Generation Units and the Student Protest Movement in the United States: An Intra- and Intergenerational Analysis

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The American student protest movement provides exceptional opportunities to observe how formative political experiences can affect intragenerational cleavages over the adult life span and how they may reflect on intergenerational continuities. Long-term national panel data from the high school class of 1965 and data from their parents and offspring are used here to exploit these opportunities. The results show that a sharp rift in political participation and attitudes emerged between protesters and non-protesters during the protest era, a rift that persists into mid-life and one that testifies to the conceptual utility of generation units. Continuities across the three lineage generations are demonstrated by the moderate similarities in the ideological and participative orientations that are associated with the protest status of the student generation.

KEY WORDS: generations, protest, socialization, participation, civil rights, partisanship

As the decades roll by, the uniqueness of the American student protest movement becomes more apparent. No movements since the mid-1960s to the early 1970s have evoked such widespread involvement on the part of young adults in the United States. The echoes of the era have become fainter, the political landscape has changed, and the so-called X and Y generations have succeeded the early boomer generation. The latter has now moved into middle age, which invokes its own set of interests and priorities. Yet it seems unlikely that so divisive a phenomenon as the student protest movement would leave its youthful participants and bystanders unmarked as they traverse the life cycle. If experiences during the formative years are to have long-term consequences, the protest era should serve as a textbook example.

Individuals actively involved in the protest movement would appear to be prime candidates for Mannheim’s classic (1928/1972) formulation of political
generation units, members of the same birth cohort experiencing and processing the "dynamic destabilization" transpiring around them in fundamentally different ways. To the extent that other members of the youthful cohorts from the protest era did not join in the movement (or reacted negatively to it), they may be considered members of null (or competitive) generation units.1 Realistically, it is not simply the single or even multiple acts of protesting that distinguish these two groups. Rather, it is the cumulative impact of all the various formal and informal, directly and vicariously experienced activities associated with protest behavior that should work to differentiate them. As Mannheim observed, generation units

are characterized by the fact that they do not merely involve a loose participation by a number of individuals in a pattern of events shared by all alike though interpreted by the different individuals differently, but an identity of responses, a certain affinity in the way in which all move with and are formed by their common experience. (p. 122)

Having been actively involved in the protest movement can serve as a concrete, behavioral indicator of this common experience, one that conceivably exerts direct and indirect influences long after the expiration of the movement itself.

One of the objectives of this paper is to extend and build on a previous account (Jennings, 1987) of a national sample of protesters and non-protesters by tracking them into the fullness of middle age. Doing so puts the generation unit thesis to a stringent test, in that both life stage and period effects might be expected to move the generation units toward convergence. Because the political attitudes of the protesters were exuberantly liberal and their rates of participation astonishingly high during the protest era, some regression toward more moderate positions might well transpire as they assumed the roles attached to mature adulthood and as they were subjected to a later political environment characterized by 20 years of the conservative Reagan/Bush and centrist Clinton administrations.2

The singularity of the protest era also encourages an effort to examine intergenerational continuity under such unusual circumstances. One of the conclusions emerging from the early studies of student protesters and civil rights activists undermined the popular belief that the protesters were engaging in wholesale rebellion against their parents. To the extent that parental characteristics weighed in at all, the activists more often came from liberal-leaning and politically active homes (e.g., Block, Haan, & Smith, 1969; Flacks, 1967; Lewis & Kraut, 1972). Over time, as the movement expanded, the social origins expanded somewhat so that more instances of dissonance between parents and children probably appeared (Mankoff & Flacks, 1971).

1 Null is used here in the sense that many, usually most, members of a political generation will not experience the "dynamic destabilization" in an active, transformative fashion, as Mannheim's example of German student movements illustrates.

2 Two major works relying on long-term survey data (Mayer, 1992; Page & Shapiro, 1992) stress the importance of period effects and secular tides in moderating generational differences.
Although such studies were often limited by a focus on intensive activists, spotty control groups, and the questionable validity of student reports about parental characteristics (e.g., Niemi, 1974), they far exceed in both quantity and quality any studies about the offspring of protesters and non-protesters. The progeny of protesters have remained a virtually untouched target population. The lacunae stems mainly from the challenge of trying to identify and survey both activist and non-activist families long after the fact. If these two groups constitute enduring political generation units, there should be remnants of that division among their offspring. Parents who experienced the protest era in radically different fashions should pass on divergent political perspectives to their children. Again, this expectation constitutes a severe test of the generation unit hypothesis, not least because of the usual presence of another parent in the home (the marriage partner) and a substantially different social and political atmosphere than that marking the protest years.

