DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 306 176 SO 019 854

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TITLE The Social and Civic Attitudes, Beliefs and Values of American Youth.
PUB DATE 10 Oct 88
NOTE 39p.; Paper presented at the International Conference on the Development of Civic Responsibility among Youth (Urbino, Italy, October 10, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; *Aspiration; Children; *Citizenship; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Objectives; *Political Attitudes; Research Reports; Responsibility; *Social Attitudes; *Student Attitudes; World Problems; Young Adults; *Youth

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a portrait of youth in the United States--one that is at odds with media images painting a gloomy picture of a deeply troubled and irresponsible younger generation. Drawing upon numerous studies, Branson states that more students are staying in school longer, fewer drop out before earning a diploma, and fewer young girls become premature parents. U.S. citizens of all ages--children, adolescents, and adults--continue to believe that there is no society, no country quite like their own. Patriotism, developing in early childhood and continuing through adulthood, plays an important role in our lives. Young and old, we tend to condemn those who espouse "extreme" views or non-centrist tendencies. Increasing numbers of young people are calling themselves independent in politics. Many political scientists attribute this to the addition of new issues to the political agenda and the inability of the established parties to respond. Youth in particular, exhibit opinions and beliefs about a wide variety of contemporary issues. Several figures detail the attitudes of elementary to college students on issues affecting the United States and the world. As future adults and U.S. leaders, the youth of the 1980s are a determined and pragmatic lot. They aspire to advanced educations, successful careers, material comforts, marriage, families, and friends that they can rely on. While concerned with particular issues, they shrink from identifying with political parties or doctrinaire positions; they have few lofty notions about "changing the world." Data is presented in numerous graphs and figures, and 20 references are cited in footnotes. (GEA)

THE SOCIAL AND CIVIC ATTITUDES, BELIEFS AND VALUES OF AMERICAN YOUTH

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A paper delivered to an International Conference on
The Development of Civic Responsibility Among Youth

The University of Urbino
Urbino, Italy

October 10, 1988

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE SOCIAL CIVIC ATTITUDES, BELIEFS AND VALUES OF AMERICAN YOUTH

Margaret Stimmann Branson

INTRODUCTION AND STATISTICAL PORTRAIT OF AMERICAN YOUTH

Any attempt to describe American youth and their social and civic attitudes, beliefs and values must be undertaken with some degree of trepidation. American youth, or that portion of the population of the United States between the ages of 15 and 24, now number approximately 43 million. Considerable diversity is bound to obtain in such a large group; American youth, to be sure, are not a homogeneous lot. Even so, thanks to the advances in public opinion polling, scientific sampling techniques, survey research and sustained scholarly interest in assessing the attitudes, beliefs and values of the young, it is possible to draw some defensible generalizations about American youth.

Before examining some specific aspects of what youth believe and value, an overview or collective portrait of the young in the United States probably is in order. That collective portrait

is at odds with media images painting a gloomy picture of a deeply troubled and irresponsible younger generation. A recently released (1988) study of non-college youth commissioned by the William T. Grant Foundation concluded "...the common portrait of deeply troubled youth is not only misleading, but harmful in itself. We ought to correct the record out of a sense of fairness, as well as accuracy... More students are staying in school longer, earning both high school diplomas and college degrees. Fewer are dropping out before earning their diplomas. More are employed, albeit in part-time jobs. Fewer young girls are becoming parents prematurely. Drug abuse, while still distressingly frequent, is less common than was in the late 1970's. Crime and homicides are down somewhat from the highs of the past decade."[1].

Other studies drawing on the latest, statistically reliable surveys tend not only to support the Commission's conclusion, they afford further insight into the condition of American youth today.[2]. Here in staccato fashion are some of their more salient findings:

- The number of American youth is shrinking dramatically. Between 1980 and 1996, the youth population, ages 15-24, is expected to fall 21 percent, from approximately 43 to 34 million. Young people as a percentage of the nation's population also will decline from 18.8 to 13 percent.

- These falling numbers will drastically alter the characteristics of the American labor pool, higher education enrollments, armed forces recruiting, the nature of consumer markets, and crime rates, among others.

- Of young adults aged 25-29, 86 percent are high school graduates, twice the percentage

of 1940. Twenty-two percent of all 25-29 year-olds have completed four years of college, nearly double the 1963 figure and four times the 1940 percentage.

- More than half of all youth are still living at home. By contrast, living alone in a non-family household is becoming less frequent; the number of youth doing so fell nearly 25 percent between 1980 and 1985.

- Three of every four 16-24 year-olds worked for pay sometime during 1985 and about 30 million had individual income. Even so, unemployment remains a serious problem for young people, Early in 1987, nearly 13 percent of 16-24 year-olds in the labor force were unemployed, with black youth experiencing much higher unemployment than white youth, regardless of their education level. Hispanic youth also experience higher unemployment than non-Hispanics.

- Today's youth are marrying later, and having far fewer children. At ages 18-19, half are in school and two-thirds are in the work force. Nearly half will wait until they are 24 years of age or older to marry (23.3 years for women, 25.5 for men). More than half of all women 22-24 years old have yet to bear their first child. The percentage of unmarried 20-24 year-old women more than doubled from 28 to 58 percent from 1960 to 1986.

- The high school dropout rate continues its decline, but students from poor families, regardless of race, are three to four times more likely to drop out than those from affluent households. Hispanic youth are twice as likely to drop out of school before graduation as non-Hispanic teenagers.

- The problems facing minority youth will take on even greater importance as they account for larger and larger proportions of the youth population; the number of black youths is declining at a slower rate than whites, while the population of Hispanic youth is increasing. The rising proportion of comparatively disadvantaged youth from minority populations, especially the five percent who are immigrants, presents special challenges.

- More than three-quarters of the students in high school say they, when eligible, will vote in most elections. But less than half of the eligible 18-22 year-olds actually registered to vote in 1986. Of those who did register, as many as 40 percent described themselves as independents.

- Today's youth will live longer than any other generation of Americans. A white woman of age 20 can expect to live to 80 and a white man to age 73. A substantial life expectancy gap persists between blacks and whites.

Statistical data such as that just presented is useful for obtaining a kind of "macro" view of American youth, but we need to sample the burgeoning political research to ascertain the attitudes, beliefs and values of American youth.

SYSTEM SUPPORT, PATRIOTISM AND NATIONAL PRIDE

Americans continue to express a degree of patriotism that is remarkable when compared to other industrial societies. From the beginning, Americans imposed on themselves a self-conscious identity distinct from the European world. And, according to Michael Vlahos, Director of the Center for the Study of Foreign Affairs, U.S. Department of State, Americans to this day continue to seek to strengthen their self-described uniqueness.

> Americans believe that there has never been a society quite like our own. This American 'exceptionalism' suggests that we are a people graced with unusual natural endowments. We think of ourselves literally as a 'people of plenty.' But our mythology also reminds us that this land was a great 'untamed wilderness,' a 'land of savagery.' It was the exceptional will, unity and vision of the American people and their beliefs that transformed the landscape. The twin icons of

> national bounty and national achievement have inspired two senses of an American national purpose; a conviction that the United States should serve as an example to the world, that America and its people are the model for all human development; and an impulse to change the world for good, to become the active agent of human progress.[3].

