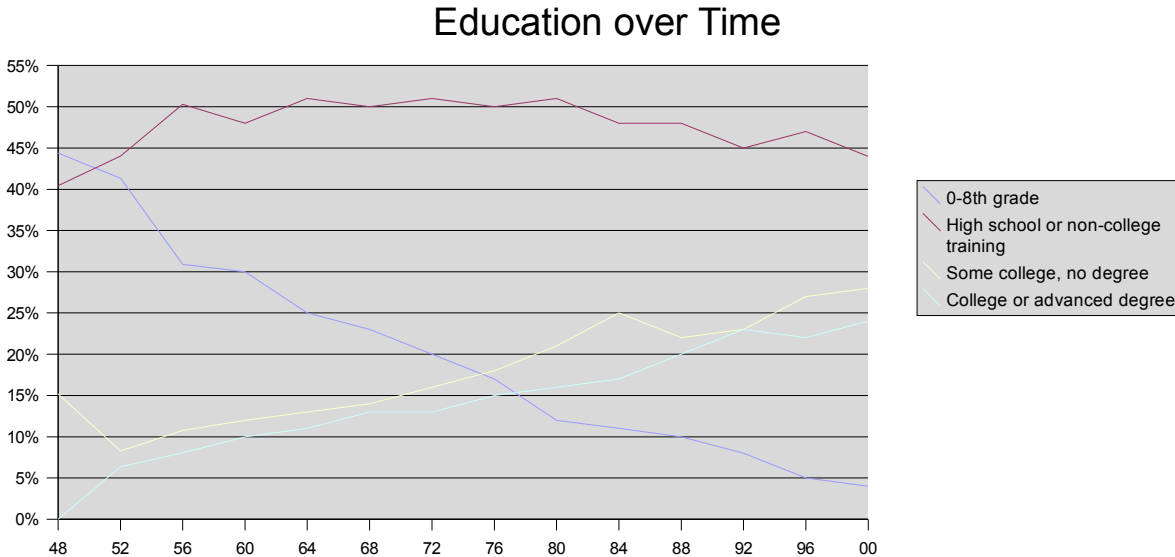AN OVERVIEW OF AMERICAN POLITICS AND SOCIETY, 1948-2000
Michael McGranahan – May 5, 2005

Exercise 1 Demographic variable over time

Education over Time

This graph shows the change in educational levels (vcf0110) in the population over time. It

should be noted that the data for 1948 was incomplete; the "college or advanced degree"

category was collapsed into the "some college, no degree" category. Several important trends are

evident. First, we see a steady and sharp decline in percentage of population with no more than a

0-8th grade education. This no doubt reflects the nations strong education policies, and society's

heightened value of education. This drop is balanced by nearly equivalent increases in the two

categories related to college education. Increased accessibility, brought about by federal student

loan programs as well as civil rights progress, has enabled this shift in education levels.

Remarkably, the size of the population segment merely with a high school degree has remained

almost constant. This data might be skewed due to the large number of baby boomers, most of

whom might have only gotten a high school education. Alternatively, this could merely reflect

the middle ground between the two complimentary trends described above.

