

PAGEANT

October, 1953

p. 6

A public-opinion expert tells

HOW OUR OPINIONS HAVE CHANGED

BY WILLIAM A. LYDGATE

Former Editor of the Gallup Poll



SEX



RACIAL TOLERANCE



WOMEN SMOKERS



BATHING SUITS



HIGH TAXES



LABOR UNIONS



WORKING WIVES



DIETING

■ **YOU'VE PROBABLY** been unaware of it, but you have been participating in another American Revolution. It's been a bloodless revolution but, in its way, as thoroughly deserving of the name as the one almost 200 years ago. This is the revolution that has taken place in the last 20 years in our social, economic and moral attitudes.

Most of us have been acutely aware of the transitions in politics and international affairs since the Great Depression, but few of us have stopped to think what great changes have also occurred in our opinions, in the way we have come to look at social customs, moral behavior and the trivia of daily living.

The fascinating story of this revolution in our thinking is told in the statistics of the polltakers—Gallup, Roper and others—beginning in 1935. Polls don't always call elections accurately, but they do provide a fine statistical picture of how our opinions and judgments change with the passing years.

For instance, would you consider it indecent today for men to wear topless bathing suits? Undoubtedly not, yet the majority of us said it was indecent as recently as 1939.

OldMagazineArticles.com

A Nation Changed

In 1937, one in four of us objected to movie scenes of women smoking and one-third said heroines shouldn't be shown on the screen drinking.

Today, as a contrast in morals, the polls show that an increasing number of males say they don't require virginity in a bride, and half of all women with views on the subject say that virginity isn't important in a man.

Mention of venereal disease was taboo in newspapers and magazines and in polite society 20 years ago. Today we discuss sex problems of all kinds freely and openly. A decided majority of us (57 per cent) approve the publication of Dr. Kinsey's statistics on sex habits, an attitude that could hardly have prevailed in the mid-'30s. Since that period, the attitude toward making information about contraceptives available to married women has changed from a bare majority to 85 per cent favoring such a practice. Smoking habits have changed. In 1935 only 37 per cent of Americans smoked cigarettes. Now more than half do, a reflection of the big increase in women smokers. We've grown more tolerant of the use of swear words. Nearly half of all men contend that they no longer have any objections to their wives saying "hell" or "damn" in public.

Racial and religious tolerance has progressed enormously. FEPC laws were rare before the war. Now nine states have such laws—Connecticut, Indiana, Massachusetts, New Mexico, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island and Washington. Four others have statutes applying to public or state employees. In 1942 Roper found only 42 per cent of Americans saying "yes" to the question, "Are Negroes as intelligent as whites and can they learn just as quickly if given education and training?" After the war the number rose to 57 per cent. Today several polls have indicated a majority of young people believe that a couple in love who are of different faiths should get married regardless of creed.

Only 14 years ago, we didn't want married women to work in business and industry. What's more, we made attempts to stop them by law. In 1939, a bill was introduced in the Illinois legislature to prohibit a wife from taking a job if her husband earned more than \$1,600 a year. Another measure introduced in the Massachusetts legislature tried to prevent state or local governments from hiring wives with husbands earning \$1,000 or more. These moves were popular. Gallup found four out of five of us

A Nation Changed

saying that women with husbands capable of supporting them should shun all thoughts of a career and remain dutifully in the kitchen. Pearl Harbor changed all that.

Today one married woman in every four is working. This army of nearly 10 million wives constitutes more than half the female labor force. Oddly, the number of *single* women who work has declined—from 7½ million 10 years ago to less than 5½ million now. There are two reasons. The high marriage rate removes single women at least temporarily from the job market and puts them into the home. Then, after a spell of matrimony, wives are setting out to find jobs—at the astounding rate of 600,000 a year. “They’re taking their place,” says Elmo Roper, “if not as breadwinners, then certainly as cake or dessert winners.”

New patterns of family living must inevitably follow the big increase in number of working wives: simpler meals, simpler ways of doing housework, less formal entertaining in the home, less time for club activities, card parties, teas. Moreover, working wives have made the men think twice about the role women should play in public affairs. Whereas in 1936 only one-third of the men thought we needed more women in politics, now six in ten say women should take as much part in public affairs as men.

Yet, in the face of these facts, there is another opinion trend seemingly aimed in the opposite direction. The Gallup Poll regularly asks the public, “What do you consider is the ideal size of family—besides husband and wife, how many children?” Back in 1936 two children were considered the ideal. This year Mr. and Mrs. America say the ideal is *four*. Will this new attitude result in bigger families? Already more young wives are having second, third or fourth babies. On the second child, for instance, the rate in 1940 was 19 per 1,000 women; now the rate is 32. Only 10 years ago the public said that the ideal age for a man to marry was 25, for a girl 21. Men are getting married nowadays at 22, on the average, and half the girls in the U.S. are at the altar by the time they’re 20. They’re having their first babies at 21.

The economic attitude of the “average American”—today and 20 years ago—indicates an increasing faith in the American economic system. A greater respect for business, less sympathy for labor unions and less tendency to look to Washington for aid are reflected in recent polls.

A Nation Changed

In depression days fewer than half of us felt that a young man with ambition and ability had an opportunity to rise in the world, buy a home and earn \$5,000 a year. Today, according to a Roper poll, more than 70 per cent of us express highly optimistic views about a young man's chances to succeed.

