In researching our September trend report, “American Dream in the Balance,” we spoke with John Zogby, who is currently engaged in his fifth presidential election as a national pollster and analyst. Author of the 2008 book The Way We’ll Be: The Zogby Report on the Transformation of the American Dream, Zogby explained why we’re seeing more “secular spiritualists” in America, why attitudes toward the Dream are changing more among older people than Millennials and how the American Dream compares with that of other countries.

What do you think the American Dream means to Americans today?

Broadly speaking, there is the traditional material dream, which has something to do with the acquisition of material things, of financial success—a piece of property, a swimming pool, a dream vacation. And then there is the spiritual American Dream, which covers that sense of spiritual well-being, of being introspective and having expectations of leading a fulfilling life. I’m being very broad here, but “fulfilling” meaning authentic, genuine, leaving a legacy for my family or community. Falling under that second category is also the American part of the Dream, which is a lot to do with freedom, the pursuit of happiness, of being liberated, free to choose—a sense of American exceptionalism or uniqueness.

One of the trends I’ve researched quite a bit is to the degree to which people are holding onto the notion of the traditional, material Dream. I call them traditional materialists versus those I call secular spiritualists, who have emphasized or even redefined themselves into that category—that the Dream is more about something fulfilling, something that makes you feel good about yourself and your role in the world, and so on. And what I’ve seen in those 14 years [since starting this research] is a shift, an emphasis away from the traditional materialists and towards this secular spiritualist.

Why do you think this shift is occurring?

One source of this shift is what’s happened materially to Americans. We have read a lot of data about disparity and wealth, and the stagnancy of the middle class, with some even arguing the death of the middle class.

I’ve done it a different way. I have seen, over 20 years, the percentage of Americans who say, “I’m working at a job that pays less than the previous job” go from 14 percent in 1991 to a steady, without any blips one way or another, 37 percent this year. This is not a Great Recession phenomenon, it’s a steady progression. And so the first source of the growth of secular spiritualism is that growing sense among this group of Americans, “Hey, what is there to aspire to? Why dream about the big house or big car I can’t afford? Time for me to adjust my expectations and readjust my priorities. There’s got to be something else that makes me want to continue to live or to think that I’m living a good, genuine life.”

Are financial pressures like personal debt and unemployment changing the lifestyle associated with the
American Dream?

There’s a downsizing in general in the desire to acquire. People more and more are learning how to trade down and then leaving open that option of being able to trade up when they feel like they deserve something special. So you buy the generic cereal and the Walmart clothing, save a few bucks and then “Hey, we’re going to Hawaii.” Completely different context than dreaming about going to Hawaii.

How are factors like unemployment affecting the American Dream for younger people?

I’ve been writing a bit about the phenomenon I call CENGAs: College Educated, Not Going Anywhere. And they’re obviously in the process of making a very similar readjustment. Purely anecdotally, I’m 64, I ran a company for many years, and for years the twentysomethings would come in and say, “Can you tell me what it takes to become a COO? I’ve got so many options and I’d like to know what you have to offer me.” And then what I started to see since the Great Recession was, “I’ll do anything, you really don’t have to pay me, I just want to get started.” That’s not a singular anecdote. It’s endemic.

What’s another reason for the shift toward secular spiritualism?

It’s on the other end of the financial sector: 11 to 12 million Americans who have made it, who by any standard have done quite well financially and materially but who have opted to de-emphasize that part of their life. “Why build a 3,000-square-foot addition to my home? I can’t enjoy the 5,500 that I already have? Do I really need the gas-guzzling car? No. And frankly it doesn’t make me happy anyway.”

So this is all part of that loosely put together simplification movement. Born and nurtured in Seattle, but it’s clearly nationwide. There are a growing number of people who say that “We give away 25 percent of what we own, we don’t need it anymore, and we’re not buying like we used to.”

It’s intellectual. Sort of comes with the turf that if you’ve had a great degree of financial success you cannot have helped but read about something going on in the environment, that something has changed and that there’s some personal responsibility that may be involved. Some of this is peer pressure as well. Just like, “Do I put a fur coat on and then everybody laughs at me for being so obviously insensitive?”

What does this shift in mindset mean for the way Boomers think of the American Dream?

First of all, financially, Baby Boomers can’t retire as they thought they were going to be able to. They have to work. And we’ve redefined what it means to be sixtysomething, then seventysomething—healthy, robust, your mind is active. There very much is that notion of, “If I’ve got 20, 25 more years, I want to make it count. I want to teach, I want to mentor, I want to travel, I want to coach. I want to make my community, my world a better place.”