Religion over Time
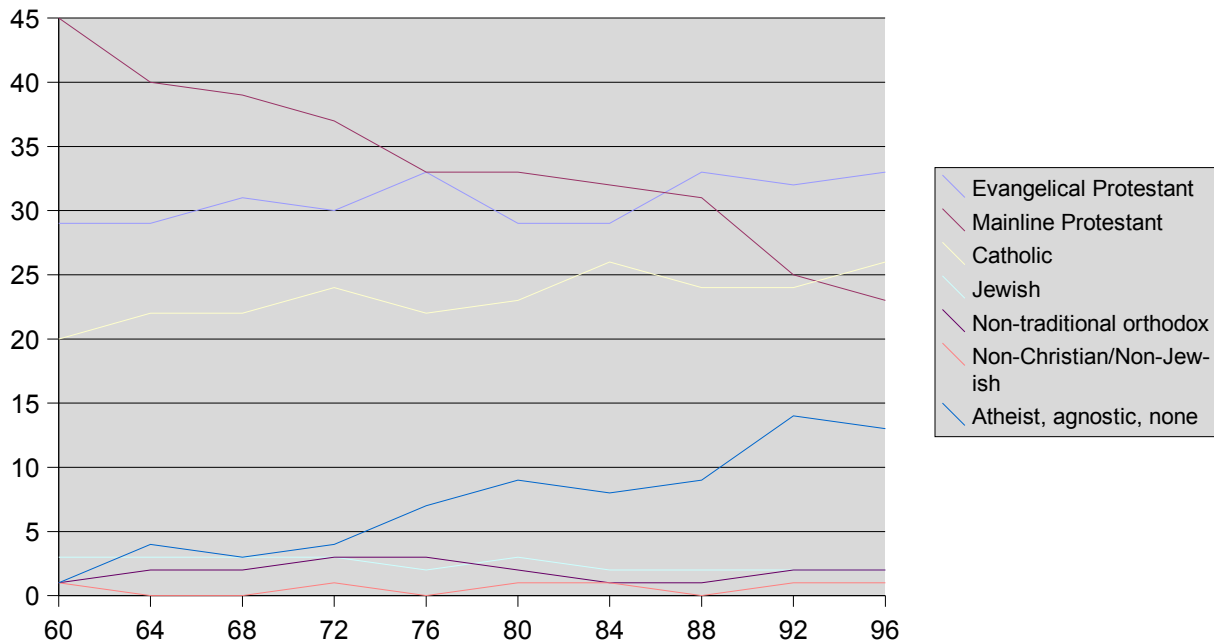
This chart illustrates the changes in religious (vcf0128a and vcf0128b) affiliation over time. It should be noted that this data is collected from two sets of similar survey questions, with data taken after 1990 making available a "black protestant church" category. I have collapsed this data back into the the "mainline protestant" category, with which most of it's respondents had previously identified. I was primarily interested in changes in the levels of atheism. Between 1960 and 1996, atheism climbed from 2% to 13%. This 600% growth in 36 years is by fair the fastest growing religious category. This could be related to the oft-cited "breakdown of traditional American values." Violence, sex and improper language permeate the day's media, and it is common knowledge that church attendance rates have slipped. Advances in science, combined with a general rise in educational levels, might have also spurred this surge in atheism. Philosophical advances such as post-modernism and existentialism also may have contributed. The biggest loser is mainline Protestantism, losing a full 50% of it's contingency. But there is no trend away from religion in general. For example, both Catholic and evangelical protestant have

grown. These are two denominations that are traditionally the most devout and dogmatically

rigorous.

Exercise 2 Political and social variables over time

Ideology vs Year
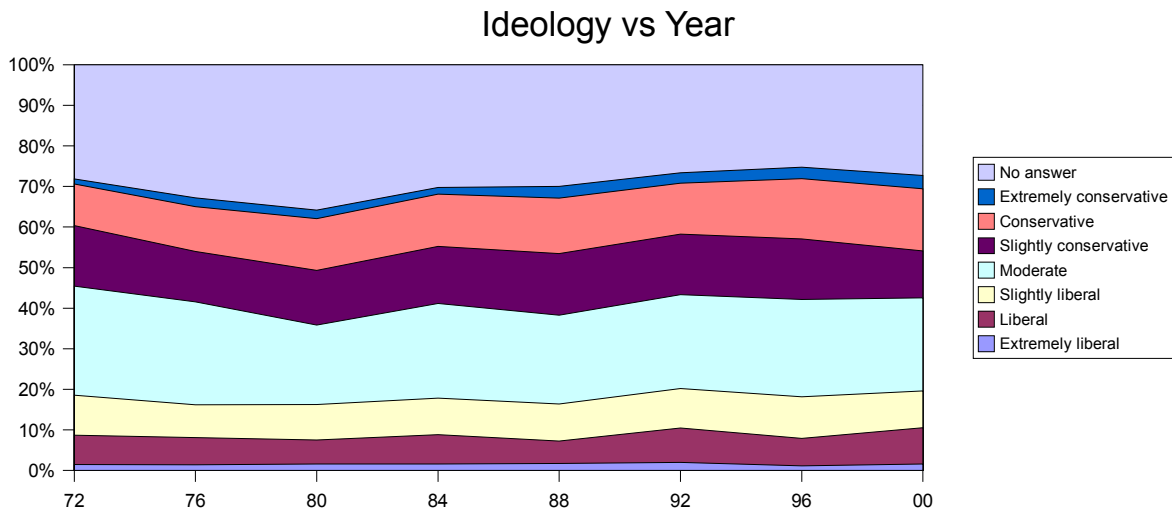
This graph is a stacked bar graph representing population shifts in ideological disposition

