

## **Political Generations in America**

Two men. One a baby boomer, one from “Gen X.” What important national events have happened during their lives? Which will they term most salient? Psychological research argues that significant political events experienced during young adulthood (a time of intense identity formation) will be considered most important and will have the greatest impact on how an individual views future events. (Duncan & Agronick, 1995) Due to this effect, it is possible to posit the existence of political “generations” formed around the shared experience of particular historical events at a certain age. To explore this idea, this paper will present research data from interviews with two American men of different generations. First, the methods used for the interviews will be described. Next, a brief biographical sketch of each participant will be presented. Third, responses from the interviews will be analyzed to determine to what degree each of the subjects exhibits the proposed construct of political generation. Finally, possible limitations of the study will be explored and overall conclusions summarized.

To carry out this study, two male participants from different generations were selected. One was born in 1957 and the other in 1972. More details on both subjects will be given in the biographical section. The subjects were both interviewed by phone, with the researcher taking notes by hand. The former interview took place on November 11, 2006, and lasted about 75 minutes. The latter was conducted on December 1, 2006, and took about 50 minutes.

Each subject was asked the same questions in the same order. The first section of the interview asked the subject to identify “the most important public event that [had] occurred during [his] lifetime.” Follow-up questions asked about other “national events or series of related events [that have] been the most personally meaningful.” Subjects were asked to consider the effect of the event on them, its overall importance, and if the event had any lessons.

This series of questions had the end result of having each subject select, describe, and evaluate several relevant events from his own life.

The second section of the interview asked about current political views. Both participants were asked, in order, about nine issues. These topics were: 1. Women's rights and gender-related issues. (equal employment, equal pay, abortion, reproductive rights.) 2. Sexual orientation and gay rights. (same-sex marriage, benefits for same-sex couples.) 3. Race relations and affirmative action programs. 4. The balance between fighting terrorism and preserving constitutional rights. 5. The war in Iraq. (justification, success, plan for the future) 6. Financing the government. (taxes, government expenditure, and national debt.) 7. Healthcare. 8. Immigration. (benefits, downsides, possible guest worker programs), and finally, 9. Economic globalization and international trade. Asking about these nine topics produced a fairly comprehensive view of each subject's political beliefs. What follows is a brief biographical summary of each participant's life.

"Frank" is a 49-year-old male (b.1957) who currently lives near Minneapolis, Minnesota. He was born in Indiana, but moved at an early age and grew up on a farm in a small town in southwestern Michigan. Frank has five siblings, all of whom still live around the same town. Although Frank expected a life in agriculture, his father encouraged him to go to college and study engineering. He started school at Michigan Tech, but transferred to the University of Michigan to complete his undergraduate degree in Mechanical Engineering. After taking a few months off to work, Frank quickly returned to school to complete a Master's Degree in Mechanical Engineering. He also met his future wife during that time. After Frank's graduation, the two moved to Florida and married. Frank and his wife lived in Florida for eight years (where they had two children), then in Rhode Island for five years, and finally in Michigan for eight

years. During this time Frank held various engineering jobs, gradually transitioning to a management role. Three years ago Frank moved to his current location outside of Minneapolis to take a new position as CEO of an engineering firm. Frank's current job involves a lot of international travel. Shortly after starting his new job, Frank also went back to school at the same time to obtain his MBA. He graduated last summer. Today, Frank has come a long way from his agricultural background to his present international business position. Frank has been married to his wife (whose education includes a dual-major bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan) for twenty-three years. The couple has two daughters who currently attend separate large, Midwestern universities.

The second participant, "Jack," is a 34-year-old male (b.1972) who presently lives near Dallas, Texas. He was born in California, moved to Michigan as a baby, and moved back to Northern California at age seven where he resided through college. Jack was raised in an upper middle-class household, as his father was a successful executive at Ford Motor Co. Although Jack has three siblings, they are much older than he is, so for his adolescent and teen years Jack was effectively an "only child." Jack's siblings currently all live in separate states across the country. Jack attended college at the University of Southern California where he obtained a bachelor's degree in history. Subsequently, Jack enrolled in a history master's program at the Kansas State University, but he left the program after about a year to pursue job opportunities. Jack held one job with a recycling company before settling at Ford Motor Company, where he worked in marketing and sales roles for nine years at locations in Texas and Michigan. About a year ago, Jack changed career fields when he took his current position near Dallas. Now he works in sales for a medical technology company, selling medical software and devices to doctors and hospitals. Jack is unmarried and has no children.

