

FROM COMMUNALISM TO INDIVIDUALISM

By Norval D. Glenn

The tendency of Americans to withdraw their allegiance from social institutions, social groupings — anything outside of themselves — is a unifying theme across much otherwise disparate social change. In other words, a “master trend” involves a shift away from communalism and toward individualism. This withdrawal of allegiance has not been anywhere nearly complete, and there have been counter-trends in parts of the population, and in the total population for short periods of time. Nonetheless, a variety of questions repeated in surveys at intervals over the past few decades point to a net decline in identification with such entities as the nation, churches, parties, local communities, and families. There is also some evidence that perceived self-interest has gained at the expense of group loyalties in shaping individuals’ decisions. [This issue’s **Public Opinion Report** features data on personal and family values.]

Politics

Political parties are the clearest case of a decline in allegiance. Several books and dozens of journal articles have dealt with the weakening of party loyalties in the US. The story is told by trend data on party identification gathered by Gallup, Chicago’s National Opinion Research Center, and Michigan’s Survey Research Center. All these series show a substantial increase in political independence from the 1950s through the 1970s and then a small decrease in the 1980s. The NORC and SRC data show a similar but more dramatic change in “independent independents” (independents who don’t lean toward either party), their proportion in the 1980s more than twice that in the 1950s. Correspondingly, strong party identifiers declined from the 1950s through the 1970s and then increased slightly in the 1980s. By the end of the 1980s the trend to political independence had apparently resumed, although it’s too early to be sure.

Other political trends also suggest an increase in individualism. Voter turnout has declined, perhaps in part because of the decline in party loyalty, but probably also because of a decline in civic consciousness and concern for the common good. The highly individualistic person may be unlikely to vote, since the personal gain from voting is rarely if ever great enough to justify the time and effort. Another trend has been an increase in political alienation and a decrease in trust and confidence in the government — a development which, like many others, was strongest in the 1960s and 1970s and diminished or ceased in the 1980s. It was probably more cause than effect of the withdrawal of allegiance from political institutions.

Religion

A more controversial body of data relates to allegiance to traditional Christianity. Several observers, including myself, have interpreted the evidence as indicating a decline in allegiance, while others (most notably Father Andrew Greeley, in a recent book entitled *Religious Change in America*) have disagreed. In any event, since the 1950s there has been (according to Gallup data) a statistically significant increase in the percentage of adult Americans who say that they have no religion, and declines in church/synagogue membership, religious service attendance, frequency of prayer, professed belief in God as a universal spirit, belief in life after death, and belief that Jesus Christ is God. While these changes have been small to moderate in magnitude, there were more substantial declines from the 1950s to the early 1980s in the proportion who say they consider religion very important in their lives (76% to 56%) and that religion can answer all or most of today’s problems (81% to 61%). Furthermore, from the early 1960s to the early 1980s, the percentage of American adults who say that the Bible is the actual word of God, to be taken literally, fell from 65% to 38%.

As Greeley and others have pointed out, the decline in traditional beliefs does not necessarily indicate withdrawal of allegiance from religious institutions. But some of the changes — such as the decline in the reported importance of religion in people’s lives — do suggest such withdrawal. Greeley argues that some of these changes, including the drop in church attendance, do not indicate secularization since they occurred largely among Catholics soon after, and apparently in response to, the birth control encyclical. It seems to me, however, that Greeley has simply identified a probable mechanism through which some of the secularization has occurred.

Periodically since 1957 Gallup has asked respondents the following question: “At the present, do you think religion as a whole is increasing its influence on American life or losing its influence?” The “increasing” responses have exceeded the “losing” responses during only two periods — from 1957 through 1962, and from 1983 through 1986. The “losing” responses were highest in the late 1960s and early 1970s, reaching 75% in 1970. In 1989, 33% said “increasing,” 49% said “losing.” Public perceptions of the trend are not necessarily correct, of course, but these data support others that indicate a decline in institutional allegiance through most of the 1960s and 1970s, a temporary reversal of that trend in the early and middle 1980s, and then a resumption of the longer-term trend in the late 1980s.

