

# People,

# Opinions &

# Polls

*“I’ve become a sort of evangelist of democracy. I’ve seen it work too many times. I don’t want to be a person who believes that the voice of the people is the voice of God....I would hastily add this qualification: When people are reasonably well-informed, collectively, they come to the right judgments, almost all of the time. But...they have to be informed.”*

George Gallup (in an interview by Paul Sheatsly, 1978)

*A Roper Center report  
of findings in public  
opinion research*

## ***Affirmative Action, Welfare, and the Individual***

***Commentary by Everett C. Ladd***

In science, as in much of life, one thing leads to another. We began work on the data that occupy this special section of “People, Opinions & Polls” with the idea of reviewing recent survey findings on affirmative action. Programs and policies in the area are the subject of intense controversy at this time. In California, an initiative is apparently set for the November 1996 ballot that would repeal virtually the entire range of the state’s affirmative action legislation. These controversies have prompted some excellent new polling.

As this review of the data proceeded, though, it became evident that opinion on affirmative action didn’t stand alone. Developments in this area seemed especially closely related to those involving welfare programs. It’s not just that the Republicans, with a majority in both houses of Congress for the first time in 40 years, were pushing for change in both areas. Public opinion in each seemed to be following the same course. Affirmative action and welfare programs are both intended to advance the ideal of social equality. In affirmative action, special effort is to be made to extend opportunity to groups previously denied it in such critical areas as education and employment. In a somewhat different way, welfare policies have also been advanced with equality and opportunity in mind. They have always been touted as temporary means, enabling people to get through rough times and—certainly in the ideal, if not the practice—to become more attaining and achieving citizens.

As analysts from Alexis de Tocqueville in the early 19th century on to the present have noted, the American understanding of the ideal of equality—which underlies affirmative action and welfare efforts—has been a distinctive one. Like so much of our socio-political value system, the idea of equality in the United States has been shaped by one overriding feature—a notably insistent individualism. It posits broad rights and entitlements for each person, but at the same time insists upon heavy individual responsibilities. At times these two facets of individualism can be seen pushing in different directions.

With regard to affirmative action, the “rights” dimension left many in the 1960s believing that special efforts were needed to overcome past discrimination. But the “responsibility” side continued to see each person responsible for

## People, Opinions, & Polls

much of his/her personal status. Individuals should be admitted to educational institutions, hired into jobs or promoted on the basis of past accomplishments. Recognizing individual merit, not settling results through pre-determined group targets, remained at every stage the ideal.

In the American value scheme, then, support for affirmative action has rested on an important but tenuous base—that because of past denials of equal opportunity some preferential treatment is appropriate—so long as it does not compromise the principle of individual merit. Affirmative action is seen a less-than-satisfactory response to past denials of the professed national ideal.

In much the same way, support for welfare programs has had a firm but narrow base. Individuals in need have a right to receive help to get them through it, and children born into need, surely not responsible for their condition, have a special claim to help, but in individualist American thinking, the help should be limited and transitional. Individuals are assigned a large measure of responsibility for their social condition.

We see the results of this approach in thinking on welfare programs during the Great Depression (see pp. 36-37). The mix of opinions recorded by Gallup interviewers in the 1930s is a striking precursor of what we see today. In 1935, for

example, by two to one Depression-ravaged Americans called government's relief expenditures *too high* rather than about right. Only one in ten called welfare spending too low.

Today, the public's stance on both welfare and affirmative action is more critical than it was a decade or so earlier. Our examination suggests that this is not at all because of change in underlying values. The mix of values—stressing both rights and responsibilities toward the end of more equal opportunity for each person but not equal results—looks constant over the span for which poll data are available (and quite likely over all of US history). What has changed in recent years involves the answers given to two questions: "Is it needed?" and "Is it working?" In the case of affirmative action, the public is significantly less inclined now than a decade ago to see a need for temporary efforts in such areas as hiring and promotions that grant preference to make up for past denials of opportunity. There's a strong sense that the last two decades have seen significant progress with regard to equal opportunity for women and for African-Americans.

What we see in the polls may be thus summarized: American experience leaves much to be desired in terms of equal opportunity. Still, enough progress has been made to leave us less inclined to countenance departures from the ideal of treating

people on the basis of individual performance.

It comes as no surprise to find that on some questions women give greater support to affirmative action on behalf of women's occupational advance than do men. Even more substantially, black Americans see a greater need for affirmative action on their behalf than do their white fellow citizens (pp. 38-39).

But on a great many aspects of both affirmative action and welfare, the story is not one of group differences but of agreement across racial and gender lines (pp. 40-42). There's a widespread sense that gains have been made, and widespread acceptance of the norm that individual ability, not group-recognizing results, is the proper standard. As to welfare programs, both blacks and whites, and welfare recipients themselves, endorse a devastating criticism of the programmatic status quo.

Now in the mid-1990s, the tide of public opinion on the large questions of equality that are caught up in affirmative action and welfare programs run moderately opposite the flow of the 1960s and early 1970s. Without changing basic values and aspirations, Americans are more inclined to see individual responsibility, rather than individual rights, as the dimension that needs strengthening.

**Please note that throughout the POP, the following symbols are used to indicate the source of the data being presented.**

□ The Angus Reid Group

○ CBS News/*New York Times*

● The Field Institute

⌘ The Gallup Organization [The polls conducted in the 1990s were done for *CNN/USA Today*.]

★ Greenberg-Lake: The Analysis Group

◆ *The Los Angeles Times*

◎ National Opinion Research Center, General Social Survey

◆ NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* [The polls are conducted by the Hart and Teeter Research Companies.]

◎ Princeton Survey Research Associates [In this issue, the polls were done for *Newsweek*.]

■ The Roper Center [in this issue, done for *Reader's Digest*.]