Frank and Jack not only come from different generations, but they also have different backgrounds, different educational degrees, and different jobs in distinct industries. A combination of all these factors may influence their political beliefs. However, the theory of political generations predicts that the political events these men consider significant should not be influenced by any of these different factors, but merely by the age they were at which the event occurred. Events taking place from age 17-25 are considered most relevant by Mannheim (1952) in his theory of generational entelechy, while Winter (2006) generalizes the “critical period” to about ages 15-23. The two participants in the study conform to the political generation hypothesis in varying degrees. They are interesting contrasts because Frank shows strong evidence of belonging to a political generation, while Jack does not.

When questioned about important political events in his life, Frank immediately said, “Well that’s easy. The fall of the Iron Curtain.” This refers to the wall built to separate East and West Germany. It was seen as the divide between communist and non-communist countries. Dismantling of the wall began in 1989 when Frank was 32. Although this is outside the critical period age range, Frank characterizes the event as a symbol of the destruction of the Soviet empire. And the Soviet empire is something which affected Frank very much during the critical period of his life. The event was personally meaningful because “I grew up as a child fearing the opposing superpower, the U.S.S.R.” In school, he faced drills where the students were trained to hide under their desks or run into the hall in the event of a nuclear bomb. The prospect of nuclear war was a part of Frank’s life from a young age. As he grew older, Frank recalls many images of Russia as the enemy. Later, when the wall came down, Frank naturally viewed it as a “major historic event.” At the time, he remembers feeling that the world was experiencing change, that it would be different. The U.S. would not have its old enemies, and there would be

a different political and economic climate. In fact, Frank worked for the defense industry at the time, and a work joke was how business would decline because “peace broke out.”

The sense of the entire world changing is significant because Stewart (2003, p.4) writes that “if events are discontinuous with a previous period in an individual’s life, they are likely to have a bigger impact.” Because this event marked a significant change in Frank’s view of the world, it is likely that other people his age also felt the same way and would identify with each other from this shared experience of change.

Today, Frank understands the main lesson from this event as the failure of communism. And the question for the future is, “Will people want to try it again even though it failed?” Frank thinks “most things tend to go in cycles” (perhaps a product of his agrarian upbringing) and points to countries today like China where he says communism still exists, only with an overlay of capitalism. He also believes the fall of the U.S.S.R. is still resulting in change, and he cites a “ripple effect” with how it has affected Europe, the U.S., the emergence of China as a power, and even events in the Middle East. Frank’s young adult experience of a world where the Soviet Empire was a feared superpower still influences how he sees world events unfolding today. Even though the fall of the Iron Curtain took place when he was a bit older, it was the overall experience of the Cold War that was the defining event of Frank’s young adult life, and surely others his age would concur.

Besides the effect of communism, every other event Frank listed also occurred within the critical period of his life. They were all memories of presidents, which probably reflects the increased importance of who was leading the country during the conflict with the Soviets. Frank mentioned the fall of Nixon as a significant moment. (He was 17.) He remembers feeling disgrace over Watergate and a sense that it was “embarrassing for the whole country and in the

eyes of the world” to have an American president resign. Again, it is not surprising that Frank considers this event important because it too marked a significant discontinuity in history.

Something happened which had never happened before nor has happened since – Nixon is the only president to resign. Frank explained how Ford was appointed and pardoned Nixon. Frank believes the pardon cost Ford the subsequent presidency but served the greater good because it “helped heal the country.” Based on this critical event, we might expect Frank’s later political views to contain a tendency to abhor unethical behavior and commend doing the “right thing,” even if that might be unpopular.

Frank’s last significant event was the election of Carter, who served when Frank was 20-24. Frank liked Carter because he was an engineer, and he seemed to be a “good guy.” (Here, already, is evidence of increased value placed on ethics.) However, Frank came to view Carter as ineffective because Carter “didn’t understand politics and thought he could operate outside them.” During this time, the U.S. faced the tricky Iran hostage situation. The hostages weren’t freed until the next president, Reagan, was sworn in (Frank was 24). Frank says Reagan “restored pride” because his election led to the freeing. Thus, there is a pattern with the Nixon/Ford and Carter/Reagan events representing, for Frank, disgrace followed by restoration.

Frank lived through events like the Gulf War, the prosperity of the ‘90s, and 9/11, but none of these events made his list of significant moments. He fits the model of a political generation very well because all his significant events come from the critical period in his life.

