

Americans' Changing Attitudes Toward Women and Minorities

By Sally Daniels, Bradford Fay, and Nicholas Tortorello

Fortunately, most surveys conducted by the Roper Organization for *Fortune* magazine from 1932 to the early 1950s have been preserved. They provide revealing snapshots of those times on a wide variety of social, cultural, and political topics. Moreover, these historical documents help us understand public opinion today. When we compare these survey research data from almost 70 years ago with recent Roper Starch Worldwide polls, attitudinal shifts towards minorities and women are among the most dramatic.

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Burns Roper, who studied public opinion in dozens of surveys over the decades and witnessed attitudinal shifts firsthand, records his observations in a chapter he authored in a 1987 book entitled *Today's American: How Free?* In it, Roper notes the evolution of opinions toward minorities and women:

Do you think a married woman who has no children under sixteen and whose husband makes enough to support her should or should not be allowed to take a job if she wants to? Would you eat in a restaurant that served both Negro and white people? Do you believe that newspapers and magazines should be allowed to print a fine painting of a nude? Do you consider it all right, unfortunate, or wicked when young men have sexual relations before marriage? Do you think it is indecent for men to wear topless bathing suits for swimming?

One could not imagine asking questions such as these today. But all of them were, in fact, asked by national polls in the late 30s and early 40s. Without even knowing what the results to these five questions are, it is clear, merely from the fact that they were asked, that prejudice was extensive and that many Americans obviously held narrow, intolerant views.

Attitudes Towards Minorities

Those survey questions from the past, among many others, reveal just how much Americans' attitudes have evolved. African Americans were not, of course, the only minority group facing discrimination in the 1930s and 1940s, but they were arguably the group most affected by prejudices. Segregation, limited job opportunities, and other discriminatory practices were fueled by attitudes that differ dramatically from those held by most Americans today.

African Americans were seen as different from whites not only culturally, but

inherently. In 1939, seven out of ten Americans believed that blacks were less intelligent than whites, and most people felt they were born that way. Burns Roper maintains that, 60 or 70 years ago, many Americans viewed racial minorities almost as a separate species. Such attitudes made possible such atrocities as the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment. Today, many Americans find it hard to believe that such attitudes were common.

Segregation in housing was widely supported by white America in the 30s and 40s. In 1939, more than eight out of ten Americans felt that African Americans should be prevented—either by law or by an unwritten understanding backed by social pressure—from living in white neighborhoods. In 1948, two-thirds of Americans said there were racial or ethnic minorities they did not want as neighbors. While segregated neighborhoods remain today, the public's attitude toward them has changed substantially. In 1993, those who said they didn't want to live near some “kinds of people” had dropped to just 16%.

Question: Do you think there should be laws compelling Negroes to live in certain districts, or there should be no laws, but there should be an unwritten understanding, backed up by social pressure, to keep Negroes out of the neighborhoods where white people live, or Negroes should be allowed to live wherever they want to live, and there should be no laws nor social pressure to keep them from it?

	1939
Should be laws	41%
Should be no laws, but unwritten understanding	42
Should be no laws nor social pressure	13

Opinions on Minorities and Women

Question: These are some of the different kinds of people making up our population: Italians, Catholics, Negroes, Protestants, Chinese, Jews, Mexicans, Filipinos. Would you prefer not to have any of these kinds of people move into your neighborhood to live, or would it make no difference to you?

	1948	1993
Prefer not	68%	16%
No difference	27	79

In 1948, nearly half of the public said there were some racial or ethnic minorities with whom they would prefer not to work. African Americans were most often singled out, but Mexicans, Filipinos, Chinese, Jews, and Italians were also named as less than desirable co-workers by many Americans. While this prejudice has not completely disappeared, in the 1990s fewer than one out of ten Americans say they prefer not to work with people from one or more of these groups.

Question: These are some of the different kinds of people making up our population: Italians, Catholics, Negroes, Protestants, Chinese, Jews, Mexicans, Filipinos. Would you prefer not to work with any of these kinds of people if they had an equal position to yours and worked side by side with you, or would it make no difference to you?

	1948	1993
Prefer not	47%	9%
No difference	49	88

Only about half (49%) of Americans in 1948 felt it should be illegal for employers to refuse to hire people because of their race or religion. Only about one-quarter said they would like Congress to pass laws to prohibit such discrimination—others felt it should be left to the states to pass their own laws if they wanted them. Deciding to hire qualified African Americans for white-collar jobs would have made about as many Americans feel less friendly toward a company (46%) as would increasing that company's prices by 10% (47%). Also in 1948, fewer than half of Americans felt that Congress should pass laws to ensure African Americans the same chance to vote as whites. Today, African Americans remain under-represented in elected offices, but their role in politics, as well as survey questions about that role, have changed dramatically.