Businessmen were exceedingly unpopular during the depression. President Roosevelt spoke scornfully of "economic royalists," and bankers were frequently bracketed with gangsters in the minds of many. Prosperity—and the production marvels of big business during the war—changed attitudes to such an extent that when Roper not long ago asked voters what group they felt was doing the most good for the country, businessmen ranked second only to religious leaders. Government leaders and labor leaders trailed far behind.

Sentiment for government ownership of railroads, banks and electric power companies, high during depression days, had dropped 100 per cent after the war. In the case of the power companies, the decrease was from 54 per cent in favor of government ownership in 1936 to only 24 per cent in 1949, according to a Roper poll. Popular "beefing" about electric light bills has declined, too. In 1938, 50 per cent of us regarded the rates we paid for electricity as too high. By 1946 Gallup found such complaints down to 21 per cent.

Along with greater sentiment toward business has come less sympathy for labor unions. We used to contend that unions were the underdog. Now the majority of us have come to feel that unions have reached maturity and that further growth of their power isn't desirable, according to surveys by Claude Robinson's Opinion Research Corp. Most of us, the O.R.C. reports, support legislation which would make unions accept a larger share of responsibilities for their activities toward the public and their members.

All of this is another way of saying that we've grown more conservative in our thinking. As individuals we have a far bigger stake in our economic society than ever before. Home ownership is way up. Two-thirds of us own automobiles as compared to only 51 per cent in 1940. Our average income has doubled in a decade. The number of families earning \$5,000 or more has jumped four-fold. We've developed an enormous middle class which includes thousands pushed down by high taxes and millions lifted up by higher wages. This has given the millions more sense of

A Nation Changed

property, more feeling of "belonging" to economic society, more identification with the "haves" rather than the "have-nots." The big question is what prolonged high taxes will do to the average American's new prosperity.

If you could double your income by working two or three more hours a day, would you do so? When business executives were asked that question in 1946 by the *Fortune* poll, 71 per cent said, "No." The vote today would be the same, and for the same reason—the United States treasury would take practically all the extra profit in taxes.

Yet one of the most astonishing facts of our century has been the absence—up until recently—of any popular complaint over high taxes. When the levies soared after Pearl Harbor, the Gallup Poll found only a small minority (10 per cent) of Americans calling their tax burden too high. Only last year, for the first time, did a substantial majority (71 per cent) come to the conclusion that tax rates were unfair. What effect this changing sentiment will have on Congress remains to be seen.

Our attitude toward foreign policy has turned around completely in 15 years. Most of us were for "tending to our own knitting" in 1938. The overwhelming majority of us (67 per cent) scorned the League of Nations. We clung confidently to the newly-passed Neutrality Act. Today we not only belong to the United Nations but we have sacrificed more than 25,000 lives in its behalf. Almost nobody is satisfied with the U.N.'s progress but at this writing almost nobody wants to pull out of it, either.

We've changed our popular views toward Russia an average of once every five years in the last two decades. First there was friendliness from 1934 to 1939, then hostility when the Soviet army invaded Finland, then cautious friendliness again after Hitler attacked Russia, and finally renewed hostility and distrust from about 1947 to date.

In pre-McCarthy America, as recently as 1946, the Gallup Poll found that one in every four of us believed that most Americans who belonged to the Communist Party were loyal to the United States rather than Russia. Nearly one-fifth of us thought it was all right for members of the Communist Party to hold jobs in the federal government. That was just seven years ago. Should leaders of the American Communist Party be allowed to speak at our colleges? Before World War II, as many as

one-fourth of us considered it perfectly all right. Today colleges hardly dare invite a speaker who is even faintly pink in his views.

Our opinions on a host of little things have changed. For instance, our literary tastes have become more sophisticated. In 1937 the favorite author of those of us who had any favorite was Zane Grey, the Gallup organization found. Today Somerset Maugham, Sinclair Lewis and Shakespeare head the list. But fewer of us read books: 18 per cent now, 29 per cent 14 years ago, according to Gallup. . . . Fewer of us today can remember the name of our Congressman than could 10 years ago. . . . A tribute to the American Cancer Society: 54 per cent of us now know the leading symptoms of cancer, as compared with only one-third in 1940. . . . As late as 1945, 14 million of us (16 per cent) didn't know what television was! . . . In April, 1953, for the first time in history, more Americans were buying oleo than butter.

Our travel habits have changed. When Gallup asked in 1936, "If you had to take a long trip would you prefer to go by train or by plane?" train travel won out by 3-to-1. When this poll was repeated 10 years later our answers were divided almost evenly. . . . Thirty million of us (mostly women) regarded ourselves as too fat in 1950. Today, just three years later, the number has increased to 34 million. . . . Are men being ruled by their wives more now than a generation ago? Six husbands in ten say they usually get their wife's approval of a new suit before buying it. But only one wife in four ever gets her husband's opinion of her hats before buying them.

On some things we haven't altered our opinions one bit in 20 years. We still think all holidays should be celebrated on Monday. . . . We still say that the man on the farm is happier than the man in the city, but city-dwellers still wouldn't change places. . . . We think, as in 1937, that the three most interesting cities in the U.S. are New York, Washington and Chicago; the cities with the finest food, New York, New Orleans, Chicago and San Francisco. . . . Our wives still wish that American men were more romantic after marriage. They continue to think it's silly for a man to kiss a woman's hand, but that men ought to remove their hats in the elevator.

For 16 years, Gallup has asked the public regularly, "How much

A Nation Changed

money do you think a family of four—husband, wife and two children—needs to get along in this community?” The answers tell the story of our generation. In 1937 people said it took \$30 a week. Their answer today: \$70. ■■

OldMagazineArticles.com