

Tall Oaks From Little Acorns Grow: The General Social Surveys, 1971-1996

By Tom W. Smith

The National Data Program for the Social Sciences of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago is a social indicators and data diffusion program. This program has two basic purposes. The first is to gather and disseminate data on contemporary American society. Through use of these data, researchers may monitor and explain social trends and constants in attitudes, behaviors, and attributes and examine the structure and functioning of society in general, as well as the role played by various sub-groups.

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Second, the program aims to compare the United States to other societies in order to place American society in comparative perspective, develop cross-national models of human society, and make high quality data easily and quickly available to scholars, students, policy makers, and others.

Both these purposes are accomplished by the regular collection and distribution of the NORC General Social Survey (GSS) and its allied surveys in the International Social Survey Program (ISSP).

Origins

In 1971, James A. Davis, then at Dartmouth College, drew on two intellectual currents of the 1960s to conceive the GSS. During this period, the social indicators movement was stressing the importance of measuring trends and of adding non-economic measures to a large repertoire of national accounts indices. At the same time, scholarly egalitarianism was advocating that data be made available to scientists at all universities and not restricted to an elite group of senior investigators at large research centers and laboratories. In 1971 Davis put these ideas together in a modest proposal to the National Science Foundation (NSF). The proposal called for the periodic asking of “twenty-some questions” to develop social indicators on national samples, with these data immediately distributed to the social science community for analysis and teaching. Approval from NSF, plus supplemental funding from the Russell Sage Foundation, spawned the first GSS in 1972.

Growth

Since 1972 the GSS has conducted 21 independent, cross-sectional, in-person surveys of adults living in households in the United States. By the 1996 GSS a total of 34,577 respondents had been interviewed in the cross-sections, along with 707 black respondents included in the oversamples carried out in 1982 and 1987. During most years there have been annual surveys of about 1,500 respondents. Currently, 3,000 cases are collected in a biennial, double-sample GSS.

Besides accumulating this long time series, individual GSSs have also greatly expanded in length. The 1972 GSS had only 151 variables, but since 1988 there have been over 700 variables in each GSS. At 90-95 minutes in length each GSS is about seven times longer than a typical public opinion poll.

In addition, since 1982, the GSS has expanded internationally. A growing number of countries have established GSS-like programs, and we have formed ties to these counterparts. Like the GSS, the cross-national research started modestly with a bilateral collaboration between the GSS and the ALLBUS of the Zentrum fuer Umfragen, Methoden, und Analysen in Germany (ZUMA) in 1982 and 1984. Then, in 1984, the GSS and the ALLBUS joined with the British Social Attitudes Survey of Social and Community Planning Research in London and the National Social Science Survey of the Research School of the Social Sciences at Australian National University to form the ISSP. Along with Eurisko in Italy and the University of Graz in Austria, the founding four fielded the first ISSP in 1985. An ISSP survey has collected data annually since then, and there are now 26 member countries (Australia, Austria, Britain, Bulgaria, Canada, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and the United States) collecting upwards of 30,000 cases a year.

Content

The General Social Survey lives up to its title. It is indeed *general*. The 2,999 variables in the 1972-1996 cumulative file run from ABANY (legal abortion if a woman wants one for any reason) to ZODIAC (astrological birth sign) and include major batteries on such topics as civil liberties, confidence in institutions, crime and violence, feminism, governmental spending priorities, psychological well-being, race relations, and work.

While the balance of components has changed over the years, currently half of the GSS consists of replicating core

questions, one-sixth is cross-national (i.e., the ISSP questions), one-sixth forms an in-depth topical module, and one-sixth is a combination of experiments, extensions of existing batteries, and new items. Recent ISSP modules include the environment, gender and work, national identity, and the role of government (social welfare, economic regulation, civil liberties). Topical modules in the 1990s cover work organizations, culture, family mobility, multiculturalism, emotions, gender, mental health, and market exchanges. Other recent additions include experiments in measuring church attendance, race and ethnicity, and supplements on sexual behavior, giving and volunteering, religious identity, and genetics.

Research Opportunities

The design of the GSS greatly facilitates several important types of research. First, the replication of items from survey to survey allows the study of social change. Since all surveys and all variables are organized into one cumulative file, one does not have to patch together time series from numerous different and often incompatible data sets. One merely asks for cross-tabulations or correlations by *year*, and over 1,000 trends can be tracked. Moreover, since the GSS draws heavily from baseline surveys by NORC, Gallup, the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan, and others, it is possible to follow hundreds of trends back as early as the 1930s. (In this case you do have to access these separate data sets from the Roper Center or elsewhere.)

