

Memory of history and generations: An international comparison

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UNIVERSITÉ
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CENTRE INTERFACULTAIRE
DE GÉRONTOLOGIE ET D'ÉTUDES
DES VULNÉRABILITÉS



COLLEGE OF
ARTS AND SCIENCES

CASE WESTERN RESERVE
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Cleveland, Ohio - December 10, 2012



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DE GENÈVE**

CENTRE FOR THE
INTERDISCIPLINARY
STUDY OF GERONTOLOGY
AND VULNERABILITY

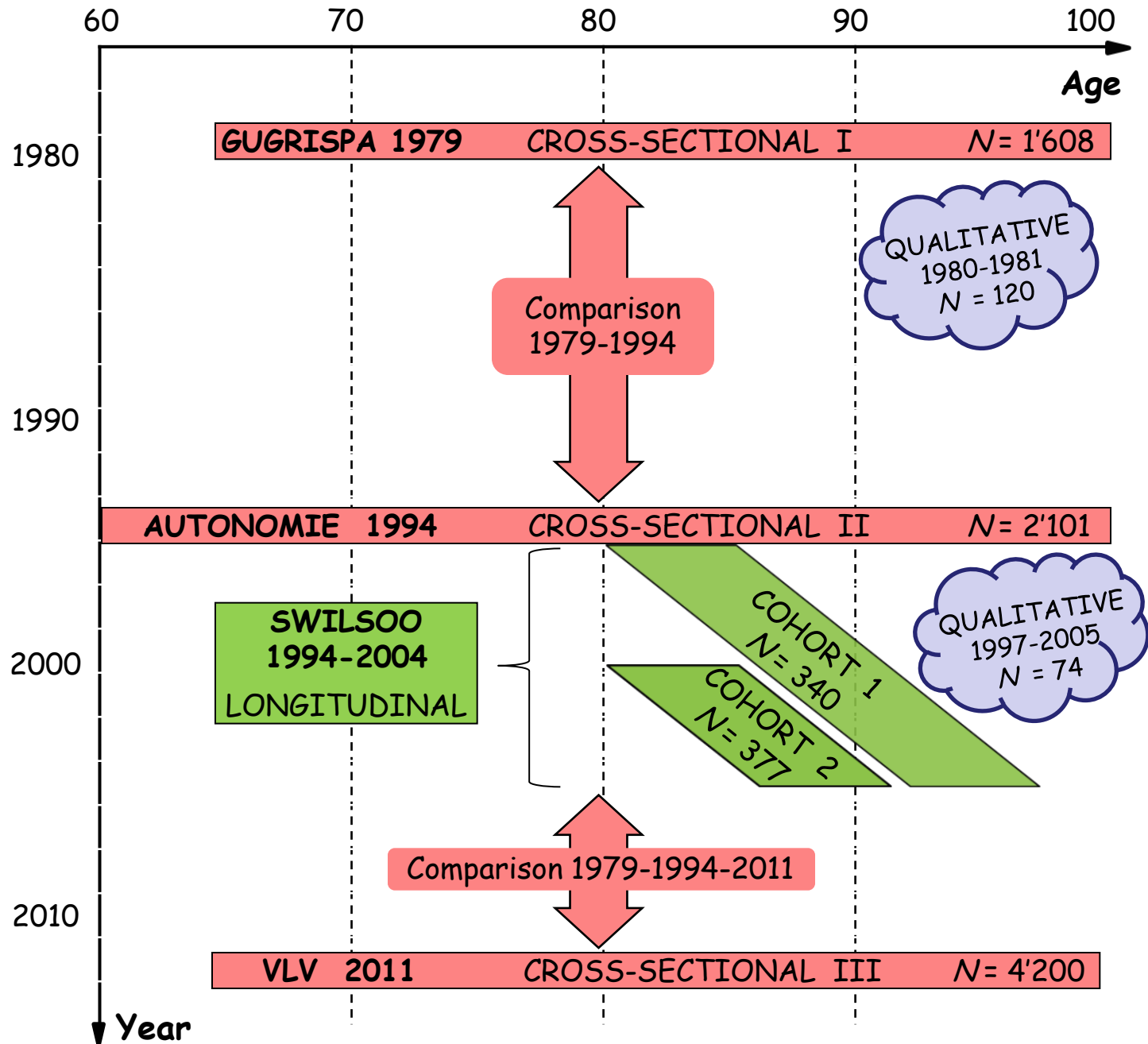
Founded in 1992 by:
Christian Lalive d'Epinay
(PhD in Sociology)



Director (since 2007):
Michel Oris
(PhD in History)



Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research



SWILSOO: Trigger question

100 Since _____ (date of the last interview) did any significant change occur in your life?

- Yes 1 /__/

- No 2 /__/

If yes:

101 What are these changes? (*please describe briefly each change*)

a) _____

When? Date: _____

b) _____

(...)

SWILSOO: Perceived changes

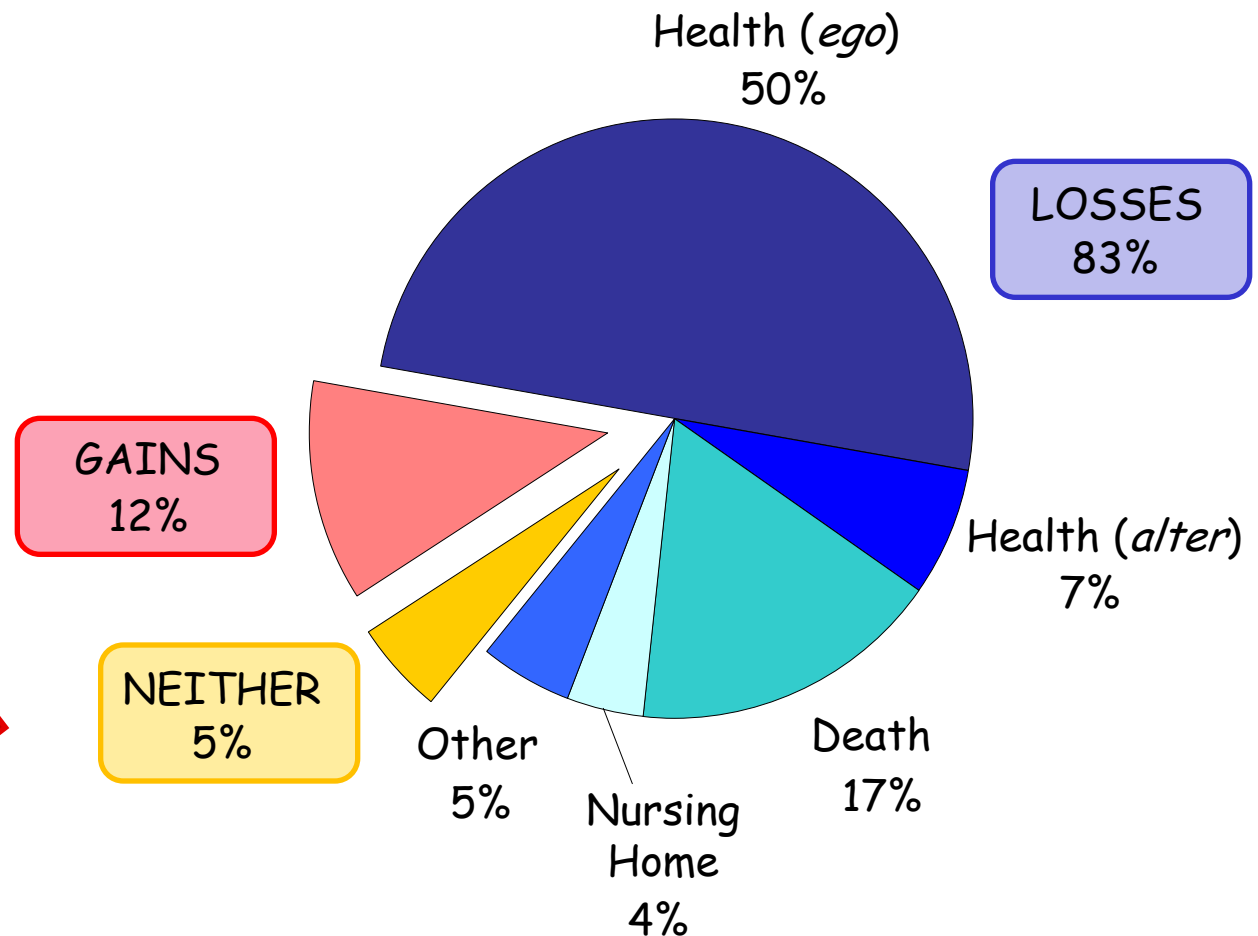
At each wave,
between 34 and
45% of the elders
mention a
significant change
in their life



That is a lot?
Not much?



Evaluation in terms
of gains/losses by
the researchers



CEVI: Question I

During the last year (since _____), did any **significant change** occur in your life?

- Yes ☐
- No ☐

If yes, please describe briefly each change and evaluate it.

- **Change 1:**
.....
Gain ☐; Loss ☐; Both ☐; Neither ☐; Don't know ☐

- **Change 2:**
.....
Gain ☐; Loss ☐; Both ☐; Neither ☐; Don't know ☐

(...)

CEVI: Question II

If you think about **your whole life**, what have been the **main turning points** – these moments which marked a **significant change** in your life?

(You may answer up to four turning points)

1. Description:
.....
.....

Why was this turning point significant?
.....
.....

