

A MATTER OF TRUST

Americans and Their Government: 1958-2004

A REPORT BY THE COUNCIL FOR EXCELLENCE IN GOVERNMENT

THIS PUBLICATION is the final project of **THE PARTNERSHIP FOR TRUST IN GOVERNMENT**, a project of the **COUNCIL FOR EXCELLENCE IN GOVERNMENT** and the **FORD FOUNDATION**. **THE PARTNERSHIP**, comprised of 34 leading organizations in industry, labor, the civic/non-profit sector and the media, have worked together for seven years to rebuild public respect and confidence in government by educating their workforces, customers, members, and audiences about the role of government and the importance of their participation in it and our democracy.

THE FORD FOUNDATION, a private, nonprofit institution, is a resource for innovative people and institutions worldwide. Its goals are to strengthen democratic values, reduce poverty and injustice, promote international cooperation, and advance human achievement.

THE COUNCIL FOR EXCELLENCE IN GOVERNMENT is a national, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization with the dual mission of improving government performance and increasing the trust and participation of citizens in government and our democracy. To meet these objectives, the **COUNCIL'S** work focuses on four strategic priorities: attract and develop talented people for public service; encourage innovation and result-oriented performance in government; promote electronic government and technology as tools for improving performance and connecting people to government, and; improve the connection between citizens and government and encourage their civic and political participation, especially by young people.



SEPTEMBER 2004

TRUST IN GOVERNMENT is a precisely unscientific balancing act between blind faith, healthy skepticism and guarded apathy.

That begs the question: How much trust—and distrust—is healthy for our democracy?

In an attempt to answer those questions—as well as to gauge the current level of trust in government and determine what influences ordinary citizens—the Council for Excellence in Government, with the generous support of the Ford Foundation, created the Partnership for Trust in Government. This broad coalition of thirty-four organizations, ranging from AOL to the AFL-CIO, the Boy Scouts of America to the League of Women Voters, and the McDonald's Corporation to Good Housekeeping magazine, worked individually and collectively on a variety of programs and efforts to explore this topic and to facilitate increased citizen participation, understanding and trust in government. In addition, the Partnership sponsored ground-breaking research that explored the “atmospheric pressures” on trust in government—including entertainment television, the role of parents, and youth attitudes.

Working to improve trust in government has been a journey amidst a sea of change. Trust has fluctuated over the years, responding to internal factors including partisan gridlock and fiscal accountability, as well as external factors such as the media's influence on the mood of the nation. We saw a rise in trust after September 11, 2001, but that growth did not resonate over time and instead receded to earlier levels.

This report is the most comprehensive review of trust in government ever produced. It is designed to be a useful resource to all of us who want our government to hear and reflect our concerns, and to engage and lead us to a better future. In other words, government that is trusting of us and worthy of our trust.

A great symbol of our nation adorns the cover of this report. The Liberty Bell serves as a testament to the democratic values upon which the United States was founded. Its famous ring on July 8, 1776 announced to the world the beginning of a new community forged from the mettle of brave new minds. Its presence reminds us that the birth of our nation called for a government which “derives its just powers from the consent of the governed.”

Today, mistrust and apathy wear away at its luster. Tarnished by the years and cracked by the pressure of its own purpose, this symbol reminds us that our current state of democracy is in need of constant renewal and reinvigoration.

But still it rings.



Patricia McGinnis
President and CEO
The Council for Excellence in Government

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A Matter of Trust

IN 1997, the Ford Foundation and the Council for Excellence in Government set out to promote trust and participation in American government and democracy. To pursue these ambitious goals from a variety of perspectives, they created the Partnership for Trust in Government – an alliance of leading industry, labor, civic/nonprofit and media organizations.

Over the past seven years, the Partnership has sponsored groundbreaking studies, surveys and focus groups. It has launched dynamic citizen-engagement initiatives. And it has generated numerous thought-provoking articles and publications.

This report synthesizes the existing data and information regarding trust in government. Divided into four main sections, it draws together and examines both academic research and the vast reservoir of public opinion data on this subject:

- 1** SECTION 1 charts the long-term decline of trust in government and discusses the various theories that have been offered to explain this trend. **PAGE 1**
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We hope this report will be a useful resource for those in the public and private sectors who care about and follow American government and politics closely and work to keep our democratic system of government strong and vibrant.