(vcf0803). Stacked bar graphs are ideal when the data is segmental for showing proportions in a

data set. It appears that traditionally, the largest contingent is ironically those that choose not to

answer. I pose two hypotheses to address this. The first is that people do not think in terms of

ideology, which is abstract and based on principles. Perhaps this is because they are not

generally interested in politics. Or perhaps they feel differently on issues that may contradict

with any ideology. It may also be a lack of education that contributes to this. This can only be

slightly to blame if at all, for the portion of "no answers" has not fallen proportionally with the

increase in educational level. However, I believe my second hypothesis to be more accurate.

People prefer to think concretely, which lends itself to the party system. The party is composed

of people, positions on actual issues, logistical infrastructure and other tangible things.

Ideologies are highly abstract and inherently more complex. Parties strive to simplify issues,
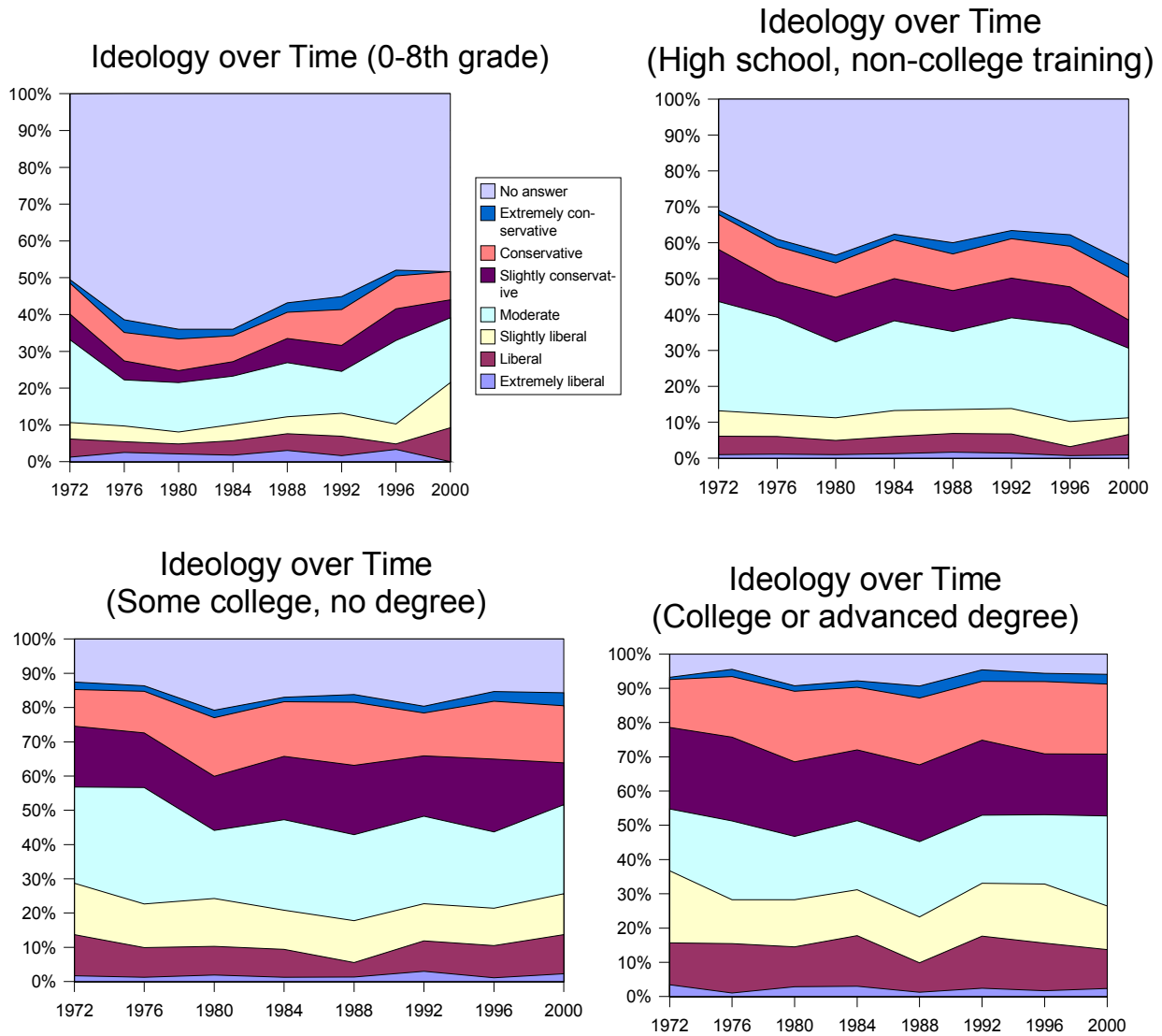
actively reaching out to the populous. An ideology simply cannot do this. Aside from this, the