The research design at hand provides the opportunity to look at both the familial antecedents and successors of a group of protesters and non-protesters. The second objective of this paper, then, is to establish whether there are threads of political orientation that serve to link the three lineage generations according to the presence or absence of youthful protesters. Put another way, did the student protesters and non-protesters of the late 1960s and early 1970s have politically distinguishable parents, and do they in turn have politically differentiated children?

This work draws on the University of Michigan’s long-term political socialization project that had, at its core, interviews with a national probability sample of 1,669 high school seniors from the graduating class of 1965. Attempts were made to resurvey these students in 1973, 1982, and finally in 1997, by which time they were 50 years of age. A total of 935 individuals survived all four waves, resulting in an unadjusted retention rate of 56% across the 32 years. Respondents in the 1973 wave indicated whether they had engaged in a variety of political activities over the past several years, including whether they had “taken part in a demonstration, march, or sit-in.” Because going to college was virtually a necessary but not sufficient condition for protesting during this era, most of the following analysis will be restricted to the four-wave panelists who were college graduates as of 1973. Of these 316 respondents, 94 (30%) had been former protesters, with almost three-fourths of them citing the Vietnam war and about one-half reporting multiple acts of protest.

3 For a clever effort to locate women activists of the 1960s at a much later date, see Cole, Zucker, and Ostrove (1998).

4 Panel bias over the course of the project appears to be slight. Comparisons between the panel stayers and eventual dropouts on politically relevant variables drawn from the 1965 interviews reveal that the panelists were slightly more engaged in and knowledgeable about politics and had slightly more liberal attitudes. In no case, however, did panel status account for more than 2% of the variance in these scores.
These individuals and their non-protesting classmates constitute the analytic units for the student sample. They also provide the basis for allocating both their parents and their offspring into two groups, as described below. Overall, the combined advantages of the study design over those found in other studies of dissident activists (and most activists, for that matter) consist of the national rather than local basis, the probabilistic rather than purposive nature of the initial sample, the presence of “before” measures, the lengthy time span covered, and the available linkages to the families of orientation and procreation.

Intragenerational Continuities

In keeping with the spirit of the generation unit approach, the intent here is not to show the unique, independent effects of protest behavior on subsequent political orientations much later in life. Rather, the goal is to establish whether the configuration of political experiences distinguishing members of a single cohort at a given historical moment of political turmoil continues to characterize them as they and the political world they inhabit move through time. In this narrow sense, and in keeping with Mannheim’s emphasis on the locational aspects of specific segments within an actual generation, self-selection into the protest category does not constitute a problem.

At the same time, establishing that revealed differences between protesters and non-protesters are not simply artifacts of other differences between them will strengthen the claims about any transformative, enduring effects of protest involvement. Having several key pre-protest measures on hand helps immensely in that respect, as does confining the data set to same-age college graduates. Additionally, a demanding multivariate analysis of the 1965–1973 panel revealed that protest status made an independent, statistically significant difference with respect to a wide range of political attitudes. And the more frequent the protest activity, the greater the impact on attitudes and behaviors (Jennings & Niemi, 1981, pp. 331–379). Protest status, therefore, is not simply a proxy for other personal traits.

Acquiring the Habit of Political Participation

By definition, protesters and non-protesters differed with respect to the frequency of at least one mode of participation between 1965 and 1973. In addition,

5 Although the data set invites panel-style analysis, the panel waves will be treated here as analytically similar to “independent cross-sections,” inasmuch as a crucial test of the generation unit hypothesis is unit durability over time (rather than individual-level dynamics or estimated individual-specific effects). Moreover, it is fully in the spirit of the quasi-experimental design used here to assess the long-term impact of protest as a “treatment” or intervention.

6 For two rather contrasting explanations of early activism in the entire sample, see Merelman and King (1986) and Sherkat and Blocker (1994).
the protesters also engaged in more conventional forms of participation during this period, for they outranked their non-protesting peers by 14% to 28% across a range of conventional participation activities (Jennings & Niemi, 1981, pp. 342-344). More germane from a generation unit perspective is the question of whether that gap carried over into mid-life.

