



THE CORINTHIAN
The Journal of Student Research at Georgia College

The Corinthian

Volume 2

Article 3

2000

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Goon, Robert (2000) "Regional Trends in Religion and Politics," *The Corinthian*: Vol. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://kb.gcsu.edu/thecorinthian/vol2/iss1/3>

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Regional Trends in Religion and Politics

Robert Goon

Faculty Sponsor: Beth Rushing

Introduction

As mass communications close the distances over which people routinely interact, there is a question about the increase in social homogenization at the expense of regional identity. In a society covering as much geographic area and encompassing as many cultures as the United States, the question is certainly valid. Traditionally, this diversity has been recognized as a “melting pot,” an analogy attempting to institutionalize a sort of homogenous diversity; the “melting pot” analogy is now giving way to notions of multiculturalism. However, one may wonder if this social diversity can avoid being buried beneath the homogenizing mass media culture. Whether homogenization is good or bad, the subject is worth investigating, if only to learn if such a trend exists in an empirically observable form that can be placed in an objective context accessible to those concerned with regional trends and their implications.

Consequently, the purpose of this limited study is to determine the trends, if any, in regional variation in religion and politics from 1975 to 1996. I will attempt to identify these trends and speculate on their relationship to the larger question of homogenization. Though the space in time is relatively short, even in the context of America’s (relatively) short national history, rapid social and cultural changes in this period have significantly influenced the relationships among these institutions and their participants. Be it the Watergate scandal just three years before my study begins or the *Roe v. Wade* decision shortly thereafter, national events have potentially influenced regional relationships among churches, states, and citizens. The question is—if so, how?

Literature Review

Much of the pioneering modern work on regional questions was done in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, decades in which sociologists like Carle C. Zimmerman, Norval Glenn, and J.L. Simmons worked toward defining regions and asking questions about the implications of regional trends. Zimmerman's attempts to define regions were based primarily on his studies of the Great Plains region of the United States, but he delineated regions in a manner departing from the traditional geographic definitions, instead suggesting that additional determinants might be necessary. While later sociologists have suggested that his work might have been more thorough, it remains an essential starting point for understanding regional differences in the U.S. (Kraenzel 1976, 210-212). Glenn and Simmons asked the question that concerns this paper and concluded that, at least in 1967, regional differences were still distinct. Further, they predicted that these differences might grow sharper with time (Glenn and Simmons 1967, 192-193) because of continuing differences in regional urbanization patterns and the inability of mass media to override pre-existing regional values. Their conclusion, though, must be assessed within the context of its time. Glenn and Simmons were writing just as the Civil Rights struggle and the Vietnam conflict were sharply dividing America, and obvious regional differences were to be expected. Further, they themselves admitted that their cohorts represented the pre-World War II generation, which grew up without access to homogenizing factors like television.¹ Not that this limitation invalidates their conclusion; in fact, it is just these sorts of factors that may serve, for better or worse, to sustain diversity.

Later studies departed from larger complexities in favor of smaller ones, like the South and religion, both individually and together. Samuel E. Wallace wrote at length on the history of the regional delineation of the South and stated in no uncertain terms that, with its senses of "time and place," it continues to stand as a distinct region (Wallace 1981, 440). Bailey, Sikkink, and Smith

concluded that the strength of religious identity within the South was strong enough to "convert" even in-migrating non-Southerners, but that it lacked the strength to sustain itself outside the region, even among Southerners migrating to other regions (Bailey et al. 1998, 504).

Last, Herting, Grusky, and van Rompaey increased the complexity of the regional question by exploring the relationship between increased "interstate mobility," regions, and the regionalisms that those moving among the regions carry with them. These researchers used their conclusions as a basis for new socio-cultural stucturations accounting for relative mobility and determined that regionalism was still distinct, in part because the strcucturations were so distinct that homogenization was all but impossible (Herting et al. 1998, 284). This thoroughly modern approach to the problem takes full advantage of innovations in quantitative social science research since Zimmerman's pioneering work in 1949.

