

The Public Arena

Public opinion on some issues has been remarkably stable over time. On other issues, changes in public opinion can—or should—raise alarm bells. Here is a synopsis of how attitudes regarding public institutions and public issues have changed—or not—over the past decade.

Little or no change

- **Little public confidence in institutions.** Confidence in most institutions has been abysmally low for decades. In 2008, the percentage of the public with a great deal of confidence in the nation's institutions was below 50 percent for all but the military. Confidence in banks and financial institutions has taken a hit recently because of their role in the economic downturn. Confidence is lowest in television and the press, with fewer than 10 percent of the public having a great deal of confidence in these institutions.
- **Americans want the courts to treat criminals more harshly.** Although the United States has more prisoners per capita than any other nation on earth, most Americans still think the courts in their area are not tough enough on criminals. Most also favor the death penalty.
- **Most support gun control.** Americans strongly support gun control. A shrinking share of the public owns a gun, the figure falling to 36 percent in 2008. Why are politicians unwilling to pass gun control laws? That is a question no one seems able to answer.

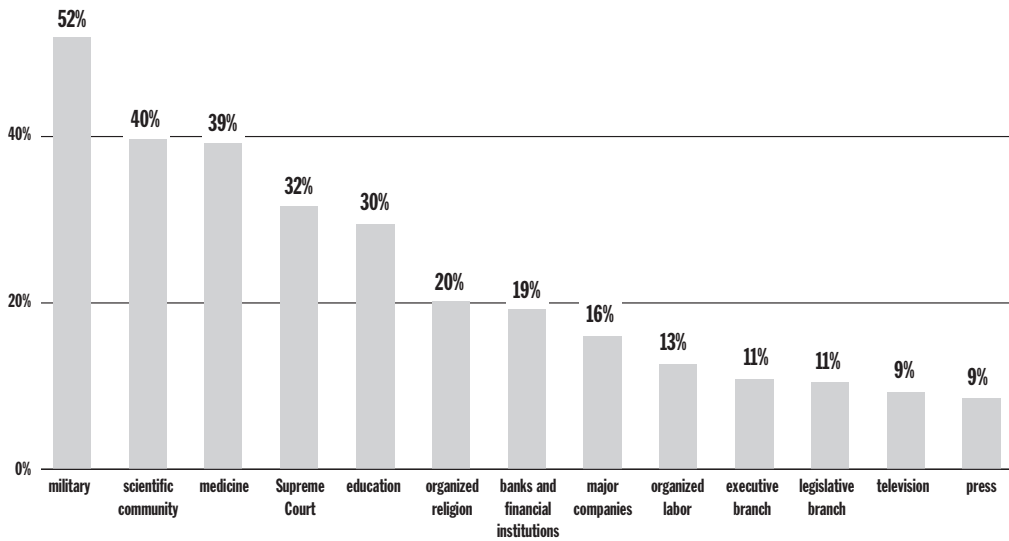
Big changes

- **Higher taxes for someone.** A shrinking share of the public believes its taxes are too high, perhaps paving the way for tax increases. But who will pay more? It might not be the rich because the plurality of Americans still believes taxes on the rich are too high.
- **Greater chance of a world war.** Americans feel secure in their homes and neighborhoods, but the world at large is a more dangerous place. Most believe the United States will be involved in another world war within 10 years.
- **Legalizing marijuana.** A growing share of the public favors legalizing marijuana. Adults under age 65 are far more likely to favor it than older Americans, boosting the chances that marijuana may one day be as acceptable as alcohol.

Public Confidence in Most Institutions Is Low

The public has little confidence in most institutions, including the press and television, the legislative and executive branches of the federal government, organized labor, and major companies. The public has the most confidence in the military, followed by the scientific and medical communities.

(percent of people aged 18 or older who say they have a great deal of confidence in selected institutions, 2008)



Source: General Social Surveys; calculations by New Strategist

Table 1.1 Confidence in Executive Branch of Federal Government, 1978 to 2008

“As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them: The executive branch of the federal government?”

