

Americans as Communitarians: An Empirical Study

David Karp

At the end of 1996, The Communitarian Network conducted a national poll, using a random sample of American adults, measuring support for both general and specific communitarian positions. This first empirical study also provides a baseline for future studies in that it will allow one to determine if communitarian ideas are gaining or losing support over time, as the efforts of The Communitarian Network and others to spread communitarian ideals continue.

The heart of the study rests on an intellectual, normative, and political assumption: that when studying which virtues a society upholds, what its core values are, and which institutions and policies best convey these virtues and values, the old dichotomy between liberals and conservatives no longer prevails. The old dichotomy focuses on the respective role of the state versus that of the private economy; the new focus is on normative commitments and moral values—on what sometimes is called culture. Here the most important distinction, at the foundation of the study at hand, is among those who express great concern for individual autonomy—*individualists* (which includes libertarians, laissez-faire conservatives, and civil libertarians); those who seek more social order, based on strong enforcement of moral norms by the state if necessary—*social conservatives*; and those who attempt to reconcile the two—the *communitarians*. Again, this typology is based on what people call “cultural” or “moral” issues; liberals are usually identified as people concerned with economic and social issues, and hence they are not included in the typology.

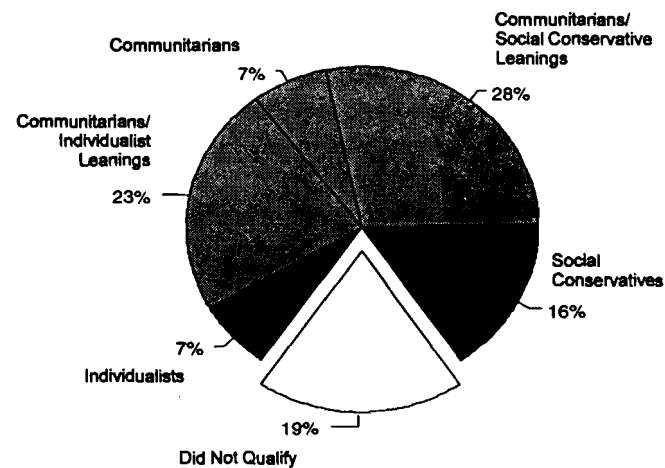
Groups that are charted at opposite sides of the spectrum in the older paradigm are grouped together here. Civil libertarians, traditionally classified as left, are coupled with laissez-faire conservatives and libertarians, who are traditionally classified as right, because all of these groups share a preoccupation with liberty. Social conservatives, traditionally lumped with laissez-faire conservatives, are here considered a group unto themselves in order to emphasize their concern with order and their willingness to rely on the government to impose this order by, for example, enforcing bans on abortion and homosexual activities and instituting prayer in schools. Communitarians, interested in minimizing the antagonism between liberty and order, focus on voluntary compliance with mores. (This new three-way typology and the rationale behind it is discussed at length in Amitai Etzioni's new book, *The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society*.)

Ideological Preference

Survey results show a fairly high degree of ideological consistency among the sample. More than 80% of the respondents consistently adhered to either individualist, communitarian, or social conservative positions, indicating that this tripartite division is a useful classification of contemporary public philosophy. (“Consistent” is defined as the respondent holding one position more often than either of the other positions and for at least six of the items.)

Fourteen of the fifteen substantive items in the survey were designed to distinguish communitarian from individualist and social conservative positions. As a whole, 58% of those surveyed showed a clear communitarian preference. Of these communitarians, nearly half (48%) showed a secondary preference for social conservative positions, i.e., when they did not support communitarian positions, they tended to choose social conservative positions. Thirty-nine percent of the communitarians held a secondary preference for individualist positions and the remaining 13% were evenly split in their secondary preference.