Data and Plan for Analysis

Regionalism for the purposes of this study is defined as the distinctiveness exhibited by those living in a geographic region traditionally associated with a homogenous cultural character. I will approach this distinctiveness by using data from the General Social Surveys from 1975 to 1996 in five-year increments. Since not all of the questions I have selected were administered in 1972 (the first year of the GSS), I begin in 1975, while substituting 1996 for 1995 for two reasons: the survey was not conducted in 1995, and 1996 is the date of the latest available data (the public release of the 1998 survey is still pending). The GSS, which is an extensively studied survey with a high frequency of administration, carries over the variables examined here with little or no change in question wording from survey to survey.²

The GSS data is divided into nine geographic regions. These regions include the Northeast (NE), Middle Atlantic (MA),

East North Central (ENC), West North Central (WNC), South Atlantic (SA), East South Central (ESC), West South Central (WSC), Mountain (M), and Pacific (P) regions.³

I have selected four specific survey questions for consideration, all of which have been asked in every study since 1975. These concern religious preference, the frequency of attendance at religious services, political view, and party affiliation. I chose the questions concerning religion and politics because prior studies have shown that obvious regional variations were to be expected in these areas. The specific questions have been intended to measure both formal affiliations (political party and religious preference) and practical associations (political view and religious attendance). The numbers of cases ranged from about 1,400 in 1975 to 2,800 in 1996.

Using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, I collapsed the response categories to help in the practical analysis and cross-tabulation. The regions were left intact, but the survey questions were re-coded to facilitate analysis. The religious preference categories were left unaltered except for coding those unable or unwilling to respond ("don't know" or "missing") as "missing." The attendance question was re-coded from nine categories (ranging from yearly to weekly attendance) to four: "never," "rarely" (less than once a year, once or twice a year, or several times a year), "moderate" (1 to 2-3 times per month), and "frequently" (weekly or nearly so, or several times per week). The political view question was re-coded from seven categories to three: "liberal" (very, slightly, and moderately liberal), "moderate," and "conservative" (very, slightly, and moderately conservative). Finally, I re-coded the party affiliation question from nine categories to four: "Democrat" (strong and moderate Democrat), "moderate" (liberal moderate, moderate, and conservative moderate), "Republican" (strong and moderate republican), and "other."

Region and Religion

Table 1 illustrates the relationship between region and religious affiliation. The Cramer's V statistics for each table indicate that the relationship between region and religious preference is statistically significant in each year. The most recent year shows the weakest association ($V=.175$), but the statistical significance suggests that regional differences have persisted over these two decades.

Looking at changes within and between regions over time is also interesting. New England reflects a growing Protestant influence that has fended off ambivalence and other religions and shows declines in Catholic and Jewish populations. This change may be attributable to some sort of persistent evangelical drive in the region, possibly peaking in 1985 and coinciding with a sharp decline in Judaism, which returns to normal by 1990. At least some of the increases in the number of Catholics in the Pacific may be attributable to the influx of Catholic Vietnamese since the end of the Vietnam Conflict in 1975 and to the chain migration of families from the Philippines. The stability of Jewish populations is likely attributable to intense homogeneity and a lack of emphasis on proselytization. The increase in non-preference may be a key indicator of regional decline since it is generally at the expense of Protestants and Catholics, whose respective peaks of dominance have declined. Also of possible significance is the rise in other religious preferences in the Pacific, where an eight percent increase is probably evidence of other kinds of immigration.

The patterns indicate general declines in the number of Protestants in all but the New England region, where there was an average of ten percent fewer Protestants than Catholics from 1975 to 1990 but five percent more Protestants than Catholics in 1996. The number of Catholics has also generally declined nationwide, though it remains stable in New England and is gaining in the Pacific. There is a noticeable peak in the numbers of Catholics in most regions in 1985 that declines again by 1990. Jewish populations remain generally stable except in New England, where they

have declined overall. In all areas (except New England and the Pacific), there are significant increases in the number with no religious preference; and without exceptions there are also significant increases in the number claiming other religions in all regions.