Year(s): **Your age** at that moment: **Place:**

(...)

CEVI: Question III

Let us now consider the **main changes and events** which occurred **in your country and in the world during your life**. What are the ones which most **struck** you?

(You may answer up to four changes)

1. Description:
.....
.....

Why did this event strike you?
.....
.....

Year(s): **Your age** at that moment: **Place** of the event:
(...)

CEVI: Aim and original features

Studying the **perception** that adults, from several countries and various age groups, have about **changes** in their lives and in their societal environment.

3 original features:

- Subjective perception
- Quantitative & qualitative
- International comparison

CEVI

Changements et événements au cours de la vie
Changes and events across the life course

An international study:

Argentina - Belgium - Brazil - Canada - Chile
China - Croatia - Finland - France - India
Italy - Mexico - Switzerland - Uruguay

International coordination: S. Cavalli & C. Lalive d'Epina
(CIGEV, University of Geneva)

<http://cigev.unige.ch/recherches/cevi.html>

CEVI: Design and methods

- Open-ended questions (+ sociodemographic characteristics)
- 5 age groups (birth cohorts):
20-24, 35-39, 50-54, 65-69, and 80-84 years old
- Non-random sample, stratified by age and gender
- Self-administered questionnaire (some exceptions)
- Data collected by students in sociology, psychology, social work, demography, and nursing

CEVI: Data collection

Country	Date	Place	N
Argentina	2004	Gran Buenos Aires	579
	2010-11	Gran Buenos Aires	585
Belgium	2009	Province of Liège	580
Brazil	2011	João Pessoa, Natal, Teresina	637
Canada	2010	City of Québec	504
Chile	2009	Gran Concepción	623
China	2010	City of Beijing	653
Croatia	2013	City of Zagreb	-
Finland	2013	(Across the country)	-
France	2010	Nancy and region of Lorraine	621
India	2012	Mumbai (slum Bandra East)	752
Italy	2009	Padua and region of Veneto	670
Mexico	2005	City of León	684
	2006-07	City of Zamora	256
	2009-10	Mexico City (Colonia Ajusco)	637
Switzerland	2003-04	Canton of Geneva	1'312
	2009	Canton of Geneva	633
	2009-10	Canton of Fribourg (French area)	250
Uruguay	2012	City of Montevideo	1'717

CEVI

Socio-historical
changes and events

Aim and research questions

Studying the **memory of history** in Western Europe (WE) and Latin America (LA).

Triple **comparison**:

- International
- Intergenerational
- Over time

What are the main socio-historical changes that struck the adults from different countries?

Are memories structured according to the age in terms of generational differences?

CEVI: Question III

Let us now consider the **main changes and events** which occurred **in your country and in the world during your life**. What are the ones which most **struck** you?

(You may answer up to four changes)

1. Description:
.....
.....

Why did this event strike you?
.....
.....

Year(s): **Your age** at that moment: **Place** of the event:

(...)

Examples of responses

Change: «The September 11 attacks»

Why?: «The visual impact. See images that seemed impossible. The feeling of living "live" a historic event»

[CEVI Switzerland 2009: Woman born in 1984]

Change: «The events of May 68 in Paris»

Why?: «Because I have been part of those who have participated to this great upheaval»

[CEVI Switzerland 2009: Man born in 1945]

Most mentioned changes (Switzerland 2004)

Type	Year	<i>n</i>	% resp.
9/11		242	39
<i>9/11 attacks</i>	2001	186	30
<i>Iraq War</i>	2003-	52	8
World War II	1939-45	138	22
End of Communism (Europe)		135	22
<i>Fall of the Berlin Wall</i>	1989	108	17
<i>Collapse of Communism</i>	1989-92	22	4
Space exploration (first humans on the Moon)	(1969)	62	10
Progress	?	56	9
Gulf War	1991	43	7
May 1968 protest	1968	40	6
European Union (refusal)	(1992)	40	6
Israeli-Palestinian conflict	?	38	6
Assassination of JFK	1963	38	6

Respondents mentioning changes (%)

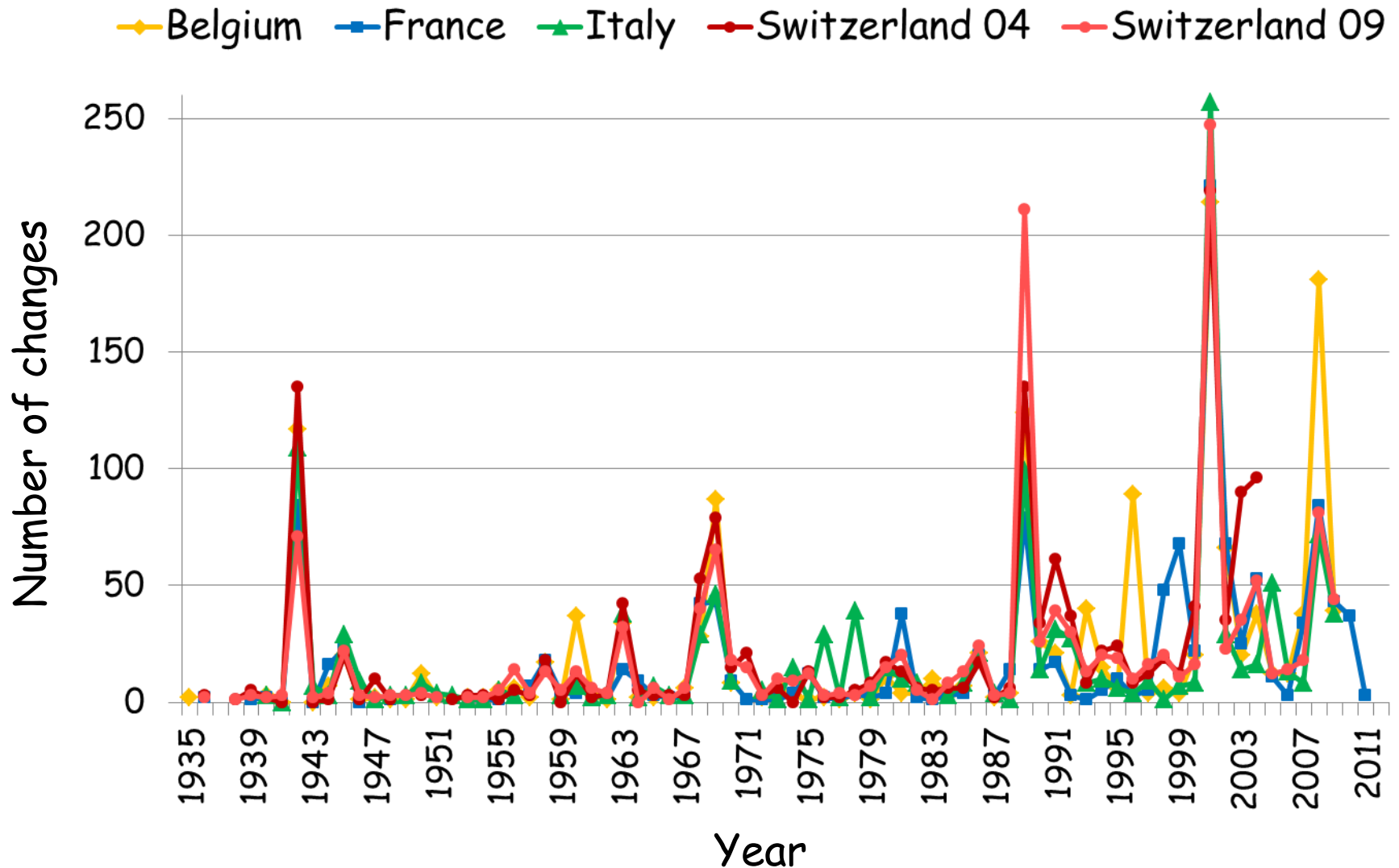
Belgium (2009)		France (2010)		Italy (2009)		Switzerland (2004+2009)	
9/11 attacks	36	9/11 attacks	41	9/11 attacks	39	9/11 attacks	33
World War II	22	World War II	19	World War II	22	Berlin Wall	22
Berlin Wall	21	Berlin Wall	13	Berlin Wall	15	World War II	18
Dutroux	15	Storm 1999	12	Years of Lead	11	Moon	9
Elect. Obama	14	Elect. Obama	11	Death JP II	7	Progress	9
Moon	13	Tsunami 2004	9	Progress	6	European Un.	6
Crisis 08-09	12	European Un.	9	Crisis 08-09	6	Iraq War	6
European Un.	11	Mitterrand	8	European Un.	6	May 1968	6
Progress	7	May 1968	8	2nd Republic	5	Assas. JFK	5
King Baudouin	7	Moon	7	L'Aquila EQ	5	Gulf War	5

Respondents mentioning changes (%)

