Charting the Mainstream: Television's Contributions to Political Orientations

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Recent findings help refine the Cultural
Indicators paradigm and suggest new ways of
thinking about television as well as about
the formation of political perspectives.

Television is part and parcel of our daily life, investing it with particular meanings. This is a report of research on the political significance of these meanings. It is part of our ongoing project called Cultural Indicators[1] and develops our paradigm of "mainstreaming" first published in this *Journal* (6).

We shall first sketch the theoretical and research context in which we present our findings. Then we shall summarize our theory of television and apply our paradigm to political orientations. We shall use survey data to show television's contributions to political orientations and to attitudes on such issues as minority and civil rights, free speech, government spending, and taxes. The implications of our findings challenge conventional theories of the role of the "press" in the political process, and suggest new ways of thinking about television as well as political research.

Some conception of the role of the "press" has always been a central feature of modern political theory. A secular press of politics and commerce was instrumental in the rise of diverse mass publics independent of church and nobility. The press was (and is) a relatively specific and selectively used organ of the more literate of every class. Freedom of the press to advocate party and group (including class) interests and to cultivate competing and conflicting perspectives was supposed to sustain the political plurality presumably necessary for representative government in a complex society.

The decline of the party press and subsequently of political parties themselves as primary means of communication with voters limits the viability of the theory of the press as a pluralistic ideological advocate. The rise to dominance of a single, market-driven, advertiser-sponsored, and thus ideologically more coherent press system, claiming superior journalistic objectivity and invoking constitutional protection of its freedom to virtually preempt the mass marketplace of ideas, further strains the traditional concept of the role of the press in democratic political theory.

Nevertheless, the print-based and literacy-oriented culture from which our political assumptions stem still offers a possibility of a certain relative diversity of perspectives and selectivity of uses. Compared to the historic strains and stresses qualifying the applicability of theories

rooted in the print era, the challenge of television, and of the telecom-
munications system with television at its cultural center, is of a different
order of magnitude.[2]

Television is a centralized system of storytelling. Its drama, commer-
cials, news, and other programs bring a relatively coherent world of
common images and messages into every viewing home. People are now
born into the symbolic environment of television and live with its
repetitive lessons throughout life. Television cultivates from the outset
the very predispositions that affect future cultural selections and uses.
Transcending historic barriers of literacy and mobility, television has
become the primary common source of everyday culture of an otherwise
heterogeneous population.

Many of those now dependent upon television have never before
been part of a shared national political culture. Television provides,
perhaps for the first time since preindustrial religion, a strong cultural
link, a shared daily ritual of highly compelling and informative content,
between the elites and all other publics. What is the role of this common
experience in the general socialization and political orientation of
Americans? That question of far-reaching social and political importance
has not yet been fully addressed.[3]

The reasons for the lag are financial, methodological, and conceptual.
The exigencies of social science research inhibit sustained theoretical
development based on abundant and varied data collected over extend-
ed periods of time. Research methodologies dealing with selective
exposure and specifically targeted communication effects have been
inadequate to the study of pervasive symbol systems, broad continuities
in the symbolic environment, and slow but massive cultural shifts.
Research concentration on individual attitude and behavior change has
inhibited the investigation of aggregate transformations in the lifestyles
of generations (as those born before and after television, or into heavy-
and light-viewing homes) that remain stable for individuals. Finally,
focusing political communication research on explicitly "political" com-
munications (or news) has obscured the complex nature of political

[2] New communications technologies are more likely to extend than to transform that
challenge. They will sharpen the aim and deepen the penetration of telecommunications
culture-power into new areas now served mostly (and often less efficiently or more
expensively) by print. The over-the-air mass ritual now called television has become
essential to commerce, acculturation, and governance. It is most likely to remain basically
intact alongside the resurgence of print by electronic means, and to become the object of
increasingly sharp contest for control.

[3] The work of Chaffee, Graber, Mannheim, Patterson, Robinson, and others (see, e.g.,
11) has established the relevance of television to political orientations and provides a
useful starting point for this study.

socialization, especially in the television age, in which the entire spectrum of program types (the bulk of which is drama) plays an integral part.

> *Our opportunity to address the broader question comes*
> *after more than a decade of data collection*
> *and analysis mapping the world of television*
> *and tracing viewers' conceptions of reality.*

The Cultural Indicators project employs a two-pronged research strategy. We call the first message system analysis and the second cultivation analysis. Both relate to—and help develop—a conception of television's historical and institutional position, roles, and functions.

For message system analysis we record and analyze week-long samples of network television drama and have done so for each year since 1967. We subject these sample weeks of television drama to rigorous and detailed content analysis in order to reliably delineate selected features of the television world. We consider these the potential lessons of television and use them as the source of questions for the second prong of the inquiry. In this "cultivation analysis," we examine the responses of light and heavy viewers to these questions, phrased to refer to the real world. (Non-viewers are too few and demographically too scattered for serious research purposes.) We want to determine whether those who spend more of their time with television are more likely to answer these questions in ways that reflect the potential lessons of the television world (the "television answer") than are groups that watch less television but are otherwise comparable (in terms of important demographic characteristics) to the heavy viewers. We have used the concept of "cultivation" to describe the contributions of television to viewer conceptions. "Cultivation differential" is our term for the difference in the percent giving the "television answer" within comparable groups of light and heavy viewers.[4]

[4] Earlier reports focused on dramatic demonstrations of social power and personal risk (the "Violence Profiles"). In recent years we have used our cumulative data bank of detailed observations based on the analysis of over 1,600 programs and 14,000 characters, and our own surveys, as well as the extensive archives of survey data available for secondary analysis, to investigate television portrayals and related viewer conceptions of women and minorities, aging, scientists and members of other professions, health and medicine, sexual depictions, family images and impact, educational achievement and aspirations, and other issues. Our data collection has been broadly conceived from the beginning so as to permit the analysis of many different trends and features of the world of television and their relationships to the conceptions and attitudes of various groups of viewers.

On issue after issue we have found that the assumptions, beliefs, and values of heavy viewers differ systematically from those of light viewers in the same demographic groups. The differences tend to reflect both what things exist and how things work in the television world. Sometimes these differences hold across the board, meaning that those who watch more television are more likely—in all or most subgroups—to give "television answers" to our questions. But in many cases the patterns are more complex. We have found that television viewing may relate in different but consistent ways to different groups' life situations and world views. We have named the most general of these consistent patterns "mainstreaming."

The "mainstream" can be thought of as a relative commonality of outlooks and values that exposure to features and dynamics of the television world tends to cultivate. By "mainstreaming" we mean the expression of that commonality by heavy viewers in those demographic groups whose light viewers hold divergent views. In other words, differences found in the responses of different groups of viewers, differences that can be associated with other cultural, social, and political characteristics of these groups, may be diminished or even absent from the responses of heavy viewers in the same groups.[5]

Our concept of cultivation relates the process to those features and dynamics of television content that are the most stable and repetitive parts of the ritual, cutting across different program types. The reason is that heavy viewers watch more of all kinds of programs. Viewer availability determines program ratings and viewing patterns (2). Furthermore, our message system analysis finds such general features as demography, action structure, and fate of characters to be similar in most program types. Therefore, it is these general features and dynamics of the world of prime time, rather than specific programs, that would be likely to cultivate the most pervasive perspectives and orientations of heavy viewers. So to understand, and even to discover, the substance of issues involved in the cultivation process, we must know something about the nature of the mainstream and the institutional context of its creation.

Living with television means growing up in a symbolic environment shaped by service to client institutions.