Table 2 shows the relationship between region and religious service attendance. Cramer's V for these tables shows a weakening relationship over time, though the relationship is still statistically significant. Looking more closely at regional differences in religious attendance, we see with some surprise that it is the East and West North Central regions that exhibit the consistently highest percentages of attendance, while attendance in the Bible-belted South and the Mountain region has declined overall. The Pacific maintains a consistently high non-attendance rate. These percentages are most noticeable in the South, where despite a 1990 resurgence, an eleven percentage point drop in frequency of attendance coincides with a four percentage point increase in non-attendance, despite the percentages of rare and moderate attendance exhibiting averages similar to the general national results. Controlling for preference might help clarify this issue and might also suggest whether changes in preference in the North Atlantic and Pacific regions are affecting those changes in attendance.

Region and Politics

The relationships between region and political views (Table 3) show fluctuating regional differences and trends. Liberalism has recovered from declines in the North, Middle Atlantic, and East North Central regions but has declined by twelve percentage points in the Pacific. Moderates are in general decline in the West North Central, South Atlantic, and Mountain regions and are increasing in only the East South Central region. Most surprisingly, the number of conservatives shows general increases in all but the Middle Atlantic and East and West North Central regions, though by 1996 the number drops again in the East North Central. The West South Central region exhibits a curious ambivalence, with no systematic change for any of the political views.

The general rise in the number of conservatives in traditionally liberal regions may coincide with the Republican Congressional sweep in 1994. Also, despite conservative gains in the region, traditionally liberal New England was moving back toward liberalism by 1996, along with the Middle Atlantic. The most interesting result is the decline in the numbers of liberals and the increase in the numbers of conservatives in the Pacific, a result that I certainly would not have expected. Perhaps this change reflects some local economic or political issue, such as the controversial Proposition 187, which would have radically altered California immigration law. A national increase in the number of moderates might have been expected, but is absent, suggesting that, however they vote, many moderates may still think in terms of traditional political labels, and that these labels are related to their regions.

The relationship between region and political view over time moves in and out of statistical significance, though the relationship is consistently weak. Party affiliations show less radical shifts (Table 4), though not without notable changes. The number of Democrats has declined in the West South Central and Pacific regions. This decrease can be contrasted, however, with curious back-and-forth percentage shifts in the East North Central and Middle Atlantic regions. Curiously, these shifts follow the popularity of the party holding presidential office. That is to say, when the popularity of the Republicans holding the presidency is high, the number of Democrats at these times in these two regions is weak. For example, the number of Republicans is high in 1980 (when Reagan displaced a fallen Jimmy Carter) and in 1990 (when George Bush enjoyed stellar approval ratings as Operation Desert Shield got under way). However, in years when the popularity of Republican presidents or presidential candidates is weak, the number of Democrats is strong. For example, the number of Republicans is low in 1975 (when Gerald Ford succeeded a failed Richard Nixon), in 1985 (when interest rates were high and "Reaganomics" were under fire), and in 1996 (when a Republican controlled Congress was under fire and the GOP failed to produce

a "winning" candidate in the presidential elections). Moderates may account for the rise and fall of these percentages, joining the Democrats in years that seem bad for Republicans. Given the generally negligible Republican gains (except in 1990), the center in these two regions seems definitely inclined toward the left.

Moderates increased in only the North Atlantic region, another surprise since the region has traditionally been strongly Democratic. Republicans are again increasing in several regions, including the South Atlantic, East and West South Central, and Pacific regions, probably as economic prosperity prompts migrations, if not as a result of general economic prosperity in general. Other parties are frequently missing and generally appear in only tiny percentages, but they seem to have increased in the West South Central, Mountain, and Pacific regions and to have declined in the North Atlantic.

These trends suggest that most regions are retaining their traditional political characters. However, increases in the number of Republicans should be viewed with caution since they coincide with the elections of 1990, 1992, and 1994 and may change significantly in 2000. Further, these gains may also not be reckoned as losses to the number of Democrats but shifts from the center.