Public opinion poll after public opinion poll and survey after survey tend to bear out Vlahos' observations. Americans of all ages — children, adolescents and adults — continue to believe that there is no society, no country quite like their own.

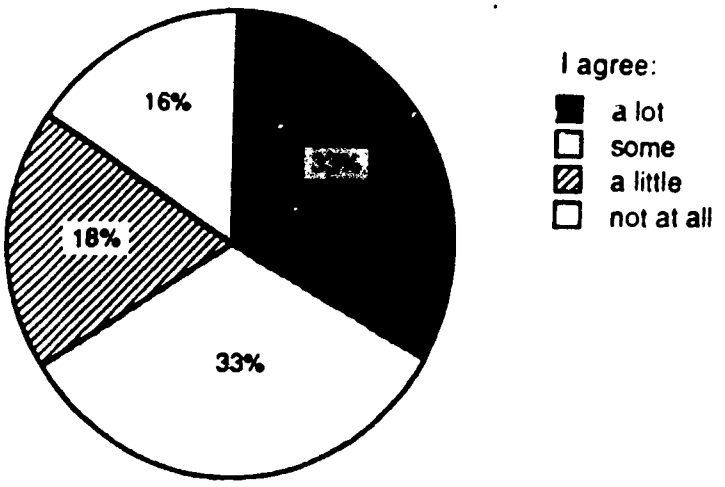
The literature on political socialization suggests that pride in country and diffuse support develop in early childhood, well before the development of more specific opinions or even the acquisition of specific political information.[4]. Two recent canvasses, The Weekly Reader National Surveys on Citizenship and Government conducted in 1984 and again in 1988, testify to that literature. In The Weekly Reader surveys with as many as 500,000 children participating, 66 percent of the students in grades 4 through 6 agreed "a lot" or "some" with the statement that "No other country in the world is as good as the United States." When the children were asked why the United States is a great country, 87 percent of them said it was great because it was a free country. Only 4 percent attributed its greatness to the fact that it is a rich country, while only 9 percent associated its greatness with the fact that the United States was "my home".[5]. (See Figures I and II).

FIGURE I.

Our Country

No other country in the world is as good as the United States

Grades 4-6

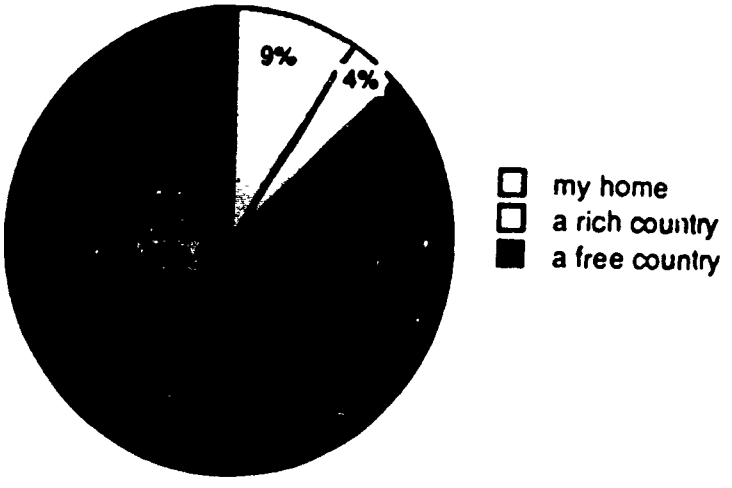


This question was asked in grades 4-6 only. Students generally agree that the United States is the best country in the world.

FIGURE II.

The United States is a great country because it is

Grades 2-6



Most students in grades 2-6 say the United States is a great country because it is a free country.

Source: The Weekly Reader National Survey on Citizenship and Government, Spring, 1988.

Surveys of patriotism, diffuse support and political affect have demonstrated that positive feelings about the United States persist into adolescence. The 1981 Norman-Harris survey of over 160,000 youth aged 13 to 18 years of age found that nine of every ten teenagers had positive feelings about the United States. Further, that figure was consistent regardless of age, race or gender. An extensive and wide ranging survey of some 1,500 students conducted in 1983 under the auspices of the National Association of Secondary School Principals showed secondary school students to be a fundamentally loyal and supportive -- but not a rabidly patriotic -- group of citizens. The students exhibited a basic faith in American society and a general, if not profound, level of confidence in its institutions.[6] The dimension of that study which deals with students' views on loyalty and dissent, is of particular interest, because it illustrates increasing political sophistication. In 1974, a fifth of the students said that a person could not both disagree with the government and be considered loyal to the country. Current student opinion on this issue more closely resembles the 1960's viewpoint; a solid 95 percent of the teenagers today agree that loyalty to the country and disagreements with government policy do not cancel one another out.[7]

Patriotism, diffuse support and political affect also are hallmarks of American adults. Symbols like the flag and campaign speeches about patriotism figure largely in American elections, even though shows of patriotism rarely are part of democratic elections elsewhere in the industrialized world. Americans of

all ages are inordinately proud of their nation, as public opinion polls and surveys consistently reveal. In 1981, the Roper Poll learned that Americans, regardless of age, were exceptionally proud of their country. (See Figure III).

FIGURE III.

Pride in Country

Question: Earlier on in American history, many people around the world thought the United States was the very best place in the world to live. Do you think it still is, or not?

Still the best place to live	90%
Is not	8%

Source: Roper Poll (1981)

In 1985, a whopping 97 percent of those polled by the New York Times/CBS News declared themselves to be "quite proud" or "very proud" of the United States. Their exuberant patriotic sentiments are in contrast to a moderate declaration of national pride expressed by citizens in other Western European nations.[8]. (See Figure IV).

FIGURE IV.

Feelings of National Pride

(in percent)

	United States	Great Britain	West Germany	France
Very proud	87	58	20	42
Quite proud	10	30	42	39
Not very proud	2	9	21	13
Not at all proud	– [a]	2	11	2
No opinion	1	1	6	4
Total	100	100	100	100
(N)	(1581)	(1001)	(987)	(965)

[a] Less than 1 percent

Source: Citizen Politics in Western Democracies.

LEFT AND RIGHT, LIBERAL AND CONSERVATIVE ORIENTATIONS

Most Americans do not routinely use the left-right spectrum to identify themselves, nor do they use those terms to refer to a richly articulated and overarching philosophy of government. On the contrary, most Americans, including the young, tend to condemn those who espouse what they consider to be "extreme" views or non-centrist tendencies. In that respect, Americans are similar to the British and West Germans. Most citizens of those nations also tend to think of themselves as ideological moderates.