Family

The family is the institution probably most profoundly affected by the extension of individualism, but

survey data provide only limited evidence of change or continuity in family values and attitudes. The data do clearly indicate increased approval of married women's working outside the home, premarital sex and cohabitation, and small families and childless marriages — the shift here being greatest in the late 1960s and early to middle 1970s. Except for the increase in approval of premarital sex, these trends, unlike most of those I discuss in this article, continued through the 1980s without temporarily ceasing or reversing.

Many social scientists who study the family think that in the past two or three decades individuals have become more inclined to put self-interest ahead of family obligations. Indeed, many mental health professionals and much self-help literature have encouraged them to do just that. The survey data provide no direct evidence of such a trend (or its absence), but the responses to a few survey questions asked in recent years do indicate a high frequency of individualistic attitudes. For instance, in a Yankelovich, Skelly, and White poll in 1978, only 37% of respondents said it's morally wrong for a couple with young children to divorce just because one of them wants to. In another poll by the same organization the same year, 60% said that persons in unhappy marriages should *not* stay together for the sake of the children. It's likely that a few years earlier the proportion of American adults saying that couples should not stay together for the sake of their children would have been much smaller.

Whatever the reality may be, most adult Americans say that they believe allegiance to the family is declining. In a recent survey of family values conducted for the Massachusetts Mutual Insurance Company, 62% opined that family values have gotten weaker in recent years, and 85% that most people today put a higher value on material things than on the family. Although few respondents admitted that they *personally* shared in this new materialism, their perceptions of others' values may be more accurate than of their own values.

Students' Views

Surveys of high school and college students during the past 20 years or so provide evidence of changes in life goals and values. The reported importance of family life to young people has not declined appreciably, at least not since the mid-1970s, but other goals and values that might take precedence over family ones seem to have become more important. For instance, the "Monitoring the Future" surveys of high school seniors conducted by the University of Michigan Survey Research Center annually since 1975 have found a rising proportion of students selecting "having lots of money" and "being successful at work" as important life goals, a declining share choosing "finding purpose and meaning in my life."

Similar but more pronounced changes have been found by the annual surveys of college freshmen conducted by the American Council of Education and the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. From the first survey in 1967 through 1985, the proportion who selected "be well off financially" as a very important or essential life goal went from around 40% to over 70%, while those selecting "develop a meaningful philosophy of life" fell from over 80% to under 45%.

The Other Side of the Coin

Many readers are likely to view most of the above developments quite negatively. However, the trend toward individualism is associated with, and may be causally related to, another trend that most are likely to view positively — a decrease in intolerance and prejudice toward other groups. This is clearly evident in responses which indicate an increase in approval of interracial and interreligious marriage, in willingness to vote for a female or minority candidate for president, willingness to allow a communist or atheist to speak in their community or teach in a college or university, and other similar measures of out-group tolerance.

As allegiance to one's own social groups weakens, acceptance of persons outside those groups should increase. In-group solidarity can, at least under some circumstances, lead to prejudice and discrimination against those outside. A strong self-interested orientation of individuals, unmitigated by strong allegiance to social groups, should tend to keep the groups from effectively pursuing their collective interests — for good and ill alike.

The New Surge of Individualism

A number of authors — including Robert Bellah and his colleagues in *Habits of the Heart* — have recently argued that different kinds of individualism have been associated with different political orientations. Backing greater freedom of the individual vis-a-vis such institutions as the family and the church, labelled the "new individualism" or "modern individualism," is associated with liberals. On the other hand, support for freedom of the individual vis-a-vis the state, and for individualism in the marketplace, is stronger among conservatives. Support for *both kinds* of individualism seems in fact to have been higher in the 1980s than it was a couple of decades earlier. The most characteristic feature of our social era may be the coexistence of high levels of both dimensions of individualism.

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