



## WHAT THE POLLS TELL US

*by Everett Carll Ladd, Jr.*

Public opinion is highly volatile and complex. Fissures open up—only to close months later. Most people adopt “liberal” positions on some issues, “conservative” ones on others; Edmund Burke may have been right when he called public opinion a coquette.

On a national level, unpredictable left/right divisions are tantalizing: Americans seem immune to neat pigeonholing by political scientists. For example, a 1978 *New York Times*/CBS News survey found that those who described themselves as “liberals” were far more likely than self-described “conservatives” to support sending U.S. troops and equipment to halt Soviet advances in Africa.

As we edge toward the 1980 presidential election, campaigns are being mounted from the left, right, and center. Rival organizers for Kennedy and Carter, Brown, Reagan, Connally, and others are publicly confident that their candidate’s fingers rest accurately on the public pulse. They can’t all be right.

Neither can all nonpartisan opinion researchers. But we *can* afford to be more aloof. Unlike politicians, we need not be occupied with appeasing every shift of opinion for electoral gain. We are thus freer to ponder long-term currents—the tides of public opinion, not just the transient swirls and eddies.

It is a cliché these days to say that Americans are moving away from “liberal” values and perspectives and toward a more “conservative” stance. Passage of California’s Proposition 13 by a whopping two-to-one margin last year and the subsequent nationwide “tax revolt” are frequently cited as evidence. Lewis Uhler, a political conservative who heads the National Tax Limitation Committee, argues that the new popular resistance to big government portends a challenge to the free-spending tendencies in vogue since the New Deal days. Senator George McGovern (D.-S.D.) worries that liberalism is now America’s “lost vision.”

Those who believe Americans are moving rightward can point to more than a “tax revolt.” During the Vietnam era, U.S. colleges were awash in protest demonstrations; today, career-conscious and seemingly docile students concentrate on making

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the grade. Opinion surveys show widespread concern over the perceived deterioration of the family. A 1978 Yankelovich study finds two-thirds of all Americans endorsing "more emphasis on religious beliefs."

### Up with Government

The public is also taking a much tougher stance on crime—and punishment: Seven out of 10 Americans, the highest proportion in a quarter century, support the death penalty for convicted murderers. Almost 9 out of 10 think the courts are too lenient. It is not hard to see why many politicians, pollsters, and newsmen assume that Americans are "moving right."

The only problem with the assumption is that it is fundamentally wrong.

Let's look at what I see as the more important trends.

*Big Government.* Despite a clamoring for tax cuts and a heavy dose of anti-Washington rhetoric, there is still no sign that the U.S. public wants to cut back substantially on the post-Depression spending habits of the federal government. In many instances, polls show just the opposite. In 1964, 64 percent of Americans surveyed agreed that "the government in Washington ought to help people get doctors and hospital care at low cost." By 1978, 85 percent wanted the federal government to assume this responsibility.

Over and over again, when asked if they want to cut back on spending for public services, the public today says no.\* People in all social classes, from all regions of the country, and of all political persuasions now endorse heavy outlays for most social services (such as schools, hospitals, police, environmental protection). Ninety-one percent of those who describe themselves as "working class" and 90 percent of those who say they are "upper class" maintain that we are spending either *too little* or the *right amount* "to improve the educational system." Ninety-four percent of professionals and 95 percent of unskilled workers take a

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\*One exception: some 61 percent of those polled felt government was spending too much on "welfare," which seems to be regarded as a dole for people *unwilling* to work.

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### WHAT'S RIGHT? WHO'S LEFT?

The problem of using standard labels like *liberal* or *conservative* is that liberalism/conservatism is not a simple, one-dimensional continuum. In fact, there is a series of distinct dimensions, and an individual may occupy quite different positions, relative to the general public, on each of them—"liberal," say, on domestic economic policy, "centrist" in foreign affairs, "conservative" on some cultural and lifestyle issues. It is perfectly possible—one is tempted to say *likely*—for a person to be moving in opposite directions at the same time.