The creation of that environment is a tightly controlled process. Commercial television is effectively insulated from public access; removed from public participation via direct consumer marketplace, box office, or ballot box; shielded from public governance by current

[5] Mainstreaming has been found to explain differential within-group patterns in terms of the cultivation of images of violence, mistrust, and alienation (6); conceptions of science and scientists (8); health-related beliefs and practices (7); sex-role stereotypes (14); and other issues.

interpretations of the First Amendment; and yet publicly licensed and protected on terms that render the medium dependent on private corporate governance.[6] The economic mechanism guiding that governance is advertising, a tax-deductible business expense, charged to all consumers regardless of their use of the medium. Sponsors pay television (and other media) for attracting and delivering customers and providing other services through news and entertainment. The occasionally unflattering portrayal of business people (probably useful for regaining credibility lost through advertising) only points up the fact that television serves its business clients through delivery, not flattery.

When many millions of dollars of revenue ride on a single ratings point, there are few degrees of freedom to indulge egos or yield to many other pressures. Competition for the largest possible audience at the least cost means striving for the broadest and most conventional appeals, blurring sharp conflicts, blending and balancing competing perspectives, and presenting divergent or deviant images as mostly to be shunned, feared, or suppressed. Otherwise, no matter how skewed or off-center a view might really be, it should be "balanced" by more "extreme" manifestations, preferably on "both sides," to make its presentation appear "objective," "moderate," and otherwise suitable for mass marketing.

These institutional pressures and functions suggest the cultivation of relatively "moderate" or "middle-of-the-road" presentations and orientations. More specific hypotheses can come from the results of the analysis of those features and dynamics of the television message system that may be relevant to the cultivation of those orientations.

Our summary of results is based on the Cultural Indicators message system data bank (unless otherwise noted) and focuses on prime-time network programming. The world of prime time as seen by the average viewer is animated by vivid and intimate portrayals of over 300 major characters a week, mostly stock dramatic types, and their weekly rounds of dramatic activities.

> *Conventional and "normal" though that world may*
> *appear, it is in fact far from the reality of*
> *anything but consumer values and social power.*

The curve of consumer spending, unlike that of income, bulges with middle-class status as well as in middle age. Despite the fact that nearly half of the national income goes to the top fifth of the real population, the myth of middle class as the all-American norm dominates the world of television. Nearly 7 out of 10 television characters appear in the "middle-middle" of a five-way classification system. Most of them are professionals and managers. Blue-collar and service work occupies 67

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[6] The work of Barnouw (1), Cantor (3), and Tuchman (15) describes in detail the institutional policy process.

percent of all Americans but only 10 percent of television characters. These features of the world of prime-time television should cultivate a middle-class or "average" income self-designation among viewers.

Men outnumber women at least three to one. Most women attend to men or home (and appliances) and are younger (but age faster) than the men they meet. Underrepresentation in the world of television suggests the cultivation of viewers' acceptance of more limited life chances, a more limited range of activities, and more rigidly stereotyped images than for the dominant and more fully represented social and dramatic types.

Young people (under 18) comprise one-third and older people (over 65) one-fifth of their true proportion in the population. Blacks on television represent three-fourths and Hispanics one-third of their share of the U.S. population, and a disproportionate number are minor rather than major characters. A single program like "Hawaii Five-O" can result in the overrepresentation of Orientals, but again mostly as minor characters. A study by Weigel and others (17) shows that while blacks appear in many programs and commercials, they seldom appear with whites, and actually interact with whites in only about two percent of total human appearance time. The prominent and stable overrepresentation of well-to-do white males in the prime of life dominates prime time. Television's general demography bears greater resemblance to the facts of consumer spending than to the U.S. Census (9, 10). These facts and dynamics of life suggest the cultivation of a relatively restrictive view of women's and minority rights among viewers.

> *The state in the world of prime time acts*
> *mostly to fend off threats to law and*
> *order in a mean and dangerous world.*

Enforcing the law of that world takes nearly three times as many characters as the number of all blue-collar and service-worker characters. The typical viewer of an average week's prime-time programs sees realistic and often intimate (but usually not true-to-life) representations of the life and work of 30 police officers, 7 lawyers, and 3 judges, but only one engineer or scientist and very few blue-collar workers. Nearly everybody appears to be comfortably managing on an "average" income or as a member of a "middle class."

But threats abound. Crime in prime time is at least 10 times as rampant as in the real world. An average of five to six acts of overt physical violence per hour involves over half of all major characters. Yet, pain, suffering, and medical help rarely follow this mayhem. Symbolic violence demonstrates power; it shows victimization, not just aggression, hurt but not therapy; it shows who can get away with what against whom. The dominant white males in the prime of life score highest on the "safety scale": they are the most likely to be the victimizers rather

than the victims. Conversely, old, young, and minority women, and young boys, are the most likely to be the victims rather than the victimizers in violent conflicts.

What might be the "television answers" relevant for political orientations?

The warped demography of the television world cultivates some iniquitous concepts of the norms of social life. Except among the most traditional or biased, television viewing tends to go with stronger prejudices about women and old people (9, 10, 12, 14). Children know more about uncommon occupations frequently portrayed on television than about common jobs rarely seen on the screen (4). Viewing boosts the confidence rating given to doctors (16) but depresses that given to scientists, especially in groups that otherwise support them most (8).

Cultivation studies continue to confirm the findings that viewing tends to heighten perceptions of danger and risk and maintain an exaggerated sense of mistrust, vulnerability, and insecurity. We have also found that the prime-time power hierarchy of relative levels of victimization cultivates similar hierarchies of fears of real-world victimization among viewers. Those minority group viewers who see themselves more often on the losing end of violent encounters on television are more apprehensive of their own victimization than are the light viewers in the same groups (13). Television's mean and dangerous world can thus be expected to contribute to receptivity to repressive measures and to apparently simple, tough, hard-line posturings and "solutions." At the same time, however, the overall context of conventional values and consumer gratifications, with their requirements of happy endings and material satisfaction, may suggest a sense of entitlement to goods and services, setting up a conflict of perspectives.

Thus we can expect the cultivation of preference for "middle-of-the-road" political orientations alongside different and at times contradictory assumptions. These assumptions are likely to include demographically skewed, socially rigid and mistrustful, and often excessively anxious or repressive notions, but expansive expectations for economic services and material progress even among those who traditionally do not share such views.

As most of our discussion revolves around differences among light, medium, and heavy viewers in otherwise comparable groups in giving "television answers," it will be useful to describe these groups.

The analyses presented here utilize data from the General Social Survey (GSS) of the National Opinion Research Center for 1975, 1977, 1978, and 1980. About 1500 respondents took part in hour-long personal

interviews each year, for a total of 6020 respondents.[7] For purposes of analysis respondents have been divided into light viewers (24.6 percent) who said they watch a daily average of less than two hours; medium viewers (45.3 percent) who said they watch either two or three hours; and heavy viewers (30.1 percent) who said they watch four or more hours a day.[8]

Differences in amounts of viewing are of course rooted in the way people live. The heavy-viewing segment of the population includes a disproportionate number of women, young and old people, non-college-educated, and lower-income persons (see Table 1). Conversely, relatively more men and middle-aged, college-educated, and higher-income persons tend to be lighter viewers.[9]

It is evident, therefore, that simple comparisons of light, medium, and heavy viewers involve more than television. In order to isolate the independent contribution of television viewing to the cultivation of political orientations, it is necessary to control for other factors and to compare viewing-related differences in relatively homogeneous sub-groups. All findings reported in this article include such controls. Subgroup differences in each viewing group enable us to specify the differential as well as the common dynamics of television viewing.[10]

> *In this article we refine and apply the*
> *paradigm of mainstreaming to political orientations.*

We will advance and illustrate some propositions about television's contribution to class and political self-identification. We will examine the political dynamics of television through the analysis of the positions

[7] The 1975 sample was drawn through a combination of block quotas and probability sampling; the samples for the other three years were full probability. The samples represent English-speaking, noninstitutionalized persons 18 years and older (see the GSS 1972–1980 cumulative codebook for full details on sampling and other issues).