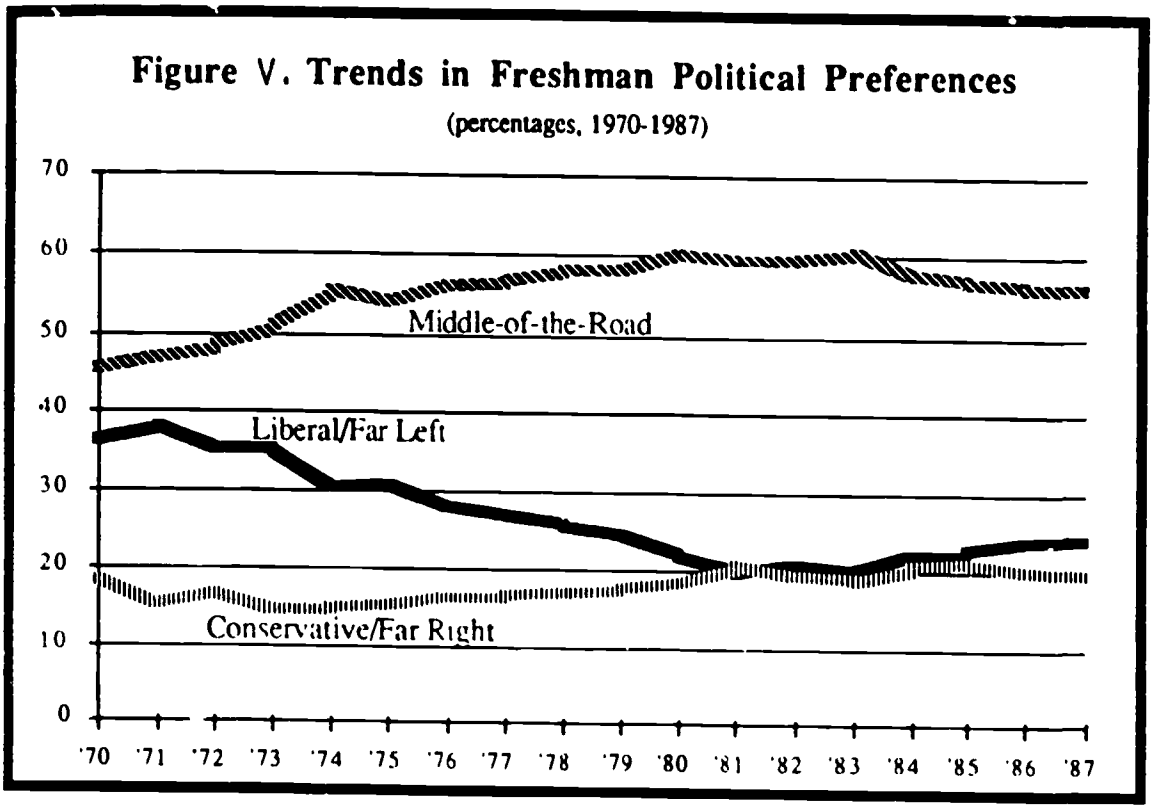
Americans, if they attempt to identify their overall political orientations, are more likely to use the terms liberal and conservative rather than left or right. But many high school age youth in the United States have difficulty even with the labels liberal and conservative. In a 1983 survey of high school youth, 40 percent of them said they couldn't place their views on

the liberal-conservative range at all, because they did not know if their perspectives were liberal, conservative or something entirely different. Those who did identify their leanings were more likely to be male or younger, and they were more likely to describe their politics as conservative. Conservative designations, however, were neither related to particular regions of the United States, nor were they more prevalent among students from higher family incomes.[9]

The results of a 1987 report of national normative data on the characteristics of students attending American colleges and universities as first-time, full-time freshmen, were not strikingly different from the high school survey. Students' self-identification of their general political posture showed a slight movement away from the political center, continuing a trend begun in Fall, 1982. Some 56 percent of the entering freshmen students described themselves as being politically "middle-of-the road," down from a high of 60.3 percent in 1983. This decline in the "middle-of-the-road" category was reflected in a slight gain in the liberal position coupled with a slight decline in the percentage of students who identified themselves as conservatives. Those shifts were very modest, however. The proportion of freshmen who identify themselves as politically conservative or far right has changed little in the past five years, despite the continuing public discussion about the apparent conservative mood on college campuses. The proportion of students identifying themselves as liberal has been rising

slowly in recent years, up to 22.2 percent of the 1987 freshmen. That is a substantial gain over the low of 18.1 percent recorded in 1981. However, the proportion of "liberal" freshmen is still well below the peak of 35.3 posted in 1971.[10] (See also Figure V).

FIGURE V.



Source: The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1987

Some political scientists find the unwillingness or inability of American youth to ascribe liberal/left or conservative/right labels to themselves disturbing. W. Russell Neumann, for example, attributes that unwillingness to a failure

to understand those conceptual yardsticks for measuring political life. Neuman concluded from extensive depth interviews which involved all age groups that

> ...only one in five citizens are able to define liberalism and conservatism in enough breadth to subsume multiple issues in the full sense of an anchoring concept, and only half of them, or about 10 percent of the sample, offer acceptable definitions. This top 10 percent exhibit some sophistication in their response by identifying such things as a posture toward change, government involvement in social problems or private enterprise, and issues of socialism or capitalism. The remainder of those who attempt a definition tend to tie it to a simple and concrete example of a particular issue or to the narrow spend-save dimension. But the more typical group, the other 80 percent, offer much narrower definitions or exhibit considerable confusion.[11].

Very similar conclusions were reached in a series of surveys of all age groups conducted in 1987 by The Gallup Organization and the American Enterprise Institute for Times Mirror Company. On a scale of one to ten, people were asked the extent to which they self-identify with 16 terms.[12].

Americans strongly identified (8-10 on the scale) with these terms by the following percentages:

FIGURE VI.

Terms With Which Americans Strongly Identify Themselves

Anti-Communist	70%
A religious person	49%
A supporter of civil rights movement	47%
A supporter of peace movement	46%
An environmentalist	39%
A supporter of the anti-abortion movement	32%
A Democrat	31%
A supporter of the women's movement	29%

A conservative	27%
A supporter of the National Rifle Association	27%
A union supporter	27%
Pro-Israel	25%
A Republican	20%
A liberal	19%
A supporter of the gay rights movement	8%

Source: Times Mirror Study of the American Electorate, 1987.p.12.

Gallup pollsters made a special point of the fact that although people say these terms identify them, the overall pattern of their responses may contradict their self-identification. Further, their responses to particular items do not always accord with the self-ascribed labels of liberal or conservative.