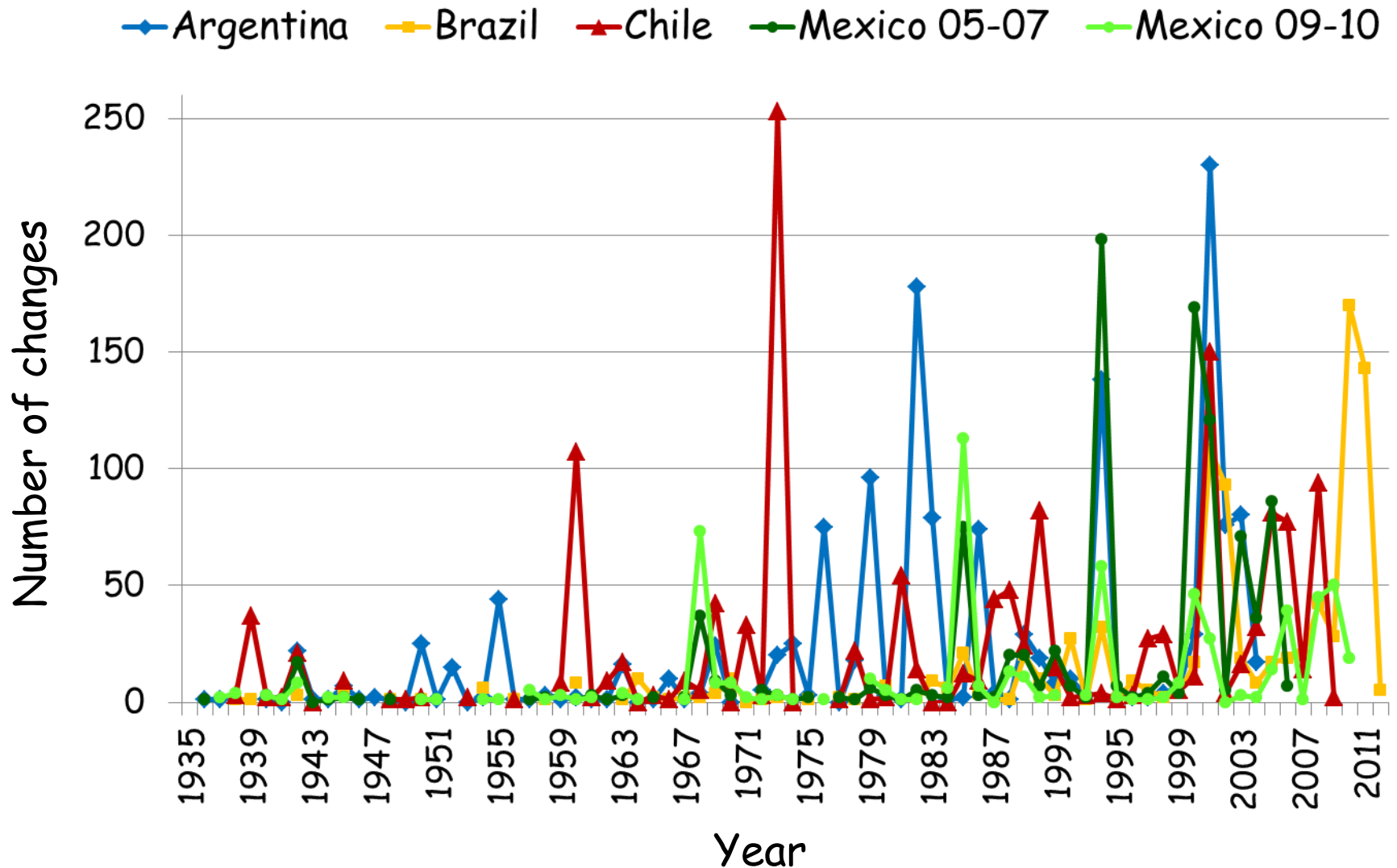
Argentina (2004)		Brazil * (2011)		Chile (2009)		Mexico (2005-07 + 2009-10)	
Malvinas War	29	Gov. Lula	22	Dictat. 73-90	49	Elect. Fox	15
Dictat. 76-83	29	Gov. Dilma	20	9/11 attacks	24	1985 EQ	14
Crisis 2001	25	9/11 attacks	20	Democracy	20	Crisis 1994	11
Democracy	13	Nat. disasters	19	Valdivia EQ	17	9/11 attacks	11
9/11 attacks	13	Gov. Collor	7	Gov. Bachelet	9	Tlatelolco 68	7
Gov. Menem	13	Economy	6	Gov. Allende	7	Iraq War	5
Post-Alianza	13	Soccer	6	Death JP II	7	Assas. Colosio	5
Gov. 1-2 Perón	13	Realengo shoo.	4	Visit JP II	7	Sport	4
AMIA bombing	11	Diretas Já	3	Elect. Obama	6	Hurricanes	3
Gov. 3 Perón	8	Elect. Obama	3	Chillan EQ	6	EZLN 94	3

* Provisional data

Changes depending on the period (WE)



Changes depending on the period (LA)



Respondents mentioning changes (%)



2004

20-24 (1980-84)	35-39 (1965-69)	50-54 (1950-54)	65-69 (1935-39)	80-84 (1920-24)
9/11 att. 58	9/11 att. 39	Moon 26	WWII 50	WWII 73
Iraq War 16	Berlin 38	Berlin 22	Moon 17	Progress 9
Berlin 15	Iraq War 12	May 1968 19	Progress 16	Moon 7
Gulf War 10	Gulf War 11	9/11 att. 19	May 1968 13	Women's r. 6
Israeli/Pal 8	Israeli/Pal 10	JFK ass. 17	9/11 att. 12	JFK ass. 5
Progress 8	UE (ref.) 8	Women's r. 10	JFK ass. 11	Great Dep. 4
El. Bush 7	El. Bush 8	Vietnam 9	Algeria 9	9/11 att. 4

Theoretical background

In sociology: (Howard Schuman, Amy Corning...)

- Events and changes occurring during adolescence and early adulthood (*critical age*) have a greater impact on the memory.

In psychology: (David Rubin, Martin Conway...)

- People recall more personal and public events that occurred in the period in which they were between 10 and 30 years old.

→ *reminiscence bump*

A universal phenomenon? What about history?

Schuman & Scott (1989)

The next questions concern how people think about the past. There have been a lot of national and world events and changes over the past 50 years—say, from about 1930 right up until today. Would you mention one or two such events or changes that seem to you to have been *especially* important. There aren't any right or wrong answers to the question—just whatever *national or world events or changes* over the past 50 years that come to mind as important to you.

(IF ONLY ONE MENTION, ASK: Is there any other national or world event or change over the past 50 years that you feel was especially important?)

Results:

- Memories of important political events and social changes are **structured by age**.
- **Adolescence and early adulthood** are the primary source of political and social memories.
- The **meaning** of the events also varies from one cohort to another.

Conway & Playdell-Pearce (2000)