[8] The independent variable in these analyses is amount of television exposure, in hours. The actual question is, "On the average day, about how many hours do you personally watch television?" This measure is not interpreted as providing absolutely accurate reports of average viewing hours. Rather, we see it as an indicator of relative exposure to and immersion in the world of television. This distribution varies by no more than 3.5 percentage points within any of the four years. For the four years combined, respondents' mean amount of viewing is 2.92 hours (s.d. = 2.17), and the median is 2.48. Thirty cases (0.5 percent of the entire sample) have missing data.

[9] These patterns are generally independent of the other demographic factors, though they are slightly reduced under simultaneous controls. This also holds for the finding that younger and older respondents watch more. The simple correlation between amount of viewing and a middle-age dummy variable is −.14; controlling for the other variables in Table 1, the partial is −.09 (both p < .001).

[10] Specifically, we will examine simple within-group differences to assess the shape of conditioning and mediating patterns, and enter multiplicative interaction terms in hierarchical regression equations following all background controls and main effects. This clarifies whether the observed simple differences among groups are significantly independent of all other factors.

Table 1: Relationship between amount of television viewing and demographic variables

	Television viewing[a]				Simple[b]	4th order
	Light %	Medium %	Heavy %	Gamma	r	partial r
Sex						
Male (N = 2638)	50	46	37	.16***	.12***	.09***
Female (N = 3352)	50	54	63			
Age						
18–29 (N = 1531)	24	24	31			
30–54 (N = 2598)	51	46	34	.03	.02	−.06***
55+ (N = 1834)	25	30	36			
Education						
No college (N = 4077)	54	67	82	−.38***	−.19***	−.14***
Some college (N = 1893)	46	33	18			
Income						
Low (N = 2060)	31	33	49			
Medium (N = 1971)	35	37	33	−.23***	−.19***	−.12***
High (N = 1543)	35	30	18			
Region						
Urban (N = 2618)	45	43	43	.03	−.02	−.02
Non-urban (N = 3372)	55	57	57			

*** p < .001

[a] TV viewing: light = 0–1 hours per day; medium = 2–3 hours per day; heavy = over 4 hours per day.

[b] Simple and partial correlations are based on continuous data; partials are based on simultaneous controls for all other demographic variables in table.

of heavy and light viewers of different political tendencies, simultaneously controlling for a wide range of other influences and factors.

Political party affiliation is traditionally related to social status. Therefore, it is not surprising that among heavy viewers, who tend to have lower status, we find more Democrats than among light viewers (45 percent to 35 percent), while proportionately more light than heavy viewers are Independents (41 to 34 percent) and Republicans (24 to 21 percent).[11] We will see, however, that television alters the social significance and political meaning of these and other conventional labels.

An example of this transformation is the blurring of class lines and the self-styled "averaging" of income differences. Table 2, illustrated on Figure 1, shows that low socioeconomic status (SES) respondents are most likely to call themselves "working class"—but only when they are light viewers. Heavy-viewing respondents of the same low-status group are significantly less likely than their light-viewing counterparts to think of themselves as "working class" and more likely to say they are "middle class." The television experience seems to counter other circumstances

[11] Heavy viewers are more likely to say they are Democrats within each of the 12 subgroups shown in Table 1, and in all cases but one (respondents under the age of 30) the relationship is significant.

Table 2: Relationship between amount of television viewing and subjective class identification, and perception of family income as average

| | Television viewing | | | | |
	Light %	Medium %	Heavy %	CD[c]	Gamma
Subjective class identification[a] by actual SES[b] (N = 5239)					
Low SES					
Working class	65	64	55	−10	.06*
Middle class	25	28	32	+7	
Medium SES					
Working class	55	58	55	0	−.07*
Middle class	42	39	38	−4	
High SES					
Working class	25	29	36	+11	−.14***
Middle class	68	66	59	−9	
Percent who say their family income is "average," by actual family income (N = 5541)					
Under $10,000	43	44	43	0	−.05*
$10–$20,000	62	65	66	+4	−.13***
Over $20,000	38	47	60	+22	−.26***

* p < .05
*** p < .001

[a] "Lower" and "upper" class responses omitted because of small number of cases.

[b] Based on trichotomization of weighted factor scores of education, income, and occupational prestige.

[c] CD = Cultivation Differential: percent of heavy viewers giving response minus percent of light viewers giving response.

in thinking of one's class. It is an especially powerful deterrent to working-class consciousness.

Middle SES viewers show the least sense of class distinction at different viewing levels. They are already "in" the mainstream. The high SES group, however, like the low SES group, exhibits a response pattern that is strongly associated with amount of television viewing. More high SES heavy viewers consider themselves to be "working class" than do high SES light viewers.[12] Television viewing tends to blur class distinctions and make more affluent heavy viewers think of themselves as just working people of average income.

These processes show up clearly when we relate television viewing to labels of direct political relevance. We used a relatively general and

[12] This result holds even when controlling for residual variation in actual SES within each of the actual SES groups.

HIGH SES/INCOME

Percent who say they are:

LOW SES/INCOME

Percent who say they are:

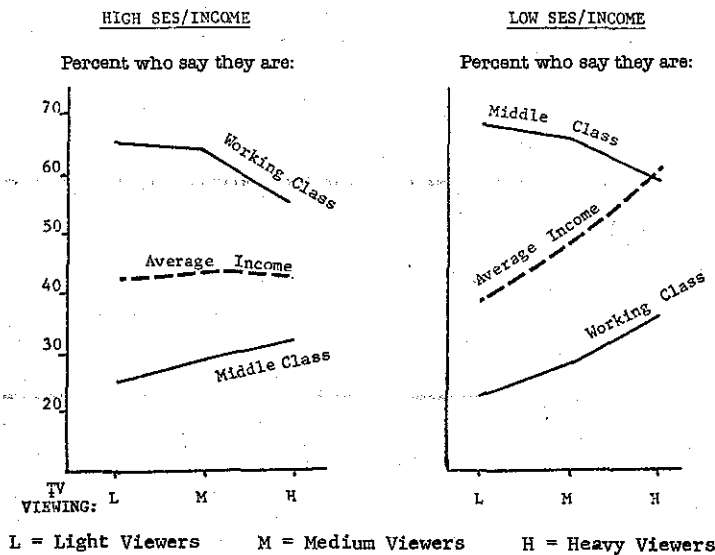L = Light Viewers   M = Medium Viewers   H = Heavy Viewers

Figure 1: Class and income self-designations by television viewing within actual SES/income groups

presumably stable designation of political tendency, most likely to structure a range of political attitudes and positions: the self-designations "liberal," "moderate," and "conservative."[13] We are assuming that the GSS respondents and, indeed, most of us, locate political positions on a continuum ranging from liberal to conservative (if not farther in either direction), owing in part to the generally accepted and commonplace use of these terms in interpersonal and mass media discourse. Consequently, unlike many things respondents might be asked about, we believe that these self-designations have a prior existence and are not created in response to the interview situation.