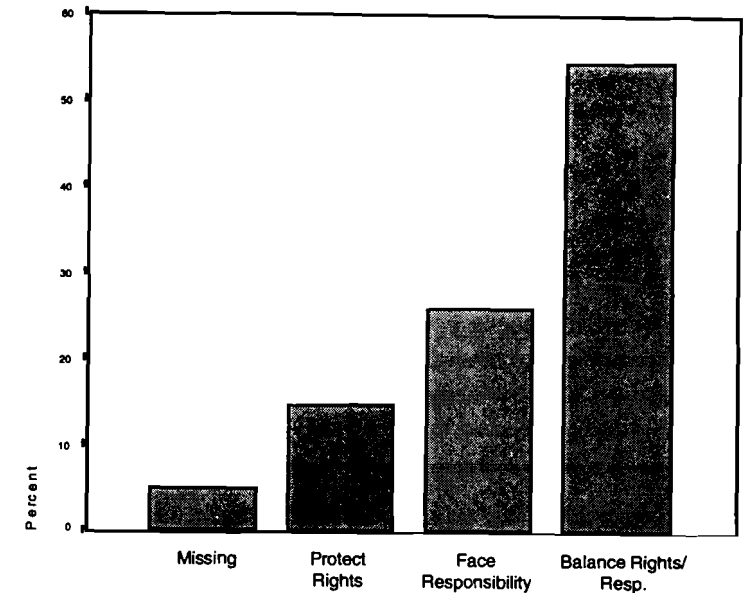
One substantive item of the survey did not distinguish communitarians, individualists, and social conservatives, but was included in or-



der to test the communitarian claim that Americans tend to believe social problems have a moral or "cultural" basis. Specifically, when we asked people what they thought the main source of our country's social problems is, 45% of Americans believed the source was "moral," 28% believed it was "political," 17% believed it was "economic." (It might be of interest to note that this was the only question in which a significant portion of the respondents volunteered that the provided alternatives did not satisfy them; 6% suggested that the source was elsewhere and 4% indicated that they did not know the answer.)

A Sense of Balance

One main question was aimed at tapping the key differentiating issue among the three groups. Fifteen percent of the respondents supported the individualist position that "we should vigilantly protect our rights against the intrusion of government." Twenty-six percent supported the social conservative position that "in an age of moral decay, Americans need most to live up to their social responsibilities." Fifty-four percent embraced the communitarian position that



"we should carefully balance our individual rights and social responsibilities."

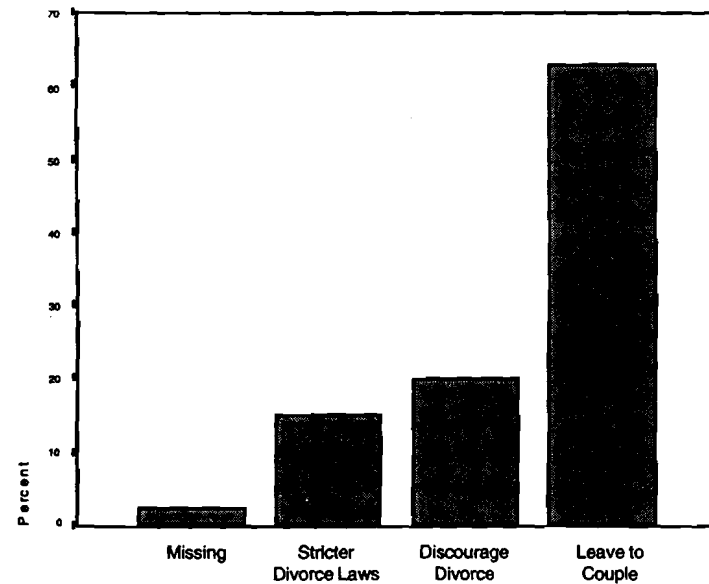
When we asked "Good citizenship means most of all..." predominant support was essentially split between a more communitarian position, "contributing to one's community" (34.3%), and the more social conservative position, "obeying the law" (34.0%). Slightly less support (27%) was given to the individualist position, "providing for oneself and one's family."

Moral Enforcement—Encourage or Legislate?

Several questions were directed at finding out Americans' viewpoints about the government's role in fostering virtue. When asked directly about the government's role in influencing morality, the plurality of Americans (45%) chose the individualist position that the government should "not get involved because morality is everyone's personal business." Thirty-five percent favored the communitarian response, in which the government should "discourage, but not pro-

hibit immoral acts." Fifteen percent favored the social conservative response in which the government should "prohibit immoral acts."

Asked specifically about the role of the government in legislative changes that might affect the rate of divorce, respondents overwhelmingly supported the individualist position of "leaving it to the couple themselves to decide." Twenty percent favored the communitarian view of "not changing the law, but discouraging divorce," and 15% favored the conservative view of "changing the law to make divorce more difficult." Both this and the previous item demonstrate that there is still significant support for the individualist position. Respondents tended towards non-intervention, at least in matters that affect them directly. The social conservative position, that the government ought to play a direct role in enforcing morality, received the least support.