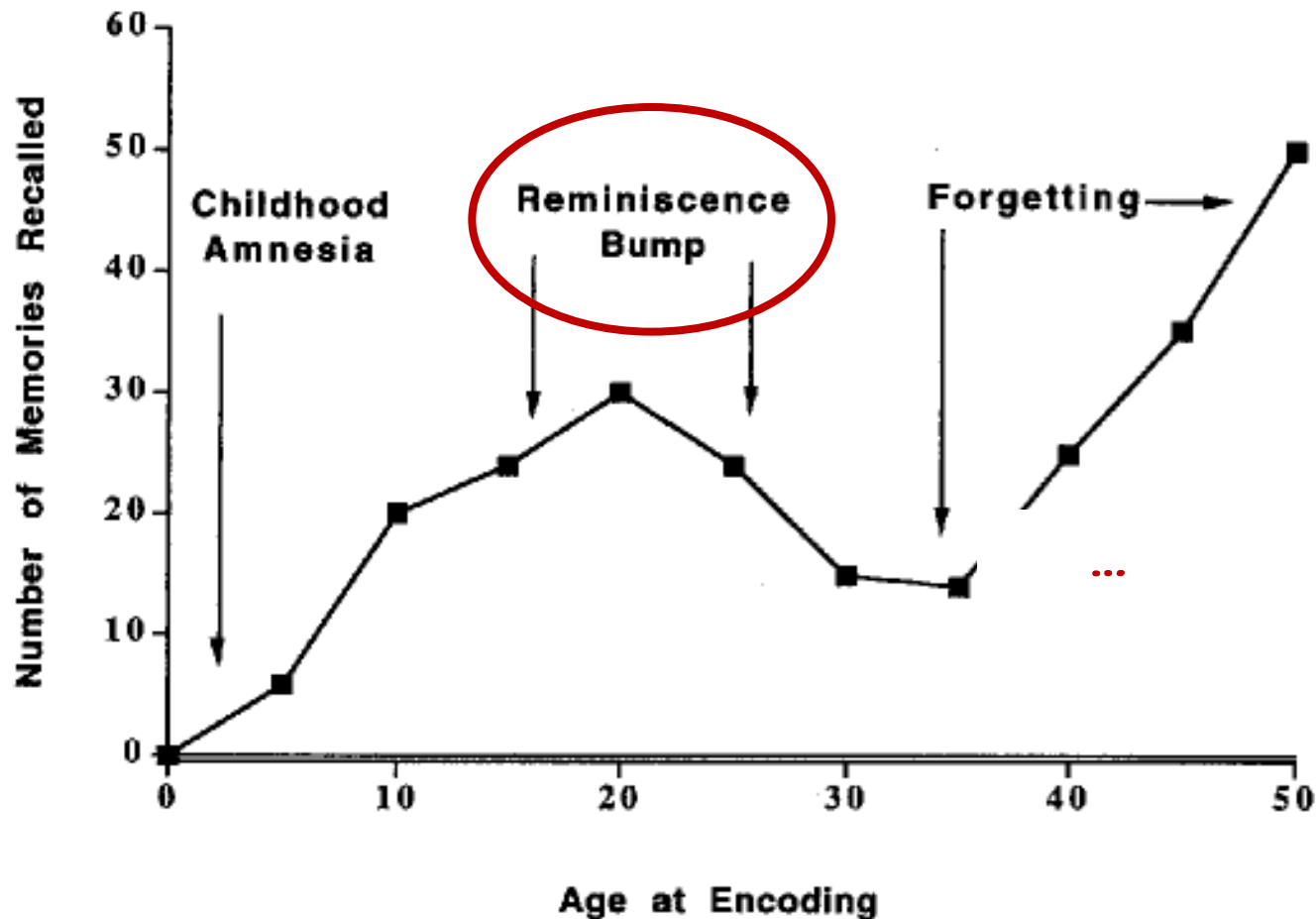
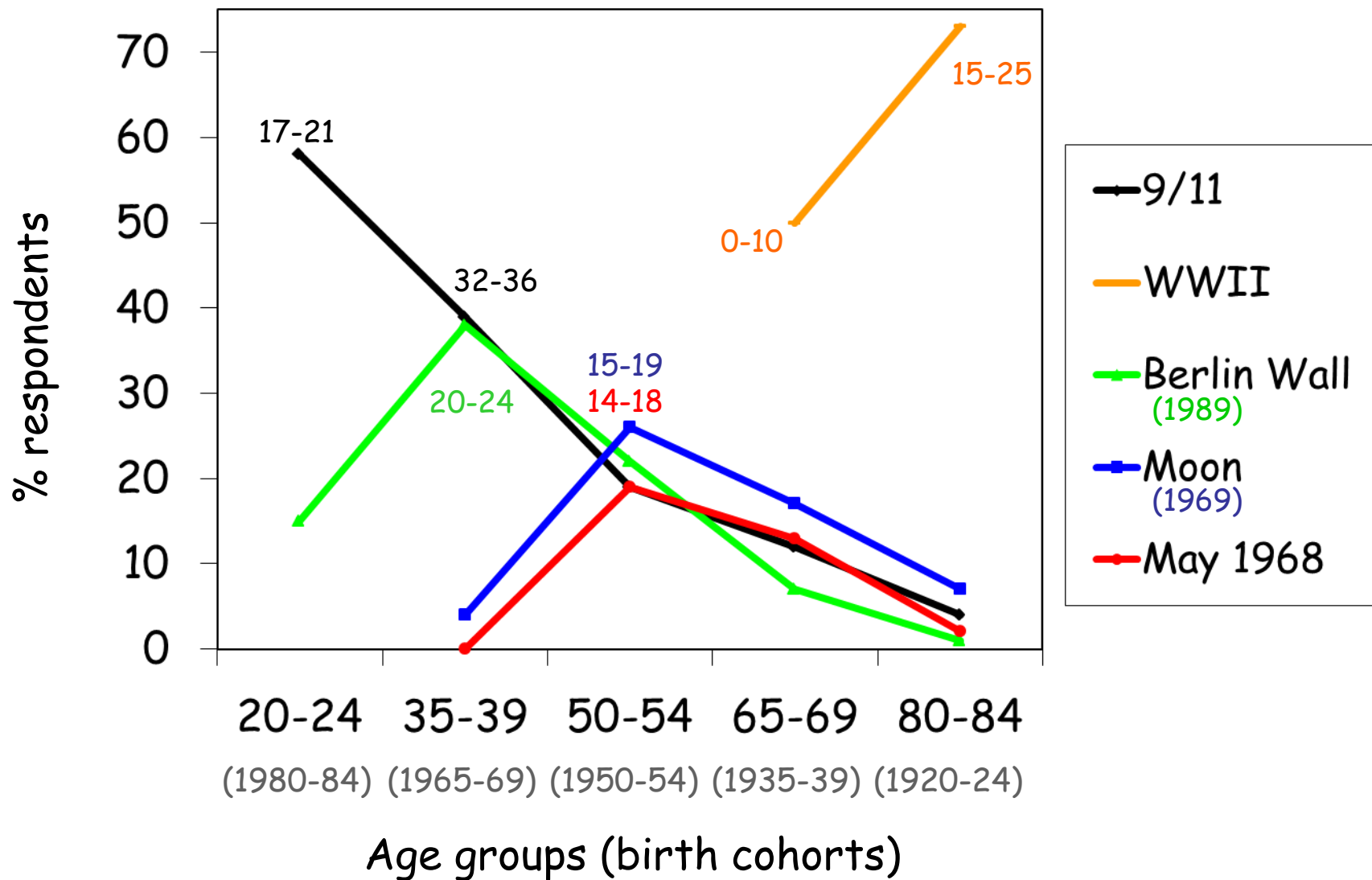


Figure 2. Idealized representation of the life span retrieval curve.

Respondents mentioning changes (%)



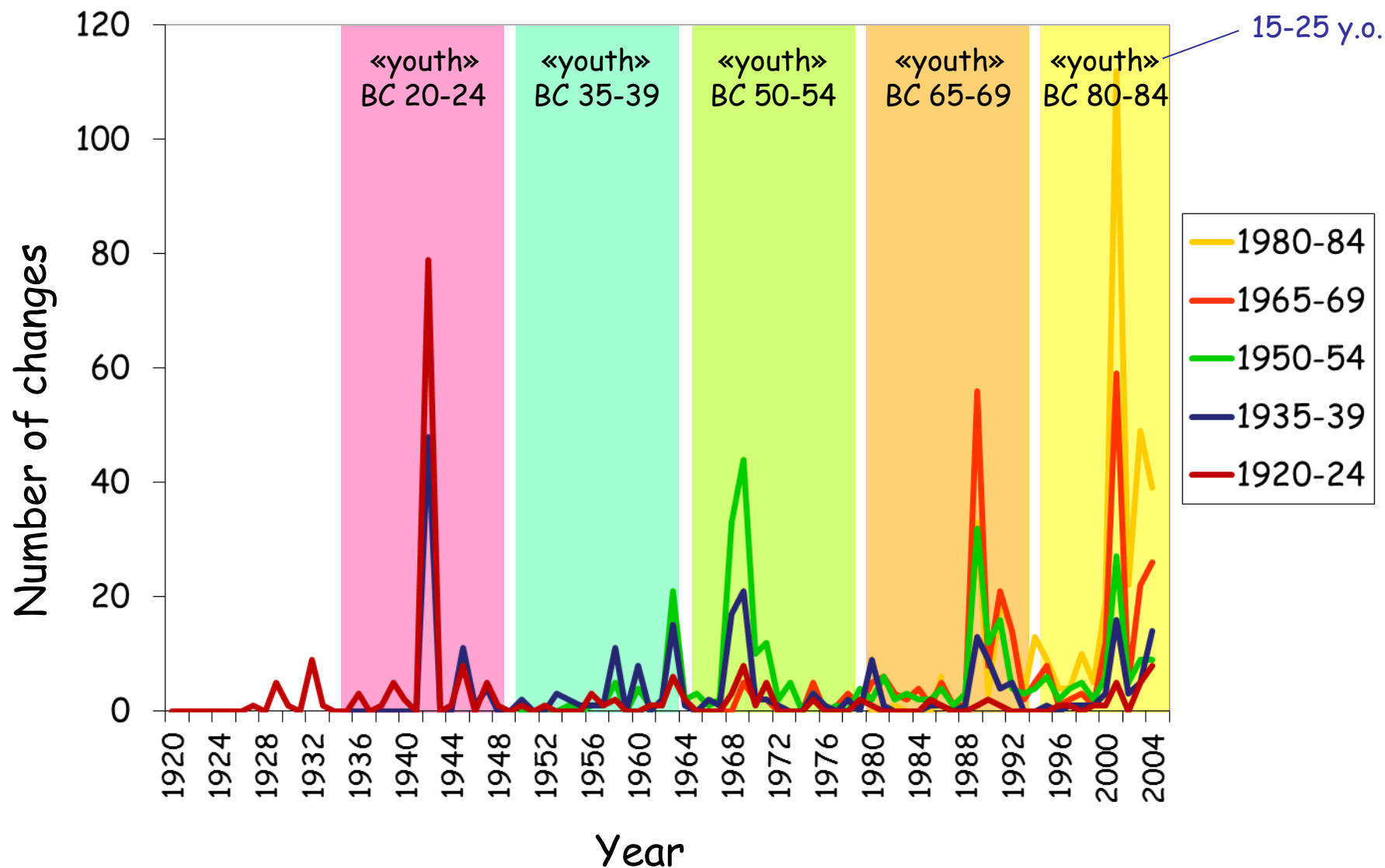
2004



Changes depending on the period (%)