For example, a 1976 *Washington Post* survey of leaders of the women's movement predictably found them well to the left on most social issues. Yet a deep respect for individual merit often pulled them perceptibly rightward. Thus 64 percent "strongly" disagreed that government should limit the amount of money a person is allowed to earn.

Similarly, U.S. professors feel strongly that there should be some sort of income "floor" for the disadvantaged; most tend to support preferential hiring for minorities. But 85 percent reject, in principle, government efforts to achieve equality of results instead of equality of opportunity.

In short, terms like liberal and conservative are *ideological* categories, but large numbers of people do not hold views that are as coherently packaged as the term *ideology* implies.

similar stand on upgrading the nation's health care. And 73 percent of grade-school-trained Americans and 81 percent of U.S. college graduates want to maintain or increase expenditures "to improve the condition of blacks."

*Civil Liberties.* Americans now frequently appear more tolerant than they did in the past. If a person wanted to make a speech in your community "against churches and religion," people were asked, "should he be allowed to speak or not?" In 1954, 37 percent of the public favored letting such a person speak; by 1977, the proportion had risen to 62 percent.

Should someone who favors "government ownership of all railroads and all big industries" be allowed to teach in a college or university? Only 33 percent said yes in 1954; two decades later, the figure was 57 percent.

*Civil Rights.* Despite some angry clashes over busing—in Boston, Cleveland, and elsewhere—Americans have become

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more supportive of the rights of minorities. In 1968, 63 percent of the U.S. public agreed that "blacks have a right to live wherever they can afford to, just like white people." Ten years later, 93 percent endorsed the right of black Americans to live anywhere they chose. Only 42 percent of the public stated in 1958 that they would vote for a qualified black for President if he were nominated by their party; by 1978, the proportion had exactly doubled.

Almost everyone now agrees (94 percent in a recent *New York Times*/CBS News poll) that barring someone from a job solely because of race is "wrong." And on the sensitive issue of interracial marriage, the proportion of those who disapproved fell from 72 percent in 1963 to the current 54 percent. In all of these areas, moreover, the attitude of Southern whites has increasingly come to mirror the opinion of the nation at large.

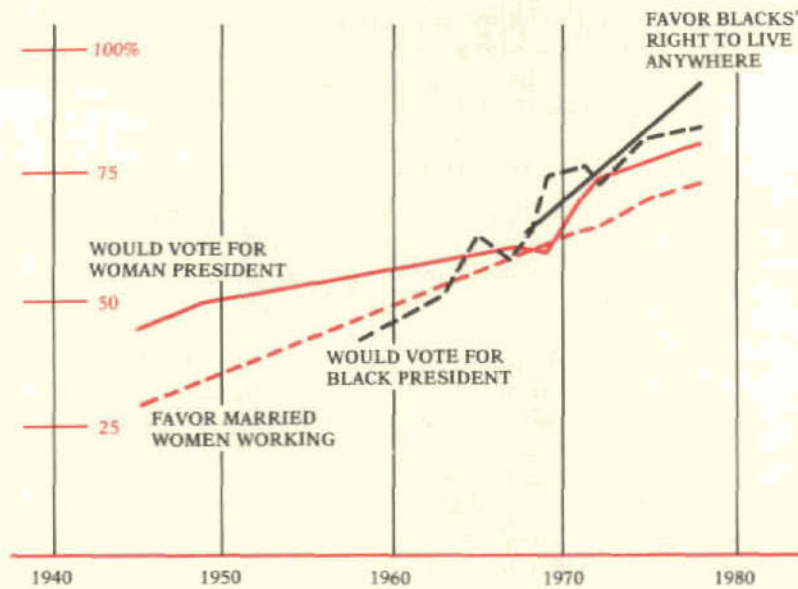
Granted, massive school busing to achieve a "racial balance" is unpopular—among growing numbers of blacks as well as whites. So is preferential hiring. Neither has ever been endorsed by a majority of whites, and many blacks appear to have withdrawn their support. That black and white Americans have grave doubts about some of the means used to attain the end of civil rights should not be construed as a reaction against the basic principle of egalitarianism itself. Compensatory education programs and laws curbing job discrimination receive virtually unanimous approval.