Table 3 shows the percent of light viewers in each political tendency category and the percentage spread between them and heavy viewers both by demographic classifications and party affiliation. The most

[13] Political tendency was measured by the question, "We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. I'm going to show you a seven-point scale on which the *political* views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal—point 1—to extremely conservative—point 7. Where would you place yourself on this scale?" Self-placements on this scale were recoded into three categories: "extremely liberal," "liberal," and "slightly liberal" (points 1, 2, and 3) respondents were treated as "liberals"; points 5, 6, and 7 were classified as "conservative"; and point 4 represents "moderate, middle of the road." The resulting groupings provide, over the four years combined, 1,611 "liberals" (28.2 percent), 2,254 "moderates" (39.4 percent), and 1,849 "conservatives" (32.4 percent); 306 cases (5.1 percent) have missing data.

Table 3: Relationship between amount of television viewing and political self-designation (N = 5691)

	PERCENT WHO SAY THEY ARE:								
	Liberals			Moderates			Conservatives		
	%L[a]	CD[b]	Gamma	%L	CD	Gamma	%L	CD	Gamma
OVERALL	31	−3	−.04*	33	+12	.15***	36	−8	−.12***
Controlling for:									
Sex									
Male	33	−1	−.01	30	+8	.11***	38	−8	−.10**
Female	29	−3	−.05	36	+12	.15***	35	−9	−.13***
Age									
Under 30	45	−7	−.09*	30	+13	.18***	26	−7	−.13**
30–54	29	−5	−.09*	32	+14	.18***	39	−8	−.11***
55+	20	+3	.07	39	+6	.07*	41	−9	−.12**
Education									
No college	24	+2	.04	41	+6	.08**	35	−8	−.12***
Some college	38	−1	−.05	25	+8	.13***	37	−7	−.07*
Income									
Low	34	−4	−.06	35	+8	.11**	31	−4	−.07*
Medium	29	−3	−.04	35	+13	.16***	36	−10	−.14***
High	31	−5	−.10*	30	+14	.19***	39	−9	−.10**
Region									
Urban	36	−3	−.04	31	+9	.12***	33	−6	−.09***
Non-urban	26	−2	−.04	34	+14	.17***	40	−12	−.15***
Party affiliation									
Democrat	37	−6	−.06*	37	+7	.08**	27	−2	−.03
Independent	34	−7	−.11**	33	+14	.19***	33	−7	−.11**
Republican	16	+5	.11**	29	+13	.18***	55	−18	−.23***

* p < .05 (tau)
** p < .01 (tau)
*** p < .001 (tau)

[a] %L = percent of light viewers giving response.
[b] CD = Cultivation Differential: percent of heavy viewers giving response minus percent of light viewers giving response.

Percent who say they are:

DEMOCRATS   INDEPENDENTS   REPUBLICANS

60

50

40

30

20

TV
VIEWING: L   M   H   L   M   H   L   M   H

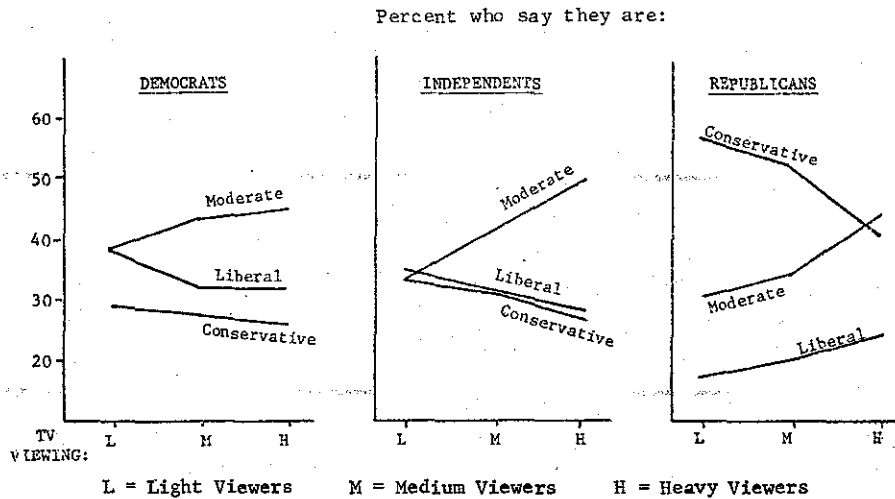L = Light Viewers   M = Medium Viewers   H = Heavy Viewers

**Figure 2: Political self-designation by amount of television viewing,
within party categories**

general relationship between television viewing and political tendency is that significantly more heavy than light viewers in all subgroups call themselves moderates and significantly fewer call themselves conservatives.[14] The number of liberals also declines slightly among heavy viewers, except where there are the fewest liberals (e.g., among Republicans). Figure 2 illustrates the absorption of divergent tendencies and the blending of political distinctions into the "television mainstream."[15]

[14] For purposes of space, medium viewers are omitted from Table 3. All the relationships in the moderate and conservative columns, however, are monotonic across all three viewing categories; eleven of the sixteen in the liberal column are monotonic. In addition, heavy viewers show significantly less dispersal around the mean of the seven-point political self-designation scale than do light viewers, overall and within most subgroups. In order to avoid curtailment of variance problems within subgroups, unstandardized regression coefficients reflecting the relationship between amount of viewing and the absolute value of respondents' deviations from the sample's political "center" (controlling for everything else) were computed within the major demographic subgroups. Without exception, all coefficients are negative, indicating that heavy viewers consistently show less dispersal around the sample mean. This is particularly true for college-educated respondents, those with medium incomes, younger and middle-aged people, noncity residents, females, and those of "Independent" party affiliation (all interaction terms except region and sex are significant). This shows that heavy viewers tend to choose "moderate" political self-designations over and above the effects of these powerful demographics.

[15] The tendency for heavy viewers to designate themselves as "moderate" holds up within each of the four years analyzed here, although there are variations in the size of the association (it is weakest in 1977 and strongest in 1978). In addition, this moderating effect seems to be a specific correlate of television viewing, and not a general media exposure phenomenon: neither radio listening nor newspaper reading are associated with similar results. The percentage of moderates among light, medium, and heavy radio listeners

On the surface, mainstreaming appears to be a "centering"—even a "liberalizing"—of political and other tendencies. After all, as viewing increases, the percent of conservatives drops significantly within every group (except Democrats), and the relationships of amount of television viewing with the percent of liberals are generally weaker. However, a closer look at the actual positions taken in response to questions about political issues such as minorities, civil and personal rights, free speech, the economy, etc., shows that the mainstream does not always mean "middle of the road."

> *Eight questions about attitudes toward blacks*
> *were asked in at least two of the four GSS years*
> *analyzed here, and explicitly assess respondents'*
> *desire to keep blacks and whites separate.*

Questions include, "Do you think that white students and black students should go to the same schools or to separate schools?" and "Do you think that there should be laws against marriages beteen blacks and whites?" Table 4 summarizes the relationships between amount of television viewing and these eight items, for self-designated liberals, moderates, and conservatives. Light-viewing liberals are always least likely to endorse segregationist statements. Light-viewing moderates and conservatives are, interestingly, often very close; in more than one instance, light-viewing moderates are slightly *more* likely to support racial segregation than are light-viewing conservatives.

More importantly, associations between amount of viewing and these attitudes are sharply different for liberals, moderates, and conservatives. Liberals, who are least likely to hold segregationist views, show some dramatic (and always significant) associations between amount of viewing and the desire to keep blacks and whites separate. Among moderates and conservatives, in contrast, the relationships between viewing and these attitudes are smaller and inconsistent. (Four of the interaction terms are significant, showing the correlates of heavy viewing to be systematically different across political categories.) On busing, moderates and conservatives even show a significant negative association, indicating *less* segregationist attitudes among these heavy viewers; this

(continued from p. 113)

(defined as for the viewing groups) is 38, 39, and 38 respectively; similarly, 39 percent of both daily and occasional newspaper readers call themselves moderates. Thus, it is television viewing, rather than general media use, that is associated with a self-ascribed "moderate" political disposition. Finally, this finding is replicated in a national survey conducted by Research and Forecasts, Inc., for the Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Co. The percentage of moderates among light, medium, and heavy viewers in this survey is 41, 48, and 49, respectively. Controlling for party affiliation, the data are virtually identical to those in the GSS.