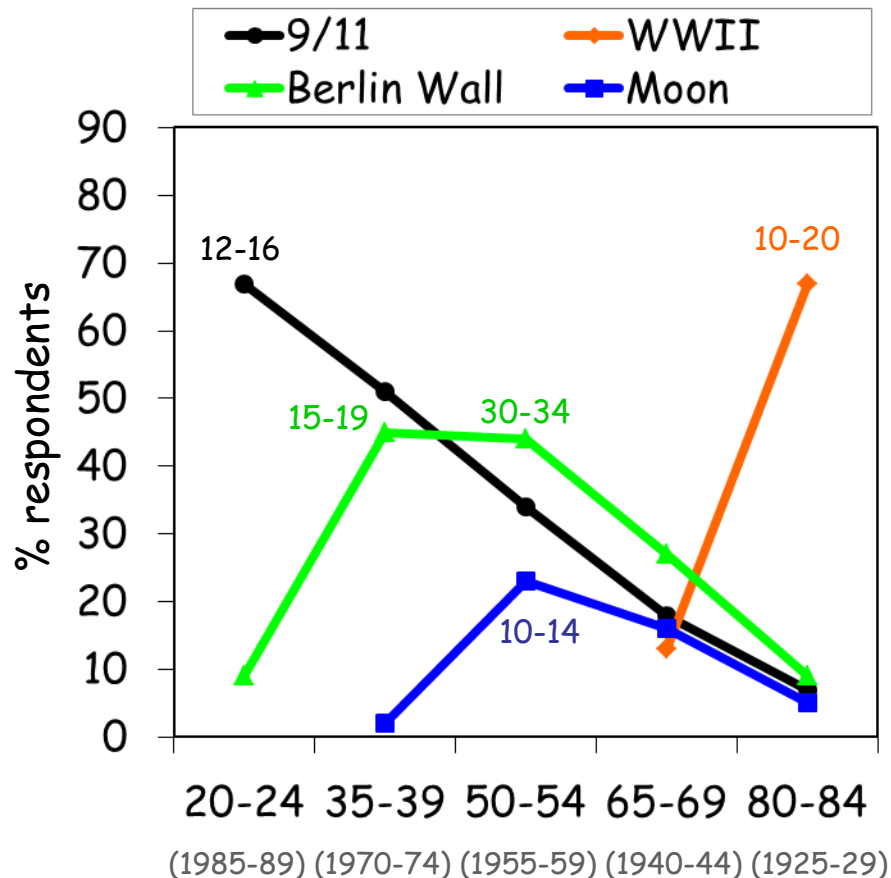
2004



Respondents mentioning changes (%)



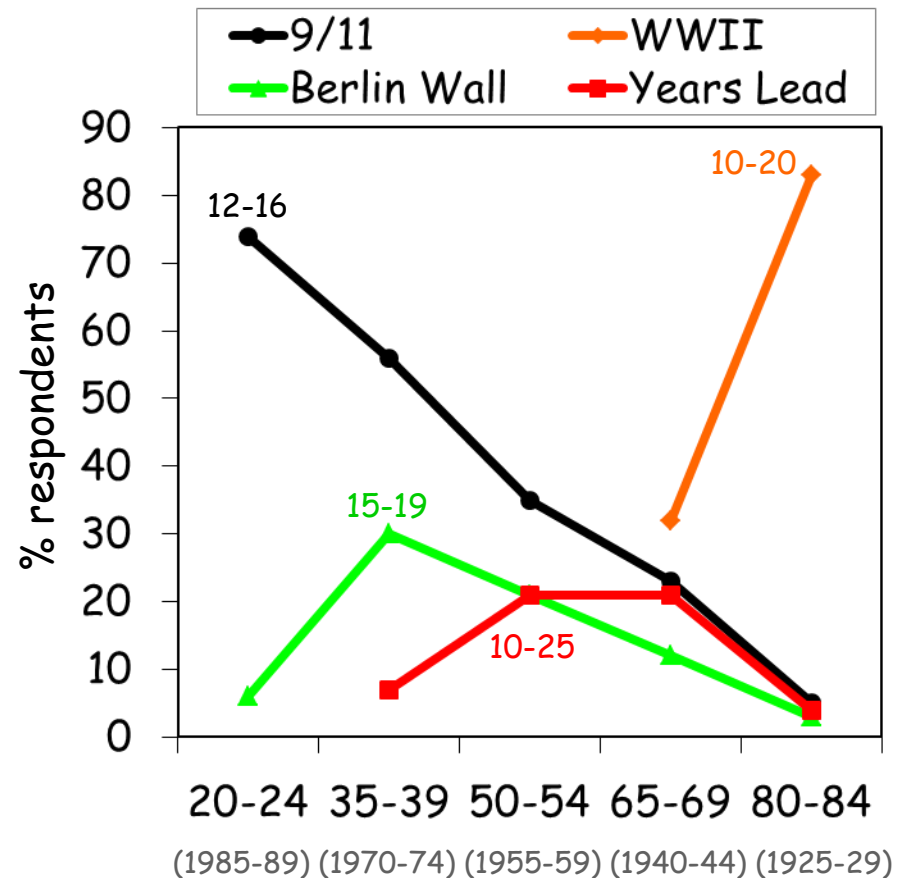
2009



Age groups (birth cohorts)



2009

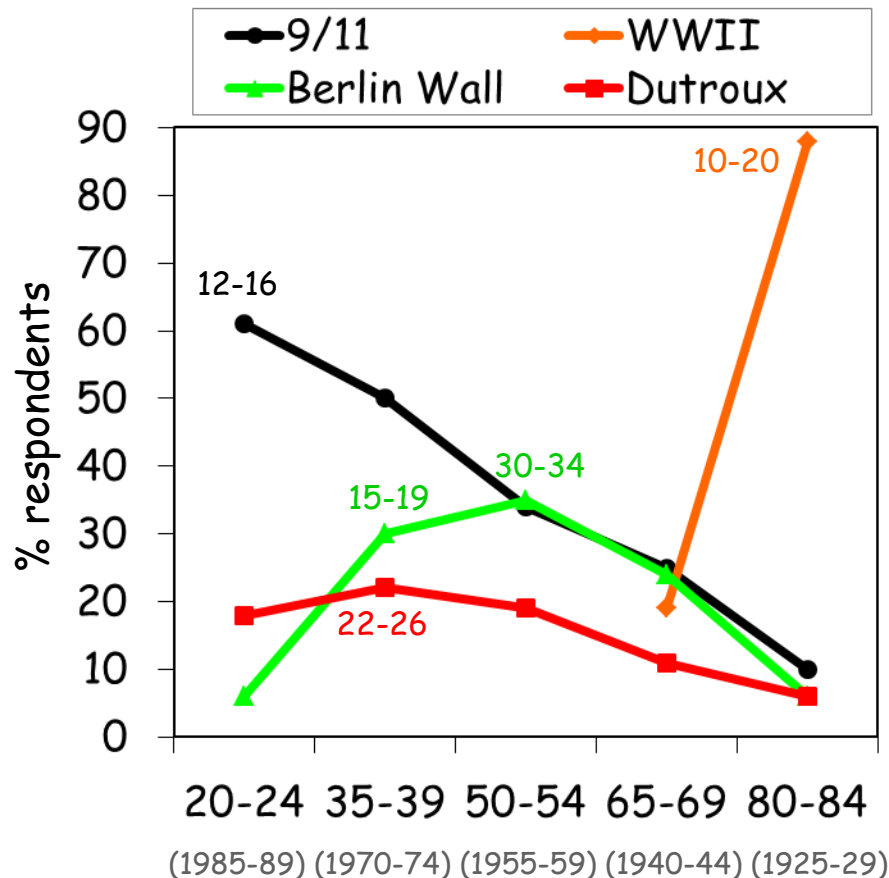


Age groups (birth cohorts)

Respondents mentioning changes (%)



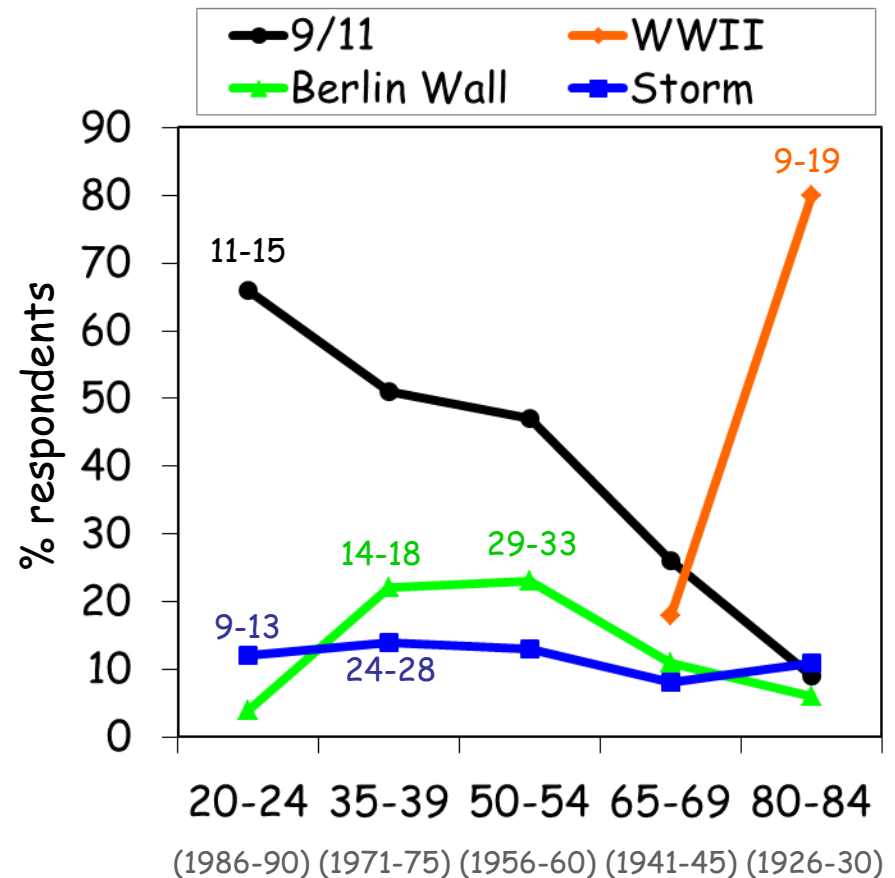
2009



Age groups (birth cohorts)