Jack, on the other hand, listed events that do not fit neatly into the age range of his critical period. The significant event that immediately came to mind for him was 9/11. This attack on the U.S., where terrorists leveled the World Trade Center towers in New York City by flying airplanes into them, happened when he was 29. He describes how he “knew people could dislike

us,” but the magnitude of the event surprised him. His main lesson from the event came from the reaction of Americans. He remembered reading about World War II with the Japanese internment, and the “mass hysteria, jingoism,” and as he describes it, “‘Middle Easterners’ being a bad word” with people acting like they “better round them up” was a horrible repeat of the same historical issues.

Interestingly, later in the interview Jack links 9/11, which occurred past his critical period, to events that happened just before his critical period – the events of the Cold War which were so vivid for Frank. Jack lists a few events he “didn’t completely grasp”: the reign of Gorbachev and the fall of communism. Because he lived near San Francisco, he remembers the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles (he was 12) and the sense that it was “the USA vs. the Soviets.” Here he is experiencing the Cold War through sports – a medium a child can understand. He also remembers seeing a movie on TV called “The Day After.” This portrait of a possible nuclear war was shown when he was 11. Jack links these earlier, vaguer memories of the Cold War with his experience of 9/11 to conclude that “society’s based a lot on fear.” In his early life it was the U.S. vs. the U.S.S.R. with the threat of nuclear war, and today it is the U.S. vs. the terrorists with the threat of ideological war. Although Jack links the early and later parts of his life, he has not yet mentioned an event from his critical period.

Jack described the Challenger explosion, which occurred in 1986 when he was 14. Although he remembers that the space shuttle accident “shook [him] at that age,” the occurrence is slightly outside the critical years. Finally during the last part of the historical events section Jack related some events that happened during the proposed critical period for forming a political generation. There were two such events in his life – the earthquakes in California in 1989 and 1992 (age 17 and 20), and the L.A. riots that also happened in 1992. The two earthquakes,

especially the earlier one which led to the collapse of the Bay Bridge and the destruction of freeways in California, were a “humbling” lesson for Jack about nature’s power and our ultimate small size in the universe. The L.A. riots were personally significant because they happened while Jack was at school just down the street at USC. Jack describes the riots as a “major life lesson” about the “anger and frustration that a certain segment of the population can experience.”

It is interesting that although these events both affected Jack, they are events of a more local, personal nature. They both occurred close to home and may not have affected other people around the country or around the world quite as much. The major world events that Jack describes (and links in his mind) occurred just before and just after his critical period. This suggests that people of Jack’s age may not have specific political events that shaped them into a cohesive political generation.

Expanding the concept of political generation to current politics, several aspects of Frank’s experiences from his critical period are still evident. He tends to take a more international view of political issues. This could be due to his young adult experiences of watching political events unfold on a global scale and tracking their effects in different countries. When asked about women’s rights, Frank is in favor of equality but acknowledges that it does not exist, especially on the global level. He points out that parts of America and Europe are more equal, yet in many countries women still face harsh inequalities. Regarding the current prison abuse scandals, Frank gives credit to the U.S. “that this stuff is revealed,” and he compares this to the Tiananmen Square massacre which the Chinese government tried to cover up, events in the former U.S.S.R., and events in current Russia. On the Iraq War and terrorism, Frank suggests that “the world views Americans as not patient [where] all that enemies have to do is persist and it will cause controversy in the U.S.” About the federal deficit Frank says,



“clearly we’d love to run a surplus instead of a deficit, but we’re competing in a global market.” He argues that the role of the government should be to support high value exports and jobs, and “promote industries within the U.S. that help the balance of trade.” This is an internationalist view. Overall, Frank took a more international view than Jack.

The impact of Frank’s critical period is also evident in a few other comments. He agrees with the need for taxes, but doesn’t want a system that “redistribute[s] wealth in a socialist way.” This reflects his views on the failure of communism. With regards to President Bush violating Geneva conventions on treatment of prisoners, Frank says he doesn’t think the President believed he was violating conventions. Also, Frank (unlike Jack) still supports the Bush administration’s Iraq War even though sometimes he feels it wasn’t justified. He says, “I don’t have all the data that I assume our government had.” These relatively more supportive views of the administration may reflect Frank’s desire for the president to be a “good guy,” not a disgrace like Nixon. Overall, there are several aspects of Frank’s current politics that show an influence from events during his critical period.