Table 4: Summary of relationships between amount of television viewing and attitudes toward blacks, controlling for political self-designation (whites only)

Percent who:	Liberals			Moderates			Conservatives			Int. beta[c]
	%L[a]	CD[b]	Gamma	%L	CD	Gamma	%L	CD	Gamma	
Favor laws against interracial marriage (N = 3716)	13	+22	.38***	31	+10	.14***	32	+9	.12**	.15**
Would object if a black were brought to dinner (N = 2511)	13	+11	.24***	22	+7	.09*	26	+7	.10*	.02
Strongly agree: blacks shouldn't push where not wanted (N = 3715)	25	+15	.21***	43	+7	.10**	38	+12	.15***	.08
Strongly agree: whites have right to segregate neighborhood (N = 2474)	10	+9	.23**	14	+8	.15**	22	+1	.04	.17**
Are against open housing laws (N = 3743)	43	+12	.15**	63	−1	−.03	70	−1	−.01	.13**
Are against busing (N = 3670)	73	+6	.13*	87	−5	−.16**	93	−5	−.17**	−.11*
Would not vote for black for president (N = 3639)	8	+12	.29***	18	0	.01	17	+9	.17**	.03
Believe whites and blacks should go to separate schools (N = 2498)	6	+11	.35***	12	+1	.06	16	0	−.02	−.07

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

[a] %L = percent of light viewers giving response.
[b] CD = Cultivation Differential: percent of heavy viewers giving response minus percent of light viewers giving response.
[c] Interaction beta = interaction of amount of viewing and political self-designation, with age, sex, education, income, region, and main effects of viewing and self-designation in equation.

is an instance of viewing bringing divergent groups closer together from both directions.

In general, these patterns vividly illustrate mainstreaming. There are, to be sure, some across-the-board relationships, but even these are markedly weaker for moderates and conservatives. Overall, these data show a convergence and homogenization of heavy viewers across political groups.

The differences between liberals and conservatives—i.e., the effects of political tendency on attitudes toward blacks—decrease among heavy viewers. Among light viewers, liberals and conservatives show an average difference of 15.4 percentage points; yet, among heavy viewers, liberals and conservatives differ by an average of only 4.6 percentage points (t = 4.54, p < .01).

Figure 3 shows the mainstreaming pattern for three of these items. In the first, opposition to busing, we can see that heavy-viewing conservatives are more "liberal" and heavy-viewing liberals more "conservative" than their respective light-viewing counterparts. In the second instance, opposition to open housing laws, viewing is not associated with any differences in the attitudes expressed by conservatives, but among liberals we see that heavy viewing goes with a greater likelihood of such opposition. Finally, in response to a question about laws against marriages between blacks and whites, we find that heavy viewers in all groups are more likely to favor these laws than are light viewers in the same categories, but this is significantly more pronounced for liberals.
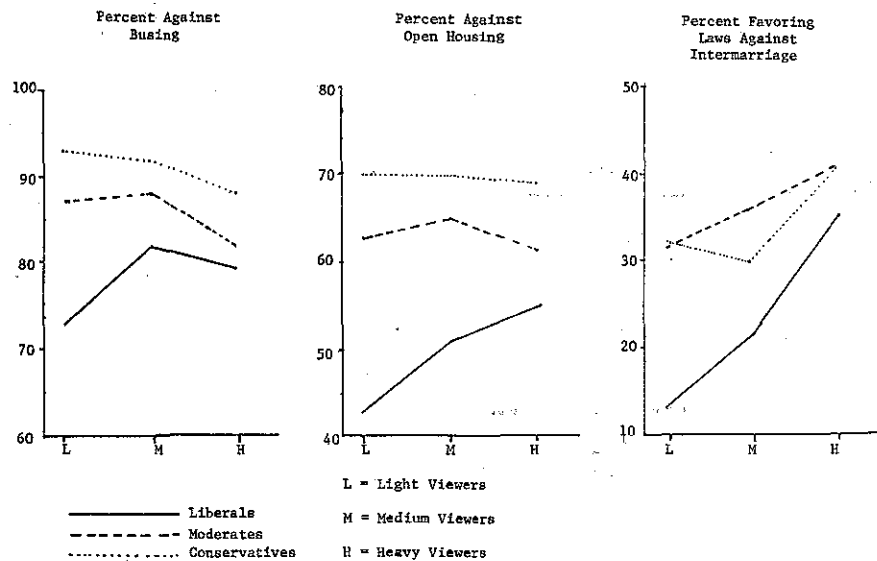

Figure 3: Television viewing and attitudes about blacks, by political self-designation

In sum, the responses of heavy-viewing liberals are quite comparable to those of all moderates and conservatives, and there is not much difference between moderates and conservatives. The television mainstream, in terms of attitudes toward blacks, clearly runs to the right.[16]

Many of the fiercest political battles of the past decade have been fought on the nation's "home front"—around a group of so-called moral issues which have sharply divided liberal and conservative forces.

We find liberals confronting conservatives over the propriety, morality, and even legality of personal behavior. The fights involving reproductive freedom, the rights of sexual minorities, and the Equal Rights Amendment have become a focus of that confrontation.

Our view of television as a stabilizing force, seeking to attract the largest possible audience by celebrating the "moderation" of the mainstream, leads us to expect that heavy viewers, once again, will show a convergence of attitudes on issues of personal morality. We expect to find that self-designated moderates and conservatives are generally close together regardless of television viewing, and that heavy-viewing liberals take up positions alongside moderates and conservatives.

Table 5 supports our predictions.[17] In the case of attitudes on homosexuality, abortion, and marijuana, there is considerable spread

[16] Besides these eight questions, the 1977 GSS contained twenty (mostly nonrepeated) items about attitudes toward blacks, and these were combined into six indices, each having acceptable internal homogeneity (with Cronbach's alphas from .50 to .60; all measures together produce an alpha of .82). Four of these indices measure support for racial segregation, in terms of interracial marriage, open housing, integrated schools, and avoidance of blacks. A fifth scale deals with respondents' tendencies to keep blacks "in their place," and a sixth measures respondents' agreement with stereotypical explanations for blacks' social disadvantages. As with the eight repeated items, these indices show that, for liberals, greater viewing means greater support for segregation and related manifestations of racism toward blacks. Five out of six relationships are significant among liberals. Yet, *none* of the within-group comparisons are significant for moderates or conservatives; five out of six interaction terms are negative, two of them significantly. Once again, heavy viewing cultivates anti-integration and related opinions only among liberals—those who are "otherwise" least opposed to racial equality. Also, again, there is not much difference between moderates and conservatives.

[17] For homosexuality, respondents indicated whether they felt "sexual relations between two adults of the same sex" are "always wrong," "almost always wrong," "wrong only sometimes," or "not wrong at all"; we focus on those who respond "always wrong." The question was asked in 1977 and 1980. Items measuring approval of legally obtaining an abortion under six specific conditions were included in each of the four GSS years that contained a television viewing question; these items produce a reliable Guttman scale (scalability = .80, reproducibility = .94). Respondents were treated as being "against abortion" if they agreed to legal abortions in less than three situations *or* only for the three "easiest" situations. Finally, a question on whether or not marijuana should be legalized was included in 1975, 1978, and 1980.