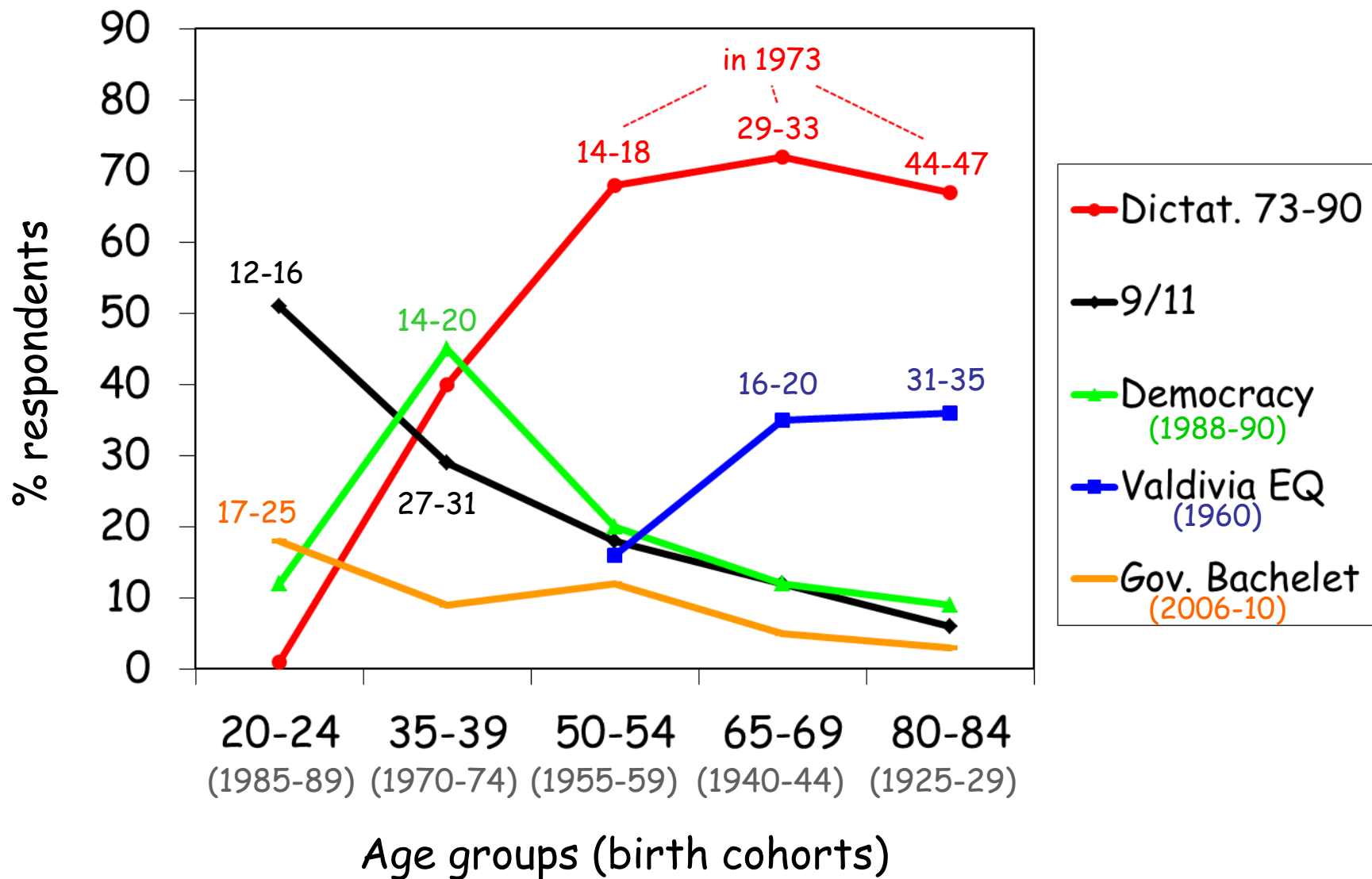


2010



Age groups (birth cohorts)

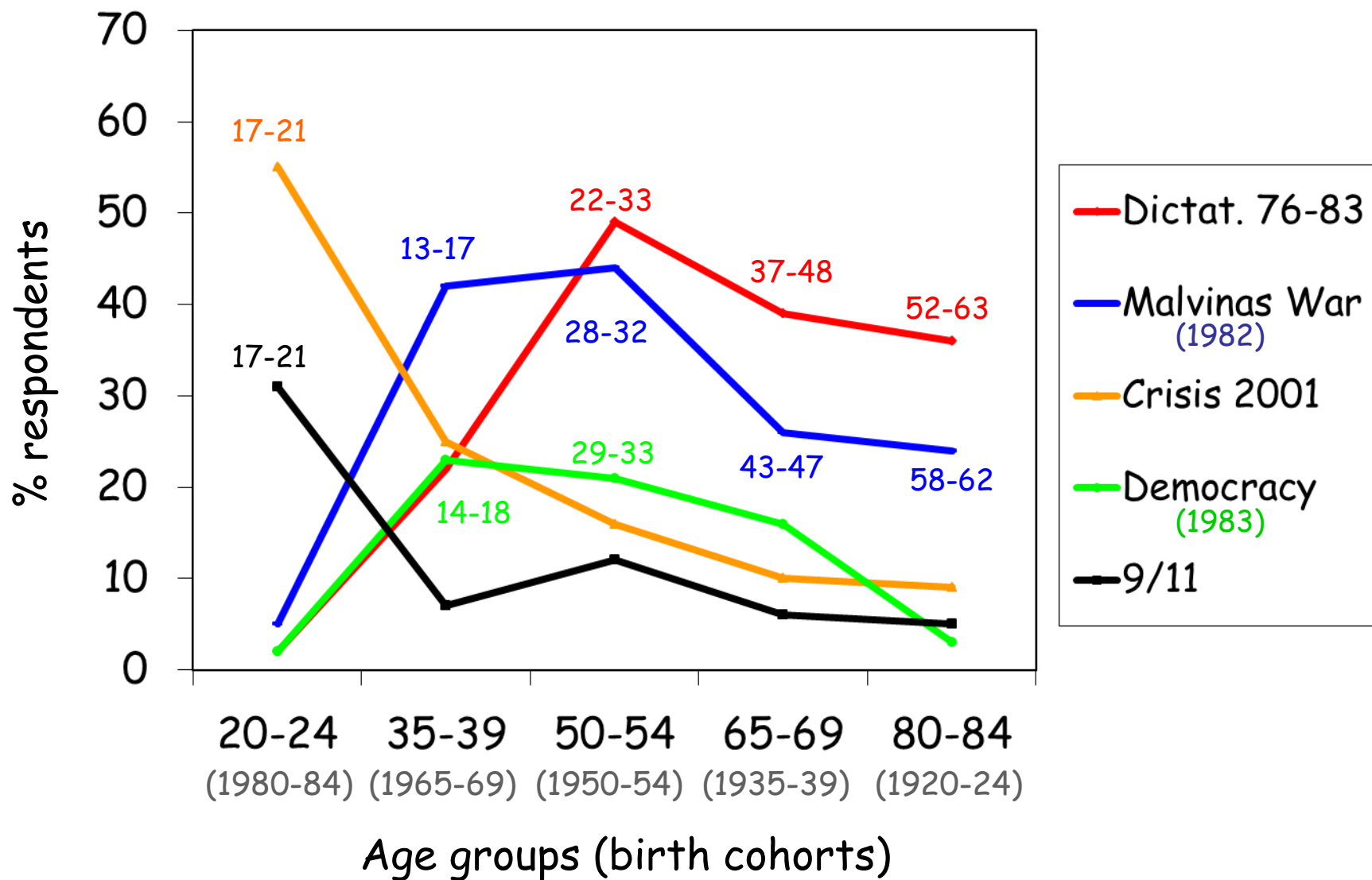
Respondents mentioning changes (%)



Respondents mentioning changes (%)



