush generations. However the opposite seems to be true with the Trump generation as they continue the downward trend of the Obama generation. All of the aforementioned changes discussed has to however also take into account the lack of statistical significance, calling all the assertions made into question.
On the whole, the issue of abortion has to at least be seen as a more complex subject than the others discussed. As no clear age or stimuli trends can strongly be argued for, it seems that other factors, not included here, would serve to better explain the unclear underlying factors of this issue.

**Table 3.** Frequency of responses coded as “No” by birth cohort within total population and the subgroup of conservatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth cohort</th>
<th>Total pop</th>
<th>Self identifying conservative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen.Reagan</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-1.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen.Clinton</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>576</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen.BushJr</td>
<td>53.7</td>
<td>576</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen.Obama</td>
<td>55.8</td>
<td>511</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen.Trump</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>430</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Significance:** *** p < 0.01; ** p < 0.05; * p < 0.10

**Disapproval towards the ban on school prayer.**

By looking at table 4, levels of disapproval on the issue of disagreement towards a ban on prayer in public schools seem to follow, a by now, predictable pattern. Generally, the levels of disagreement are higher among the subgroup of self-identifying conservatives. The levels of disapproval, within both the subgroup of conservatives and the population at large, show a negative correlation as it pertains to age, with the levels decreasing between virtually every generation. With the biggest and only statically significant change occurring between the total populations Obama and Trump generations. However, the total drop within the subgroup of conservatives could also be verified.
As similarly to the results on the question of abortion, none of the shifts between generations is statistically significant. It would seem that no impact from conservative presidential stimuli is present.

Table 4. Frequency of responses coded as disapprove by birth cohort within total population and the subgroup of conservatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth cohort</th>
<th>Total pop</th>
<th>Self identifying conservative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disapprove%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen.Reagan</td>
<td>62.3</td>
<td>544</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-4.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen.Clinton</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-2.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen.Obama</td>
<td>55.5</td>
<td>501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-11.4***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen.Trump</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>415</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Significance:** *** p < 0.01; ** p < 0.05; * p < 0.10

### 7.1 Summary

To summarize and tie the results back to the purpose of this essay, we begin with the first research question posed, is the younger generation more socially conservative than previous generations? The answer, based on the definition of this essay, seems to be no. The Trump generation consistently demonstrated the lowest levels of conservative sentiment, barring the issue of abortion, which we will get back to later. This fact is perhaps most evident within the questions on school prayer and homosexual marriage were the youngest generation is clearly the most liberal. On the question of having the husband as the provider, the shifts were noticeably smaller and not statistically significant. However, as all the generations hovered around 1, meaning disagreement, there wasn’t much support to begin with. On abortion a
more complex pattern is visible, overall opposition to abortion seems to fluctuate and not follow a clear trend. Surprisingly, this is the only question were the Trump generation are the most conservative, indicating either A, that this is an area of growth in conservative sentiment or B, that its a poor indicator of conservatism. On the matter of abortion one also has to take into account that the demonstrated shifts weren’t big nor statistically significant, possibly indicating that no actual change really has occurred. Nevertheless what can be said about abortion is that the issue has been and will continue to be in the foreseeable future a heavily polarized question. As all values hovered around the fifth percentile.

If we move to the second question of this essay, on the matter of presidential conservative stimuli, no real support for the hypothesis was found. Instead, in all but one of the questions understudy, a phenomenon of liberalisation correlating to age was seen, as each step in the generational chain showed a decrease in conservative sentiment. The only anomaly would again be the question of abortion, where levels were at their peak within the Trump and Reagan generations, speaking in favour of presidential impact. Yet, as the Reagan generation is the first generation studied, and thus cannot be contrasted to a prior generation, this potential spike can not be proven. Moreover, the effect was absent during the Bush generation despite anti-abortion stimuli being present during this administration. Coupling this with the fact that no change was statistically significant, the effects of conservative stimuli by the Trump administration has to also be met with a healthy dose of scepticism.

The third question of whether or not the results in question 1 and 2 differ when looking within the subgroup of self-identifying conservatives there are a few trends of note. Unsurprisingly, the levels of conservative sentiment were consistently higher, yet the negative correlation as it pertains to age was still visible. With the greatest shifts occurring again, between the Obama and Trump generations. More surprising was that even among conservatives, stimuli by conservative presidents didn’t have much of an effect. With the only exception perhaps being the increase in anti-abortion sentiment during the Bush generation, however, this effect isn’t statistically proven. It thus seems that even within the group of conservatives sentiment around conservative issues are changing. Essentially tentatively suggesting that the very meaning of what a conservative is, is itself changing. In closing based on the research conducted in this paper, the notion that the coming generation will be more conservative is false. Instead, regardless of self-defined political affiliations,
they seem to follow a general trend of liberalisation. The exact mechanism behind the phenomena is, at least as it relates to this paper, unknown.

8. Discussion

Based on the research conducted it seems that, apart from the question of abortion, Americans at large are getting less socially conservative as time goes and that the new generation, here defined as the Trump generation are no exception. This trend was also visible within the subgroup of self-identifying conservatives. Furthermore it did not seem as though being socialized under a liberal versus a conservative government left any discernible marks on rates of political social conservatism. There are however a number of interjection that have to be made. We can start by discussing the apparent lack of impact made by presidential conservative stimuli. Why did we get this result?

There are a number of ways to explain this outcome. Conservative stimuli wasn't provided, conservative stimuli didn't stick, either because the theory of value retention from an era is wrong or because other factors drowned out the affect or lastly, the methods used to gage conservatism were lacking.

The conservative presidents did make laws and statements that would, by this study's definition, be classified as conservative stimuli. However the examples presented were somewhat random, or at the very least, not clearly structured or based on any sociological definition on stimuli. Which in retrospect, is certainly problematic.

The age-stability hypothesis is still only a hypothesis, yet there seems to undoubtedly be a lot of evidence that supports the notion of value retention. The problem then would more likely be one of how values are formed. If the stimuli was provided, which again is a big if, it wasn't sent out in a vacuum. Other events that took place during the presidential eras were significant. These events could very likely have shaped the era in far more profound ways, and thus explained our outcome. There's also the problem of degrees of retention. This study does not factor in control variables. It could be that presidential stimuli plays a greater role in shaping the attitudes of a certain few. Controlling for factors such as gender, what state the subjects live in or how much they read the news, among others, could further illuminate the exact mechanism behind the impact of the stimuli.
The problem could also be that the very definitions used to capture social conservatism are at fault. Which leads us into problems surrounding the first research question.

Can we really say that levels of PSC have gone down? The answer depends on many things. Firstly if the variables used are accepted as good operationalizations of social institutions. Secondly, if the preservation of social institutions is even a good definition of social conservatism in the first place. In reality the only thing we can say for certain is that attitudes on specific questions have generally changed.

This would also explain why other studies mentioned in the introduction claims the opposite, that levels of conservatism has increased. It all depends upon what gets defined as conservative.

This points to the inherent problem of doing research on a topic like this. As conservatism, as argued, lacks a clear definition, even within academia, is it really a word that should be used? Is there really value in using a term that means different things to different people at different points in time? Perhaps time would be better spent simply analysing attitudinal trends without invoking political ideology.
References


IFAC, 2018. Make way for gen z: identifying what matters most to the next generation.