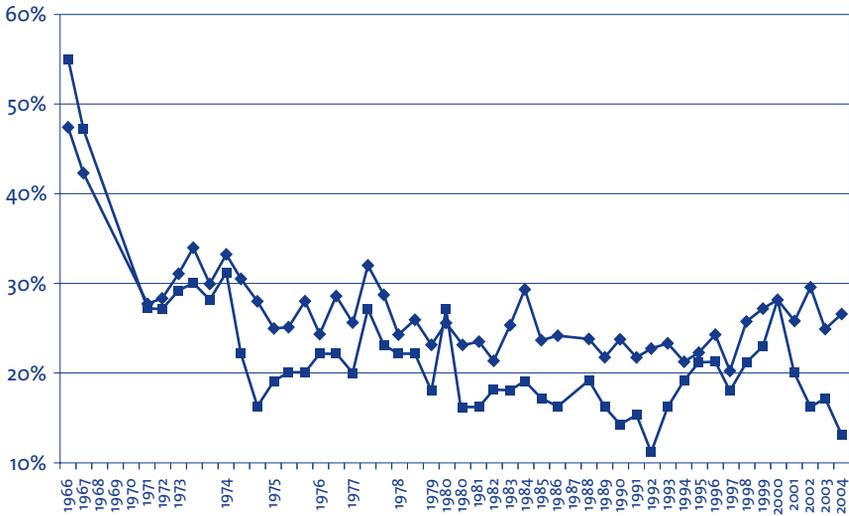
1 Trust over time (1958–2003)

IN THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, public trust in government soared. This was a remarkable response that seemed to reverse a mostly downward trend in opinion over the past three and a half decades. Throughout most of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the American public expressed very little trust in the federal government, viewing it mostly with a skeptical, often cynical, eye.

But it hasn't always been this way. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the American public showed enormous faith in the federal government. This was reflected in the 1963 book by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture*, which painted a picture of an American public actively engaged in public affairs and confident in their political leaders and institutions. In many ways, Almond and Verba's work became a baseline against which changing American attitudes would be judged.

In 1958, the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan placed five new items in the American National Election Studies (ANES) that were designed to determine basic attitudes toward the national government. That is when social scientists first started asking the now famous question, "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right – just about always, most of the time or only some of the

Figure 1A: Confidence in institutional leadership 1966-2002



- ◆ Mean percentage expressing "a great deal of confidence" in 10 institutions (medicine, education, the military, organized religion, major companies, the press, the Supreme Court, the Executive branch, Congress and organized labor)
- Percentage expressing "a great deal of confidence" in major companies

time?” At the time, 73% of respondents said they could trust the federal government just about always or most of the time. The high-water mark came in 1964, when 76% held this view. By 1970, only a bare majority expressed this level of trust in the federal government, and by 1974, the number had plummeted to 36%.

Government institutions were not alone in their fall from glory during the late 1960s and 1970s. The public’s confidence in a whole host of domestic institutions declined sharply, as did evaluations of academic, business, labor and media leaders (Figure 1A). Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider outlined these trends in their book, *The Confidence Gap*.

Many historians and social scientists have taken note of this general trend, analyzed the ANES trust in government question closely and advanced numerous theories that attempt to explain the downward spiral. There also has been much hand-wringing over how trust might be restored. But in order to understand the factors that shape attitudes toward government today, we must examine how and why trust in government has fluctuated in recent decades.

Throughout most of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the American public expressed very little trust in the federal government, viewing it mostly with a skeptical, often cynical, eye.

THE EVENTS THAT SHAPED TRUST

Although there is very little reliable data about attitudes toward government in the years before 1958, the general assumption seems to be that public trust and confidence in government was consistently high from the end of World War II until the early 1960s. It is important to note that this may have been a unique period of public opinion. As Stephen Bennett pointed out in *Were the Halcyon Days Really Golden?* good economic times, strong presidential leadership, and the emerging Soviet threat may have converged to produce an era of good feelings toward government that eventually proved unsustainable.