Whatever the traditional political characters of the regions, there is generally a weaker significance in the relationships between region and political party affiliation (Table 4). Indeed, this regional association is the weakest of the four considered here. The fluctuation of correlation suggests that other factors are influencing regional politics.

Conclusions

The evidence I have presented here does not support either the popular perception of cultural homogenization or its sociological refutation. Rather, I would suggest that while regionalism remains a cultural influence, it is a force in flux. Recent assertions about regional holding power (Herting et al.) seem also to apply to religion and politics even as occupational and recreational mobili-

ty increase. Rather than percentages consistently shifting toward central trends, we observe minute shifts more easily identifiable as fluctuations attributable to those with the strongest (or weakest) convictions.

Most notable is the shift in the South Atlantic populations, which appear to be getting less religious. The remaining question is whether this shift is a result of homogenization or a new generation's disaffection with institutions of the previous generation. If the answer is the former, we would expect uniform trends through the rest of the U.S., but these are in fact absent. If the answer is the latter, then we can expect either a resurgence of those institutions as the disaffected generation shifts back toward tradition later in life or perhaps a shift of the Bible Belt to the North Atlantic region.

Political preferences reflect the fluctuation much more strongly, but despite increases in conservative and Republican affiliation, there is nothing to suggest that regions are losing their distinctive characteristics. The biggest problem is that the data do not cover enough time to allow us to see if the fluctuations in percentages are random fluctuations or signs of larger trends. Further, it might be more revealing to add further controls in order to determine whether and how other factors are influencing the results. Nevertheless, my conclusion remains.

To a rapidly expanding mass media, we have added the Internet, possibly the greatest distance equalizer of all, especially with electronic commerce steadily overcoming an understandably cautious potential consumer market. The future is an uncertainty in flux, and while many futures are possible, I would suggest that, based on the traditional response of American society, we as a society are likely to consolidate internally. That is to say, we will retreat to our traditions, including and especially our regionalism, in an effort to reclaim and revivify our diverse identities, and create a society that, despite its diversity, is closer together than ever before.

Notes

¹For a study of the effect of television viewing on regional diversity, see Morgan (1986).

²For an extensive discussion of trends in, and studies of, GSS questions, see Smith (1979).

³NE: Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island. MA: New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania. ENC: Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio. WNC: Michigan, Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas. SA: Delaware, Maryland, West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Washington, D.C. ESC: Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi. WSC: Arkansas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Texas. M: Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico. P: Washington, Oregon, California, Alaska, Hawaii.

