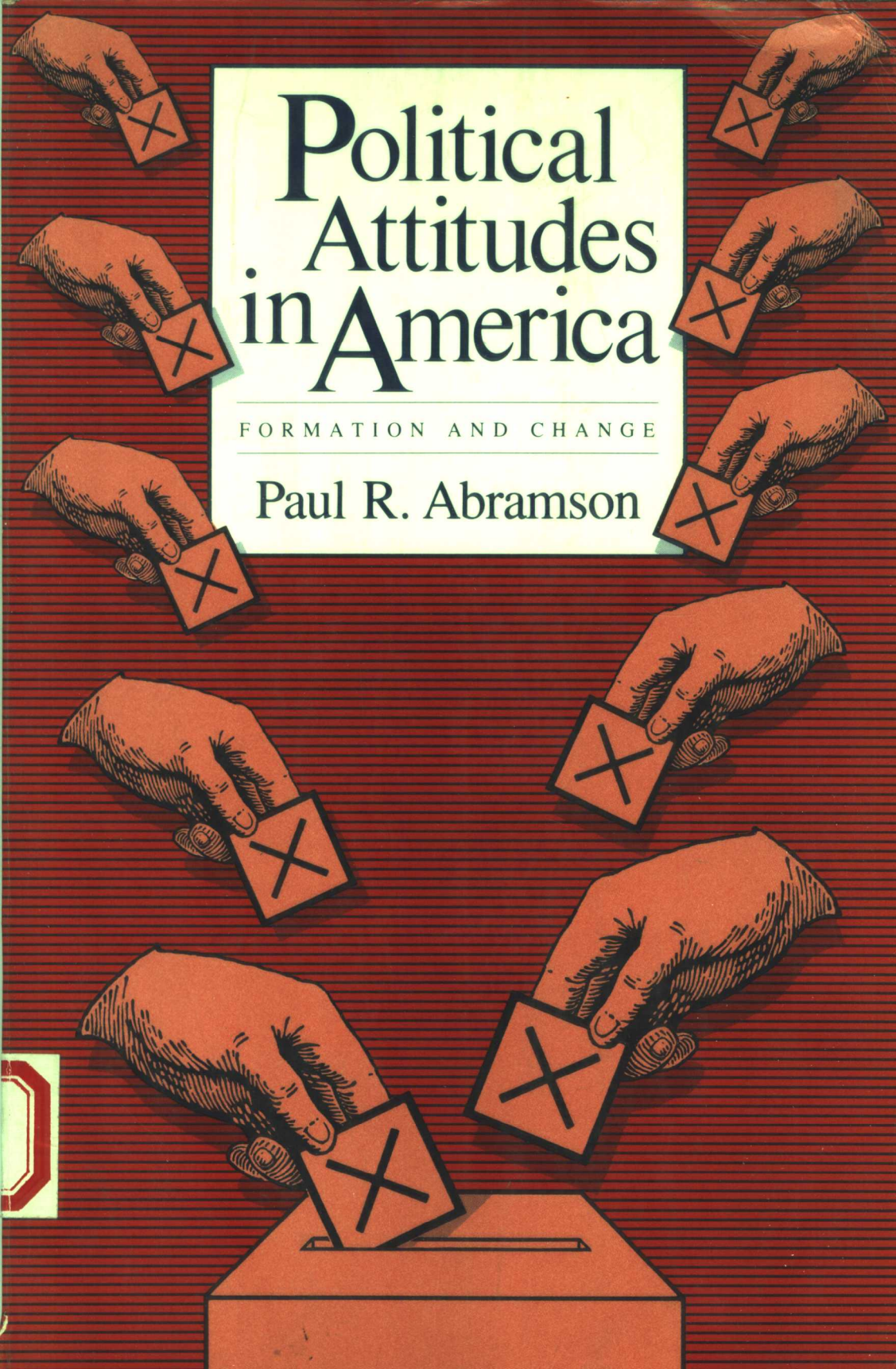
Political Attitudes in America

FORMATION AND CHANGE

Paul R. Abramson



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Preface

Since World War II, the American electorate has lived through two unpopular wars and has witnessed the assassination of one president and the forced resignation of another. Black Americans in the South gained political and social rights that had been denied them earlier. And although the postwar years began relatively quietly, they eventually witnessed urban riots and campus rebellions, only to return to a period of political quiescence.

There have been other tumultuous periods in American history, but the postwar years can be studied in ways that cannot be applied to earlier periods. For since the early 1950s, public opinion researchers have continually monitored the political attitudes and behaviors of the electorate. Thus, we now have far better data with which to examine how the public reacts to political and social change. Moreover, during the last two decades, a growing number of social scientists have studied the political attitudes of preadults, so we now have data on the origins of political attitudes. In addition, several studies have now examined individuals at more than one point in time, allowing us to study the way individuals' political attitudes and behaviors change.

The goal of this book is to synthesize the research to better understand the way electorates change over time. Despite some comparisons with other countries, this study is confined to a single electorate for a limited period in its history. The American electorate is the only mass public that can be studied over so long a period, and there is far more extensive research on American political attitudes than on any other. Moreover, although the three decades we study represent only about a seventh of the life of the republic, they represent over half the adult political life of most individuals. Thus, as we shall see later, we can trace the attitudes of some birth cohorts over half their adult political life.