Table 5: Relationship between amount of television viewing and attitudes toward personal conduct, controlling for political self-designation

	Television viewing					
Percent of respondents:	Light %	Medium %	Heavy %	CD[a]	Gamma	Int. beta[b]
Saying homosexuality is always wrong (N = 2736)						
Liberals	47	54	67	+20	.25***	
Moderates	71	79	77	+6	.08	−.19**
Conservatives	77	81	82	+5	.09	
Against abortion (N = 5691)						
Liberals	32	38	44	+12	.16***	
Moderates	45	46	51	+6	.08*	−.18***
Conservatives	55	47	51	−4	−.05	
Against legalization of marijuana (N = 4088)						
Liberals	50	56	67	+17	.22***	
Moderates	72	79	79	+7	.09*	−.18***
Conservatives	80	84	84	+4	.08	

* p < .05
** p < .01
***p < .001

[a] CD = Cultivation Differential: percent of heavy viewers giving response minus percent of light viewers giving response.

[b] Interaction of amount of television viewing and political self-designation with age, education, income, race, sex, region, and amount of viewing and political self-designation in equation.
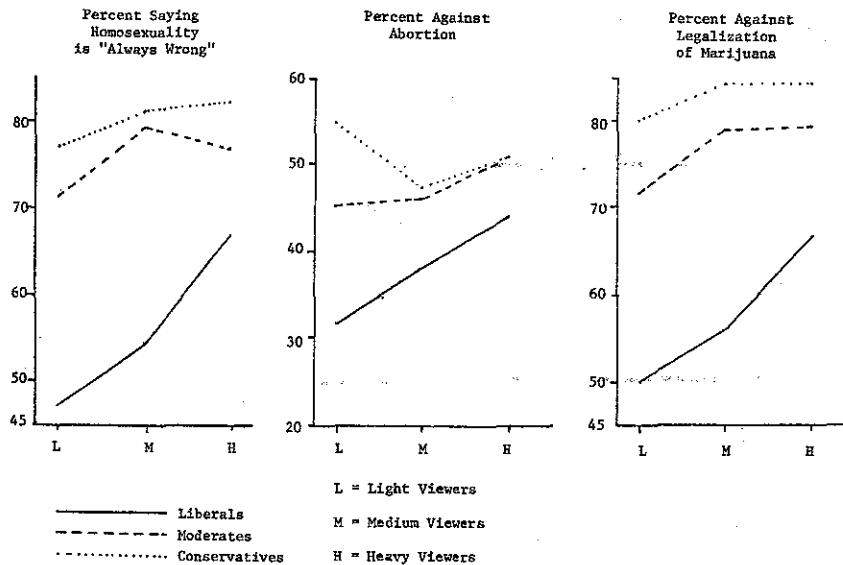

Figure 4: Television viewing and attitudes toward personal conduct, by political self-designation

between light-viewing liberals and light-viewing conservatives (an average of 28 percentage points); the latter are always much more likely to be opposed. And, once again, the attitudes of heavy-viewing liberals and conservatives are far closer together (an average of 13 percentage points; t = 16.6, p < .01), due primarily to the difference between light- and heavy-viewing liberals. (All interaction terms are significant.) In all instances, the self-designated moderates are much closer to the conservatives than they are to the liberals (see Figure 4).[18]

The narrowing of the political spectrum is also revealed in some more explicitly "political" findings.

Whatever its reasons and justifications, anti-communism has been used as the principal rationale for political repression since the first Red Scare of 1919–1920. Responses to several GSS questions tap television's relationship to anti-Communist sentiments and to the tendency to restrict free speech.[19]

Table 6 shows the familiar pattern (illustrated on Figure 5). Five out of ten light-viewing moderates and six out of ten light-viewing conservatives consider communism "the worst form [of government] of all." Heavy-viewing moderates and conservatives nearly unite in condemning communism as "worst" by even larger margins (64 and 67 percent, respectively). But viewing makes the biggest difference among liberals: only one-third of light-viewing but half of heavy-viewing liberals agree that communism is "the worst form" of government. (The interaction of amount of viewing with political self-designation is significant over and above all controls and main effects; beta = −.15, p < .05.)

Responses on restricting free speech show similar patterns. Heavy viewers of all three political persuasions are more likely to agree to restrict, in various ways, the speech of "left" and "right" nonconformists than are their light-viewing counterparts. There is little difference between conservatives and moderates. But, again, the most striking difference is between light- and heavy-viewing liberals.

[18] The same patterns hold for attitudes toward both premarital and extramarital sex. Light-viewing liberals are much more unlikely to say that these behaviors are "always wrong," while the responses of heavy-viewing liberals approach those of moderates and conservatives. As with busing, moderates and conservatives show significant *negative* associations between amount of viewing and disapproval of premarital sex—another instance of convergence from both directions (the interaction beta, with all other variables and main effects in the equation, is −.18, p < .01).

[19] A single question (asked in 1977 and 1980) deals with respondents' feelings about communism, on a four-point continuum from "it's the worst kind [of government] of all," to "it's a good form of government." Fifteen questions (all asked in 1977 and 1980) deal with whether each of five types of people should be allowed to (a) make a speech in the respondent's community, (b) have a book in the community's library, and (c) teach in a local college or university. We subdivided the five types into "leftists" (atheists, Communists, homosexuals) and "rightists" (racists, militarists), and constructed two indices of respondents' willingness to curtail the freedom of speech of these groups. The antileftist items yielded an alpha of .90, and the antirightist alpha is .82.

Table 6: Relationship between amount of television viewing and attitudes toward communism and free speech, controlling for political self-designation

	Television viewing					
	Light %	Medium %	Heavy %	CD[a]	Gamma	Int. beta[b]
Communism is the worst form of government (N = 2812)						
Liberals	34	45	49	+15	.19***	
Moderates	51	61	64	+13	.15**	−.15*
Conservatives	60	61	67	+7	.08	
Willingness to curtail freedom of speech of[c]	Light X̄	Medium X̄	Heavy X̄			
Left (N = 2505)						
Liberals	2.04	2.66	3.95***			
Moderates	3.81	4.06	4.40			−.29***
Conservatives	4.24	4.42	4.29			
Right (N = 2633)						
Liberals	1.71	2.07	2.83***			
Moderates	2.78	2.99	3.14			−.22***
Conservatives	2.79	3.01	3.03			

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

[a] CD = Cultivation Differential: percent of heavy viewers giving response minus percent of light viewers giving response.

[b] Interaction of amount of viewing and political self-designation with age, education, income, race, sex, region, and amount of viewing and political self-designation in equation.

[c] Scales for mean values of indices are explained in text footnote 19.

In general, with respect to anti-communism and restrictions on political speech of the left and right, those who call themselves conservatives are in the "television mainstream." Those who consider themselves moderates join the conservatives—or exceed them—as heavy viewers. Liberals perform their traditional role of defending political plurality and freedom of speech only when they are light viewers. Mainstreaming means not only a narrowing of political differences but also a significant tilt in the political balance.[20]

But political drift to the right is not the full story. As we noted before, television has a business clientele which, while it may be politically