For each panel period, 10-point indices were constructed on the basis of whether respondents reported having performed the following activities in the interim between the survey dates: wrote a letter to the editor; gave money for a political cause; attended political rallies; displayed stickers and buttons; tried to influence others how to vote; did any other work for a party, candidate, or issue; conveyed opinions by contacting officials; worked with others to solve some local problem; and took part in a demonstration, protest march, or sit-in. Index scores ranged from 0-9, depending upon how many of the activities had been performed.

Figure 1 shows the mean index scores of protesters and non-protesters for each panel period. Not only were the protesters’ initial absolute levels extraordinarily high by any reasonable standard; these levels also dwarfed those achieved by their non-protesting classmates. A wide gulf still remains after dropping the act of protesting from the calculations (a difference of 3.8 compared with 4.8). As national protest activity and the mobilization associated with it dropped precipitously beginning in the mid-1970s, the protesters’ absolute levels of political participation also declined, as did the gap between them and the non-protesters.

Figure 1. Mean participation levels in three panel periods.
Notwithstanding that decline, the protesters still outdistanced the non-protesters by substantial margins well into middle age, a result similar to that reported for a comparison of civil rights activists and non-activists (McAdam, 1989). The habit of participation had become well-ingrained among the protesters at a young, impressionable age, even though much of that initial activity had been directed against establishment institutions and personnel. The gap remains even though the non-protesters, having commenced very slowly in 1965–1973, picked up their pace between 1973 and 1982. By doing so they followed the more traditional “starting up” curve that accompanies young adulthood. By contrast, the protesters began on an exceptionally high plane and then leveled off at a reduced pace. Still, the key point remains the continuing gap between the two groups, a gap that is larger in the final panel period than in the second period. An important consequence of this ongoing difference stems from the fact that the two groups grew to diverge appreciably in terms of political preferences, as shown below.

Marked Divisions on Political Issues

As noted earlier, the Vietnam war was the primary focus of student protest. We have no “before” measures regarding the Vietnam war, inasmuch as it was not a salient issue (at least for this sample) in the spring of 1965. However, repeated measures beginning in 1973 can be used to compare the two student groups. In 1973, and again in 1982 and 1997, this question was put to the respondents: “Looking back on the Vietnam war, do you think we did the right thing in getting into the fighting in Vietnam or should we have stayed out?” Not surprisingly, an overwhelming majority of the protesters in 1973 opposed the country’s having become involved, a proportion that scarcely changed over time—90%, 90%, and 86% for 1973, 1982, and 1997, respectively. Corresponding figures for the non-protesters were 64%, 73%, and 78%. Although a majority of the non-demonstrators also opposed involvement, they trailed the demonstrators by substantial margins early on (p < .001 for 1973 and 1982) but increased their opposition over time. Contrary, then, to conventional expectations about protesters moving toward non-protesters with the passage of time, much more movement occurred in the other direction on this signal issue. At bottom, the non-protesters began to reflect the secular shift in how the American public retrospectively viewed the Vietnam war.

Perhaps equally noteworthy, the reactions to the Vietnam war in terms of how it affected attitudes toward the American government differed markedly between

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7 Unless otherwise noted, all significance tests refer to product-moment correlations based on full distributions of the various measures.

8 The same was true with respect to the issue of women’s equality, but on several other issues first tapped in 1973 the protesters moved toward the non-protesters over time. However, large and statistically significant differences (p < .001) remained as late as 1997.
the two groups. Although they both affirmed in 1973 that U.S. involvement had caused them to change some of their views about the United States, that conviction applied to 86% of the demonstrators versus 56% of their non-demonstrating classmates (p < .001). Follow-up questions revealed overwhelming sentiments of governmental fallibility, increased distrust, and lack of confidence in the government among both groups. However, because more of the protesters survived the screening question, a logical inference is that their overall levels of distrust increased more than did those of the non-protesters.9

Taken together, the assessment of whether the United States should have become involved and the impact of this involvement on evaluations of the government serve to provide a clear distinction between protesters and non-protesters in terms of beliefs and affect. This distinction was repeated in a number of other attitudinal domains. Opposition to the Vietnam war motivated the majority of the protesters under consideration here, but issues of civil rights and civil liberties also permeated the protest movement. Indeed, the free speech and civil rights movements served as visible, immediate precursors to and models for the anti-war effort. Consequently, we should expect to observe attitudinal contrasts between protesters and non-protesters in the immediate aftermath of the protest era. The more intriguing topic is whether these contrasts endure.