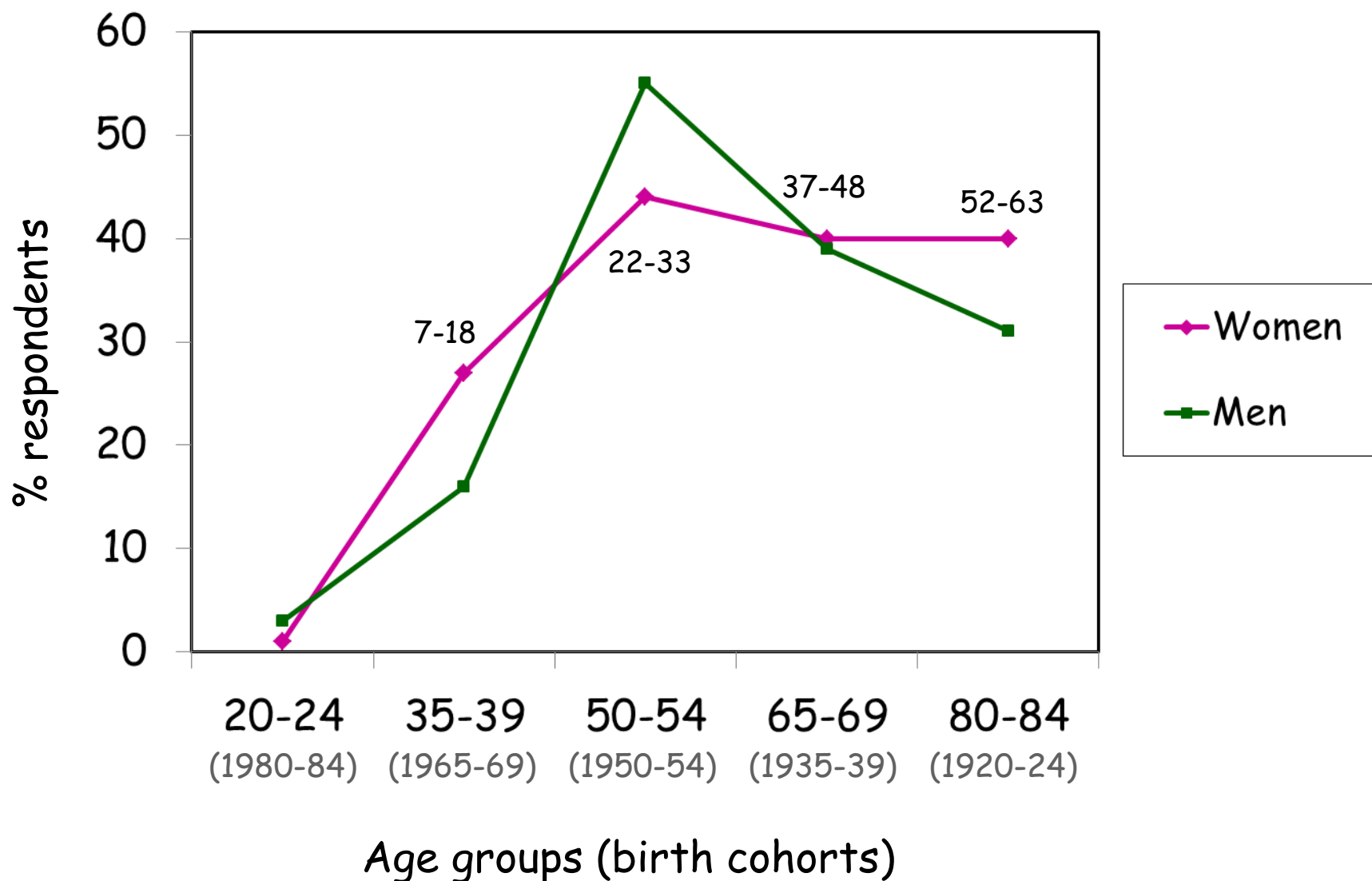
2004



Respondents mentioning Dictat. (%)



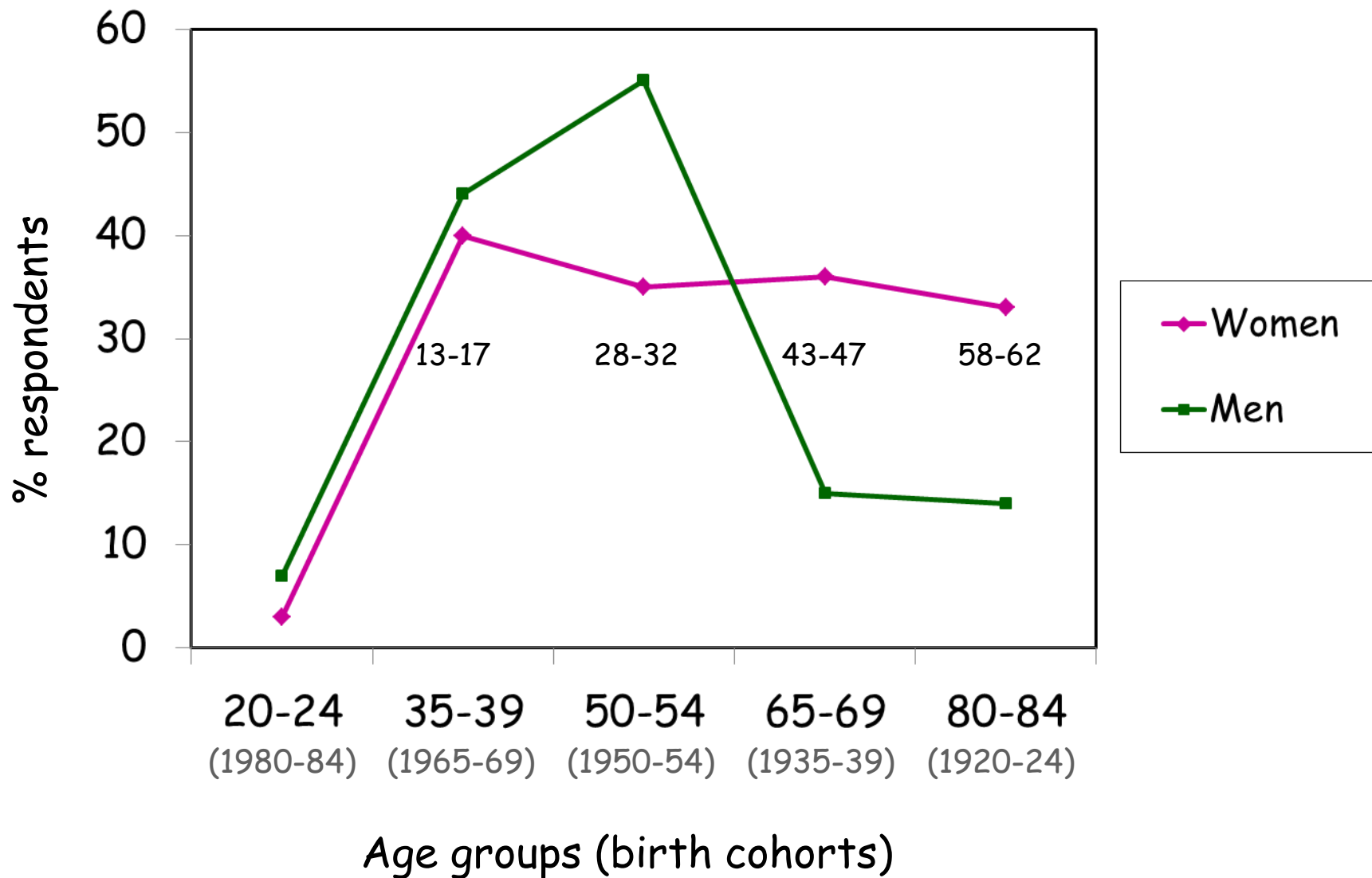
2004



Respondents mentioning **Malvinas** (%)



2004



Differences according to age

There is a tendency to recall the changes that have occurred during adolescence and early adulthood.

A specific event is especially mentioned by those who were about 20 years old at the time of its occurrence.

Ex: 9/11 (everywhere), Fall of the Berlin Wall (Europe), May 1968, First humans on the Moon (Switzerland), Crisis 2001 (Arg.), Return to democracy (Arg., Chile), ...

But we are **not** facing a universal phenomenon!

The constitution of *generational memories of history* depends on the intersections between individual life courses and history.

Two conditions

1. There must have been **significant** historical changes during the *critical age*.

Ex: This is not the case in Switzerland during the 1950s

2. Should the change be perceived as especially important by members of **one** birth cohort.

→ *trans-generational collective memories*

Ex: 1973 coup d'état (Chile)

WWII (Europe) ??

Dictatorship 1976-83 and Malvinas War (Arg.)

→ but only for women !