(percent of people aged 18 or older responding, 1978 to 2008; and percent responding by demographic characteristic, 2008)

	a great deal	only some	hardly any
TREND			
2008	10.9%	50.3%	38.9%
1998	13.7	49.7	36.6
1988	17.1	55.4	27.5
1978	12.0	61.9	26.2
2008 PROFILE			
Total people	10.9	50.3	38.9
Men	10.3	47.6	42.1
Women	11.4	52.7	36.0
Black	13.5	47.0	39.5
Hispanic	18.5	52.6	28.9
White	10.4	50.0	39.6
Aged 18 to 44	12.4	56.8	30.8
Aged 45 to 64	10.8	43.8	45.4
Aged 65 or older	6.5	44.0	49.5
Not a college graduate	10.9	52.3	36.7
Bachelor's degree or more	10.8	44.4	44.9

Source: Survey Documentation and Analysis, Computer-assisted Survey Methods Program, University of California, Berkeley, General Social Surveys, 1972–2008 Cumulative Data Files, Internet site <http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsta+gss08>; calculations by New Strategist

The Public Supports Federal Funding of Scientific Research

Three out of four Americans think the quality of science and math education is inadequate. Nearly nine out of ten think the federal government should support scientific research. The 61 percent majority do not think scientists should be allowed to do scientific research that causes pain and injury to animals, however. Only 48 percent of men are against research using animals compared with 73 percent of women.

(percent distribution of people aged 18 or older by attitude toward federal funding of scientific research, 2008)

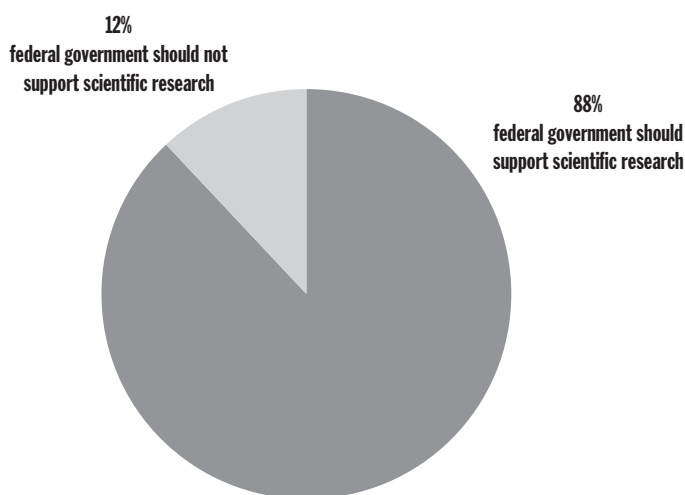


Table 3.11 Quality of Science and Math Education Is Inadequate, 2008

“The quality of science and mathematics education in American schools is inadequate.
Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree?”

(percent of people aged 18 or older responding by demographic characteristic, 2008)

	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
Total people	22.7%	52.3%	23.3%	1.7%
Men	21.1	54.3	23.1	1.5
Women	24.3	50.5	23.4	1.8
Black	18.0	49.7	28.8	3.5
Hispanic				
White	23.6	52.8	22.2	1.4
Aged 18 to 44	17.0	53.1	28.0	1.8
Aged 45 to 64	27.8	49.8	20.6	1.8
Aged 65 or older	29.0	56.6	13.6	0.8
Not a college graduate	20.4	51.5	26.3	1.8
Bachelor's degree or more	29.2	54.8	14.9	1.2

Source: Survey Documentation and Analysis, Computer-assisted Survey Methods Program, University of California, Berkeley, General Social Survey, 2008 Cumulative Data Files, Internet site <http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsda+gss08>; calculations by New Strategist

Many Americans Rarely Attend Church

More than 40 percent of the public attends church only once a year or less. The percentage of Americans who say they are Protestant fell from 63 to just under 50 percent during the past 30 years. At the same time, the percentage with no religion has grown from 8 to 17 percent.

(percent distribution of people aged 18 or older by frequency of attendance at religious services, 2008)

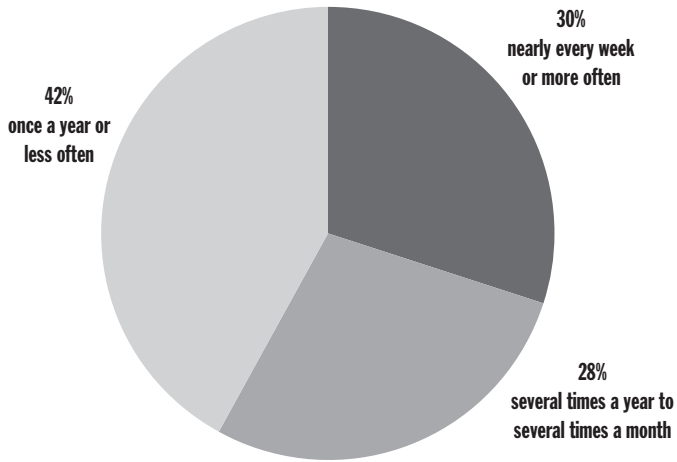


Table 4.1 Religious Background, 1978 to 2008

“In what religion were you raised?”