POLITICAL PARTY IDENTIFICATION

Studies in the United States document a decline in the public's identification with political parties and growing disenchantment with parties in general. The decline in partisanship among younger cohorts began in the mid 1960's, and it occurred among both the high-school-educated and the college-educated, but not among those with only a grade school education.[13] Eschewing party labels, increasing numbers of youth call themselves independent. Youth Action, a Washington, D.C.-based organization devoted to encouraging youth activism, reports that as many as 40 percent of first-time voters in the 18-to-22 age bracket are currently registered as independents.[14]

Even the very young demonstrate a reluctance to identify with a particular political party. Students in grades four, five

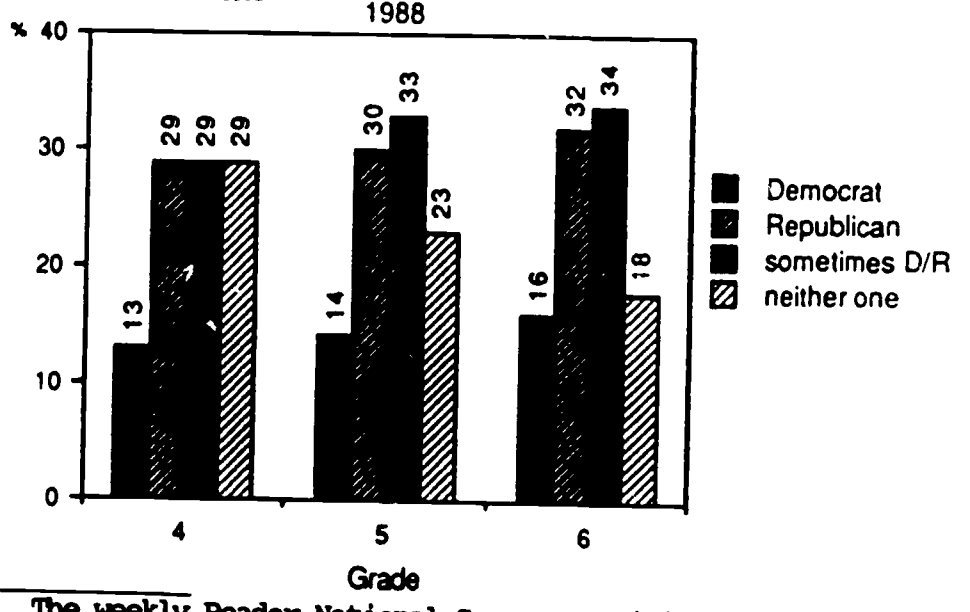
and six were asked about their party preferences in nationwide surveys conducted in 1984 and again in 1988. Students were asked, "If you could vote, which would it be? Democrat, Republican, sometimes Democrat and sometimes Republican, or neither one." Many students -- more than half -- said that if they could vote they would be independent -- sometimes Democrat and sometimes Republican or neither one. Older students were more likely than younger students to chose one of the major parties. More than twice as many students chose the Republican party as chose the Democratic party. There also was a substantial increase over the 1984 survey in the number of students who said they would be Republicans.[15] (See Figure VII).

FIGURE VII.

Citizenship

If you could vote, which would you be?

A. Democrat
B. Republican
C. sometimes Democrat, sometimes Republican
D. neither one



Source: The Weekly Reader National Survey on Citizenship and Government, Spring, 1988.

The tendency to view one's self as an independent is corroborated by other studies. If today's high school students were to maintain the political party affiliations they now profess through their adult years, all future elections will be decided by the undeclared voters. Interestingly enough, the so-called "gender gap" in the Republican party may be borne out in some measure among present day high school age students. Significantly more male students than female students reported themselves as Republicans, whereas the student Democrats were composed of males and females in equal numbers. However, given that more females than males indicated that they were undecided about party affiliation, the currently lower rate of student identification with the Republicans may only be a function of time. A 1986 Time/Yankelovich poll found that 64 percent of the "baby boomers", or the cohort aged 32-45, say they have become "more conservative" in their political views since the 1960's. Four recent surveys by the Americans Talk Security project found that the oldest groups in the American population are now the most Democratic while the youngest (18 to 24) are the most Republican. The middle-aged baby boomers are somewhere in the middle.[16].

The decline in identification with political parties has not extinguished the desire of the young to hold public office. While only about six percent of American teenagers report they would be "very interested" in running for an elected office, another 30 percent qualify their opinion by saying they "might" be willing to run for office. Interestingly enough, careers in

politics now seem to be more appealing to the female students of the 1980's. Today's male and female students, in equal numbers, indicate an interest in seeking public office, but in 1974 the number of males interested outnumbered females by a two-to-one margin.[17].

There is considerable agreement among scholars who have examined the trend toward weakened allegiance to political parties that it has important political consequences. This trend is probably at least partially responsible for a parallel decline in voter turnout. The decline in the trend of voter turnout has been monotonically downward after 1960 until 1980, when turnout was 52.6 percent. The largest decrease from 60.9 percent to 55.2 percent came from 1968 to 1972, and it can be attributed largely to the extension of the franchise nationwide to persons 18, 19 and 20 years of age. The youngest persons eligible to vote have always had lower voter turnout than older persons, and since 1972, the lowest turnout has been among those 18 to 20 years old. Many explanations for the failure of the young to vote have been offered. M. Margaret Conway of the University of Maryland observes in her study Political Participation in the United States:

> Younger citizens are less likely to participate than are middle-aged citizens. Several social characteristics interact with age to produce this effect. One is marital status: a lower proportion of those who are under the age of 25 are married, and persons who are not married are less likely to be involved in politics.... A second reason why young citizens participate in politics less is their high rate of mobility. Individuals who have lived in an area a relatively short time are less likely to vote, and younger citizens move more frequently than do older citizens.[18].

The role of community ties in political participation is strikingly evident when voting turnout rates among college students are compared with those of non-students of the same age group. Community norms within the college student community tend to promote voting participation. Social interaction and integration into the campus community further encourage participation among students. On campus, special efforts usually are made to register students. But after students leave the college environment, a drop in political participation rates occur.[19].

Before leaving the subject of declining political identification, some attention needs to be directed to more recently identified reasons for the phenomenon. Many political scientists now believe that these trends are at least partially the result of the addition of new issues to the political agenda, the difficulties the established parties have had in responding to these issues and the changing characteristics of contemporary publics. As a result of his study of public opinion and political parties in the United States, Great Britain, West Germany and France, Russell J. Dalton of Florida State University concluded that more issue-oriented, less partisan publics are emerging not only in the United States but in all of the Western democracies.

> Unsophisticated voters once relied on social group cues and party leaders as a basis for making political decisions. Because of the dramatic spread of education and information sources, more citizens are now able to deal with the complexities of politics and make their own political decisions. Consequently, issues are becoming a more important basis for voting behavior as the influence of traditional party and group

allegiances wanes. The new style of citizen politics includes a more sophisticated issue-oriented public.[20]

Other scholars, while agreeing that the public, particularly in the United States, is becoming more issue-oriented, are less sure about the public's sophistication. His 1986 study of knowledge and opinion in the American electorate led W. Russell Neuman to conclude

> Most citizens do have carefully developed opinions on some issues and partial or vague opinions on most issues. Cautious survey research, after offering respondents every opportunity to volunteer that they do not have an opinion on a particular issue, finds routinely that 80 percent of the respondents insist on offering one. Furthermore, these opinion distributions are stable in the aggregate over time and correlate in modest degree with the traditional demographic and behavioral variables.... Perhaps these phenomena could best be termed quasi-attitudes. The measured public opinion on an issue is a mixture of carefully thought out, stable opinions, half-hearted opinions, misunderstandings, and purely random responses.[21]

STUDENTS' ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS ABOUT CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