Replication also means that sub-groups can be pooled across surveys to aggregate an adequate sample for analysis. For example, African-Americans, at about 12% of the population, account for about 175 respondents in a 1,500-case GSS—too few for detailed analysis. But in the combined 1972-1996 GSSs there are

4,783 black respondents—more than enough for analysis. Other numerically small sub-groups that can be studied in the cumulative GSS file include the self-employed (3,755), the currently divorced (3,659), those with graduate degrees (1,916), Jews (757), and nurses (578).

With many of these sub-groups, one can both track trends and pool cases. For example, blacks from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s can be combined to have three time points and still have over a thousand black respondents in each sample.

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Comparative research is facilitated by the 11 ISSP studies (1985-1996), which offer the largest and most readily accessible body of cross-national social science data available. In keeping with the GSS's core interest in social trends, the ISSP research also has an across-time component. The first module on the role of government in 1985 was repeated in 1990 and 1996; the 1987 social inequality module was refielded in 1992 and will appear again in 1999; the women and work module was asked in 1988 and 1994; and the 1990 religion module will appear again in 1998.

The large number of variables in a GSS means that one can examine relationships across dozens or even hundreds of variables. For example, Peter Rossi examined the differences between homeowners and non-homeowners in over 300 variables, and Andrew Greeley compared Protestants and Catholics in 117 questions. The extensive variable list gives a more comprehensive view of patterns, and associations can typically be ascertained.

Finally, because the GSS employs a detailed and extensive set of demographics, in-depth analysis of background influences is possible. For example, the GSS doesn't just have a single measure of education, but eight standard measures, including the exact number of years of schooling completed and the highest degree obtained for respondents, their mothers, their fathers, and their spouses. In terms of occupation the GSS has three-digit Census codes, International Standard of Occupation Codes, NORC-GSS prestige scores, and Duncan SEI values for respondents, parents, and spouses.

Impact on the Social Sciences

As the largest and longest-running project funded by the Sociology Program of NSF, the GSS has had a tremendous impact on social science research in the United States. The 1996 Annotated Bibliography documents 3,771 uses of the GSS, and new usages are accumulating at over 300 per year. Among the top sociology journals (*American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, and *Social Forces*) the GSS is second only to the Census/Current Population Survey in frequency of use and is utilized as often as the next eight most frequently used surveys combined. Moreover, on average the GSS articles in the top sociology journals have been cited 60% more often

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than non-GSS articles from the same journals.

The GSS has also had a large influence on college teaching. Hundreds of thousands of students have learned about American society and research methodology in courses built around the GSS. MicroCase Corporation has developed more than a dozen textbooks in sociology, criminology, political science, and statistics around the GSS, and the CHIPendale statistical analysis system developed by Davis has GSS-based workbooks covering such topics as inequality, marriage and the family, social problems, working women and the family, and research methods. Texts by Earl Babbie (*Adventures in Social Research* and *The Practice of Social Research*) include diskettes with GSS sub-sets. These GSS-centric courses have allowed students to learn about society through hands-on analysis of fresh, high-quality, relevant data.

Conclusion

The GSS has aptly been described as a "national resource,"¹ as a "public utility for the community at large,"² and as "a unique source for comparative, historical, methodological, and cross-sectional research."³

And its value grows with time. As the GSS extends into the future, the time series lengthens. So far the GSS is only halfway towards following a cohort from

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entering adulthood to entering retirement (the 2020 GSS will capture them becoming seniors). By measuring the entire life cycle of cohorts we will be better able to understand the complex interaction of age, period, and cohort. In addition, econometric time series analysis is becoming increasingly possible with the GSS series.

At the same time, the ISSP continues to add more countries. In particular, several developing countries will join within the next few years. Thus, the ISSP is increasingly becoming representative of the world as a whole.

Finally, the GSS continues to explore cutting-edge research questions that will expand our general knowledge of human society. The GSS has preliminary plans for a study of inter-group relations and pluralism (including an Hispanic oversample and possibly related investigations of recent immigrants) and a module on social capital which will examine changes in institutional trust and social cohesion.

The GSS is grounded in the past, but growing toward the future. It joins together replication and innovation, incorporates both the social-change and comparative perspectives, and combines patrician quality standards with plebeian applications. Through these synergies it has served and will continue to serve the social science communities.

Endnotes

¹ Duncan R. Luce, Neil J. Smelser, and Dean R. Gerstein (eds.), *Leading Edges on the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (New York: Russell Sage, 1989).

² Office of Inspector General, "National Opinion Research Center, Chicago, Illinois: Inspection Report." National Science Foundation, 1994.

³ Thomas A. DiPrete, "Review of The NORC General Social Survey: A User's Guide," *Contemporary Sociology*, (July 1992), pp. 549-550.



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