(percent of people aged 18 or older responding, 1978 to 2008; and percent responding by demographic characteristic, 2008)

	Protestant	Catholic	Jewish	Buddhism	Hinduism	Moslem/ Islam	other	none
TREND								
2008	52.9%	33.2%	1.8%	0.3%	0.6%	0.5%	2.0%	8.7%
1998	57.9	31.2	1.8	0.2	0.2	0.6	2.2	5.9
1988	62.9	29.4	2.1	–	–	–	2.1	3.6
1978	66.0	28.2	1.8	–	–	–	0.8	3.2
2008 PROFILE								
Total people	52.9	33.2	1.8	0.3	0.6	0.5	2.0	8.7
Men	52.8	33.1	1.2	0.5	0.8	0.1	2.0	9.5
Women	53.1	33.3	2.3	0.1	0.4	0.9	1.9	8.0
Black	81.8	6.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.2	3.0	7.2
Hispanic	13.1	79.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.4	5.5
White	52.5	34.4	2.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.9	8.8
Aged 18 to 44	42.8	37.4	2.5	0.3	1.1	1.1	2.6	12.2
Aged 45 to 64	62.8	29.3	1.1	0.2	0.1	0.0	1.0	5.5
Aged 65 or older	60.2	29.6	1.5	0.4	0.1	0.0	2.5	5.7
Not a college graduate	52.5	35.1	0.9	0.1	0.1	0.0	1.8	9.5
Bachelor’s degree or more	54.1	28.1	4.5	0.6	2.2	1.9	2.1	6.5

Note: “–” means data are not available.

Source: Survey Documentation and Analysis, Computer-assisted Survey Methods Program, University of California, Berkeley; General Social Surveys, 1972–2008 Cumulative Data Files, Internet site <http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harsda+gss08>; calculations by New Strategist

Pay Is Not Keeping Up with Cost of Living

The 41 percent plurality of workers say their pay has not kept up with the cost of living. A substantial 31 percent say their starting pay at their current employer was lower than their earnings at their last employer. Many workers (32 percent) think free trade has taken jobs away from Americans. Only 15 percent think free trade has created more jobs in the United States.

(percent distribution of workers aged 18 to 64 by how pay has changed since they started their current job, 2008)

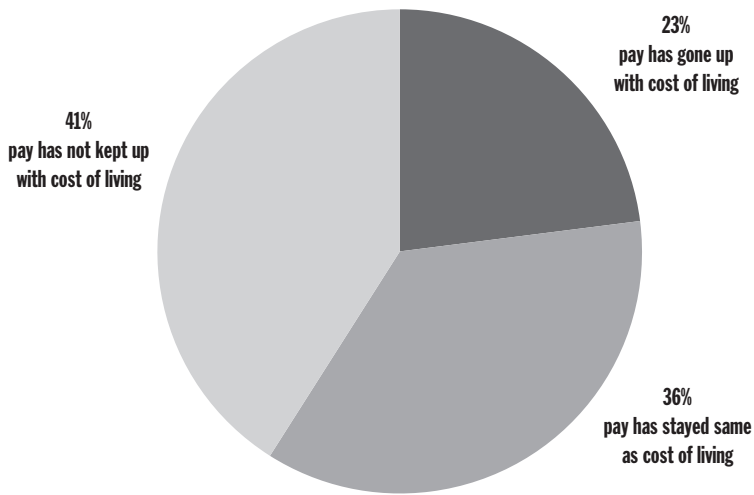


Table 5.6 Full-Time Jobs in Past Three Years, 2008

“How many full-time jobs have you had in the past three years,
that is since 2005 (counting the current job)?”

(percent of workers aged 18 to 64 responding by demographic characteristic, 2008)

	one	more than one	none
Total people	59.6%	21.0%	19.4%
Men	68.9	20.6	10.6
Women	51.0	21.4	27.6
Black	58.0	27.0	15.0
Hispanic	52.3	31.2	16.5
White	60.2	19.3	20.5
Aged 18 to 44	54.1	29.9	16.0
Aged 45 to 64	65.1	12.1	22.8
Not a college graduate	57.3	22.8	19.9
Bachelor's degree or more	65.2	16.6	18.2

Source: Survey Documentation and Analysis, Computer-assisted Survey Methods Program, University of California, Berkeley, General Social Survey, 2008 Cumulative Data Files, Internet site http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harc_sda+gss08; calculations by New Strategist