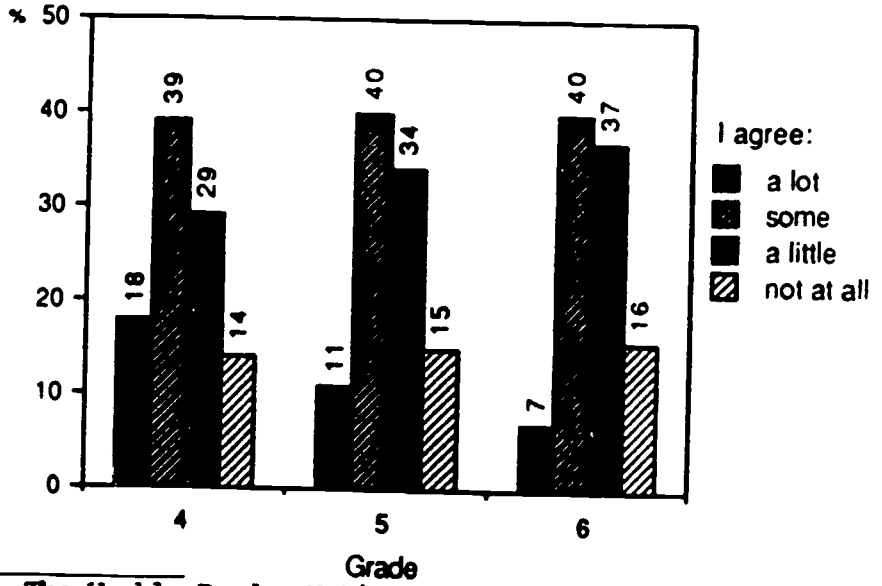
Although Americans in general, and youth in particular, seldom exhibit adherence to any one particular set of political perspectives, they do have opinions, attitudes and beliefs about a wide variety of contemporary issues. Space limitations prevent extended discussion of particular issues in this paper, but significant findings from recent, reliable polls will be reported.

First, let us examine the attitudes and beliefs of the youngest of students surveyed. In a nationwide survey conducted in 1984 and repeated in 1988, students in grades four, five and

six were asked to indicate their agreement with the statement "People in the government can almost always be trusted to do what is right." The majority of students in fourth grade agreed at least somewhat that people in the government can generally be trusted to do what is right. However, as grade level increases, the proportion of students who agree a lot with that statement declines precipitately.[22] (See Figure VIII).

FIGURE VIII.

People in the government can almost always be trusted to do what is right.



Source: The Weekly Reader National Survey on Citizenship and Government, Spring, 1988.

Elementary school children also were asked to indicate whose job they thought it should be to do the most about specific problems or issues currently of concern in the United States. The vast majority -- some 78 percent -- view the government as having special responsibility for keeping the country out of war. A majority also agreed that government bears special

responsibility for protecting the nation from its enemies and for keeping prices down. On those items, in particular, the higher the grade level, the more inclined the students were to put responsiblity on government. (See Figure IX).

FIGURE IX.

Whose job should it be to do the *most* about each of these problems? (Check *one* box for each.)

	It should be the job of:		
	government	other groups	all citizens
Providing work for all who want to work	44%	21%	35%
Fighting crime	30%	31%	39%
Protecting our country from its enemies	59%	14%	27%
Keeping prices down	55%	28%	17%
Providing shelter for the homeless	44%	23%	33%
Protecting the rights of blacks and other minorities	50%	18%	32%
Protecting the rights of women	40%	22%	38%
Providing a good education for all	49%	20%	31%
Keeping our country out of war	78%	7%	15%
Fighting pollution	20%	21%	59%

Source: The Weekly Reader National Survey on Citizenship and Government, Spring,1988.

When elementary school students were asked how good a job they thought the government was doing on each of the problems identified in Figure VII, they gave the government a mixed report card. The majority of students believed that the government is doing quite a good job of keeping the United States out of war and protecting the country from its enemies. A majority also believed that the government is doing a good or very good job of providing a good education for all, and of protecting the rights of women, blacks and minorities. They are less laudatory about the response of the government to other problems. Many students think the government is doing only a fair job, or even a poor job, of providing shelter for the homeless, providing work for all who want to work, fighting pollution, and keeping prices down. Many younger students tend to think the government is doing a good job of fighting crime, while older students tend to think the government is not doing quite so well. In fact, in nearly every instance, older children are inclined to take a less sanguine view of government performance. When the 1984 and 1988 surveys on the same issues are compared, however, students show increased satisfaction with government performance. They tend to think government was doing a better job in 1988 of keeping the United States out of war, protecting the country from its enemies, protecting the right of women and providing work for all who want to work.[23].

Secondly, let us examine the results of surveys of American teenagers or high school age youth. One of the most

comprehensive studies of high school students ever undertaken was conducted under the auspices of the National Association of Secondary School Principals in 1983. Students were asked to register their views about social, military and moral issues and about criminal justice and education.[24]. (See Figure X).

High school students' views of social issues -- health, jobs, and housing, in particular -- were closer to the traditionally liberal outlook. It should be noted, however, that the survey questions were phrased without mention of financial costs. In the "guns versus butter" debate, the majority of students chose "butter". Interestingly enough, however, a majority of students simultaneously held a belief that seemed to run counter to their choice of spending money on social rather than military needs. About 54 percent of the students said that nuclear weapons were necessary to protect the United States. As the pollsters observed, "Judging by their expressed support for a number of costly military and social programs, students apparently share in the politicians' perpetual quandary of how to sort out all of the nation's competing demands on its fiscal resources."[25].

The issues which most severely split the opinions of the high school students surveyed were also the issues that are most divisive among the American public at large. Issues dealing with morality, sex and drugs evoked the greatest range of views as the responses recorded in Figure X. reveal.

FIGURE X.
Views on Contemporary Issues

	Percent of Students				
	Strongly Agree	Mildly Agree	Mildly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Answer
I. Social Issues					
a. Money should be spent on social needs rather than military needs	22.1	35.8	28.1	10.5	3.4
b. Adequate health care for all should be provided through a national health plan	43.9	41.0	9.1	2.8	3.2
c. There should be a guaranteed annual income to insure every citizen of the U.S. a decent and adequate standard of living	31.1	40.0	15.7	10.4	2.8
d. The government must provide safe, decent, and sanitary housing for all Americans, whatever the cost	23.9	38.6	23.7	11.0	2.9
e. If people are unable to find jobs, it is their own fault	5.3	22.5	36.3	30.6	5.4
II. Military Issues					
a. Nuclear weapons are necessary to protect the U.S.	21.2	32.6	22.4	21.3	2.5
b. A military draft is necessary to keep U.S. defense strong.	23.5	8.5	53.8	0	14.3
c. Draft registration should not be required during peacetime.	16.6	17.8	51.7	0	13.9
d. It would be a good idea to have a system of national service for both sexes which would require spending at least two years with such agencies as the Peace Corps, VISTA, etc	7.1	27.1	35.5	27.0	3.3
III. Criminal Justice					
a. The death penalty is an acceptable form of punishment for some crimes	48.6	29.8	10.6	9.3	1.8
b. We need stricter laws to control the use of the insanity plea.	67.3	24.5	5.6	1.9	0.8
c. Laws should be enacted to control handgun sales and ownership	41.3	27.0	15.6	14.7	1.7
IV. Education					
a. Community control of schools is the best way to provide the best education	21.2	48.0	21.0	7.1	2.7
b. A bilingual education program should be offered in areas where a high percentage of families are non-English-speaking	36.3	43.1	11.8	5.9	3.0
c. Local school officials should be able to censor the books and materials to be used in their schools	63.9	34.5	0	0	1.5
V. Moral Issues					
a. Sex education should be done by parents, not in the schools	20.1	15.1	50.5	0	14.3
b. Abortion should remain legalized	21.8	30.4	15.6	31.6	0.6
c. Pornographic materials should be legally available to adults	10.3	33.9	23.9	30.6	1.3
d. The legal drinking age should be raised to 21 in all states	34.5	22.0	20.6	22.0	0.9
e. The purchase and use of marijuana should be legalized	16.8	10.5	58.6	0	14.0

Source: The Mood of American Youth.