Racial integration of the schools, and the federal government’s role in such integration, stood for many years as a touchstone of the civil rights movement. Although it has currently faded from view and is no longer a priority item on the liberal agenda, opinions regarding the issue may still be taken as an indicator of commitment to civil rights, especially for individuals coming of age during that era. After an initial filter, this integration question was asked in all four waves: “Do you think the government in Washington should see to it that white and black children go to the same schools, or stay out of this area as it is none of its business?”

Even as high school seniors, the future protesters favored integration more than did the non-protesters (Figure 2). The gap had enlarged appreciably by 1973, expanded into a chasm by 1982, and then contracted by 1997, although it remained quite significant both substantively and statistically. These fluctuating gaps originated exclusively in shifts on the part of the non-protesters. Quite remarkably, about three-fourths of the protesters favored integration at each time point. This rock-steady proportion persisted in the face of wide downward trends in the nation at large (Miller & Traugott, 1989, p. 163). Thus, involvement in the movement apparently shored up the protesters’ support for integration, or at least retarded its possible decay.10

9 This inference is borne out by looking at the 1973 scores on the standard NES five-item political trust measure. The two groups differed not at all in 1965, but a very discernible gap had opened up by 1973 (p < .001).
10 Although black respondents constitute slightly more of the protesters (10%) than of the non-protesters (4%), the same patterns hold when blacks are removed from the analysis.
Standing in contrast to the stable position of the former protesters, the non-protesters seem to have responded to changes in the political environment. With respect to this environment, note especially the low point reached in 1982 (Figure 2). The late 1970s and early 1980s marked a turn toward a more conservative public mood with respect to the federal government’s role in addressing racial inequality.\textsuperscript{11} Even though protesters were subject to the same shifts in the larger political environment, they remained untouched at the aggregate level. A competing hypothesis is that the enlarged gap of 1982 sprang from differential responses of the two groups to the presence of school-age children in their homes. No significant differences on this issue emerged within either group, however, according to such presence.

Additional evidence of the continuing division between protesters and non-protesters in the area of civil rights comes from responses to questions asked only

\textsuperscript{11} Public opinion on the government’s role in helping minorities to improve their economic position moved substantially in the negative direction in the 1978–1982 period. The early boomer cohort, in fact, shifted from a net positive posture to a decidedly negative one (see Miller & Traugott, 1989, pp. 162, 195).
in the 1997 survey. Former demonstrators proved more likely to agree that structural features were major reasons for “the economic and social problems that blacks face today,” and to disagree that the problems stem from individual shortcomings. Whereas 50% of the non-protesters cited lack of educational opportunities as a major reason for these problems, the same was true of 66% of the protesters. Similarly, 63% of the non-protesters agreed that lack of intelligence was not at all a reason, versus 82% of the protesters.

In evaluating these differences \((p < .001)\), it should be recalled that higher education is strongly and positively related to liberal stances on civil rights. Differences such as those just cited, as well as those above, illustrate the discriminating power of protest status.\(^\text{12}\)

A protest background also accompanies intragenerational differences in the area of civil liberties. The school prayer issue has waxed and waned over time. Although it was not a burning controversy during the protest era, we can use opinions about the issue as an indicator of civil libertarianism throughout the study period. The key part of the question read: “Which do you think—[public] schools should be allowed to start each day with a prayer, or religion does not belong in the schools?” Starting from a statistically insignificant difference in 1965, responses to this question opened up a sharp divide between protesters and non-protesters by 1973 (Figure 3). That divide widened even further in 1982 and held steady in 1997. This litmus test for the doctrine of separation of church and state shows no signs of losing its power to distinguish between demonstrators and non-demonstrators.

Additional evidence of lasting divisions in the civil liberties arena comes from comparisons based on a three-item civic tolerance index that consists of answers to questions about allowing a communist to take office, allowing anti-religious speeches in the community, and whether all nations should have the U.S. form of government. The percentage of each group scoring in the highest category on the 4-point index is shown in Table I for each survey wave.