The Changing Role of Women

In the 1930s and 40s a woman's "place" was clearly in the home. Despite women's participation in the work force during World War II, attitudes about females in the work place remained negative after the war. Six in ten Americans said, in 1945, that married women whose husbands made enough to support them should not be allowed to hold jobs. Another 13% said that whether they should be allowed to hold jobs depended on the circumstances.

Question: Do you think married women whose husbands make enough to support them should or should not be allowed to hold jobs if they want to?

	1945
Should be allowed	24%
Should not be allowed	60
Depends (vol.)	13

When asked about an imaginary family with two school-aged children and an adequate income from the husband's job, only 3% supported the idea of the wife taking a full-time job and hiring someone to help in the home.

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Question: I'd like to read you a short paragraph about an imaginary family named Jones and then ask you a question about it. The Jones family lives in a small modern home. Mr. Jones earns a good but not a high salary. There are two children, both in school. Mrs. Jones would enjoy doing something besides running her home if she could arrange it. Which of the things on this card do you think Mrs. Jones should do?

	1946
Take a full-time job and hire someone to help in the home with the money she earned	3%
Take a part-time paying job	31
Take no paying job but do volunteer work in some worthwhile activity in the community	29
Do none of these—taking care of her family is plenty	33

The public was somewhat more supportive of married women working if they didn't have children younger than 16, although only about four out of ten felt this should be allowed. The primary reasons given for wanting women excluded from the work force were that they would take jobs from men and that women should devote their time to their homes and families. Only one out of ten felt, in 1946, that running a home was less than a full-time job for married women.

Question: Do you think a married woman who has no children under 16 and whose husband makes enough to support her should or should not be allowed to take a job if she wants to?

	<u>1946</u>
Should be allowed	39%
Should not be allowed	43
Depends (vol.)	16

In sharp contrast to those earlier days, women today are an important part of the work force and the public—both men and women—approves of this role. In the 1990s, three-quarters of Americans believed there is no reason why a woman with young children shouldn't work outside the home if she chooses.

Women today are about evenly split on whether they would prefer to stay home or have paying jobs, although considerably fewer than in 1946 believe that running a home is as interesting as working outside the home. In 1946, half of Americans believed that being a full-time homemaker was more interesting than holding a full-time job. In 1993, only three out of ten felt this was true.

Question: On the whole, who do you think has the more interesting time, the woman who is holding down a full-time job, or the woman who is running a home?

	<u>1946 (Total)</u>	<u>1993 (Total)</u>	<u>1993 (Women)</u>
Full-time job	30%	33%	42%
Running a home	50	32	30
Same (vol.)	8	26	25

Jobs seen as appropriate for women (if they were to work outside the home at all) in the 1930s and 1940s were very different from those in which men were expected to excel. When asked about different kinds of jobs and whether men or women would be expected to perform them better, about eight out of ten Americans felt that men make better lawyers or factory welders than women. Women, said 86% of the public, make better stenographers.

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Women's role in politics was similarly seen as less important than that of men. More than seven out of ten, in 1946,

believed that members of Congress, mayors (89%), and school board heads (72%) should almost always be men. On the other hand, about half said a woman should be president of the parent-teacher association or head of the local Red Cross chapter.

Women were viewed, in 1946, more often as having an easier life than men (40% vs 33%). In the 1990s, with women holding full-time jobs and caring for homes and families as well, that picture has changed. The majority of Americans, in 1993, believed that men have the easier time.

Question: On the whole, and considering people of all walks of life, who do you think has the easier time in present-day America—men or women?

	<u>1946</u>	<u>1993</u>
Men	33%	56%
Women	40	17
Same (vol.)	20	23

Most men and women, however, are not ready to exchange roles. Only about four out of ten men or women say they would be willing to consider swapping with their spouses the responsibilities of providing financial support and taking care of the children and home.

Moreover, just being a woman in the 1990s is more desirable today than it was in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1946, only about one-third said that, if they could be born over again, they would rather be a woman than a man; six out of ten said they would choose to be male. By 1993, only half would choose to be men. Men's views on this subject, however, are unchanged from 1946: nine out of ten then and now said they would choose to be born male. Among women the number who would have preferred to be born male has declined from 25% in 1946 to 14% in 1993.

For Further Study

By comparing public opinion from the 1930s and 1940s with that of the 1990s, it is clear that attitudes toward women and minorities have changed markedly as have public policies and practices regarding these groups. American society, then, continues to evolve and perhaps is even maturing. A wealth of other survey data are also available through the Roper Center archives to document the evolution of attitudes over time and to study a broader range of issues.



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