Character Education

Two questions spoke to the general issue of promoting virtue by specifically addressing character education. The first asked about the appropriate role of public schools in this area. Most respondents (63%) selected the communitarian response, that public schools should

"teach only the values we all share." Twenty-two percent took the conservative position that they should "teach religious values." Here support for the individualist position, that they should "not teach values at all," was the smallest—only 10%.

In another question, when Americans were asked about high school community service programs, 54% took the communitarian position that high schools should, "sponsor community service programs but not require them." Thirty-five percent supported the conservative position that high schools should, "sponsor and require community service for graduation." Only 8% took the individualist position that high schools should, "not sponsor community service programs." The pattern for both of these questions was identical. Most Americans favored moral education, but opposed requiring it. Few, however, would dismiss it out of hand.

The Family

The study sought to assess Americans' views of various models of the family. When asked, "What kind of family structure do you think would be best for kids?" most respondents (58%) supported the communitarian position of having "both parents sharing responsibility for chores and child-raising." Twenty-four percent supported the conservative position of having the "mother at home while the father works." And 17% supported the nonjudgmental individualist position that "there is no one best structure."

Social Order

Schools and families are supposed to bring up young people who internalize the values of their society. When these efforts fail, the question arises of how social order is to be maintained. Three items of the survey directly addressed this issue. When asked, with regard to police, what our top priority should be, substantial support (62%) was given to the communitarian position, "monitoring police closely, but giving them more leeway." Only 18% supported the conservative view of "giving police more leeway in catching criminals," and 17% sup-

ported the individualist position emphasizing "stricter rules to protect citizens from police abuse."

Another item also contrasted civic protections and crime control. Here when asked, "Which of the following statements is closest to your view regarding random drug testing for illegal drug use?" support again was highest (48%) for the communitarian position, which holds that "the government should be able to conduct random drug tests only for people who have jobs that put others' lives at risk (such as bus drivers and pilots)." Thirty-five percent favored the conservative position that "the government should be able to conduct random drug tests on anyone." Only 15% endorsed the individualist position that "the government shouldn't be able to conduct them—random drug testing is an unacceptable violation of privacy."

In the final social order item, the communitarian position received less support. When asked about the best way to deal with prostitution, most respondents (42%) favored the conservative position that the best way is "longer sentences for prostitutes and their customers." Twenty-six percent endorsed the individualist stance that the best way is to "legalize prostitution." The communitarian position, which addresses the problem by enhancing informal social control, obtained the least support (25%). In this case, the alternative suggested that the best way is to "publish customers' names."

The low number for the communitarian response may be somewhat misleading. The communitarian response is not commonly suggested, especially in contrast to the other solutions. Some communitarians, for example, James Fishkin in *Democracy and Deliberation*, argue that many communitarian positions require thoughtful consideration because they are neither self-interested nor intuitive. Such may be the case in this instance, and future studies ought to contrast immediate responses and deliberative responses.

Economic Welfare

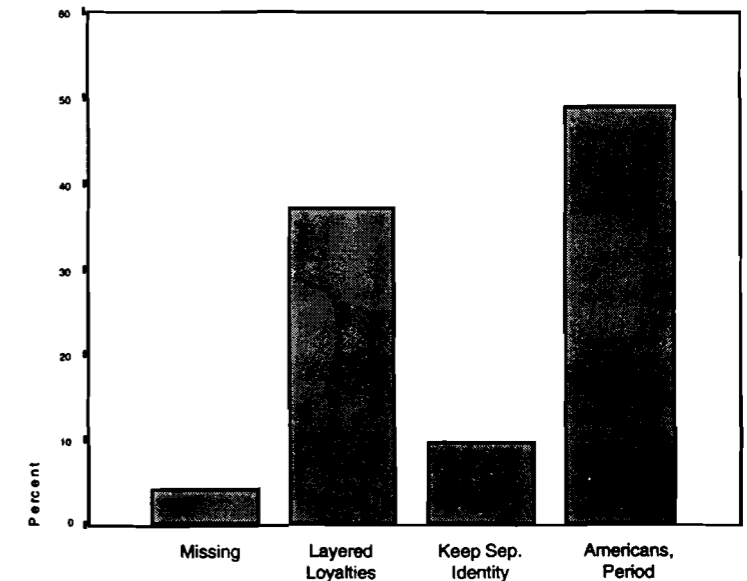
Two items of the survey are a slight variation on the standard tripartite division of the others. They distinguish communitarians from individualists and from political liberals. Both of these items address issues of economic welfare. When asked, "Which comes closest to

your view on the poor?" the communitarian view that the "local community organizations should have the primary role in taking care of them" received the strongest support (48%). The liberal position that "the government should have the primary role in taking care of them" received support from 22% of the sample, as did the individualist position that "the poor must learn to make it on their own."