### Slippage on ERA

*Rights of Women.* Just over half of Americans surveyed in 1970 favored "most of the efforts to strengthen and change women's status in society today." By 1978, with such efforts increasing, well over two-thirds of the populace (72 percent) indicated their approval. Less than a third of the electorate was prepared to vote for a qualified woman for President in 1937; that figure has climbed to 81 percent. What about a married woman, not in financial need, going out and getting a job? Only a fifth of the public supported the idea in 1938, but almost three-quarters do four decades later.

Admittedly, support for the specific legal affirmations embodied in the proposed Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) has slipped—from 74 percent in 1974 to 58 percent in 1978. This decline in support must be seen in context. First, backing for the amendment remains widespread and strong. Second, there is evidence that the earliest surveys on ERA were picking up unconsidered positive responses to the words "equal rights," much

## CHANGING U.S. ATTITUDES



## SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC SPENDING :1978

NATIONAL	TOO LITTLE OR ABOUT RIGHT	TOO MUCH
Improving and protecting the nation's health	93%	7%
Improving and protecting the environment	90	10
Solving the problems of the big cities	78	22
Improving the conditions of blacks	73	27
<b>Welfare</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>LOCAL</b>		
Police department	87%	13%
Public hospitals	80	20
Public schools	73	27
<b>Social services (welfare, counseling, mental health, etc.)</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>47</b>

Sources: Survey Research Center, University of Michigan, 1968; *New York Times*/CBS News, February 16-19, 1978; American Institute of Public Opinion, 1937-71; Roper Organization, for *Fortune*, 1945; NORC, 1972, 1975, 1978; *Newsweek*/American Institute of Public Opinion, June 1978.

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the way people will automatically endorse "party reform" or "honesty in government." Some real slippage in ERA approval *has* occurred, as often happens when public debate matures over time. But much of the statistical drop can be attributed to the unrealistically high initial ratings—a phenomenon that also comes into play in political primary polls.

### Underlying Trends

*Personal Life.* There is markedly less opposition to premarital sex, legalized abortion, and the use of marijuana than there was a decade ago. Thirteen percent of the public in 1969 approved legalization of marijuana; 31 percent approved nine years later. Less than one-sixth of the adult population in 1969 accepted legalized abortion for a married woman who simply wanted no more children; now, 4 out of 10 adults do.

In sum, the trends of four decades belie the current view of a generalized "shift to the right." Certainly Americans are upset about welfare, busing, government inefficiency, and criminal justice. They are concerned about taxes and inflation. Yet these attitudes are best interpreted as notes of caution or dismay, not as a sweeping indictment of the interventionist state. (Most supporters of Proposition 13, for example, believed that large cutbacks in revenue *would not* result in reductions of the government services they were accustomed to.) The underlying trends of the 1960s and '70s are clear enough. And they are not conservative, in any sense of that much abused term.

The simplest way to conceive of trends in national opinion is as vectors—forces with a certain magnitude and a certain direction. Vectors are not necessarily simple; most result from the combination of smaller vectors of different magnitudes and varying directions. Looking at the various elements can be as revealing as examining the composite.

Whatever the "averages" might suggest, groups within the populace take distinct and differing stands on many of the issues coming before them. Blacks are more liberal on many social issues than whites, for example, and old people more conservative than young. Jews are further to the left than Protestants. Leaving race and religion out of the picture, there are differences between college graduates and those with only high-school diplomas. These differences in the breakdown of opinion vary in importance. However, some of them persist, appear across a wide range of questions, and have roots deep in the American social structure. "Class conflict" is of central importance, even in the United States where it has been relatively

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muted. And a basic change has occurred in this area since the New Deal days.

During the Roosevelt years and indeed up through the 1950s, the central class conflict in this country was between the *middle class* and the *working class*. This confrontation was always somewhat fuzzy and only partly reflected in Democratic or Republican party affiliation, but it was tangible nonetheless.