Part I of this book provides an introduction to the study of political attitudes. Chapter 1 is an overview of some of the major changes in political behaviors and attitudes during the postwar years, the decline of electoral participation since 1960, the erosion of partisan loyalties since 1964, and the decline of political trust since 1964. Chapter 2 explains how surveys of the American electorate are conducted. It compares the advantages and disadvantages of alternative survey methods and describes the sampling procedures employed by the University of Michigan Survey Research Center. Chapter 3 briefly describes how political attitudes are measured and explains how data are presented in this book. Chapters 2 and 3 provide a useful introduction to survey research methods that should enable readers who are not familiar with the logic of survey research to follow the remaining chapters.

Chapter 4 examines the importance of generational replacement. It defines some of the basic terms used in cohort analysis, explains how generational replacement occurs, and shows the speed at which replacement has occurred among both the white and the black electorates. It provides a concrete example of the effects of generational replacement to illustrate how we can measure the impact of replacement processes. The chapter spells out the six basic effects that generational replacement can have on the distribution of attitudes and behaviors among mass electorates.

Part II examines continuity and change in partisan loyalties, Part III discusses continuity and change in feelings of political effectiveness, and Part IV studies change in feelings of political trust. These three sections follow the same basic logic. The first chapter of each section (Chapters 5, 8, and 11) explains the concept to be studied, shows how it is measured, and examines the importance of the attitude for political behavior. The second chapter (Chapters 6, 9, and 12) shows how these attitudes are learned among preadults. These chapters examine the impact of parents, as well as other sources of political learning. In each of these chapters, we examine differences in political learning between whites and blacks; and in Chapters 9 and 12, we evaluate systematically the way subcultural differences in political attitudes develop. The third chapter of each section (Chapters 7, 10, and 13) examines attitude change among adults. Each chapter begins with panel studies that examine the same individuals more than once and attempts to determine how and why individuals change their political attitudes. We then see how attitudes have changed among the electorate as a whole, paying careful attention to racial differences in political attitude trends. By studying each attitude, we determine the effects of generational replacement on the distribution of attitudes among the electorate and ultimately provide concrete illustrations of the basic effects of generational replacement.

Part V studies a variety of trends, some of which are the subject of considerable controversy. Chapter 14 analyzes change in feelings of tolerance toward ideological nonconformists. This chapter parallels the basic structure

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of Parts II, III, and IV, although, given the absence of extensive research on the preadult origins of tolerance and the absence of extensive panel studies of tolerance, a fully developed section on tolerance is unwarranted. Still, the study of tolerance provides one of the clearest examples of the effects of generational replacement on political attitudes and allows us to comment briefly on a fascinating debate over the meaning of recent tolerance trends.

Chapter 15 examines changes in levels of conceptualization among the electorate, possible changes in issue consistency, attitude stability, and issue voting. We evaluate the claims of scholars who argue that there have been changes in these attitudes and behaviors among the electorate, as well as those of observers who maintain that little change has occurred.

Part VI explores the implications of attitude change for American political behavior. Chapter 16 shows that two of the attitude trends we study—the decline of partisan loyalties and eroding beliefs that the government is responsive—can account for about seven-tenths of the decline in electoral participation. We thus shed light on one of the major puzzles of postwar American politics, by explaining why electoral participation has declined despite major changes that should have increased participation among the electorate. The final chapter summarizes our main conclusions, reviews the effects of generational replacement, and spells out some of the major gaps in our knowledge. Lastly, we use the data we have examined to speculate on the future of American politics.

November 1982 Paul R. Abramson

Acknowledgments

My study of attitude change among the American electorate during the past three decades was possible only because of the pioneering efforts of scholars who began to collect data back in the early 1950s. My primary debt, therefore, must be to the late Angus Campbell, and to his collaborators, especially Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes. The task of storing and disseminating these data, along with data collected during the subsequent quarter century, fell to the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. Unless otherwise indicated, all of the data presented in my figures and tables are based on my analyses of data provided by the Consortium. The Consortium bears no responsibility for my analyses and interpretations of these data.

I am grateful to M. Kent Jennings for providing me with analyses of the panel data for the University of Michigan Survey Research Center study of high school seniors and their parents. Clyde Z. Nunn provided me with additional information about his study of tolerance, and Ruth S. Jones and William S. Maddox provided additional information about their research on American preadults. My own study of preadult political attitudes, based on a survey of Saginaw, Michigan, tenth graders, was funded by an All-University Research Initiation Grant from Michigan State University. I am grateful to the officials of the City of Saginaw school district for their cooperation and to Rick E. Rollenhagen for his assistance with the field work and data analysis.

My colleagues, Cleo H. Cherryholmes, Ada W. Finifter, Robert W. Jackman, Joseph A. Schlesinger, and Brian D. Silver, commented on portions of this manuscript, as did two former colleagues, John H. Aldrich and Terry M. Moe. I learned a great deal about the political-trust measure through collab-

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I am grateful to Richard J. Lamb for encouraging me to undertake this project, to John H. Staples for editorial suggestions, and to Pearl C. Vapnek for her assistance with the production of this book. William J. Crotty, of Northwestern University; Edward C. Dreyer, of the University of Tulsa; and Richard G. Niemi, of the University of Rochester, provided extensive reviews of the entire manuscript.

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