As high school seniors, the future protesters and non-protesters were indistinguishable on this measure. Largely as a function of their college education, both groups scored dramatic gains in 1973, with the protesters leading the way by a substantial margin. The gap actually widened a bit in 1982 and then closed up somewhat in 1997, when the difference is still significant \((p < .01)\). Even though the items making up the index have lost some of the currency they possessed in 1973 and 1982, they still serve to sort out the protesters and non-protesters of yesteryear.

\(^{12}\) Small-scale, longitudinal studies of civil rights activists also point toward persistence of liberal views, though with some moderation at work. See Fendrich and Lovoy (1988) and Marwell, Aiken, and Demerath (1987). For a retrospective, intensive look at a small number of SDS and YAF activists from the 1960s, see Braungart and Braungart (1990) and Klatch (1999).
Figure 3. Opposition to prayers in school.

Table I. High Scores on the Civic Tolerance Index

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<tr>
<td>Non-protesters</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>70%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Protesters</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>84%</td>
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Besides these longitudinal results showing continuing disparities on civil liberties, questions asked in 1997 about more contemporary civil liberties issues also produced decided differences. One topic of unique salience concerns burning the U.S. flag, which constituted one of the most contentious protest acts during the anti-war movement. Recurrent proposals at various government levels mandate the prosecution of flag burners. True to their generally higher commitment to civil liberties, only half as many protesters (28%) as non-protesters (59%) supported that proposition (p < .001).

Partisan Polarization

The protest era helped to usher in a weakening of partisan loyalties as well as a change in the social composition of the two major parties. The two generation segments at hand have traveled strikingly divergent paths since that time. What had
been virtually no difference as the class of 1965 prepared to graduate from high school evolved into a massive divide by 1973, as assessed from distributions attached to the traditional National Election Studies (NES) party identification scale: Demonstrators had become far more Democratic and the non-demonstrators much less so (Figure 4). Coming as those 1973 declarations did in the wake of a liberal, dovish presidential campaign in 1972 by George McGovern on the Democratic side, we might have expected the division to recede later on, especially during the administrations of Presidents Reagan and Bush. That did not happen. As Figure 4 clearly shows, the aggregate gap has changed not at all since 1973 in terms of those identifying themselves as either strong or weak Democrats. Twice as many protesters as non-protesters claimed the Democratic party at each time point past 1965. The partisan division between these two generation units seems set in stone, and the aggregate stability levels resemble those found in two long-term studies of special populations (Alwin, Cohen, & Newcomb, 1991; Sears & Funk, 1999).

Another important contrast also appears in the party identification distribution. Over time, the positions of the two strata reversed themselves with respect to the claim of being Independents (including leaners), as shown in Table II. Protesters started out with a higher proportion of Independents, a positioning that had altered as early as 1973; the difference continued to expand into the 1990s. Their earlier

![Figure 4. Proportions of strong and weak Democrats.](image-url)
railing against “the system” notwithstanding, the former demonstrators developed a much stronger attachment to one of the key institutions in that system than did their non-demonstrating peers. The latter, in fact, had become extremely disaffected by 1973, an estrangement from which they never fully recovered. Ironically, then, the protesters best exemplify the historical tendency for partisan ties to strengthen over the life course. In a sense they are a writ-large version of Tom Hayden, an SDS founder, Chicago 7 member, and subsequent Democratic state legislator from California.

Presidential vote preferences also show massive differences in the partisan division that developed in the class of 1965. Figure 5 displays the reconstructed history of support for Democratic presidential candidates as a proportion of votes for the candidates of the two major parties. Two caveats are in order. First, the 1964 reported vote is necessarily based on how the students said they would have voted, inasmuch as only a handful were eligible. Second, only a minority of the votes cast pertained to elections within a year or two of the survey dates. A few votes were in all probability not actually cast, and some overreporting in favor of the winning candidates most likely took place.

