

Introduction

Surveys and polls have become fixtures of American life, with each day bringing new findings and making 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 the survey's director, Tom W. Smith, the GSS has been described as a "national resource" by the National Academy of Science and a "public utility for the community at large" by the National Science Foundation. The survey may not always show us a pretty picture of ourselves, but it is a more accurate picture than can be gleaned from scattershot surveys carried out by a multitude of organizations.

The sixth edition of *American Attitudes: Who Thinks What about the Issues that Shape Our Lives* brings you the results from the latest GSS, fielded in 2008. In five 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 examining changes in the public's attitudes over the past three decades, but also providing a demographic breakdown of those attitudes question by question. In hundreds of tables, the sixth edition of *American Attitudes* taps into the GSS gold mine, revealing what the public thinks about topics ranging from gay marriage to the American Dream, how Americans feel about their financial status, their 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, Hispanic origin, and education. *American Attitudes* also compares attitudes in 2008 with 1998, 1988, and 1978 (if available), examining how opinions have or have not changed during those three decades.

Changing attitudes

On most issues, Americans have been surprisingly constant in their views. Over the decades of the GSS, 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. 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 1978 and 2008, 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 the government spends too little on health care climbed from 57 to 77 percent between 1978 and 2008. The 54 percent majority of the public now believes the government should help people pay for medical care, up from 48 percent who felt that way in 1988. 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 drop in the percentage of people who believe their income is “average,” falling from 53 percent in 1978 to 47 percent in 2008. The percentage of Americans who believe their income is below average relative to others has grown from 25 to 31 percent. Most disturbing, perhaps, is the loss of faith in the American Dream. The percentage of people who agree with the statement, “The way things are in America, people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living,” has fallen from 75 percent in 1998 to 59 percent in 2008.

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, television, 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 46 percent). Whites are more likely than blacks to favor capital punishment (72 versus 46 percent). Young adults are more likely than older Americans to think gays and lesbians should have the right to marry (49 versus 22 percent). The college-educated are much more likely than those without a college degree to believe in evolution (63 versus 46 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 sixth edition of *American Attitudes* is organized into nine topical chapters: Public Arena; Government and Politics; Science and Information; Religion; Work and Money; Family and Friends; Race; Personal Outlook; and Sexual Attitudes and Behavior.

Within chapters, a series of tables display 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 1998, 1988, and 1978 (when available) and in 2008. Each table also shows the 2008 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 highlighting 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 GSS 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, the survey's results are not published comprehensively or regularly. Most GSS analysis appears in academic papers and journals, which are not readily available to the average person. 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 painstakingly produced *American Attitudes* line by line, extracting the results of the GSS like gold from a mine. With this volume, New Strategist Publications places the latest survey results into the hands of the public.

For more information

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

To explore the GSS extraction tool, visit the Computer-assisted Survey Methods Program site at http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin32/hsda?harc_sda+gss08.