A review of the data on trust in government from 1958 through the present reveals a long and sustained trend toward mistrust (Figure 1B). However, within this downward trend there have been important fluctuations – often precipitated by specific events and conditions, both in the United States and around the world.

Many scholars, for example, see the extremely low level of trust in 1974 as a direct response to the public outrage over the Watergate scandal. Indeed, the largest two-year decline in trust occurred between 1972 and 1974 (a drop of 17 percentage points in the number of people who said they trust the government all or most of the time, from 53% to 36%).

But it is important to note that the 1972 level of trust was already down 23 percentage points from 1964 – evidence that the public’s trust had eroded significantly long before Watergate became front-page news. The traumatic events of the mid-to -late-1960s – assassinations, racial turbulence and America’s deepening involvement in a divisive war – clearly contributed to this falloff.

Figure 1B: Trust in government (1958-2003)

Trust the government in Washington...

	Just about always/Most of the time	Only sometimes	Never (Vol.)+	Don't know/ Refused
	%	%	%	%
2003	36	55	5	4
2002	56	44	0	0
2000	44	55	1	1
1998	40	58	1	1
1996	27	70	2	1
1994	21	74	3	2
1992	29	68	2	1
1990	28	69	2	1
1988	41	56	2	1
1986	38	58	2	2
1984	44	53	1	2
1982	33	62	2	3
1980	25	69	4	2
1978	29	64	4	3
1976	34	62	1	3
1974	36	61	1	2
1972	53	44	1	2
1970	54	44	*	2
1968	61	37	*	2
1966	65	28	3	4
1964	76	22	*	2
1958	73	23	0	4

+ Volunteered response * means < 1%

Source: American National Election Study (1958 to 2002) New York Times/CBS News Poll (July 2003)

Trust in government continued to decline throughout the mid-1970s, bottoming out in 1980. At that time, a mere 25% of Americans said they could trust the government in Washington to do what is right just about always or most of the time. This period of decline coincided with a severe economic downturn.

Trust began to rebound during Ronald Reagan’s first term in office. By 1984, 44% of Americans said they trusted the federal government. This resurgence is most often attributed to the economic recovery that occurred during the mid-1980s. The “Reagan recovery” in trust ended during his second term, due at least in part to the Iran-Contra scandal.

By 1990, the public had once again become highly distrustful of government (only 28% said they trusted the government in Washington to do what is right). This decline has been attributed to worsening economic conditions, partisan gridlock and bickering in Washington and numerous congressional scandals.

The historic low point came in 1994, when only 21% of Americans said they trusted the federal government just about always or most of the time. Continued economic uncertainty and political scandals undoubtedly contributed to the public's lack of trust. In addition, in the wake of Bill Clinton's failed attempt to reform the nation's health care system, the concept of "big government" was under a full-scale attack.

Public trust rebounded somewhat from 1994 to 1996. Similar to what had happened in 1984, economic growth and presidential popularity contributed to this upward trend. The Republican attack on big government coupled with Bill Clinton's success in pursuing popular centrist policies had a rallying effect on the public. By 1996, 27% of Americans said they trusted the government in Washington to do what is right. This upward trend continued throughout the late 1990s, spurred by ongoing economic recovery. In 1998, 40% of Americans said they trusted the government in Washington all or most of the time. That number swelled to 44% in 2000 – a significant rebound from 1994, but still nowhere near the pre-Watergate levels.

The historic low point came in 1994, when only 21% of Americans said they trusted the federal government just about always or most of the time.

THE IMPACT OF SEPTEMBER 11

Immediately following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, public trust in government soared (Figure 1C). Polls conducted in 2001 – prior to the attacks – showed public trust was mired well below 40%. In a January 2001 *New York Times*/CBS News poll, for example, 31% of Americans said they could trust the government in Washington to do what is right. Similarly, Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA), polling for the Brookings Institution in June and July 2001, found that only 29% of respondents expressed trust in the federal government.

Surveys conducted after the attacks paint a remarkably different picture. In a late September PSRA poll, trust had risen to 57% – an increase of nearly 30 percentage points. And a Gallup/CNN/*USA Today* poll in early October 2001 found that 60% of Americans were expressing high levels of trust in the government.