What do you think the American Dream means for this group?

It includes two subdivisions. First, it is the desire to acquire, the desire to grow financially. It’s the stuff of which creativity and entrepreneurship is made. By the same token, it includes a group of people who actually believe they can achieve that Dream. But sadly, there are those who believe they can’t achieve it. We have asked people since 1998, “Is the American Dream achievable for the middle class?” It was
always 73 percent, 74 percent who said yes. In our recent polling, that’s down to 55 percent, 56 percent. So that’s taken a tumble. And the major tumble is taking place among those who believe the American Dream is about materialism.

Why has this tumble in belief occurred?

Well, it’s certainly accelerated during this Great Recession. I did cite the trend of people working for less having been with us throughout the ’90s, in the early part of this millennium, which was defined mainly as a growth spurt and yet you also had the increased disparity in wealth.

The Great Recession has been a hope killer for many financially. And it includes not simply the blue collar. It includes now the young people and parents with $250,000 in student loan debt. That’s a hope killer. “How are we going to pay that one off? And the clock is ticking every day. I don’t have a job, the interest is going up and it’s deferred. Do I want to be paying these loans off and deferring until I’m 67? And I’m already going to be paying off the national debt too.”

Do you think these concerns affect Americans’ sense of exceptionalism?

I think the sense of American exceptionalism is still very much alive. That’s not a policy thing. The issue is, “If I had to live somewhere, I’m damn lucky that this is the place I’m living.” That’s alive and well. But so too, simultaneously, I get some lemons thrown at me. And now it’s getting harder to make lemonade. One way to make lemonade is to say, “This is what I’ve got, so we’re living on a tighter budget. How far did credit card debt get me, how far did it get me to go underwater with my home? Boy, I can probably afford a decent living, certainly much better living than most other places in the world. And then where do I get my jollies? Secular spiritualism.”

As things get more difficult, what role does the Dream play for the middle class?

It’s what keeps them alive. In a period like this, it’s what motivates them to get up in the morning—“My life can be great, and my life can achieve great things, it all depends on how I identify great things.”

How does the American Dream compare to other countries’ dreams?

Every country has its own character. For China and Russia, for young people it’s restoring national imperial greatness. That’s what motivates them. They care less about democracy, frankly. In Brazil, it’s divine-inspired greatness. I learned that Brazilians, they’re the only other country that talks about the Brazilian way, and they define it as “God is Brazilian.” Here in the U.S., it is the American Dream—the notion that it’s a level playing field, the cards stacked against you are not as horrible as they are in other places. And the little guy has a chance.

The thing is, we’re redefining what that chance is. There’s a certain downsizing of expectations for what’s a good life. We’re redefining our expectations. But the truth is that it’s a necessity, and it’s come to this. The American Dream has been retooled. It had to be. It was unsustainable, like everything else is.

How do Millennials feel about the American Dream?
In the most recent poll I did about the American Dream, which was mid-July, 18- to 29-year-olds were a bit more sanguine about the Dream than any other age cohort. It could very well be because those are also the people that will light a cigarette and say, “I’m not going to get cancer for 40 years anyway.” So there’s something maybe that defers those problems and, “I’m going through hard times now, but just you wait and see, just hang in there.”

They have a tendency to believe in the American Dream more than any other age cohort but not as much as before. It’s taken a hit. But they’re still more optimistic about the American Dream than any other age cohort.

**Why does this attitude change as people get older?**

Well, there’s more responsibilities the older you get. Then there’s always “Hope springs eternal.” I mean, say I’m 25, “I’m having a hard time getting started today, but it’ll get better.” If you’re 68, there’s a sense that maybe it’s not going to get better quite soon enough.

**How is the American Dream tied to people’s national identities?**

The American Dream is in the bloodstream. It’s like “God is Brazilian.” Brazilians are the happiest people on earth. Why? Because “God is Brazilian.” That’s not going to change, unless God makes a major announcement. And they won’t take it well. But it is what defines them, and the American Dream is what defines us.

Sure, there is disappointment, but there is mainly retooling of it. When I think it through, it’s a transformation in the American character as well to move away from that singular focus on the desire to acquire and instead say, “I’m going to be a citizen of the world, I can’t have it all, I can’t have it my way, certainly financially, but there’s got to be another way of making this life a good one, and this is probably still the best place on earth to do it.”