RESEARCH IN CONTEXT:
Measuring Value Change

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A quarter of a century ago Inglehart (1971) proposed a theory of value change predicting that value priorities in advanced industrial societies would tend to shift away from "materialist" concerns about economic and physical security toward great emphasis on freedom, self-expression, and the quality of life, or "postmaterialist" values. This change, he argued, was generated by generational population replacement, and would therefore be gradual. Fortunately, because the ongoing surveys conducted by the Commission of the European Communities consistently employed Inglehart's basic four-item...
measure, over the course of the following decades an extensive time series, ultimately including over 250,000 respondents, was created.¹

Subsequent analyses, we argue, confirm Inglehart’s basic prediction of a trend toward postmaterialism. Abramson and Inglehart (1995) (see also, Inglehart and Abramson, 1994) demonstrate a clear trend toward postmaterialism in seven of the eight West European societies that can be studied over the course of two decades: West Germany, Britain, The Netherlands, France, and Italy, which were first surveyed in 1970, and Denmark and Ireland, which were first surveyed in 1973. Belgium (first surveyed in 1970) is the only society that fails to manifest a clear trend toward postmaterialism, although even in Belgium a significant trend emerges when simultaneously controls are introduced for the short-term effects of inflation and unemployment (see Abramson and Inglehart, 1995; Inglehart and Abramson, 1993, 1994.)

Although a trend toward postmaterialism is driven by generational replacement, short-term factors also influence the distribution of values among West European publics. This was clearly recognized by Inglehart, and the reasons for expecting economic adversity to suppress postmaterialism were clearly explained over 15 years ago (see Inglehart, 1981). And Abramson and Inglehart (1986) clearly pointed out the impact of inflation on reducing postmaterialism.

Clarke and his colleagues (Clarke and Dutt, 1991; Clarke, Dutt, and Rapkin, 1997) have been among Inglehart’s most persistent critics. Although they acknowledge that his research is “pathbreaking” (Clarke, Dutt, and Rapkin, 1997, p. 20), they challenge his basic thesis that there actually is a trend toward postmaterialism. In their most recent critique, they question Abramson and Inglehart’s (1995) time series analyses. An analysis by Abramson and Inglehart (1995) (see also Inglehart and Abramson, 1994) employing ordinary least squares (OLS) strongly suggests that the long-term trend toward postmaterialism is driven by generational replacement, but that short-term forces, especially rising inflation rates, can impede, prevent, or even reverse the long-term trend toward postmaterialism. In their analyses, the percentage of materialists subtracted from the percentage of materialists (the PDI) (or what Clarke, Dutt, and Rapkin refer to as the “values balance”) is the dependent variable.² Three independent variables are employed: the number of years since the baseline survey, the annual inflation rate, and the annual unemployment rate. Presenting analyses for each of the eight countries, as well as for a combined sample of the six West European societies that can be studied from 1970 through 1992, Abramson and Inglehart’s estimates support three findings: (1) a significant trend toward postmaterialism in all eight countries; (2) a significant inverse relationship between inflation and postmaterialism in every country except France, Belgium, and Denmark, and (3) a spurious relationship between unemployment and postmaterialism.

Clarke, Dutt, and Rapkin (1997) challenge the first and third of these findings. They argue that the trend toward postmaterialism is spurious, but that