These caveats aside, the post-1964 voting reports show that protesters never gave fewer than three-fifths of their votes to the Democratic candidate, whereas the non-protesters never gave more than one-half to that party. It would be difficult to envision a wider, more consistent set of vote choice differences among college-educated, predominantly white Americans drawn from the same birth cohort. As expected, the largest discrepancy occurred in the Democratic debacle of 1972, which opened up a 48% gap between the two segments. Differences in the two-party vote never fell below 33% in succeeding elections until the 1996 contest between Bill Clinton and Bob Dole. The 1992 and 1996 Democratic gains among the non-protesters almost certainly represent a process of identification between them and Bill Clinton, the first presidential nominee drawn (within a year or so) from their own birth cohort.

**Intergenerational Continuities**

As noted above, the research design enables a comparison of parents of protesters and non-protesters as well as the offspring of these two generation units. Personal interviews were held with at least one parent in the 1965 survey. Analysis
of the parent sample will be restricted to those whose children had obtained a college degree by the time of the second wave in 1973. These parents were then divided between those whose children reported no history of protest behavior in 1973 ($N = 288, 71\%$) and those who did claim such activity ($N = 117, 29\%$).13

During the 1997 wave of the political socialization project, self-administered questionnaire data were obtained from the children, aged 15 and above, of those members of the class of 1965 still in the panel. Of the 768 usable questionnaires, which represents a response rate of 54\%, some 233 came from the children of parents who had completed college as of 1973.14 These 233 cases were then apportioned according to those parents who had not been protesters ($N = 173, 74\%$) and those who had ($N = 60, 26\%$).15 Unfortunately, the $N$ for the protesters’ offspring is rather small, thereby limiting the statistical robustness of the findings.

13 So as to take advantage of a modestly larger $N$, the parental sample treated here takes in all those parents whose college degree offspring were surveyed in 1973, including those parents whose offspring dropped out in either 1982 or 1997.

14 Two-thirds of this total consists of multiple offspring from the same parent, thus raising the question of whether weights should be used. Because various analyses produced very few differences between weighted and unweighted results, the latter are reported here.

15 G2 protesters in general have been less prolific than non-protesters. As of 1982, when they were around 35 years of age, 45\% of the protesters had no children compared with 28\% of the non-protesters.
Consequently, somewhat more emphasis than usual will be placed on the patterns found in the results.

Armed with data from three generations, we can examine the degree to which political attributes associated with protest behavior appear to be passed on from generation to generation. Because there are now two sets of parents and two sets of offspring, it is more convenient and less confusing to relabel the sets of respondents in terms of generations. Standing at the center of these three generations are the high school seniors of 1965, Generation 2 (G2), bracketed on one end by their protesting and non-protesting parents, Generation 1 (G1), and on the other end by their protesting and non-protesting offspring, Generation 3 (G3).16 These three generations make up two sets of parent-child pairs, G1-G2 and G2-G3.

A number of comparisons can be made across the three generations, limited in part by the availability of the same or comparable measures. The question remains as to which dates of observation to use. Only one option exists for G3, namely 1997. Several options exist for the other two. For G1 the most plausible year is 1965 because it predates the beginning of G2’s transitional years from late adolescence to young adulthood. For G2, the 1997 observations offer a roughly similar life stage comparison with G1 (average age of 46 in 1965) and a contemporaneous comparison with G3. The objective here is to determine whether the political features associated with G2’s protest status have a precedent in the parental generation and a consequence in the offspring generation. Are there political traits that link families on the basis of the incidence of protest involvement among the students of G2?

Political Participation

As demonstrated above, protesters proved to be a participative lot over time and continued to outpace non-protesters. For purposes of comparing the three generations, a political participation index was constructed for each generation, based on the number of activities carried out over the past several years preceding the survey date. Because the three indices are based on variable time periods and a variable number of possible activities, it was necessary to standardize them in some fashion.17 For the present purposes, this was accomplished by taking the percentage of the protest and non-protest segments of each generation that fell into the (approximate) top quartile of the participation index for each generation.

