This Century Has Seen Extraordinary Change—Most of It Outside the Realm of Politics

By Everett Carll Ladd

Public opinion surveys (as opposed to market research) focus disproportionately on politics and public policy. How is voter sentiment trending in election contests? What's our current view of the President's job performance? How satisfied or dissatisfied are we with our health care, and what changes will we support? How, if at all, has public thinking on abortion evolved since *Roe v. Wade*, and what legal restrictions on abortion "rights" does majority opinion now support?

"When the century began, virtually all Americans moved about their communities by foot, horse, or (in some places) trolley. Just 8,000 highly unreliable cars were registered in the then-forty-five states. Now, more than 200 million autos are on the roads. While in 1942 just 36% of Americans employed outside the home got to work by driving themselves there, something around 85% now drive. In 1942, 41% walked to work; only 5% were feet-propelled to the job in 1993."

On the many "non-politics" dimensions of public opinion and behavior, though, much less systematic work has been done. I've just finished a book on this country's civic engagement, focusing primarily on levels of joining, volunteering for, and giving money to the multitude of civic organizations and causes that are outside the political sphere (*The Ladd Report on Civic America*, Free Press, 1999). This—not politics—is the arena where most participating citizens spend most of their "civic time," and most would agree it's of vital importance to the society's health. But the survey research that's been done on it—with, happily, some notable exceptions—is spotty, episodic, and incomplete.

Most Americans spend most of their everyday lives thinking about and participating in activities outside politics: their families and churches, the sports and the television they watch, their efforts to maintain good health, their sense of what constitutes proper behavior for themselves and their fellow citizens.

This is a huge and fruitful field for survey research. While, as I've said, I wish that much more had been done on it, a lot has in fact been done, much more than this magazine can begin to summarize. We are going to begin to give it greater attention than we have in the past, starting with this issue and the one that follows.

The "Lighter Side" of Everyday Life

Here, we explore what might be called the lighter part of people's lives. By "lighter" I don't mean just the odd or whimsical in our experience, or trends in pop culture. I mean such things as what we partake of in sports, food, and travel; where we live and would like to live, and how often we move, what forms of dress we find appropriate, e.g., on the beach and in the schools. We also look at the rapid evolution in such areas as transportation and communications technology, and their impact on everyday life.

We review the saga of the motor car and a few of the changes it has wrought. (There are many we couldn't begin to summarize for reasons of time, space, and frail intelligence.) When the century began, virtually all Americans moved about their communities by foot, horse, or (in some places) trolley. Just 8,000 highly unreliable cars were registered in the then-forty-five states. Now, more than 200 million autos are on the roads (p. 24). While in 1942 just 36% of Americans employed outside the home got to work by driving themselves there, something around 85% now drive (p. 5). In 1942, 41% walked to work; only 5% were feet-propelled to the job in 1993.

For all the changes in some aspects of popular culture—such as the music succeeding generations favor—our cultural conservatism is still striking in many others. The US Constitution has been in place for 211 years and few Americans want to change it in any significant regard. Such conservative impulses are also evident in the lighter part of everyday life. We want, for example, our paper money to remain green; no rainbow-colors, please. Even though Ulysses S. Grant—President from 1869 through 1877—is the most recent figure on any denomination of paper currency, Americans by a huge margin say No to putting new visages on even one bill. About two-thirds don't want to stop minting pennies—even though they are essentially worthless—and two-thirds think the new 20 dollar bill "doesn't look like real American money" (p. 11).

Our sense of propriety in dress (and undress) has changed a lot over this century. When Gallup asked about beachwear in 1939, his question was: "Do you think it is indecent for *men* to wear topless bathing suits for swimming?" [Emphasis added here.] By

1977, Yankelovich, Skelly and White were asking something quite different: "Do you feel that... *nude bathing beaches* are acceptable or unacceptable at least for other people, even if not yourself?" About two-thirds said No or Unacceptable each time. Still, only 7% of women polled in 1992 said *they* would consider sunbathing topless on a public beach were it allowed. Few are ready for the Riviera (p. 12). Our sense of what's a luxury and what's a necessity has shifted mightily as technology and affluence have evolved (p. 26). Television has transformed how we spend our leisure time. Nearly half of all Americans say they watch the tube at least three hours, on average, each day. Since 1949, the question has shifted from whether one has a television set (just 6% did in 1949) to how many sets (with three-fourths of the public having two or more, and four in ten, three or more). A majority of us now say, though, that we think TV has more of a bad than good influence on our own children (p. 29).

The "Serious Side" of Everyday Life

Few Americans lament that we now light our homes by electricity rather than kerosene lanterns or oil lamps, that we can travel cross country in a few hours by plane rather than a few days by train, or that opportunities for leisure and recreation have been greatly extended. But many are concerned about the country's direction in moral standards and ethical judgments. In the next issue we will look at this latter dimension, again keeping our focus on the public's norms and conduct rather than those of politicians or other elites. Our focus will remain on the moral dimension of everyday American life.

While few are as pessimistic about the country's moral condition at century's end as, for example, Robert Bork is (see his *Slouching Toward Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline,* Regan Books, 1996), many thoughtful people all across the spectrum see problems in the spiritual side of American life, even amidst great material progress. The emphasis varies—from a sense that religious belief has lost its vitality or behavior-shaping "authenticity" for many people, to worries that the "me" now looms too large in everyday conduct at the expense of "us," to the belief that the public's ethical standards have been lowered. Many believe the contemporary US needs a big dose of "traditional family values." Few think that young people today share most of their own values (see the table).

It's all too easy, of course, to see past performance as being better than that of the present—because it's today's shortcomings we must confront. In the next issue, we'll compare Americans' views, past and present, on a number of ethical issues, and explore public norms bearing on the moral dimension of everyday life.

Worries Over Values

Question: [Agree/Disagree]..."This country would have many fewer problems if there were more emphasis on traditional family values."

Agree strongly	71%
Agree somewhat	18%
Disagree somewhat	6%
Disagree strongly	4%

Question: "[Do]...you think...[young people under the age of 30]...generally share most of your moral and ethical values, some of your moral and ethical values, or hardly any...?

Most	16%
Some	53%
Hardly any	25%
None (vol.)	6%

Source: Survey by Chilton Research for the *Washington Post*/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University, July 29-August 18, 1998.