[20] The same basic patterns also hold in terms of attitudes toward the Equal Rights Amendment (asked only in 1977), but nonsignificantly. Among liberals, 17 percent of light but 20 percent of heavy viewers oppose its passage. For moderates and conservatives—who are more likely to be against the amendment—heavy viewing means greater support. Among moderates, 28 percent of light and 24 percent of heavy viewers are opposed; among conservatives, 40 percent of light and 32 percent of heavy viewers would not see it passed. A 23 percentage point spread between light-viewing liberals and conservatives is cut in half (to 12 points) among heavy viewers.
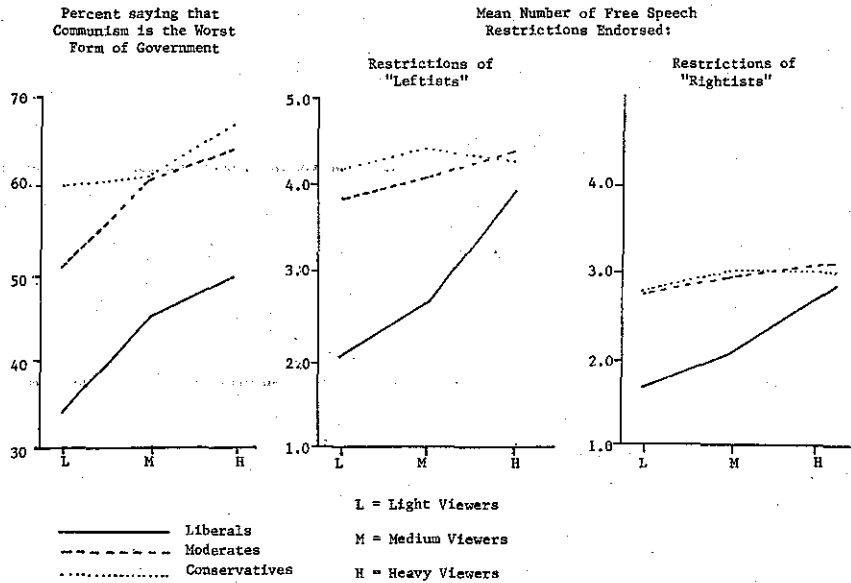
Percent saying that
Communism is the Worst
Form of Government

Mean Number of Free Speech
Restrictions Endorsed:

Restrictions of
"Leftists"

Restrictions of
"Rightists"

L = Light Viewers

——————— Liberals
— — — — — — Moderates
·················· Conservatives

M = Medium Viewers

H = Heavy Viewers

Figure 5: Television viewing and attitudes toward communism and free speech, by political self-designation

conservative, also has a mission to perform that requires the cultivation of consumer values and gratifications pulling in a different direction.

A number of surveys have documented the tendency of respondents to support government services that benefit them while taking increasingly hard-line positions on taxes, equality, crime, and other issues that touch deeply felt anxieties and insecurities. The media interpreted (and election results seemed to confirm, at least in the early 1980s) these inherently contradictory positions as a "conservative trend" (5). Television may have contributed to that trend in two ways. First, as our Violence Profiles have demonstrated, heavy viewers have a keener sense of living in a "mean world" with greater hazards and insecurities than do comparable groups of light viewers (6, 13). Second, while television does not directly sway viewers to be conservative (in fact, heavy viewers tend to shun that label), its mainstream of apparent moderation shifts political attitudes toward conservative positions.

> *When positions on economic issues are*
> *examined, however, a different if*
> *perhaps complementary pattern emerges.*

Television needs to attract a wide following to perform its principal task of delivering the buying public to its sponsors. It could afford even less than most politicians to project austerity, to denigrate popular bread-and-butter issues, or to urge saving instead of spending for goods, services, and security. The essential mission of the television institu-

Table 7: Relationship between amount of television viewing and attitudes toward federal spending, controlling for political self-designation

% saying we spend too much on:	Television viewing			CD[a]	Gamma	Int. beta[b]
	Light %	Medium %	Heavy %			
Health (N = 5478)						
Liberals	5	3	3	−2	−.16	
Moderates	9	5	4	−5	−.22**	−.15***
Conservatives	17	11	8	−9	−.25***	
Environment (N = 5387)						
Liberals	7	7	8	+1	.03	
Moderates	14	10	9	−5	−.15**	−.19***
Conservatives	22	20	13	−9	−.16***	
Cities (N = 4983)						
Liberals	13	15	15	+2	.06	
Moderates	23	20	16	−7	−.14**	−.11*
Conservatives	31	28	27	−4	−.07	
Education (N = 5492)						
Liberals	7	9	7	0	−.02	
Moderates	10	9	8	−2	−.11*	−.14**
Conservatives	20	16	14	−6	−.14**	
Foreign aid (N = 5398)						
Liberals	70	70	69	−1	−.01	
Moderates	71	75	74	+3	.04	.08*
Conservatives	73	74	79	+6	.09*	
Welfare (N = 5454)						
Liberals	48	51	43	−5	−.06	
Moderates	62	61	52	−10	−.15***	−.06
Conservatives	71	66	58	−13	−.17***	
Blacks (N = 5276)						
Liberals	19	21	17	−2	−.04	
Moderates	30	28	22	−8	−.13**	−.06
Conservatives	35	33	29	−6	−.07*	
% saying we spend too little on:						
Crime (N = 5419)						
Liberals	58	66	70	+12	.17***	
Moderates	69	74	77	+8	.11**	−.09*
Conservatives	65	70	69	+4	.05	
Drugs (N = 5317)						
Liberals	48	58	68	+20	.26***	
Moderates	57	64	67	+10	.12**	−.01
Conservatives	55	56	64	+9	.11**	
Arms (N = 5328)						
Liberals	18	27	31	+13	.21***	
Moderates	32	35	33	+1	.00	−.15***
Conservatives	41	40	41	0	.01	
Space (N = 5385)						
Liberals	20	16	10	−10	−.23***	
Moderates	10	10	8	−2	−.08	.04
Conservatives	18	15	9	−9	−.21***	

* p < .05   ** p < .01   *** p < .001

[a] and [b]: See definitions in Table 6.

Percent Saying We Spend Too Much On:

Percent Saying We Spend Too Little On:

——————— Liberals

— — — — — — Moderates

··············· Conservatives

L = Light Viewers

M = Medium Viewers
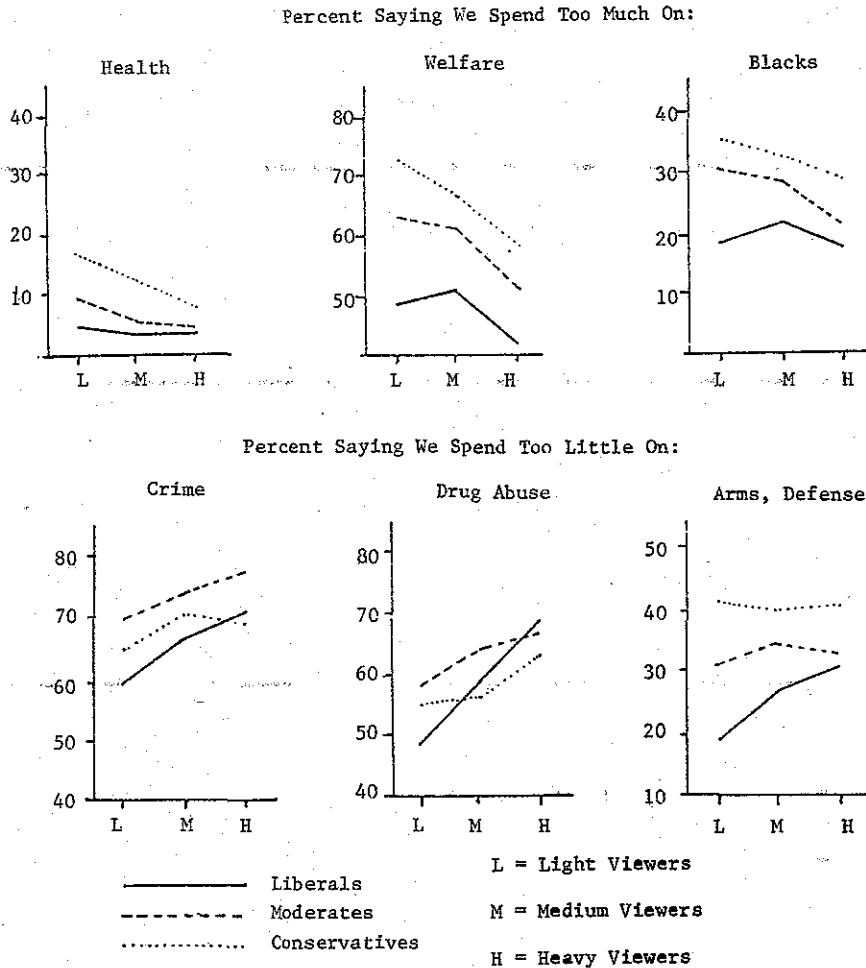
H = Heavy Viewers

Figure 6: Television viewing and attitudes toward federal spending, by political self-designation

tion—mass mobilization for consumption—would seem to dictate an economically popular and even populist stance.