On a broad array of economic and social questions, groups identified by one or more facets of middle-to-upper-middle-class status (higher incomes, jobs as managers or professionals, a college education) differed sharply, in a generally conservative direction, from the working class—that is, from blue-collar workers, those with lower incomes, or those with only a grade-school or high-school education. The college-trained segment of the population, for example, gave consistently less backing to New Deal social programs than did people with high-school and grade-school educations. High-school graduates provided more support for government ownership of utilities (telephones and electric power), for extension of the vote to 18-year-olds, and even for the idea that husbands should pay their wives a weekly wage for housework.

Today, much of this has changed. The primary class conflict is no longer between the lower income group and the middle class but rather pits a *lower-middle* against an *upper-middle class*. What we have is a “new conservatism” and a “new liberalism.” And in a reversal of the New Deal relationship, it is now the higher status group that is the more “liberal.”

### Today's Class Lines

Neither of these groups, I should add, is “conservative” in the Ronald Reagan sense. Both take the liberal “political economy” of the New Deal for granted, and they are not prepared to dismantle it. But still, these two new groupings occupy markedly different places in contemporary society.

Current differences between higher- and lower-status groups are sharpest on the broad array of social, cultural, and “lifestyle” questions. Thus, 70 percent of Americans with five or more years of college training believe that a pregnant woman should be able to get a legal abortion simply because she wants to; only 45 percent of high-school graduates and 33 percent of those without secondary school diplomas agree. Adultery is described as “always wrong” by less than half of those with five or more years of college, but 81 percent of persons with less than a high-school education express disapproval.

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This contrast goes further. In the New Deal era, higher status groups were more resistant to public spending. No longer. The National Opinion Research Center has examined public attitudes on a range of federal spending programs: improving the condition of black Americans, welfare, space exploration, environmental matters, health, urban problems, education, crime, drug addiction, defense, and the like. For almost all of these, college-educated Americans favor increased public spending to a greater degree than do their less-educated counterparts. The less well educated showed more support for greater outlays in only three areas: to halt the rising crime rate; to fight drug addiction; and to provide for national defense. In all other indexes, the class and opinion patterns have been turned on their heads.

### The Educational Divide

Interestingly enough, traditional "bourgeois" values today find greater support from among the working class than from the ranks of college-educated professionals, even as the country has become more liberal. The high-school-trained segments of the population place more stress than do the college-trained on the importance of hard work, on "duty before pleasure," on frugality and the avoidance of debt, and on the material attainments that the bourgeoisie has historically associated with "success."

Conversely, the college-trained, when compared to the high-school- and grade-school-educated, urge less emphasis on money, more on "self-fulfillment," less on making "sacrifices" for one's children.

Is it valid to look at this class divide primarily in terms of education? In fact, one often reaches the same conclusions if one looks at occupation or income. Yet, in the 1970s, education, not income or occupation, is the key variable. Differences separating the basic occupational categories (professional, managerial, white-collar, blue-collar) are more modest than those that education alone produces. More striking, when education is held constant—that is, when only people with college degrees or only the high-school-educated are considered—the occupation-related differences *disappear completely*: professionals, managers, office and retail clerks, and blue-collar people who are college graduates show virtually identical distributions on the entire range of issues we have been discussing. By way of contrast, if occupation is held constant, education-linked variations are sharp within each occupational category.



**OPINION DIFFERENCES BY EDUCATION****VIEWS ON DOMESTIC ISSUES**

U.S. SPENDING TOO LITTLE ON:	less than high school	high school grad	some college	college grad	post grad
Space exploration	4%	7%	15%	16%	15%
Improving/protecting environment	51	59	66	69	67
Improving/protecting nation's health	61	63	66	65	66
Solving problems of big cities	49	52	57	57	64
Improving nation's education system	46	51	58	55	60
Halting rising crime rate	69	73	67	67	64
Dealing with drug addiction	67	64	62	56	54
<b>SPENDING TOO MUCH ON:</b>					
Improving condition of blacks	27	27	24	19	18
Welfare	47	60	57	54	50

**VIEWS ON FOREIGN POLICY AND DEFENSE**

U.S. should cut back defense spending	33%	28%	39%	44%	60%
Even if it means U.S. strength falls behind U.S.S.R.	18	19	38	61	58
Even if it means unemployment	32	36	59	75	66
Communism not worst kind of government	40	46	60	69	74
Not a threat to U.S. if . . . became communist					
Western European countries	15	18	25	34	42
Japan	18	21	28	46	42
African countries	31	37	45	57	61
Latin American countries	16	19	24	39	48
CIA should not work inside foreign countries to strengthen pro-American elements	35	30	40	46	61

Sources: NORC, General Social Surveys, 1972-77; Harris/Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 1974.