Student attitudes about issues related to criminal justice also reflected a mixture of liberal and conservative viewpoints. High school age students definitely believed that the death penalty is an acceptable form of punishment for some crimes, with almost half of them characterizing their support of the death penalty as a very firmly held position. Student defense of stricter laws governing handguns and the insanity plea also indicated that youth today are concerned not only with the incidence of crime but with its prevention and punishment as well.

American teenagers were asked their views on three issues facing the nation's schools: book censorship, bilingual education and community control of education. Surprisingly, almost 99 percent of the students said local school officials should be able to censor books and materials used in their schools. Four-fifths of the students supported bilingual education in areas where a high percentage of families are non-English speaking. Finally, almost 70 percent of the students registered support for local control of schools as the best means of providing a good education.[26.]

When high school students were asked to name the most important world problems, they cited the threat of nuclear disaster and war as today's foremost global issues. (See Figure XI).

Figure XI.

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' ASSESSMENT
OF THE MOST IMPORTANT WORLD PROBLEMS

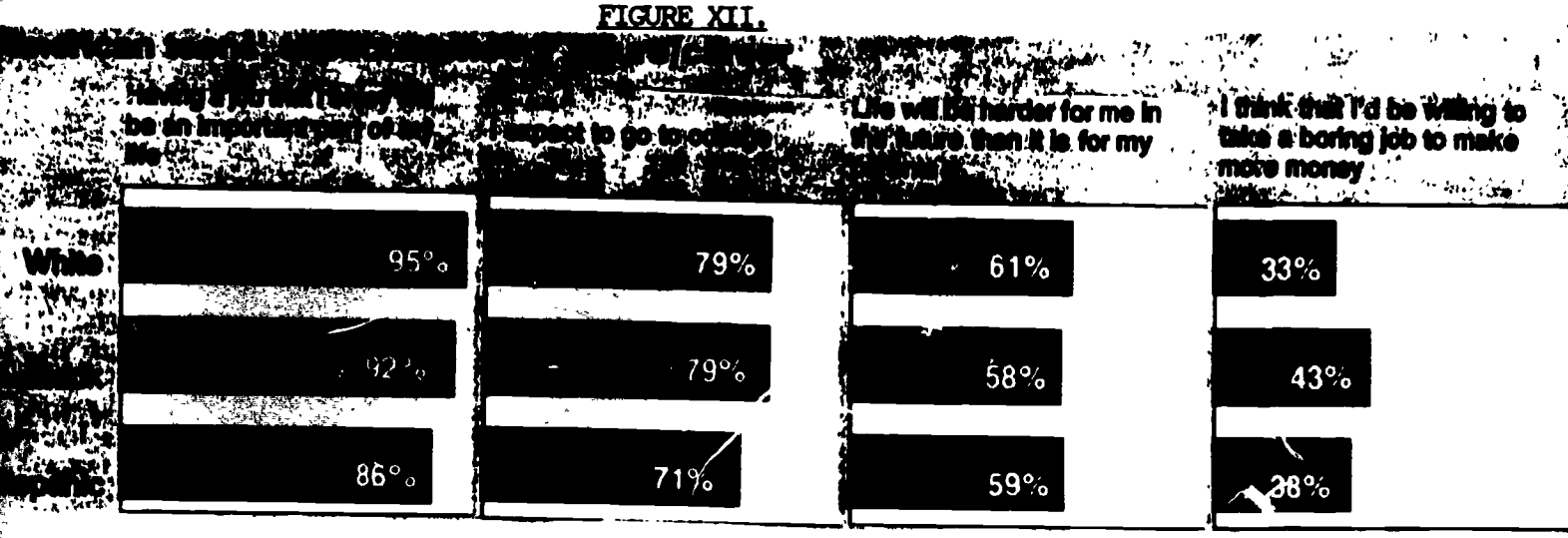
	Problem Areas	% Students
1.	Nuclear Disaster	31.7
2.	Threat of World War III	21.3
3.	Poverty	15.1
4.	Overpopulation	10.5
5.	Environmental Problems	6.5
6.	Energy	4.3
7.	Unemployment	1.5
8.	Inflation/Economy	1.0

Source: The Mood of American Youth.
(Responses to a NASSP Survey, 1983.)

Two more recent, but less extensive studies of the attitudes and beliefs of high school age youth also are worth noting. USA TODAY polled 1,154 delegates to the National Association of Student Councils convention held in June, 1988. The results of the poll showed that student leaders are becoming more liberal. They took stronger liberal positions than three years ago on issues such as abortion, gun control, health care, school prayer and the arms race. Only 40 percent favored banning abortions, down from 44 percent three years ago. The vast majority -- 77 percent -- backed gun control, up from 74 percent in 1985. Eighty-six percent of the student leaders thought government should guarantee all citizens adequate health care, up from 82 percent in 1985. A majority -- 63 percent -- said that students who want to pray in school should be allowed to do it, but that was down from 73 percent three years ago. Finally, more than three-fourths of the student council representatives wanted the federal government to cut military spending and use the money for social problems.[27]

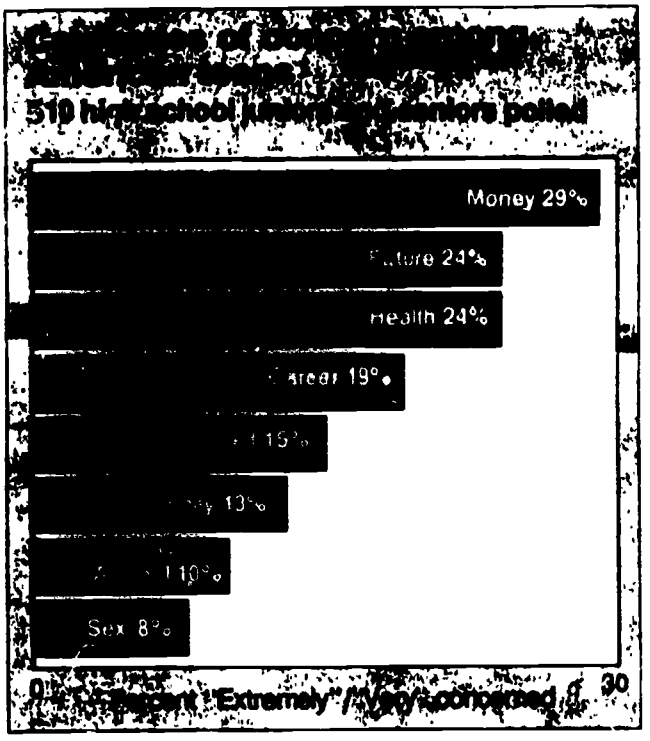
The American Home Economic Association (AHEA), in Spring, 1988, asked 510 high school junior and seniors in 15 urban, suburban and rural centers across the United States to rate their schools, their parents, their peers, and their concerns and hopes for the future. Eighty percent of those surveyed said they were basically happy with their life today. Eighty-one percent said they trust their parents. More than two-thirds expect to go to college, as opposed to the less than half who will actually attend. Almost all those surveyed plan to get an "interesting" job. Although their personal futures looked bright to them, American teenagers in this survey worried about nuclear war. Some 72 percent said they expected such a disaster some time in the near future. A majority -- 58 percent -- said they did not believe that racial discrimination would be eliminated during their lifetime. About one-third of the students were of the opinion that the United States is on a steady downhill path. (See also Figures XII and XIII).[28].