graph suggests that there has been minimal fluctuation in the distribution of people across the

ideological plane, with a slight edge given to the conservative side. In 1998 however, there

appears to be signs that liberal numbers are chipping away at the conservative. Unfortunately the

data does not cover the last 4 years, which have witnessed increasing and alarming interplay

between church and state.

Support for Job Ensurance vs Year
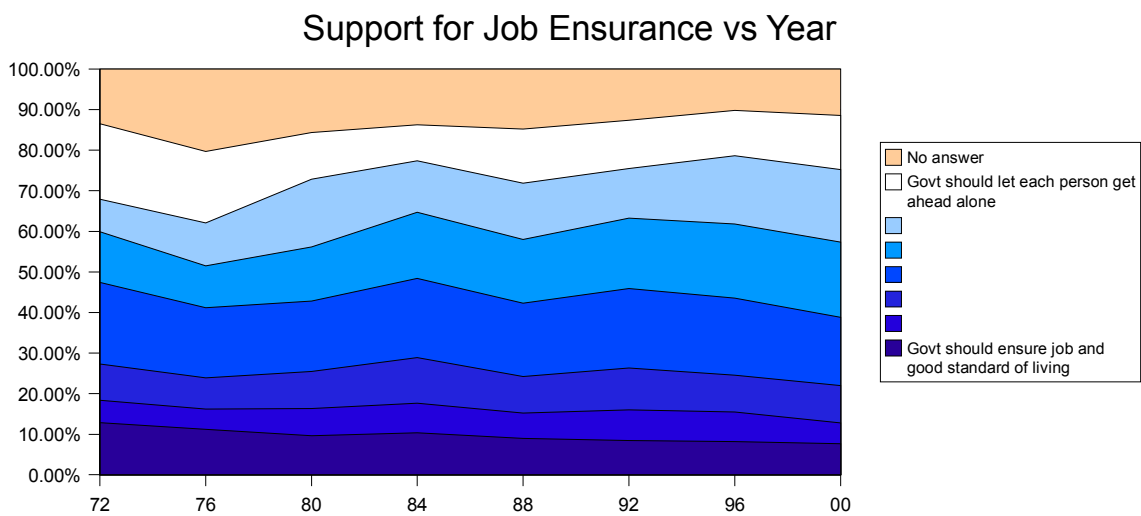
This graph shows the trends in public support of the notion that the government has a

responsibility to ensure a job and minimal quality of life (vcf0809). Throughout the last 30

years, a tug-of-war has played out over this issue. However, the equilibrium point is lies well-

within the "no support" camp. This could be correlated with anti-communist sentiment, which

would indicate the substantial boost to support in 1984. Additionally, there appears to be a slight

trend toward the "support" side. One more trend to note would be the shrinking numbers of

people that choose not to answer. Whether social conditions make it easier to decide, or

education make the subject more understandable, there now exist more people with opinions on

the subject. It is also interesting to note that there was no surge in support for the idea after the recession of the early 90's.

