

It's a Major Trend in America: People Want More Control

BY MADELYN HOCHSTEIN

Since 1987, we at DYG have been studying demographic, economic, and social-cultural trends through our program called DYG SCAN. We conduct an annual survey among a nationally representative sample of four thousand Americans, ages eighteen and older. The survey tracks some fifty social values and attitudes and how they change. We also conduct focus groups and undertake secondary source research. The methodology allows us to analyze trends among many subgroups as well as in the population as a whole.

We see a current convergence of several trends that can help explain the public's interest in the performance of their local government. One trend, which we call "the valuable life goal," is the shift we have seen since September 11, 2001, toward Americans assertively pursuing meaning and significance in their lives. (In addition to the events of September 11, there are other events that contribute to the shift: the bursting of the technology bubble and now the housing bubble; the meltdown of institutional ethical behavior, from Enron and the Catholic Church to the Red Cross; perceived poor performance by the federal government in response to Hurricane Katrina; and other factors.) Without going into all the reasons for this shift, Americans are abandoning the "me-ism" that had ruled for many decades and are looking outward and upward to higher standards for themselves and others. This new goal is expressed in various ways, notably a desire to create change and make one's mark. This trend alone would shine a much brighter light on local government and how it facilitates "a valuable life" for its citizens.

Another significant trend we see is what we call "personal sustainability." People worry about sus-

taining themselves and their families on a day-to-day basis, be it worrying about sustaining their health, their emotional well being, or economic opportunities. They are concerned about product safety, congestion, their family's safety, and crime.

The third relevant trend is toward much more interest in the idea of community, with less focus on self and more on those who are part of "my world, who share my values and my neighborhood and my city." Fewer people are giving the highest marks to their neighborhood or community in our latest SCAN. The well-being of one's community (in the term's geographic sense) is the direct responsibility of local governments to a major extent, so when it is perceived as being threatened we can expect people to look at how their local government is performing.

A fourth major trend is risk averseness. The American public in 2007 has become uncharacteristically quite sensitive to risk and is looking for ways to reduce or avoid risk in every aspect of life—"to make everything safer for me and my loved ones."

The final trend is the new "take command" attitude of the public. Simply put, there is a massive trend toward individuals wanting to control and run more and more aspects of their lives. In the marketplace, we see this as being their own travel agent, real estate agent, more educated patient, designing their own house, and so on. There are virtually no aspects of day-to-day life that are immune from the individual consumer, patient, or traveler turning into a professional. Becoming a "professional citizen" goes hand in hand with this trend. People want to learn about how their local government is working and want to weigh in on its performance.

We like to say that one trend is powerful but the convergence of several trends is dynamite, and this is what we see with regard to the public and government performance. The trends add up to the intriguing likelihood that municipal governments will be showing increasing interest in involving the public in government performance measurement and reporting in response to growing public interest and demand. It may not be overt or conscious on either part, but the trends support more public engagement.

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