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In sum, then, the *primary* class conflict is no longer between the lower and middle classes, defined by differences in the sources and amounts of income, but between the lower-middle and upper-middle classes, classes that are shaped largely by education.

### A New Intelligentsia

What lies behind these new class lines?

Two key developments set the stage. First, the upper-middle class in the United States has shed much of its identification with the business world. Increasingly, large segments of the broad, new upper-middle class think of themselves primarily as professionals—business administrators, engineers, accountants, lawyers, and so on—all responding to intellectual values rather than the profit orientation traditionally associated with business. Along with their counterparts in the growing public sector, these upper-middle-class professionals have become the core of a new “intelligentsia.”\*

Louis Harris has found confirmation of one aspect of this argument. Noting that, in the contemporary United States, “at the key executive level, more people [are] employed in professional than in line-executive capacities,” he puts special emphasis on the fact that “the one quality that divided most professionals from line executives in business organizations was that the professionals felt much more beholden to their outside discipline—whether it be systems engineering, teaching, scientific research, or other professional ties—than to the particular company or institution they worked for.”

The critical factor in creating the intelligentsia has been the extraordinary expansion of higher education in the post-World War II period. The number of students enrolled in degree-credit programs in the country’s colleges and universities—now about 10 million—is seven times greater than what it was on the eve of World War II. College students now make up nearly 5 percent of the total population of the country, compared to just over 1 percent in 1940. Some 16 percent of all Americans 21 years or older—about 21 million people—have completed at least four years of formal college training.

As the American upper-middle class has been transformed into an intelligentsia, there has been a second and equally important development: A new bourgeoisie has appeared on the

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\*I use “intelligentsia” to include not only intellectuals—people involved in the creation of new ideas, new knowledge, new cultural forms—but also that far larger community whose training gives them some facility in handling abstract ideas or whose work requires them to manipulate ideas rather than things.

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scene in an interesting kind of replacement phenomenon. The working class of the depression decade included people who were, disproportionately, "have-nots," and it formed opinions accordingly. Today, skilled manual workers and those in related blue-collar occupations have moved decisively into a "have," rather than a "have-not," economic position. In a wonderfully American semantic contradiction, a large segment of the *working class* has become *middle class*, with cherished values and substantial economic interests to protect.

A complex set of precipitating events is involved here. The United States saw a tremendous spread of economic well-being in the first three decades after World War II, when the median income for all American families jumped from \$5,665 to \$11,120 (in 1972 dollars). Individual families, even with inflation, gained more purchasing power in this brief span than in all preceding periods of American history combined. A lot of people have moved a long way.

Public opinion possesses a certain inertia; it is slow to get started in a particular direction, and once on the move it is hard to stop. The trends I have identified—toward greater liberalism *in general*, with the better educated Americans at the forefront—are inertial trends. They will not be deflected easily. What do they tell us about our society?

I believe they reflect the development in the United States of what Daniel Bell has called a *postindustrial society* marked by affluence, the critical importance of the "knowledge" and communications industries, and the rise of new kinds of jobs (such as "services"), lifestyles, social classes, and centers of power.

What I have called the intelligentsia—its outer boundaries would be the tens of millions of Americans who have been to college—is in many respects the advance guard of this new society. The content of most serious magazines, newspapers, and network television news broadcasts is shaped by them. The result is a kind of two-step transfer of ideas and information from the intelligentsia via the media to the nation at large.

Opinion polls bear this notion out, and I suspect they will for many years to come.