FIGURE XII.



Source: Christian Science Monitor.

FIGURE XIII.



Source: Christian Science Monitor.

Finally, let us concern ourselves with the attitudes and beliefs of America's college and university students. One of the most reliable and revealing sources of information is the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), the nation's largest and oldest empirical study of higher education. Each year approximately 280,000 college freshmen at some 550 two- and four-year colleges and universities across the United States participate in the annual CIRP freshmen survey. Since 1966, when the annual survey was inaugurated, nearly 6 million students, some 100,000 college faculty and more than 1,250 institutions have participated in CIRP surveys.

Before examining the results of the most recent (Fall, 1987) annual survey, notice should be taken of a special publication by

the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) Higher Education Research Institute entitled The American Freshmen: Twenty Year Trends, 1966-1985. That report attempted to assess the significance of two decades of research by CIRP. Those two decades witnessed dramatic shifts in the attitudes, values, educational achievements and life goals of American college freshmen. "We are fascinated by the complexity of the changes revealed in the 20 annual freshmen surveys and by the possibility that these trends might be explained in terms of larger political and social forces," said Alexander W. Astin, UCLA Professor and Institute Director. Astin then went on to say that the widely-discussed "conservative" political and social mood on campuses really reflected a rising tide of materialism coupled with student concern about an uncertain economic future, rather than strong support for conservative political and social policies.[29]

Briefly summarized, these are among the more important observations and conclusions of the report on 20 year trends among college freshmen from 1966-1985:

- There has been a significant migration away from the traditional liberal arts fields into more occupationally-oriented majors. Business has emerged as the number one major and career choice of college freshmen. In fall, 1985, almost one freshman in four planned to major in business (24.8 precent), up from 14.3 percent in 1966. The increases for women were even more dramatic: the proportion of women planning business careers increased by over 500 percent from 1966 to 1985.

- Student interest in the humanities experienced an especially steep decline.

- The effect of the Women's Movement of the last decades cannot be overestimated. That

conclusion is reinforced by practically all of the sex differences found in the data. Dramatic shifts in intended majors and careers and in behavior, attitudes and values speak to the rapidly changing role of women in American society.

- Student values and life goals showed dramatic shifts. Most of the value items on the annual freshmen survey showing large increases were concerned with money, power and status: being well off financially, being an authority in one's chosen field, having administrative responsibility for others and obtaining recognition. In contrast, values showing the largest declines involved altruistic activities and social concerns: helping others, promoting racial understanding, cleaning up the environment, participating in community action problems, and keeping up with political affairs.[30]

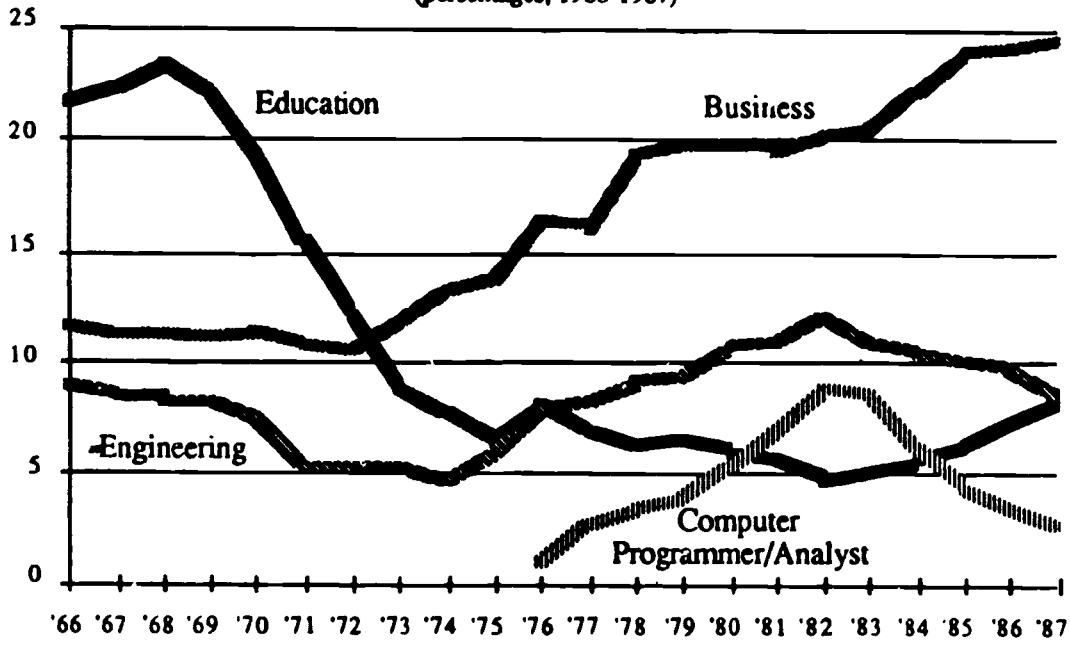
National norms established as a result of the 1987 annual survey of American freshmen do not signal any significant changes in the trends noted in the twenty year study. On the contrary, the 1987 norms indicated an intensification of some of the attitudes, behaviors and values manifested by earlier freshmen classes.

Students entering college in 1987 demonstrated not only continuing but greater concern with material values. Their concern was evidenced in at least three ways. First, business continued to attract students. It is still the most preferred career among college freshmen. Almost a quarter of the students (24.6) elected to major in business. That is an all-time high. Business was especially popular with women students, who enrolled at more than six times the level recorded in 1966. As a matter of fact, women now outnumber men in some business fields. (See Figure XIV).

FIGURE XIV.

Figure XIV: The Career Preferences of College Freshmen

(percentages, 1966-1987)



Source: The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1987.

A second manifestation of material values on the part of youth was the proportion of freshmen who said that a key reason in their decision to attend college was "to make more money". The desire to make more money reached a new high of 71.3 percent, up from 70.6 percent in 1986.