The second item addressed the extent to which the private sector should take responsibility for social problems. Most respondents (48%) took the communitarian view that "corporations should be encouraged to provide some goods or services to their communities at no cost." The liberal response that "corporations should be required by law to provide some goods or services to their communities at no cost" received significant support (29%). The least support (19%) went to the individualist position that "corporations should focus on making products and profit."

The Community of Communities

In one of its position papers, The Communitarian Network argues in favor of a new approach to America's growing diversity. The



position rejects the notions of a melting pot (which entails the melting away of ethnic traditions and subgroup cultures), but also cautions against unbounded tribalism. It calls for pluralism within unity; for a community of communities in which the subgroups accept certain shared values and institutions but otherwise maintain their distinct natures. (For additional discussion see "The Community of Communities" in this issue.) We asked our fellow citizens what they thought about the new position. Thirty-eight percent agreed with the communitarian position that "people of different racial, ethnic, and other backgrounds should be encouraged to maintain separate identities, but also share a commitment to America as a nation." Ten percent endorsed the individualist position, which encourages Americans to "maintain separate identities, that is, maintain diversity." The strongest support (50%) was for the social conservative position that Americans should "be Americans, period."

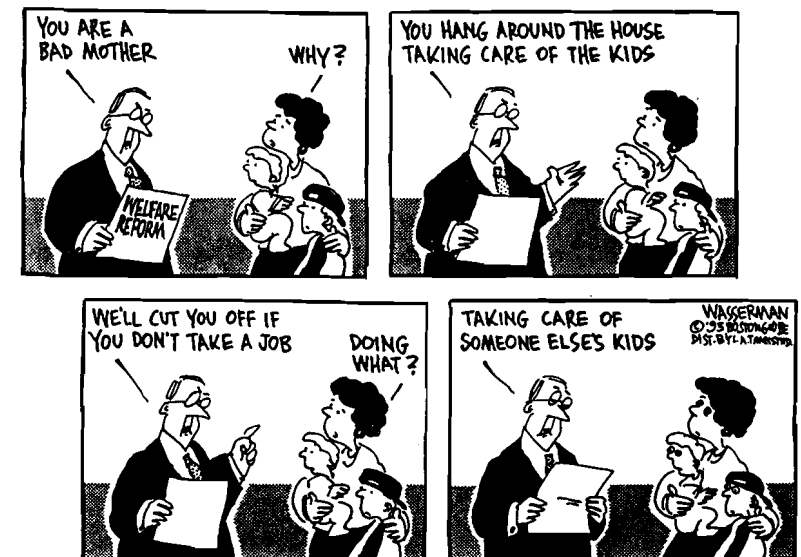
Demographics

With every increase in level of education, support for communitarian ideas increased while support for social conservative ideas decreased. (Individualist support came from all levels of education.) For instance, 46% of the college graduates polled believed that contributing to the community was the essence of good citizenship; only 35% of the high school graduates believed this. In contrast, 39% of the high school graduates thought citizenship is grounded in obedience to the law while only 12% of the college graduates took this view. Income, traditionally correlated with education, produces similar results: those with higher earnings are more communitarian and less conservative than those with lower earnings.

Individualists were more likely to be male than female (by almost 2 to 1). Communitarians and social conservatives were more likely to be female, but the differences between the sexes were not as great as with the differences in education and income. Finally, individualists tend to be young people, communitarians tend to be baby-boomers, while social conservatives tend to be older folks. For instance, 44% of the baby-boomers (ages 34-54) were dedicated communitarians compared with only 32% of the younger cohort (ages 18-33) and 35% of the older cohort (ages 55 and up).

Conclusion

In sum, the poll demonstrated significant support for numerous communitarian positions, while the rest of the public seems to be somewhat more socially conservative than individualistic on several issues (except in the case of legislating morality). The fact that many of those who are not primarily communitarian hold some communitarian positions suggests that continued educational efforts may further expand the communitarian camp.



Copyright © 1995 Boston Globe. Distributed by Los Angeles Times Syndicate. Reprinted with permission.