Figure 6 depicts a 15% gap between G2 protesters and non-protesters in the upper participation quartile as of 1997. Although G1 also shows an advantage for

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16 Strictly speaking, comparisons of the G2 results with those of G3 should perhaps be limited to those G2 individuals who actually had a child represented in G3. Restricting the cases in this fashion would lower the analytic N and, in any event, does little to change the basic results for G2.
17 For G2 in the present analysis, the time specified was “since 1982,” the date of the most recent prior survey. For G1 in 1965 it was the “past 10 years or so,” and for G3 it was during “the past 4 years.”
Generation Units and the Student Protest Movement

Figure 6. Scores in the upper quartiles of the participation indexes in three generations, by protest status of student generation.

the protest parents, the edge is much smaller at 8%. Intergenerational continuity appears to be much stronger between G2 and G3; the absolute gap of 15% in the upper quartile for G3 is exactly the same as that for G2. Differences according to protest status also appear with respect to volunteer activities, a traditional indicator of civic virtue; 52% of the G3 offspring with protesting parents claimed such activity, versus 39% \( p < .05 \) for the comparison group. Making inferences from these fairly early soundings, then, it appears that a participation gap associated with its protest lineage will accompany G3 as it moves through adulthood.

Issue Positions

Protesters and non-protesters from G2 remained quite distinct from each other as of 1997 with respect to the two longstanding issues of school prayer and school integration. This intragenerational continuity is complemented by intergenerational similarity, as Figures 7 and 8 indicate. G1 parents disagreed with each other, as did G3 offspring (though noticeably less so on the integration issue), according to the protest status of G2. This continuity is all the more remarkable in view of how both issues have undergone some redefinition and as their salience has ebbed.

18 Significance tests in this instance represent \( \chi^2 \) results based on 2 \( \times \) 2 tables for each generation, where protest status and participation (low-high) are both dichotomies.
and flowed, to say nothing of the diverse influences that could interrupt and distort intergenerational persistence. At the same time, there is no mistaking the understandable fact that the largest gaps occurred in G2. Differential contact with a divisive political environment during their formative years served to perpetuate a sharp division in a fashion not applicable to either their parents or their children.

Additional information from the 1965 parent survey supports the contention about the connecting tissue of liberal issue orientations. An open-ended question asked respondents to describe what they were least proud of as Americans. Considering the nature of the times, it comes as no shock that one-half of the parents mentioned civil rights of one form or another. About one-half of those mentions contained a clear directional component, either decrying the unfavorable treatment of blacks or, infrequently, inveighing against them and the civil rights movement. Dividing the G1 parents according to the protest status of their children produces a striking result: 18% of those with non-protesting children volunteered pro-civil rights statements, compared with 32% of those having protesting offspring (p < .001). Moreover, all of the 14 parents making specific anti-civil rights statements came from the ranks of the non-protesting parents.

Opinions drawn from the 1997 surveys of G2 and G3 provide further support for intergenerational ideological continuity and enable lineage comparisons based
on more contemporary, salient issues than that of school integration. When asked whether a variety of groups in American society had too much, too little, or about the right amount of influence, the groups diverged considerably according to G2’s protest status (Table III).

Within each generation, those affiliated with protesting more often said that blacks and women have too little influence and that whites and Christian fundamentalists have too much. Levels of statistical significance range from .001 to .07 for G2 and from .004 to .22 for G3. These contrasting perceptions take on added meaning because they reflect beliefs about concrete groups deeply involved in contemporary political controversies.

Relatedly, G2 protesters denied more firmly than did non-protesters that equal rights were being pushed too far in this country (68% vs. 49%, \(p < .001\)). G3 divided itself in very similar fashion: 46% of the children coming from non-protesting homes disagreed with that assertion, whereas 63% of those growing up in protesting homes did likewise (\(p < .02\)). The net difference in the two generations was virtually the same: 19% for G2 and 17% for G3. Educational status alone could not be driving these sorts of results, because all the G2 respondents have at least a 4-year college degree.
Table III. Attributions of Group Influence

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<td>Non-protesters</td>
<td>Protesters</td>
<td>Non-protesters</td>
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<tr>
<td>Too little influence:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blacks</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>59%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much influence:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundamentalists</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Partisanship

As demonstrated earlier, a wide partisan gulf separated the erstwhile student protesters and non-protesters as late as 1997. That division is but dimly reflected in G1, where the parents of protesters held only a slight Democratic edge over the parents of non-protesters (Figure 9). This seemingly incongruous finding reflects in part the fact that dramatic changes in the social composition of the two political parties were just getting under way in the mid-1960s. In particular, a majority of white middle-age Southerners, who supplied a disproportionately low fraction of the student protesters, still considered themselves Democrats. Nevertheless, the significant point rests in the vivid aggregate contrast between G1 and G2, a contrast highly associated with whether G2 members had become involved in the protest movement. Although the gap in G3 is not as wide as for G2, it is still quite sizable (Figure 9). Growing up in an environment colored by parental involvement in the protest movement, however remotely in time, appears to have helped preserve the Democratic edge.