A third and very telling way in which students telegraphed their material values was their acknowledgment that "being very well off financially" is one of their top personal goals. A record number (75.6 percent) of freshmen identified this as an essential or very important life goal in 1987. That figure is nearly double the level recorded in 1970 (39.1 percent). In contrast with this strong commitment to financial goals, less

than two-fifths (39.4 percent) of the freshmen said that "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" was an important life goal. In 1968, however, the overwhelming majority (82.9 percent) ranked developing a meaningful philosophy as their number one aim.[31] (See Figure XV).

Figure XV.

WEIGHTED NATIONAL NORMS FOR ALL FRESHMEN
FALL, 1987

OBJECTIVES CONSIDERED TO BE ESSENTIAL OR VERY IMPORTANT	PERCENT
Be authority in my own field	77.2
Be very well off financially	75.6
Get married	59.9
Help others in difficulty	58.7
Obtain recognition from colleaques	58.3
Raise a family	57.8
Have administrative responsibility	45.1
Develop a philosophy of life	39.4
Influence social values	36.0
Promote racial understanding	29.0
Participate in community action	19.8
Influence political structure	16.4

Source: The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1987

More than half (56 percent) of 1987's freshmen described themselves as "middle-of-the-road" in respect to their political posture. That figure is down somewhat from the peak of 60.3 percent recorded in 1980. That description, however, is somewhat misleading, because the data show that the freshmen strongly endorsed a number of traditionally liberal positions and a number of traditionally conservative ones. Figure XIV illustrates just

how ambivalent they were.

FIGURE XVI.

WEIGHTED NATIONAL NORMS FOR ALL FRESHMEN
FALL 1987

AGREE STRONGLY OR SOMEWHAT	PERCENT
Government not controlling pollution	80.9
Government not promoting disarmament	70.9
College increases earning power	69.4
Too much concern for criminals	68.8
Government not protecting consumer	65.9
Abortion should be legalized	58.7
Nuclear disarmament attainable	58.0
Busing o.k. to achieve racial balance	53.3
College appreciated if costs higher	53.3
Prohibit homosexual relations	53.1
Live together before marriage	52.1
Sex is o.k. if people like each other	51.9
No endowment investment in So. Africa	47.6
Increase in federal military spending	26.2
Women's activities best confined to home	26.0
Raise taxes to reduce deficit	24.8
Abolish death penalty	23.8
Marijuana should be legalized	19.3

Source: The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1987

CONCLUSION

Every nation is concerned about its youth and justifiably so. The United States is no exception, because Americans have always understood that their destiny lies with the next generation. Even so there is a tendency among older generations to fear that successor generations will not be able to measure up to the challenges they inevitably face. As Chester E. Finn, Jr., Assistant Secretary of Education, recently observed, "No subject is more susceptible to sensational treatment than the lives of adolescents, (but) if we are to make wise choices about policies

that affect them, we must be armed with reliable information."[32].

It is to be hoped that this paper has provided the reader with some "reliable information" about American youth in the late 1980's. That information paints a picture of American youth that is more complex and in some ways more encouraging than the picture the media usually draws. As future parents, spouses, employees and political leaders, American youth of the '80's are a determined and pragmatic lot. Their goals are to pursue an advanced level of education, carve out successful careers for themselves, enjoy material comforts, marry, raise a family, and be attentive to friends and family members in times of difficulty. While they are concerned about particular issues, they shrink from identifying with political parties or doctinaire positions; they have few lofty notions about "changing the world". They have chosen instead to make their contributions within their own careers, families, friends and communities.

FOOTNOTES

1. The Forgotten Half: Non-College Youth in America: An Interim Report on the School-to-Work Transition. (Washington, D.C.: The William T. Grant Foundation, 1988), p.2.

2. James R. Wetzel. American Youth: A Statistical Snapshot. (Washington, D.C.: The William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship, June, 1987), passim. See also U.S. Census Bureau "Registered Voters, 1986".

3. Michael Vlahos. "The End of America's Postwar Ethos", Foreign Affairs (Summer, 1988), pp. 1091-1092.

4. Michael X. Delli Carpini. Stability and Change in American Politics: The Coming of Age of the Generation of the 1960's. (New York: New York University Press, 1986), p. 90.

   Carpini says that "Diffuse support represents the 'margin for error' or the 'benefit of the doubt' built into a system, allowing it to survive change and conflict at the level of issues, agenda and personnel, without necessitating parallel changes in the basic rules of the game. It also keeps individuals and groups who lose political battles committed to the system and abiding by the decisions of the winners."

5. The Weekly Reader National Survey on Citizenship and Government, Spring, 1988. (Middletown, CT.: Field Publications, 1988), p. 30.

6. The Mood of American Youth: Based on a 1983 Survey of American Youth. (Reston, VA. The National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1984), p. 46.

7. Ibid. p. 47-48.

8. Russell J. Dalton. Citizen Politics in Western Democracies. (Chatham, New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers, 1988), pp. 119-120.

9. The Mood of American Youth. op.cit. p. 47.

10. Alexander Astin, et. al. The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1987. (Los Angeles: Cooperative Institutional Research Program, Graduate School of Education, University of California, Los Angeles, December, 1987), pp. 8-9.

11. W. Russell Neuman. The Paradox of Mass Politics: Knowledge and Opinion in the American Electorate. (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 18-19.

12. The People, Press and Politics: A Times Mirror Study of the American Electorate. (Los Angeles: Times Mirror, September 1987), p. 12.

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15. The Weekly Reader National Survey on Citizenship and Government. op. cit., p. 26.

16. Karlyn Keene. "What Baby Boomers Believe," The Wall Street Journal, 19 August, 1988, Part I, p. 16.

17. The Mood of American Youth. op. cit., p. 45.

18. M. Margaret Conway. Political Participation in the United States. (Washington, D.C.: The Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1985), p. 18.

19. Ibid. p. 19.

20. Russell J. Dalton. op. cit. p. 9.

21. W. Russell Neuman. op. cit., p. 185.

22. The Weekly Reader National Survey on Citizenship and Government, op. cit., p. 14.

23. Ibid., p. 17.

24. The Mood of American Youth. op. cit., pp. 53 and 54.

25. Ibid., p. 51.

26. Ibid., p. 44.

27. Pat Ordonovensky. "Students Say Schools Are Improving," USA Today, 29 June, 1988, pp. 1 and 2.

28. Deborah Churchman. "New Results Show Expectations of American Teens," The Christian Science Monitor, 23 June, 1988. pp. 23-24.

29. American Council of Education/ University of California, Los Angeles. "New Report Tracks 20 Year Shift in Freshmen Attitudes, Values, and Life Goals." 1986.

30. Alexander Astin, et. al. The American Freshman: Twenty Year Trends, 1966-1985. (Los Angeles: Cooperative Institutional Research Program, The Higher Education Research Institute, 1986), passim.

31. Alexander Astin, et. al., The American Freshmen: National Norms for Fall, 1987. (Los Angeles: Cooperative Institutional Research Program, The Higher Education Research Institute, 1987), p. 7.

32. Chester E. Finn, Jr., quoted in David Broder. "Reality of Youth Not Too Grim," The Bakersfield Californian, September 9, 1988. Part I, p. 12.