

American Society: Where Are We Headed?

by *Everett C. Ladd*

My colleagues and I are partial to surveys that look broadly at a society, examine the social and political values of its people, help us understand where important change is occurring—and, conversely, where the persistence of long-standing norms and behavior is the story.

Like many researchers, we have admired and made extensive use of the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Surveys (GSS)—comprehensive social trackings that were begun 25 years ago and are conducted annually (with only a few years skipped since 1972). GSS director **Tom Smith** describes the origins, develop-

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ment, and use of this important social science resource on pages 28-30 of this issue. In the following article, **James A. Davis**, who fathered the GSS in 1971, discusses the extent and direction of the shifts in social outlook this series has charted.

Societies are, obviously, complex things, and no single survey examination, however well-designed, can cover all or even most important aspects of them. We were especially pleased, then, to see a few months ago the first reports of a major new survey of American political culture, conducted in the winter and spring of 1996, under the direction of James Davison Hunter and Carl Bowman, as part of the Post-Modernity Project at the University of Virginia. The field work was done by the Gallup Organization. This intellectually innovative exploration of Americans' sociopolitical experience and beliefs deserves the attention of all students of the society. **James Davison Hunter and Daniel C. Johnson** report on some of the study's principal findings on pages 35-38. Along with these three articles, my colleagues and I have compiled, and publish here, 26 pages of what we consider some of the most important findings of the GSS and the 1996 Survey of American Political Culture.

What have we learned? The answer is, happily, “Quite a lot.” Analysts will inevitably differ as to how some of the findings should be understood. For example, Jim Davis stresses in his essay the extent of the shifts that the GSS has uncovered in its 25 years. While recognizing that some important changes have indeed occurred, notably in thinking about gender roles and norms of sexual conduct, I'm more impressed by the extent of the continuities. And, when it comes to deeper national

values, the picture that Hunter and his colleagues develop so ably from their 1996 survey looks very much like the one American social historians of the late 18th and 19th centuries developed from other types of materials.

Hunter and Johnson ask whether “the American political system [is] facing a legitimation crisis,” and conclude that the answer is both yes and no. “No” because we aren't seriously questioning the ideals of the system, are committed to our political institutions, share important beliefs about our common history, and express “civic mindedness” in high degrees. “Yes” because the public's “assessments of current trends in America are highly pessimistic,” because there is a continuing loss of confidence in the performance of national government, and because in evaluating the country's governing elite “people's opinion turns toward cynicism.”

Rarely enthusiastic about the state historically, Americans *are* now highly critical of important aspects of government performance. *We do* believe that current leadership leaves much to be desired. And *we are* troubled by deficiencies in the moral life of the nation, evident in family break-up, crime, and a degraded television culture. But there *are* real problems in these areas: If the public were unable to see them—that would be cause for deep concern. If we believe, as most Americans do, that our institutions are well defined and the country's constituent values worthy of continued respect, but that current performance with respect to these institutions and values falls short, the call must be for reform *within* the established framework. It is not a call for the sorts of actions that would be appropriate if, indeed, the US faced a “legitimation crisis.”

