

THE 60s AND THE 90s

AMERICANS' POLITICAL, MORAL, AND
RELIGIOUS VALUES THEN AND NOW

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Paul Conklin/Time Magazine



As the American people sort out the second impeachment proceeding of the century, it is a good time to examine how the nation's political and moral values have changed in the past 30 years and how Democrats and Republicans differ today on some important values. Last summer and fall, we conducted three polls to look at these two issues, as well as Americans' views on religion in the public domain. We found that Americans today are generally more conservative in their views on the role of government and more concerned about the country's moral decline than they were 30 years ago.

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Table 1 sets out differences in Americans' values during the 1960s and today. During the 1960s only a distinct minority of Americans was distrustful of government; today two-thirds of Americans could be so categorized, trusting the government in Washington to do the right thing "only some of the time or never." The proportion of Americans who see big government—as opposed to big labor or big business—as the biggest threat to the country's future has grown from 35 percent in the 1960s to 59 percent today. Thirty years ago Americans were pretty evenly divided over whether the government should provide special help to minorities and whether it had a responsibility to reduce income differences. Today only 37 percent would like government to do more to help minorities, and only 30 percent believe government should help reduce differences in income. In fact, of the issues we tested, the only power Americans are more willing to invest in their government today than they were 30 years ago is the power to administer the death penalty for persons convicted of murder.

Americans are also more worried about moral values than they were 30 years ago. In 1952, only 34 percent of Americans thought that young people of their time did not have as strong a sense of right and wrong as young people did 50 years earlier. In 1965 fewer than half of poll respondents embraced that negative view of young Americans. But today 78 percent feel that the morals of young Americans have declined. Indeed, 71 percent believe that people in general lead less honest and moral lives than they once did.

Table 1. American Values, Then and Now

| Role of Government | Then | Now (1998) |
|---|---------------|-----------------------|
| Trust government in Washington to do the right thing only some of the time or never | (1964) 23% | 66% |
| Big government is biggest threat to the future of the country | (1965) 35% | 59% |
| Government has gone too far in regulating business and interfering with the free enterprise system | (1964) 43% | 59% |
| Prefer smaller government with fewer services to larger government with more/many services | (1976) 40% | 59% |
| Would like government to do more to help minority groups | (1968) 50% | 37% |
| (Government should/It is the responsibility of government to) reduce differences in income | (1973) 48% | 30% |
| Favor death penalty for persons convicted of murder | (1966) 42% | 69% |
| Morality and Toleration | | |
| Young people today do not have as strong a sense of right and wrong as they did 50 years ago | (1965) 46% | 78% |
| People in general today do not lead lives as honest and moral as they used to | (1965) 52% | 71% |
| Homosexuals should have equal rights in terms of job opportunities | (1977) 56% | 87% |
| Approve of marriage between Jews and non-Jews | (1968) 59% | 75% |
| There should not be laws against marriages between (negroes/blacks/African-Americans) and whites (response of whites) | (1963) 36% | (1996) 87% |
| If your party nominated well-qualified person for president who was an atheist, would vote for that person | (1958) 18% | 44% |

ANOTHER STRIKING CHANGE SINCE THE 1960s IS THAT AMERICANS TODAY EXPRESS MUCH MORE TOLERANT VIEWS OF DIFFERENT GROUPS IN SOCIETY.

Table 2. Role of Government Today:
Differences between Republicans and Democrats

| | Republicans | Democrats |
|---|-------------|------------|
| Big government is biggest threat to the future of the country | 70% | 47% |
| Government has gone too far in regulating business and interfering with the free enterprise system | 72% | 52% |
| Prefer smaller government with fewer services to larger government with many services—and feel strongly | 73% 50% | 47% 20% |
| Would like government to do more to help minority groups | 23% | 52% |
| Disagree that we have gone too far in pushing equal rights | 43% | 64% |
| Support affirmative action programs that give preference to minorities | 21% | 43% |
| It is responsibility of government to reduce differences in income | 20% | 39% |
| It is government's responsibility to improve standard of living of all Americans | 38% | 65% |
| Favor death penalty for persons convicted of murder | 76% | 60% |

Another striking change since the 1960s is that Americans today express much more tolerant views of different groups in society. Approval of marriage between Jews and non-Jews rose from 59 percent in 1968 to 75 percent in 1998. Even more dramatically, the proportion of whites who believe there should not be laws against marriages between African Americans and whites rose from 36 percent to 87 percent. As late as 1977, not much more than half of Americans thought homosexuals should have equal rights in terms of job

opportunities; today 87 percent support equal job opportunities. Americans have also become more tolerant of atheists. Though a majority are still unwilling to vote for an atheist for president, the share that is willing to do so increased from 18 percent in 1958 to 44 percent today.