Conclusions

This paper began by noting that the protest era provides an exceptional opportunity to observe how divergent political experiences during the formative years of young adulthood can affect intragenerational divisions over a very long haul and how they may reflect on intergenerational divisions as well. As with all quasi-experimental designs, the conclusions to be drawn here are constrained by the fact that the protest experience was not randomly assigned to the original sample of high school seniors. Selection effects cannot be completely accounted for, but the availability of “pre-treatment” observations alleviated that weakness. It is also undoubtedly true that differences in later life experiences accompanied different responses to the protest era. Bearing these caveats in mind, a number of strong conclusions may be drawn.

Although the within-generation results were based on aggregate rather than individual-level analysis, they do speak to models of political learning and
development. More specifically, they address the impressionable years model, wherein considerable fluctuations occur during late adolescence and young adulthood, succeeded by a time of consolidation and crystallization, and then substantial continuity throughout most of the remaining years (Alwin, 1993; Sears, 1990). In accordance with this perspective, very sizable aggregate shifts transpired in young adulthood among both protesters and non-protesters, followed for the most part by far less movement. Of greater significance, the findings revealed substantial continuity in differences between the two groups with respect to political activity, partisanship, civil rights, and civil liberties, thereby supporting the claim that the protesters and non-protesters constitute distinctive generation units. The consequences of the proactive nature of the protesters can be readily discerned. It is more difficult to capture the elements making up the motives, interests, and reactions of the non-protesters as they went through the protest era, which is why they may be labeled as either a null or reactive set. In any event, the two groups emerged from the era with markedly different and enduring political profiles. A trajectory had been established.

The results also speak to intergenerational continuities and the family’s role in political socialization. Families represent a merging of imperfectly overlapping political predispositions, thus limiting the degree to which specific
political orientations are passed on, let alone the degree to which certain predispositions might, in the present case, inspire or reflect protest involvement. Nonetheless, substantial signs of ideological and participation continuities appeared in the three lineage generations at hand, defined in terms of the student generation’s protest status. This classification yielded sharper contrasts within the student generation than it did for their own parents and their own children. Any other outcome would have been surprising, given the experiential histories unique to the protest generation units, the differences in historical contexts characterizing the three generations, and the multiple influences acting on the parental and offspring generations. Although influenced by their parents, the two student groups—most particularly the protesters—carved out their own political identities. These distinctive identities, forged in great part by differential contact with the history surrounding the protest era, are being echoed in the offspring generation.

One of the most important theoretical and practical lessons to be drawn from the foregoing results is that intensive political participation during the formative years fosters lifelong engagement. Non-protesters followed the classic starting-up curve and made slow but steady progress. Nevertheless, as they approached the mid-century mark, they still lagged well behind their protesting classmates, who—despite their earlier anti-establishment deportment—maintained relatively high levels of conventional participation. In addition, the protesters’ children were proving to be considerably more active than those of the non-protesters.

These findings about participation have relevance for recent efforts to encourage political participation among adolescents and young adults through service learning and volunteer work. The short-term results are mixed, and long-term studies are rare to nonexistent. Unless such activities include some form of group involvement or mobilization, it seems problematic that they could produce the kind of sustained high activity levels that stem from early, concrete involvement in the politics of mobilization and collective action, especially over emotionally charged issues (DeMartini, 1983). Political skills, experience, commitment, and networking are more likely to develop, flourish, and persist as a result of performance in manifestly political arenas. Admittedly, youth-galvanizing events such as the civil rights movement, the Vietnam war, and the 1972 election occur with unpredictable frequency. However, early involvement in proto-collective action such as that represented by school politics and organizational endeavors also leads to heightened levels of future political participation (e.g., Beck & Jennings, 1982; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995, pp. 416–462; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). Thus, the challenge is to develop more institutionalized and regularized ways of instilling the habit of participation.

19 For a recent symposium, see “Service Learning in Political Science,” PS: Political Science and Politics, 33, 615–649.
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