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Appendix

Table 1. Religious Preferences

	% Region	NE	MA	ENC	WNC	SA	ESC	WSC	M	P
1975	Protestant	31.3	46.6	65.7	72.4	86.4	84.5	69.4	60.7	56.4
N=1488	Catholic	48.4	40.1	26.9	24.8	8.5	6.0	25.6	24.6	12.1
V=.195**	Jewish	6.3	3.4	0.9		1.0	2.4	0.8		0.6
	None	14.1	7.6	6.5	2.9	2.7	7.1	4.1	14.8	18.6
	Other		2.3			1.4				2.3
	Total	100.0								
1980	Protestant	20.8	39.5	59.2	73.5	81.6	91.9	75.8	69.6	57.9
N=1465	Catholic	58.5	44.5	31.0	19.6	10.9	5.4	16.7	20.3	20.5
V=.202**	Jewish	5.7	5.0	0.7	2.0	1.1	0.9	2.5		3.2
	None	9.4	8.8	7.2	4.9	5.3	1.8	4.2	7.6	13.2
	Other	5.7	2.1	2.0		1.1		0.8	2.5	5.3
	Total	100.0								
1985	Protestant	42.6	34.8	56.7	71.2	77.4	89.3	72.0	69.6	54.2
N=1529	Catholic	48.9	45.3	34.4	24.5	15.3	5.7	22.7	22.5	21.1
V=.212**	Jewish	1.1	9.5	0.7		1.1	0.8	0.7		2.6
	None	7.4	8.0	7.4	2.2	5.4	3.3	4.7	3.9	17.9
	Other		2.5	0.7	2.2	0.8	0.8		3.9	4.2
	Total	100.0								
1990	Protestant	39.7	44.5	58.5	70.7	73.1	97.1	71.3	72.3	50.8
N=1367	Catholic	49.3	36.0	30.3	22.6	15.5	2.9	18.3	20.5	21.2
V=.187**	Jewish	2.7	5.5	0.8		0.8		0.9	1.2	4.5
	None	5.5	10.5	8.7	3.8	7.6		6.1	1.2	17.9
	Other	2.7	3.5	1.7	3.0	2.9		3.5	4.8	5.6
	Total	100.0								
1996	Protestant	36.9	40.2	57.1	65.2	73.4	85.2	67.4	41.7	45.2
N=2899	Catholic	42.0	39.0	26.8	16.7	13.4	4.8	18.9	27.1	25.1
V=.175**	Jewish	3.8	5.3	1.6	1.0	2.2		1.9	1.5	2.4
	None	15.3	10.6	11.7	11.0	8.2	8.6	6.8	20.1	17.0
	Other	1.9	4.8	2.9	6.2	2.8	1.4	4.9	9.5	10.3
	Total	100.0								

N: number of cases V: Cramer's V probability of error: *: $\leq .05$, **: $\leq .01$

Table 2. Religious Service Attendance

	% Region	NE	MA	ENC	WNC	SA	ESC	WSC	M
1975	never	15.6	18.8	13.0	9.5	8.8	10.7	9.1	16.7
N=1487	rarely	40.6	37.2	35.8	24.8	25.4	28.6	37.2	40.0
V=.152**	moderate	12.5	11.5	10.8	21.9	22.0	25.0	14.9	18.3
	frequent	31.3	32.6	40.4	43.8	43.7	35.7	38.8	25.0
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
1980	never	17.0	13.5	9.2	6.9	9.1	2.7	10.0	16.5
N=1461	rarely	39.6	40.5	38.0	32.4	38.3	28.8	41.7	40.5
V=.120**	moderate	5.7	12.7	16.1	17.6	16.7	14.4	15.0	13.9
	frequent	37.7	33.3	36.7	43.1	36.0	54.1	33.3	29.1
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
1985	never	13.8	14.4	17.8	9.3	12.5	8.2	10.7	12.7
N=1530	rarely	47.9	39.3	30.9	28.6	32.3	28.7	35.6	29.4
V=.116**	moderate	9.6	9.5	13.8	17.9	18.3	18.0	18.1	17.6
	frequent	28.7	36.8	37.5	44.3	36.9	45.1	35.6	40.2
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
1990	never	13.7	16.9	11.0	13.0	13.0	4.2	16.1	9.5
N=1333	rarely	39.7	31.8	39.4	36.6	29.4	29.5	30.4	32.1
V=.095**	moderate	19.2	20.0	14.8	16.8	16.0	26.3	18.8	16.7
	frequent	27.4	31.3	34.7	33.6	41.6	40.0	34.8	41.7
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
1996	never	20.3	18.2	13.3	9.7	12.5	10.8	9.4	24.0
N=2823	rarely	43.1	36.9	36.4	41.1	36.1	32.8	41.2	39.6
V=.094**	moderate	12.4	14.3	17.5	18.4	18.4	20.6	20.0	12.5
	frequent	24.2	30.7	32.8	30.9	32.9	35.8	29.4	24.0
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