Partisan Differences

Republicans are clearly the party of limited government, though close to half of Democrats polled (see table 2) are also skeptical of “big govern-

ment.” Considerably more Democrats than Republicans are favorably inclined toward specific government programs, such as aid to minorities and support for equal rights. Twice as many Democrats as Republicans (though still a minority of Democrats) support affirmative action. Far more Democrats than Republicans (but, again, still a minority of Democrats) believe government should reduce differences in income; a strong majority of Democrats (compared with only 38 percent of Republicans) believes it is the government’s responsibility to improve the living standard of all Americans.

When the issues become focused on morality and toleration, other discrepancies between the parties arise (table 3). Although strong majorities in both parties see morality in America on the decline and are tolerant of different groups in our society, Republicans are substantially less tolerant of certain behaviors than are Democrats. Three behaviors in particular divide Republicans and Democrats: having a child without being married, having sexual relations before marriage, and having an abortion. In each case a majority of Republicans finds the behavior unacceptable, while a majority of Democrats believe it is acceptable. A small minority of both parties (31 percent of Democrats, 16 percent of Republicans) approves of sex between two adults of the same sex. The two parties also agree that divorce should be harder to obtain.

The role of the president in setting a moral example sharply splits the parties. The long-running controversy over President Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky is undoubtedly part of the reason for the divide, but the

Table 3. Morality, Toleration, and Religion in the Public Domain Today: Differences between Republicans and Democrats

| | Republicans | Democrats |
|---|-------------|-----------|
| BELIEF THAT MORALITY IS DECLINING | | |
| Young people today do not have as strong a sense of right and wrong as they did 50 years ago | 80% | 75% |
| People in general today do not lead lives as honest and moral as they used to | 78% | 68% |
| Values and moral beliefs in this country have gotten pretty seriously off on the wrong track | 83% | 65% |
| TOLERATION OF GROUPS IN SOCIETY | | |
| Homosexuals should have equal rights in terms of job opportunities | 84% | 88% |
| Approve of marriage between Jews and non-Jews | 75% | 77% |
| There should not be laws against marriages between (blacks/African-Americans) and whites | 86% | 85% |
| If your party nominated well-qualified person for president who was an atheist, would vote for that person | 35% | 41% |
| TOLERATION OF BEHAVIORS | | |
| Agree strongly that Americans are too tolerant and accepting of behaviors that in the past were considered immoral or wrong | 55% | 34% |
| Agree that the world is changing and we need to adjust our morals | 33% | 50% |
| <i>Is acceptable behavior...</i> | | |
| Having a child without being married | 47% | 62% |
| Having sex before marriage | 45% | 60% |
| Having an abortion | 42% | 56% |
| Sex between two adults of the same sex | 16% | 31% |
| Disagree that divorce should be harder to obtain | 24% | 41% |
| PRESIDENT AS MORAL EXAMPLE | | |
| The president has a greater responsibility than leaders of other organizations to set an example with his personal life | 69% | 26% |
| SUPPORT FOR RELIGION IN PUBLIC DOMAIN | | |
| Would like to see religious and spiritual values have a greater influence in politics and public life | 48% | 36% |
| It is important for organized religious groups to stand up for their beliefs in politics | 61% | 49% |
| It is sometimes right for clergymen to discuss political candidates or issues from the pulpit | 40% | 29% |
| Government should take specific steps to protect America's religious heritage | 55% | 46% |
| Religious people must take political action to protect their rights | 63% | 55% |

partisan positions are generally in tune with attitudes expressed on other issues of moral behavior.

Republicans express stronger support than Democrats for religion in the public domain. Forty-eight percent of Republicans, but only 36 percent of Democrats, would like to see religious and spiritual values have a greater influence in politics and public life. A majority of both parties (63 percent of Republicans, 55 percent of Democrats) believe that religious people must take political action to protect their rights; 61 percent of Republicans and 49 percent of Democrats believe it is important for organized religious groups to stand up for their beliefs in politics; and 55 percent of Republicans and 46 percent of Democrats believe government should take specific steps to protect America's religious heritage. Minorities of both parties (40 percent of Republicans, 29 percent of Democrats) think it is sometimes right for clergymen to discuss political candidates or issues from the pulpit. ■

Polls Used

The current results reported here are drawn from three polls in a special series conducted by the *Washington Post*/Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University survey project, July 29–August 18, 1998; August 10–27, 1998, and November 13–17, 1998. Other data come from polls by Ben Gaffin and Associates (1952); the Gallup Poll (1958, 1965, 1966, 1968, 1977); Gallup/Potomac Associates (1964); the National Election Survey (1964); Gallup/*Catholic Digest* (1965); Trendex/General Electric (1968); the National Opinion Research Center (1963, 1973, 1996); and CBS News/*New York Times* (1976). Results of all polls cited may be obtained from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Storrs, Connecticut.

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