

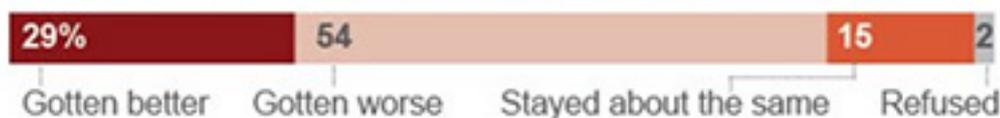
Gloomy Americans See a Downhill Slide to 2050

CONNIE CASS, Associated Press

Poll: Americans' dreary outlook

More than half of Americans see a bleak future for the U.S. in the next 40 years, according to an AP-NORC Center poll.

Thinking of life in America now compared with the early 1970s, do you think life in America over that time has:



Looking ahead to the next 40 years, that is from now until about 2050, do you think life in America over that time will:



NOTE: Poll of 1,141 adults; conducted Dec. 12-16, 2013; margin of error ± 3.7 percentage points.

SOURCE: NORC Center for Public Affairs Research

AP

Ask people to imagine American life in 2050, and you'll get some dreary visions.

Whether they foresee runaway technology or runaway government, rampant poverty or vanishing morality, a majority of Americans predict a future worse than today.

Whites are particularly gloomy: Only 1 in 6 expects better times over the next four decades. Also notably pessimistic are middle-age and older people, those who earn midlevel incomes and Protestants, a new national poll finds.

"I really worry about my grandchildren, I do," says 74-year-old Penny Trusty of Rockville, Md., a retired software designer and grandmother of five. "I worry about the lowering of morals and the corruption and the confusion that's just raining down on them."

Even groups with comparatively sunny outlooks — racial and ethnic minorities, the young and the nonreligious — are much more likely to say things will be the same

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or get worse than to predict a brighter future.

"Changes will come, and some of them are scary," says Kelly Miller, 22, a freshly minted University of Minnesota sports management grad.

She looks forward to some wonderful things, like 3D printers creating organs for transplant patients. But Miller envisions Americans in 2050 blindly relying on robots and technology for everything from cooking dinner to managing their money.

"It's taking away our free choice and human thought," she says. "And there's potential for government to control and regulate what this artificial intelligence thinks."

Overall, 54 percent of those surveyed expect American life to go downhill, while 23 percent think it will improve, according to a December survey from the AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Only 21 percent predict life will stay about the same. That minority may be onto something, however.

While no one can say what catastrophes or human triumphs are to come, contentment at a personal level has proven remarkably stable over the past four decades.

Interviews by the federally funded General Social Survey, one of the nation's longest-running surveys of social trends, show Americans' overall happiness as well as satisfaction with their jobs and marriages barely fluctuating since 1972. Those decades spanned the sexual revolution and the women's rights movement, race riots and civil rights advances, the resignation of one president and impeachment of another, wars from Vietnam through Afghanistan, the birth of the home computer and the smartphone, boom times and hard times.

Despite the recent shift toward negativity about the state of the nation, the portion of U.S. residents rating themselves very or pretty happy stayed around 9 out of 10.

"Most people evaluate their lives very stably from year to year," said Tom W. Smith, who has been director since 1980 of the GSS, conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago. "You don't want massive surges and falls in personal happiness, and the fact that we don't see that is reassuring."

The GSS, conducted once every two years, will send interviewers back into the field in 2014. The AP-NORC Center survey asked people to rate the change in American life during the period tracked by the GSS, from 1972 to 2012.

A majority — 54 percent — say life in America is worse today than four decades ago.

Those old enough to remember the early '70s are especially nostalgic, as are tea party supporters and people who live in the countryside. Those who say U.S. life has

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declined are more apt to name politics, the economy, moral values or changes in families as the biggest difference.

The 3 in 10 who think life is better are more likely to point to computers and technology as the big change. Racial and ethnic minorities are apt to cite domestic issues, including civil rights.

The GSS offers a look at the real-time changes in American opinion, along with things that have stayed the same, and hints for the future:

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EQUALITY

Some of the opinions voiced in the 1972 survey are rarely uttered today.

Back then, nearly 4 in 10 nonblacks agreed with the idea that whites had the right to keep blacks "out of their neighborhoods." A quarter of nonblacks said they wouldn't vote for a black man for president, and 26 percent of all adults wouldn't back a well-qualified woman.

Now the president of the United States is black and a woman is the most-discussed prospect for 2016. The GSS dropped those three questions in the 1990s as results began to show they were no longer contentious.

La'Shon Callaway, a 19-year-old political science student at Stockton College in New Jersey, is optimistic that his generation will make the future brighter and that he'll see discrimination fade over his lifetime.

"People are getting tired of it, and fed up," said Callaway, who is black. "They're realizing even if you're not the same color as me, you're still a person and I'm still a person."

As 2050 approaches, one central component of U.S. race relations will change: Non-Hispanic whites will no longer make up the majority of the population, according to Census Bureau projections.

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LOVE AND FAMILY

In 1972, the sexual revolution was ablaze. That year the Supreme Court ruled that unmarried couples had a right to birth control. "The Joy of Sex" manual was published. And then there's "Maude," the sitcom character who shocked Americans by getting an abortion.

Still, a third of Americans back then disapproved of a woman working if she had a husband to support her. The GSS no longer bothers asking that one.

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Americans today are more worried about divorce and the increasing number of never-married moms. Nearly 4 out of 10 women who gave birth in 2011 were unmarried, according to the census.

"It's very sad to me," says Christine Hicks, 57, of Nashville, Tenn., who divorced when her two children were teens. "It's really hard to be a parent when you're alone."

Despite the social turmoil, 98 percent of married people today say their union is happy, including two-thirds who are "very happy." And marital fidelity remains an ideal endorsed by nearly all Americans.

The political debate over abortion shows no signs of being resolved, more than 40 years after *Roe vs. Wade*. Young people today are somewhat more conservative on the issue than middle-aged Americans.

Gay marriage, on the other hand, appears headed toward future acceptance. Young people are solidly in favor, while opposition is strongest among the oldest Americans.

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GOD

Through those decades of moral tumult, the vast majority of Americans held onto belief in God or some higher power. Fewer than 1 in 10 say there's no God or no way to know.

Yet ties to organized religion are slipping.

Since 1972, the number of Americans who name no faith preference has quadrupled to 20 percent.

"Maybe it just means people are thinking for themselves and not following blindly," says Hicks, a Tennessee state worker and Methodist churchgoer. "But I do think the church gives families a foundation."

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MONEY

Recession, a stock market crash, runaway inflation and an oil crisis marred the U.S. economy in the early 1970s. Forty years later, those look like the good times to many.

Before the Great Recession hit in 2007, most people consistently said their family finances were getting better instead of worse. That's not the case anymore. Americans are more likely to consider themselves "lower class" than ever in GSS history — 8 percent say that.

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"You read every day about 'no more middle class'," says Bill Hardy, 67, a Westerville, Ohio, investment adviser. "It's the poor versus the rich almost."

Whites are especially pessimistic about their prospects. Black and Hispanic optimism surged after Barack Obama became the first black president in 2008.

Overall, about half of Americans still believe their children will have a better standard of living than they do.

"I just think they're going to have to deal with a lot," Hardy, who is white, said of his grown children and three grandkids. "They'll deal with it. Kids today are very smart."

Associated Press Director of Polling Jennifer Agiesta and AP News Survey Specialist Dennis Junius contributed to this report.

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