N: number of cases V: Cramer's V probability of error: *: <.05, **: <.01

Table 3. Political Views

	% Region	NE	MA	ENC	WNC	SA	ESC	WSC	M	P
1975	Liberal	38.7	32.1	27.3	28.0	27.3	28.9	22.8	28.6	41.3
N=1397	Moderate	37.1	38.3	44.4	40.0	41.9	30.3	45.6	41.1	32.3
V=.094	Conservative	24.2	29.6	28.3	32.0	30.7	40.8	31.6	30.4	26.3
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
1980	Liberal	30.6	27.5	24.2	25.5	22.8	26.7	25.6	24.7	27.3
N=1429	Moderate	40.8	42.8	43.4	40.2	42.5	38.1	32.5	40.3	38.5
V=.058	Conservative	28.6	29.7	32.3	34.3	34.7	35.2	41.9	35.1	34.2
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
1985	Liberal	30.3	26.7	21.5	18.2	34.1	19.1	23.4	25.0	25.0
N=1462	Moderate	42.7	44.0	37.7	44.5	30.9	38.2	44.1	32.0	38.6
V=.107**	Conservative	27.0	29.3	40.8	37.2	35.0	42.7	32.4	43.0	36.4
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
1990	Liberal	22.9	29.5	28.1	20.8	30.5	20.6	25.7	22.6	31.3
N=1315	Moderate	42.9	37.3	36.0	38.4	31.4	40.2	33.3	33.3	38.1
V=.077	Conservative	34.3	33.2	36.0	40.8	38.1	39.2	41.0	44.0	30.7
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
1996	Liberal	35.9	28.2	22.4	25.5	23.5	17.3	21.1	29.1	29.0
N=2743	Moderate	34.0	44.7	43.8	36.1	35.6	36.8	37.7	32.3	34.6
V=.099**	Conservative	30.1	27.1	33.8	38.5	40.9	45.9	41.3	38.6	36.4
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

N: number of cases V: Cramer's V probability of error: *: <.05, **: <.01

Table 4. Party Affiliation

	% Region	NE	MA	ENC	WNC	SA	ESC	WSC	M	P
1975	Democrat	40.6	36.9	28.5	35.6	43.9	39.3	66.1	32.8	50.0
N=1485	Moderate	39.1	36.2	45.5	34.6	32.3	44.0	21.5	41.0	33.9
V=.132**	Republican	18.8	26.2	25.1	29.8	22.8	16.7	11.6	26.2	14.9
	Other	1.6	0.8	0.9		1.0		0.8		1.1
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
1980	Democrat	34.0	35.1	24.8	32.7	46.4	44.5	35.8	29.1	42.9
N=1465	Moderate	45.3	38.9	43.0	39.6	33.7	31.8	47.5	41.8	30.9
V=.089	Republican	20.8	24.7	22.0	27.7	19.9	22.7	15.8	27.8	25.1
	Other		1.3	0.3			0.9	0.8	1.3	1.0
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
1985	Democrat	26.6	42.7	35.7	30.9	48.1	50.4	42.7	24.8	35.8
N=1529	Moderate	54.3	31.2	28.6	33.1	25.4	22.8	37.3	34.7	28.9
V=.124**	Republican	18.1	24.6	34.2	36.0	26.1	26.0	27.3	39.6	34.2
	Other	1.1	1.5	1.5		1.0	0.8	2.7	1.0	1.1
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
1990	Democrat	42.5	37.7	27.6	28.6	39.4	46.7	40.0	35.3	31.3
N=1368	Moderate	38.4	23.6	36.6	34.6	27.5	20.0	38.3	36.5	33.5
V=.106**	Republican	17.8	37.7	35.0	36.1	32.2	33.3	20.9	25.9	34.6
	Other	1.4	1.0	0.8	0.8	0.8		0.9	2.4	0.6
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
1996	Democrat	26.1	38.8	32.4	32.9	33.8	33.0	35.5	30.7	34.0
N=2898	Moderate	51.6	36.1	40.5	38.6	33.8	35.9	30.9	38.2	35.2
V=.070*	Republican	21.7	23.4	25.3	28.1	31.8	29.7	31.3	29.6	28.5
	Other	0.6	1.7	1.8	0.5	0.6	1.4	2.3	1.5	2.4
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

N: number of cases V: Cramer's V probability of error: *: <.05, **: <.01