Jack, on the other hand, did not seem to experience major world events during his critical period. When Jack was about ages 15-23 (1987-1995), the world was in a relative era of peace and prosperity with the abatement of the Cold War and the economic boom of the late ‘80s and early ‘90s. “Gen X” is still defined as a generation, but not really by political events. In fact, Ortner argues that “‘Generation X’ is an attempt to deal with profound changes in the U.S. middle class in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.” (1998, p.420) She cites the “widening abyss in the middle class” (p.423), the prospect of “low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, no-future jobs in the service sector” (p.418), and the “doomsaying prediction” that Gen X will never reach the standard of living of its parents as specific concerns for this generation. Interestingly, the concerns that she

proposes define his generation are indeed more evident in Jack's political views. While noting how equality for women is not the reality, he transitions to the thought that the workplace is getting "harder and harder for the lower and middle class in general." Several times Jack talks about equal standards – he is fine with the legalization of same-sex marriage as long as they have "the same guidelines as heterosexual [couples]." He believes some level of healthcare is a universal right, but that the government shouldn't provide "some superior level of care." Furthermore, Jack speaks of the "sense of entitlement" he sees among doctors to make a certain amount of money. He thinks nationalized healthcare might not work because these doctors would find ways to get around cost controls and make more money. All these views can be traced to a desire to keep the abyss Ortner mentions from bursting wide open. Jack's view on middle class concerns is perhaps best summarized when he discusses economic globalization and international trade. He think it is "extremely unfortunate" because it creates a gap between the "haves and the have-nots" where quality of life in one part of the world is obtained at the expense of poor conditions and labor violations in the rest of the world. However, Jack is "glad to be who he is so he can enjoy it now" because he worries that the jobs available in the future will not support a viable middle class. He even suggests that a few years down the road he might easily be on the "have-not" side. This fear of a virtual overnight disappearance of the American middle class has been noted in Generation X by Ortner and others, and may define them as a generation more than any political event.

It is worth noting that although Jack does not seem to belong to a politically-influenced generation, his views today do also seem to be somewhat influenced by personal events from his own critical period. One might argue then that the critical period can still be important on an individual basis even when it does not apply at a national, generational level. For example,

experiencing the L.A. riots exposed Jack to violent racial tensions. This may well be a factor in his current support of affirmative action. He says, “I do think society owes a certain debt to people we brought to this country who didn’t have the benefit of a white, Anglo-Saxon background.” Jack also believes that the federal government does a poor job of providing programs and says that “any time the government tries to get involved in some sort of national program, invariably it’s a bumbling mess.” Views like these could be partially inspired by the jarring explosion of the Challenger, itself a government project gone terribly wrong. The online encyclopedia Wikipedia states that the panel investigating the accident “found that NASA’s organizational culture and decision-making processes had been a key contributing factor to the accident.” (“Space Shuttle Challenger disaster,” 2006) These critiques of the government, which came out during Jack’s critical period, may have influenced his later views.

To summarize, Frank’s accounts of his current political views do show effects from the political events he experienced as a young adult. Also, all the important national events he names fall within his own critical period. These observations support the concept of a political generation. Jack, on the other hand, does not seem to belong to a clear political generation based on the significant national events he describes. It is likely that the generations immediately before and after him feel a stronger sense of political generation. (Indeed, we see this with Frank, who is of the preceding generation.) Jack’s current politics seem to be influenced more by other factors proposed to define his generation than by specific political events; however, he still shows some influence from the critical period in his own life if not from one marking his generation. This discovery is a compelling argument for the overriding importance of the critical period – it is always of some significance, at the very least on an individual scale.

Of course, these conclusions are not without their limitations. Despite the clear differences between the subjects, they are each only a single representative of their generation. A much broader sample from would have to be taken to draw any definitive general conclusions about political generations. Furthermore, it should be noted that the men actually agreed on many subjects, and even with their differences – with Frank being more internationalist and Jack more concerned about equality and class differences – it was not as though Jack never mentioned internationalism nor Frank class. These were merely broad trends of difference. Another possible limitation is that there may be third variables at play. Frank’s internationalist view might owe partly to his recent MBA education or his world travel. Also, although not detailed, there were several instances where Frank expressed distaste for a sense of entitlement, free-loaders, and handouts. These views could be influenced by Frank’s hard work on the farm as a child, and it just shows that there are other variables that might influence political views besides world events occurring during one’s critical period.

Still, even with all this, the data available from this study points to two important conclusions. First, the interviews provide evidence (from Frank) that the concept of a “political generation” is valid. Second, they also show (via Jack) that the critical period may be of such importance that it matters on an individual level even when generations do not experience national political events together. Thus, in conclusion, both the broad concept of the political generation and the particular idea of the critical period are constructs that deserve continued attention in future research.

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