We examined patterns of responses to questions about government spending on 11 programs. The results are shown in Table 7. Seven are traditional "liberal" issues: health, environment, cities, education, foreign aid, welfare, and blacks.[21] The percents of light, medium, and heavy viewers in the three political categories who say the U.S. spends "too much" on health, welfare, and blacks are shown on the top of Figure 6.

Here, instead of heavy-viewing liberals taking positions closer to conservatives, the opposite happens: heavy-viewing conservatives, as

[21] These seven items yield an alpha of .65. The other four (space exploration, halting the crime rate, drug abuse, and the military/defense) share little common variance (alpha = .28) and clearly represent a different dimension.

**Table 8: Percent of respondents who oppose spending cuts and reductions in services
but feel their taxes are too high, by television viewing (N = 1220)**

	Television viewing				
	Light %	Medium %	Heavy %	CD[a]	Gamma
OVERALL	29	31	38	+9	.13**
Controlling for:					
Sex					
Male	26	26	36	+10	.14*
Female	32	35	39	+7	.10 (p = .07)
Age					
Under 30	35	32	44	+9	.14 (p = .07)
30–54	27	35	41	+14	.19**
55+	26	22	29	+3	.08
Education					
No college	36	32	40	+4	.09 (p = .08)
Some college	23	28	29	+6	.12 (p = .08)
Income					
Low	31	32	37	+6	.10
Medium	28	29	40	+12	.18*
High	28	30	35	+7	.10
Region					
Urban	29	29	40	+11	.16*
Non-urban	29	32	36	+7	.10 (p = .07)
Party affiliation					
Democrat	40	35	42	+2	.04
Independent	24	31	38	+14	.19**
Republican	20	22	30	+10	.17 (p = .07)
Political self-designation					
Liberal	36	32	44	+8	.11
Moderate	32	33	37	+5	.07
Conservative	20	26	30	+10	.16*

* p < .05
** p < .01

[a] CD = Cultivation Differential: percent of heavy viewers giving response minus percent
of light viewers giving response.

well as moderates, converge toward the liberal position on six of the
seven issues. The more they watch, the less they say the U.S. spends
"too much." On these six issues, the average distance of 16 percentage
points between liberal and conservative light viewers is only 9 percent-
age points for heavy viewers, with conservatives accounting for most of
the convergence (t = 8.2, p < .001). The exception is the relatively
distant issue of foreign aid.

The remaining four issues are crime, drugs, defense, and space
exploration. Percents of respondents who say the U.S. is spending "too
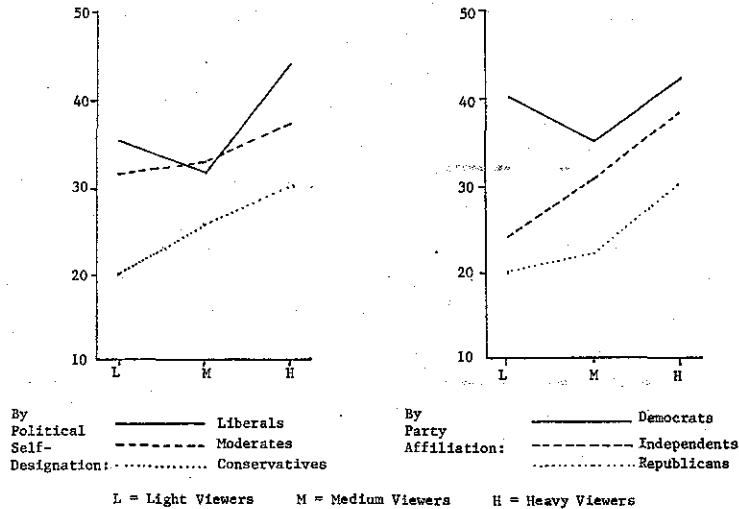little" on the first three issues can be seen on the bottom of Figure 6.

Figure 7: Television viewing's association with opposing spending cuts but feeling taxes are too high, by political self-designation and party affiliation

Here again, with the exception of space, heavy viewers generally want to spend more. As these are somewhat more "conservative" issues, it is the moderates and conservatives who are in the "television mainstream," taking a position toward greater spending, and heavy-viewing liberals stand close to them. On these four issues an average liberal-conservative spread of nearly 10 percentage points for light viewers compares with a gap of 4 percentage points among heavy viewers (t = 2.2, p < .12).

To investigate further the populist streak in the otherwise restrictive political mix of the typology of the heavy viewer, we looked for questions that combine outlooks on both taxes and spending. The 1980 GSS permitted us to isolate those respondents who oppose reductions in government spending and yet feel their taxes are too high.[22] As shown in Table 8, heavy viewers are more likely to express this contradictory position in every subgroup (although the relationship remains significant at p < .05 only overall and within six of these groups). Figure 7 illustrates the political lineup.

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[22] In the 1980 GSS, respondents were asked their position on a seven-point scale, with point 1 equal to "government should provide many fewer services; reduce spending a lot" and point 7 labeled "government should continue to provide services; no reduction in spending." We combined respondents who fell on the upper three points with those who said the amount of taxes they pay is too high, in order to construct a typology of attitudes on spending and taxes. We focus on the one-third (32.1 percent) who take the contradictory position of opposing reductions in spending while claiming their taxes are too high. Forty percent want less spending and lower taxes, 13.9 percent want reduced spending but do *not* feel their taxes are too high, and 13.9 percent want continued spending and do not feel their taxes are too high.

As on the other economic issues, liberals and moderates are close together while heavy-viewing conservatives join the liberal-moderate mainstream; the tilt is in the liberal (if conflicted) direction. Heavy-viewing Republicans and Independents also express attitudes closer to the Democratic position than do their light-viewing political counterparts. But all heavy viewers are more likely to want a combination of more social spending *and* lower taxes.

> *Is "commercial populism" the new*
> *American melting pot?*

The cultural—and evidently political—television mainstream tends to absorb the divergent tendencies that traditionally shaped the political process and to contain its own cross-currents. Heavy television viewers tend more than comparable light viewers to call themselves "moderate" but take positions that are unmistakably conservative, except on economic issues.

Our analysis shows that although television viewing brings conservatives, moderates, and liberals closer together, it is the liberal position that is weakest among heavy viewers. Viewing blurs traditional differences, blends them into a more homogeneous mainstream, and bends the mainstream toward a "hard line" position on issues dealing with minorities and personal rights. Hard-nosed commercial populism, with its mix of restrictive conservatism and pork-chop liberalism, is the paradoxical—and potentially volatile—contribution of television to political orientations.

The "television mainstream" may be the true twentieth-century melting pot of the American people. The mix it creates is of central significance for the theory as well as the practice of popular self-government. If our charting of the mainstream is generally valid, basic assumptions about political orientations, the media, and the democratic process need to be reviewed and revised to fit the age of television.

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