

Introduction

Surveys and polls have become fixtures of American life, and each day brings new findings and makes new headlines. Some of the results are enlightening, while others serve only to muddy the water. Many surveys do not segment their findings by demographic characteristic, and most cannot be used to study trends in attitudes over time because methodologies and questions vary from survey to survey.

The General Social Survey is different. It has a long history. For more than 30 years, it has asked Americans many of the same questions, allowing researchers to compare attitudes not just over time, but also by demographic characteristic. The General Social Survey is one of the few resources that allow attitudinal differences and changes in attitudes to be explored in depth, often permitting researchers to pinpoint why change has occurred. The GSS is the mirror of America. According to survey director Tom W. Smith, the National Academy of Science has described the General Social Survey as a “national resource” and the National Science Foundation has called it a “public utility for the community at large.” The survey may not always show a pretty picture of ourselves, but it is a more accurate snapshot than what can be gleaned from scattershot surveys carried out by a multitude of organizations.

The fifth edition of *American Attitudes: What We Think about the Issues That Shape Our Lives* brings you the results from the latest General Social Survey, fielded in 2006. In four previous editions of *American Attitudes*, New Strategist Publications has coaxed GSS results out of the shadows of academia and placed them solidly in public view. This edition does even more with GSS results. Not only does it examine changes in the public’s attitudes over the past decade, but it also provides a demographic breakdown of those attitudes question by question. In hundreds of tables, the fifth edition of *American Attitudes* taps into the GSS gold mine, revealing what the public thinks about topics ranging from premarital sex to global warming, how Americans feel about their money and their marriages, hopes for their children, how often they socialize and with whom, their religious beliefs, political leanings, and working conditions. It shows those answers by the demographics that shape perspective—sex, age, race, and education. *American Attitudes* also compares attitudes in 2006 with 1996, examining how opinions have—and have not—changed during those ten years.

Changing attitudes

On most issues, Americans have been surprisingly constant in their views. Over the decades of the General Social Survey, the majority of Americans have consistently claimed to be at least “pretty happy,” and most husbands and wives have described their marriage as “very happy.” Religion remains highly important to the majority, although religious diversity

has increased. Most support the death penalty. Most also support abortion, at least in some circumstances.

On some issues, however, there have been important shifts over time. Attitudes toward sexual behavior, sex roles, and race relations have changed profoundly as younger generations with different attitudes have replaced older ones. Most of these shifts occurred before the time frame examined in this book, although the past can still be seen in the attitudes of people aged 65 or older. Overall, only 35 percent of Americans still favor traditional sex roles, for example. Among people aged 65 or older, however, the 54 percent majority thinks traditional roles are best—a relic of the era when most Americans subscribed to rigid boundaries between the sexes.

Between 1996 and 2006, there have been some important shifts in attitudes. One shift is the feeling that the federal government must do more about health care. The percentage of the public that believes government spending on health care should increase, even if it means raising taxes, climbed from 67 to 81 percent between 1996 and 2006. The 55 percent majority of the public now believes it “definitely should be” the government’s responsibility to provide health care for the sick, up from 38 percent in 1996. Other issues that have experienced significant attitudinal shifts in the past decade include a decline in the percentage of people who identify themselves as Protestant, a sharp drop in daily newspaper readership, a decline in the percentage of people who think two is the ideal number of children, and a decrease in the percentage of people who say their health is “excellent” or “good.”

Differences by demographics

Demographics do not necessarily divide Americans. On many issues, men and women think alike, whites and blacks agree, young and old are on the same side, and college graduates are in accord with their less educated counterparts. Every demographic segment, for example, overwhelmingly supports gun control. Regardless of their demographics, few people have much confidence in Congress or the press.

On some issues, however, there are large differences by demographic characteristic. Women are more likely than men to pray at least once a day (68 versus 48 percent). Whites are more likely than blacks to favor capital punishment (75 versus 45 percent). Young adults are more likely than older Americans to think premarital sex is “not wrong at all” (50 versus 32 percent). The college-educated are much more likely than those without a college degree to say they have a clear understanding of the meaning of scientific study (50 versus 22 percent). Mix these diverse attitudes and values together, and you get the American perspective. That perspective is revealed in *American Attitudes*.

About the book

The fifth edition of *American Attitudes* is organized into 11 topical chapters: The Public Arena, Government and Politics, Freedom, Science, Religion, Work and Money, Family and Friends, Race, Personal Outlook, Sexual Attitudes and Behavior, and Health.

Within chapters, a series of tables displays the public's response to the survey's questions. The exact wording of the GSS question is shown above the table—minus instructional details. Each table shows the total response in 1996 (if available) and in 2006. Each table also shows the 2006 response by sex, race and Hispanic origin (black, Hispanic, and white—the sample size is too small to allow for a breakout of Asian attitudes), broad age group (18 to 44, 45 to 64, 65 or older), and education (not a college graduate, and bachelor's degree or more). The chapters also include charts and text that highlights the findings and trends. Each chapter's introductory text examines what has—and has not—changed over the past decade.

About the General Social Survey

The General Social Survey is fielded by the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center. NORC is the oldest nonprofit, university-affiliated national survey research facility in the nation. It conducts the GSS through face-to-face interviews with an independently drawn, nationally representative sample of approximately 3,000 to 4,000 people aged 18 or older living in households in the United States. NORC fielded the first GSS in 1972, conducted it annually through 1994 (except for the years 1979, 1981, and 1992), and has fielded the survey every two years since then.

Until recently, GSS data have not been readily available to the public. Although social scientists frequently use the GSS to study trends, survey results are not published comprehensively or regularly. Most GSS analyses appear in academic papers and journals, which are not readily available to the average person. New Strategist Publications decided to publish the first edition of *American Attitudes* in 1996 to make these valuable data more accessible to the public.

A few years ago, the Computer-assisted Survey Methods Program of the University of California-Berkeley created a web-based tool for analyzing the GSS. The online tool allows users to create custom tables of GSS data. Using the tool, the researchers at New Strategist produced *American Attitudes*, which puts the results of the GSS in your hands.

For more information

If you want more information about the General Social Survey, visit the National Opinion Research Center site at <http://www.norc.org/projects/general+social+survey.htm>

If you want to explore the GSS extraction tool, visit the Computer-assisted Survey Methods Program site at <http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin32/hsda?harcsda+gss06>.