CEVI

Socio-historical
changes and events

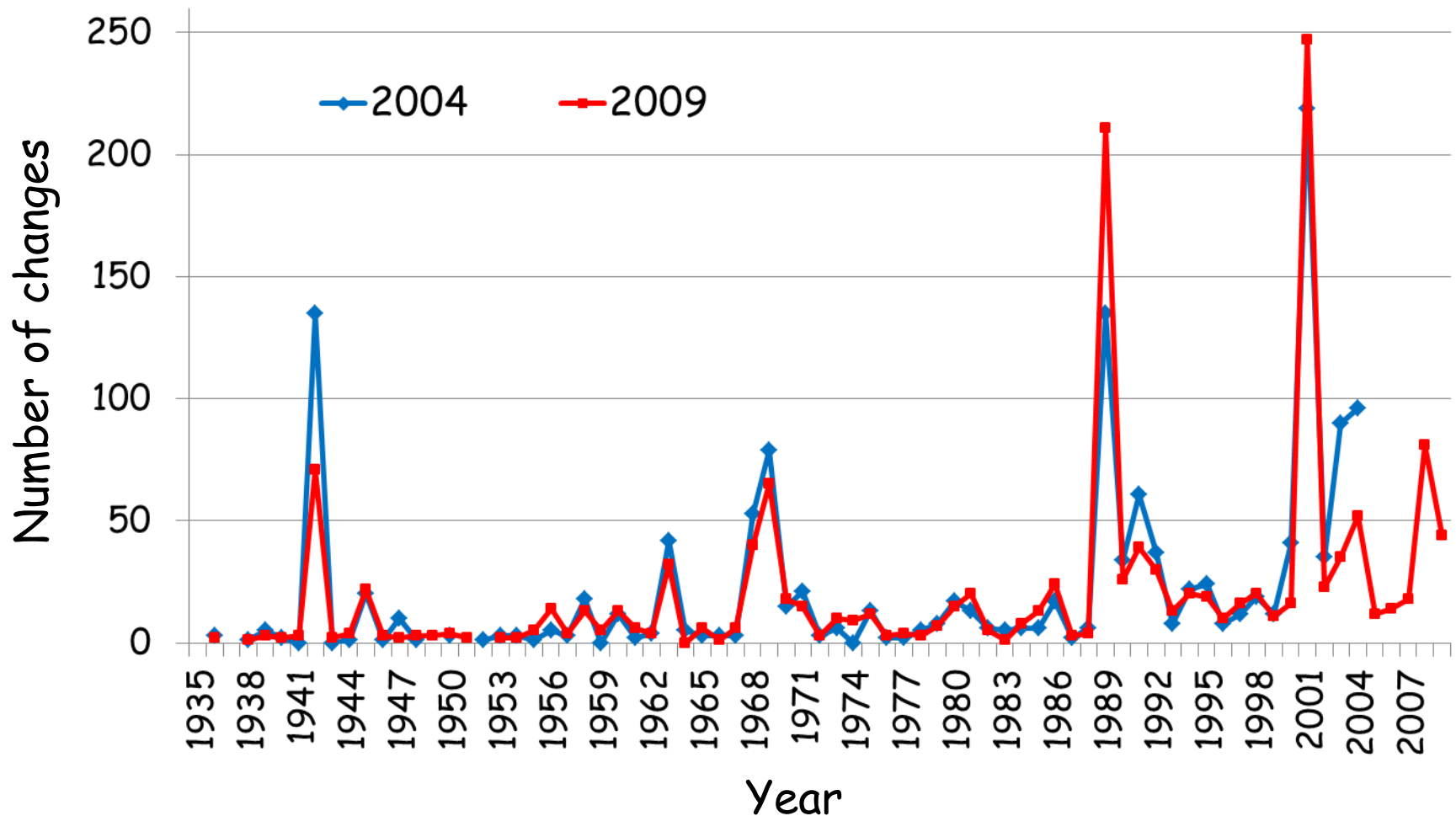
Switzerland
Comparison 2004-2009

Respondents mentioning changes (%)

Type	2004	2009	diff.
9/11	39	41	+2
<i>9/11 attacks</i>	30	37	+7
<i>Iraq War</i>	8	4	-4
End of Communism (Europe)	22	33	+11
<i>Fall of the Berlin Wall</i>	17	28	+11
<i>Collapse of Communism</i>	4	3	-1
World War II	22	14	-8
Space exploration (Moon)	10	9	-1
Progress	9	9	0
Natural disasters	5	12	+7
<i>Tsunami 2004</i>	-	6	new
Financial crisis	5	7	+2
European Union (refusal)	6	6	0
May 1968 protest	6	5	-1
Assassination of JFK	6	5	-1
Gulf War	7	3	-4
Israeli-Palestinian conflict	6	3	-3
Election of Obama	-	7	new
Climate change	2	5	+3
Cold War	2	4	+2
Elections of G.W. Bush	5	1	-4

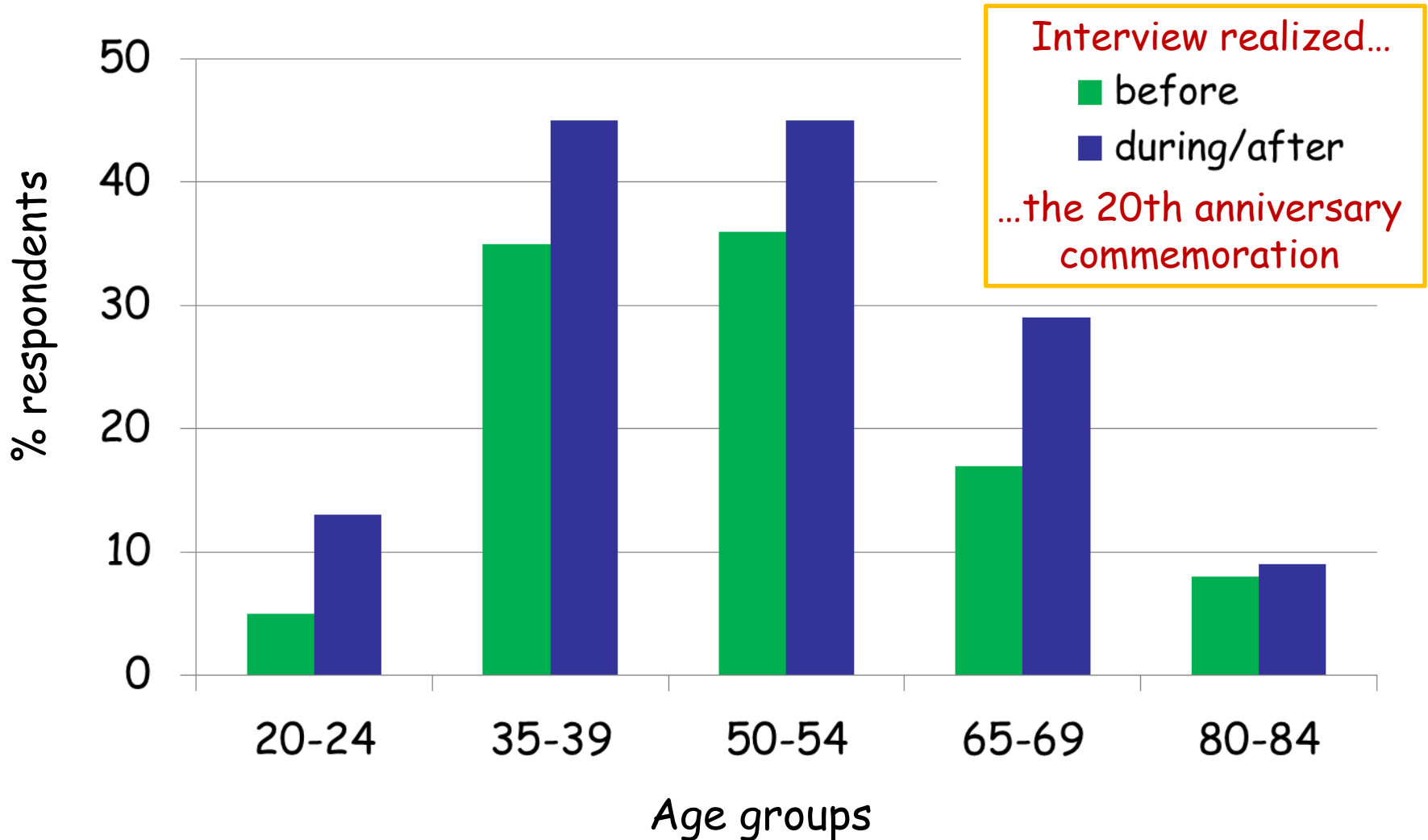
Changes depending on the period

Source: Aude Martenot master's thesis (2010)



Respondents mentioning - in 2009 - the Fall of the Berlin Wall (%)

Source: Camille Guignet master's thesis (2010)



What determines the choice of the socio-historical changes (SHC)?

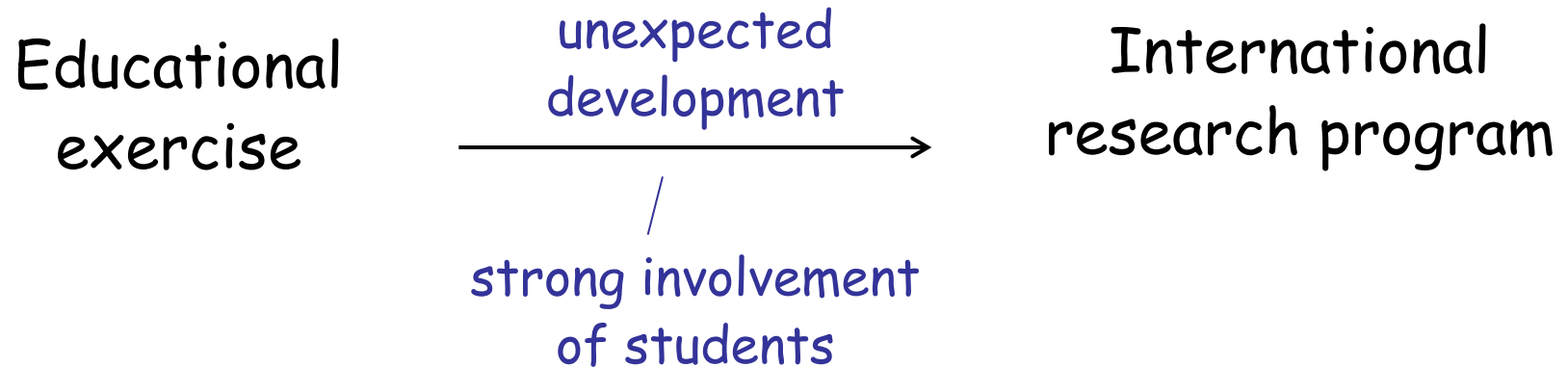
Importance of the interaction between:

- The **age of the individual** at the time of the SHC (its position in the life course)
→ *cohort effect*
- The **strength** of the SHC («objective» importance, consequences, novelty, media coverage, etc.)
→ *period effect*

But also:

- Recency effect
- Resurrected events
- Closeness to the change

CEVI: Limitations and future directions



Perceived changes *versus* «objective» changes

→ Life History Calendars?

Methodological *bricolage* → How to deal with the limitations?

→ Qualitative developments?

Future developments → «Toward a global geography [of the perception] of the life course» ...

CEVI



<http://cig.unige.ch/recherches/cevi.html>

Cleveland??

Mexico

Costa Rica?

Chile

Argentina

Thank you !!

China

India

<http://cig.unige.ch/recherches/cevi.html>