Exercise 3 Political/Social variables by demographic variables over time

Ideology over Time (0-8th grade)

Ideology over Time (High school, non-college training)

Ideology over Time (Some college, no degree)

Ideology over Time (College or advanced degree)

This collection of charts represents the change in ideological affiliation of four educational categories over time. If each graph could be thought of as a slab and stacked atop of each other in order of educational level, we would have a single graph of the data in three dimensions. By assessing all of the data at once, several trends emerge. First, it is apparent that with more education comes more certainty in responding to the survey. This is demonstrated by the section across the top of each graph corresponding to "no answer" which shrinks when the graphs are

taken in order of increasing educational level. This is an expected result. An unexpected result is the presence of greater fluctuation over time the lower the educational level. This might demonstrate greater susceptibility to momentary social issues or political manipulation. Another interesting trend is toward greater polarization with more education. This is shown in the graphs as thicker bars corresponding to extreme liberal or extreme conservative that are present in the higher education levels compared to those in the lower educational levels. This might reflect lesser levels of engagement and understanding of the ideological principles involved. This accompanies the suggestion, that each educational level has it's own unique proportional distribution across the ideological spectrum, that is resistant to time: lower levels are mostly independent, while upper levels have an even distribution across the spectrum.
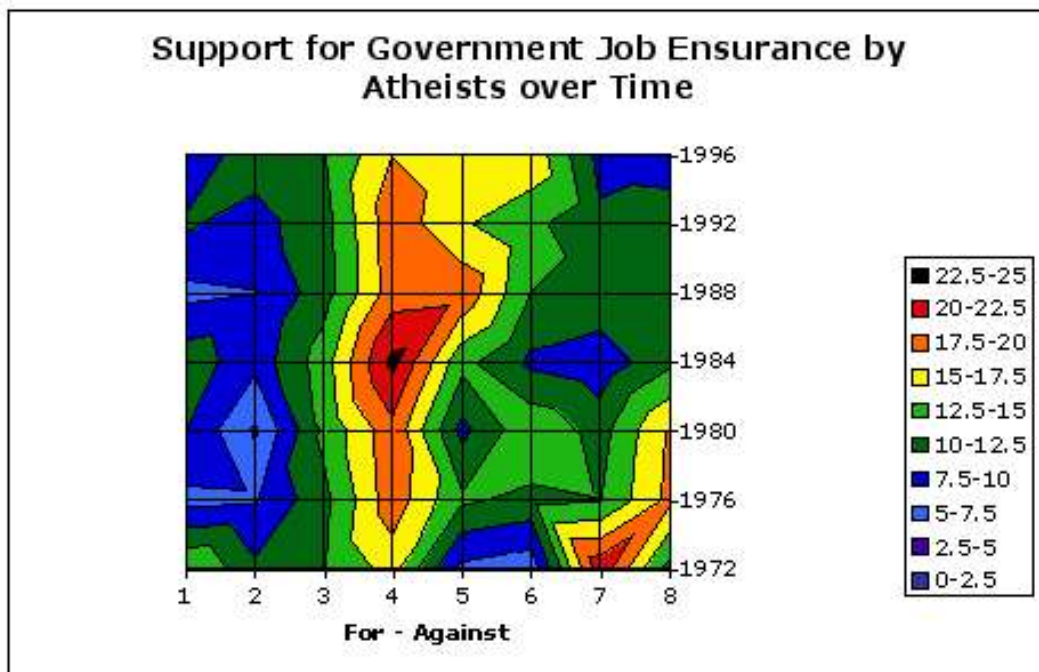
This is a contour graph of atheist support for the idea that the government should ensure that each individual has a job and a minimal quality of life over time. The contour graph highlights the relationship between the data variables, in this case the interaction between time and the

spectrum of support for government job gurantee. The graph illuminates the strongest ever

consensus on the subject occurred in 1984, when nearly 1 in 4 felt completely neutral on the

subject. This is in stark contrast to 1972, when the second strongest consensus existed more than

1 in 5 completely opposed to the idea. Ironically, we see that of all the years, that year held the

largest support of the subject ever. There appears to be a long-term trend against the idea of

assisting those living in poor conditions, as the consensus for each year appears to move to

increasing opposition. Perhaps this is because atheists do not believe they are accountable for

helping those in need. Or perhaps they feel it would not make a spiritually significant difference

in those lives anyway, since they do not believe in an afterlife.