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Public Opinion on Social Issues -- 1975-2004
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Chapter 1
Social Issues and the Study of American Institutions

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As an introduction to the study of social issues, Skolnick and Currie's history of changes in the study of American social institutions (2000:1-13) provides a useful background for student projects based on this data set. These broad trends in the study of social problems and social changes in America both reflect and affect our basic assumptions about society and the way social issues and social problems are perceived by Americans in general and by social science as it has analyzed them.

At the end of the Nineteenth Century, American values and institutions emphasized individual hard work, thrift, and personal discipline. The challenge to American society was to maintain these distinctive American values despite industrialization and urbanization, accompanied by immigration from other parts of the world. Defective moral characteristics in individuals were considered to be the cause of social problems. Social scientists, politicians, and social reformers sought ways to change these people into individuals who could compete and succeed in American society. The solutions they proposed emphasized social control such as prisons and mental institution but included a few social welfare programs. Social scientists concentrated on the scientific study of the society to preserve its optimal functioning. Their personal or professional values as social scientists or as social reformers were not to be involved. Social problems were considered to be signs of problems in a particular segment of society. After objective study, social scientists would make recommendations for change to government or business. The ideals and values of American society were accepted without question, especially the competitive, capitalistic economic system characterized by private property and individual competition.

World War I, the Depression, and World War II interrupted this study of American life, but the end of World War II brought political optimism and economic affluence for many Americans. Often this was the first real chance for people to meet economic and personal goals. The expanding economy produced jobs that paid men well enough that they could support families. The 'baby boom' was really a nuclear family boom as Americans married at higher rates and younger ages and had more babies. Communism was considered to be the most serious threat to American culture and economic-political life. Any social changes were left to the expertise of the political and military institutions and were not social science concerns. Social scientists

supported existing social American institutions, considering a strong national defense and effective counterespionage intelligence to be necessary and desirable.

During the 1960s American perspectives shifted as the country became more aware of disadvantaged people both in our general affluence here and in so-called underdeveloped areas elsewhere. At first the response was to extend American technological and political resources to the less fortunate, especially encouraging social changes to help people help themselves toward democracy, development, and modernization. American society was considered to be the ideal economic and political system. (The only criticism was that not enough of the world, or even of our own people, benefited from it.) The early 60s were optimistic that this could be done, and social science concerned itself with identifying glitches in the system, focusing on particular social problems as the deviant behavior of individuals or social disorganization in segments of society. It was assumed that scientists could recommend appropriate changes. Social analysis was assumed to be politically neutral. If the society operated less efficiently than it might, specific problems would be analyzed and then referred to the appropriate social institutions—education, political, military--for adjustments. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the federal government began a variety of social programs to bring American reality closer to the ideal. Programs and legislation included the War on Poverty, the Civil Rights Act, Medicare expanding the Social Security system, the proposed Equal Rights Amendment, Title IX of the Education Amendment to the Civil Rights Act.

However, later in the 1970s, economic problems, persistent poverty, racial and ethnic cleavages, urban disorganization, increasing crime and violence led Americans, including many social scientists, to more pessimistic conclusions. Some concluded that the government had tried to do too much for people. Maybe the programs were too generous and had negative consequences in the long term. Theories of racial inferiority and cultural inadequacy revived. Harsher sentences for those convicted of crimes were mandated, and some states reinstated the death penalty. Communities spent more money for prisons and less for education. By mid 1990s, welfare reform legislation was designed to force the poor to work and limited the time for benefits for their families. Public opinion on social issues showed cleavages within the public that were taken more seriously, not only by public officials concerned with reelection, but also by social scientists and the general public. Public debate and controversy increased and became almost a phenomenon its own right. Since problems such as poverty, crime, school failure continued despite government programs and social policies, the conclusion that these programs had failed or even contributed to ongoing problems seemed plausible. The idea that the disadvantages stemmed from deficiencies in individuals, families, communities, and/or subcultures reappeared.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, American thinking about social issues seemed to have come full circle and now blamed school failure, poverty, delinquency, and welfare dependence on individuals or subcultures. At the same time, the gap between the have and have-nots increased, and the American economic system had been transformed by global economic competition and new workplace technology. There seemed to be no consensus on solving the problems related to the increasingly complex and rapid changes that affected many American institutions.

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READING

Social Issues

- Skolnick, Jerome H. and Elliot Currie. 2000. *Crisis in American Institutions* Eleventh Edition. Boston: Allyn and Bacon