Figure 1C: The impact of September 11

Trust the government in Washington...

	Just about always/Most of the time	Some of the time	Never	Don't know/ Refused
	%	%	%	%
<i>Pre-9/11</i>				
<i>ABC News/</i>				
Wash. Post March 2000	30	64	5	1
Gallup* July 2000	42	56	2	0
CBS/NYT Jan. 2001	31	64	3	2
<i>Immediate aftermath</i>				
Wash. Post Sept. 2001	64	35	1	0
CBS/NYT Oct. 2001	55	42	2	1
Gallup* Oct. 2001	60	38	1	1
<i>Longer-term effect</i>				
CBS/NYT Jan. 2002	46	51	2	1
Gallup* June 2002	45	51	3	1
CBS/NYT Sept. 2002	38	57	4	1

* Gallup/CNN/USA Today

Source: Karlyn Bowman, American Enterprise Institute

Interestingly, the public's appetite for government services also changed as trust in government increased. In a PSRA poll for *Newsweek* (October 2001), a majority of Americans said they would prefer a government that provides more services even if it would cost more in taxes. By contrast, only 27% held this view in 1994, when trust in government was at its nadir.

In a late September 2001 PSRA poll conducted after the 9/11 tragedies, trust had risen to 57% – an increase of 30 nearly percentage points.

The dramatic increase in trust following the terrorist attacks has not been sustained. By September 2002, most major polling organizations were finding that roughly 40% of the American public trusted the government in Washington to do what is right all or most of the time: 38% in a *New York Times*/CBS News poll, 46% in a Gallup/CNN/*USA Today* poll, and 39% in a *Los Angeles Times* poll.

But the American National Election Studies survey conducted immediately after the mid-term elections of 2002 revealed markedly different results (56% of the public said they could trust the government in Washington to do what is right). There is no obvious explanation as to why trust would have surged to this degree between September and November of 2002. The ANES finding may, in fact, be attributable to new methodologies employed by the researchers (different interviewing and sampling techniques). But even if

there was a genuine surge in trust, it was most likely short-lived. In March 2003, a National Public Radio/Kaiser Family Foundation poll found only 34% of the public trusted the government in Washington.

The sense of national unity that immediately followed 9/11 has given way to an era of unprecedented political polarization. Rare is the political commentary that doesn't mention "red states" and "blue states" (those carried by George W. Bush and Al Gore in the 2000 presidential election, respectively). The most obvious manifestation of the current political climate is the nearly even split among the public along partisan lines – underlined by very deep divisions over political, social and economic values. Democratic pollster Stanley Greenberg coined the term the "two Americas" to describe this landscape. In his recent book by that name, Greenberg describes the United States as a "country divided politically and, increasingly, culturally, with distinct and counterpoised views about government, values, the family and the best way of life."

It is not clear what has created this divide, but dissecting the public's views about government adds context and richness to our understanding of the current political climate.

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EXPLAINING THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL

As the preceding review has shown, the public's trust and confidence in government have clearly been influenced by the events and conditions that have shaped our nation's recent history. However, in attempting to account for the steep decline in trust over time, we must consider other factors as well. Many scholars have hypothesized about the root causes of declining public trust in government. Their theories cover a wide spectrum, including:

- A) Presidential approval and economic conditions**
- B) Mood of the nation**
- C) External threats**
- D) The media**
- E) Trust in people**

A) Presidential Approval and Economic Conditions

As early as 1974, a debate emerged between Arthur Miller and Jack Citrin – leading scholars in the study of attitudes toward government. The debate centered on whether the decline in trust constituted a rejection of the political system or simply reflected increased dissatisfaction with incumbent leaders.

As the political system has clearly withstood the test of time, scholars have focused more attention on how public attitudes toward incumbent leaders shape trust in government more broadly. Many agree that presidential job approval ratings are linked to trust in government. In their 1986 article *Presidential Leadership and the Resurgence of Trust in Government*, Citrin and Donald Green proposed a model that held that presidential leadership and economic evaluations caused the rise in trust during the early 1980s. In 2001, Citrin and another colleague, Samantha Luks, added another facet to this model: people’s approval (or disapproval) of Congress.

Figure 1D: Trust in government by presidential approval

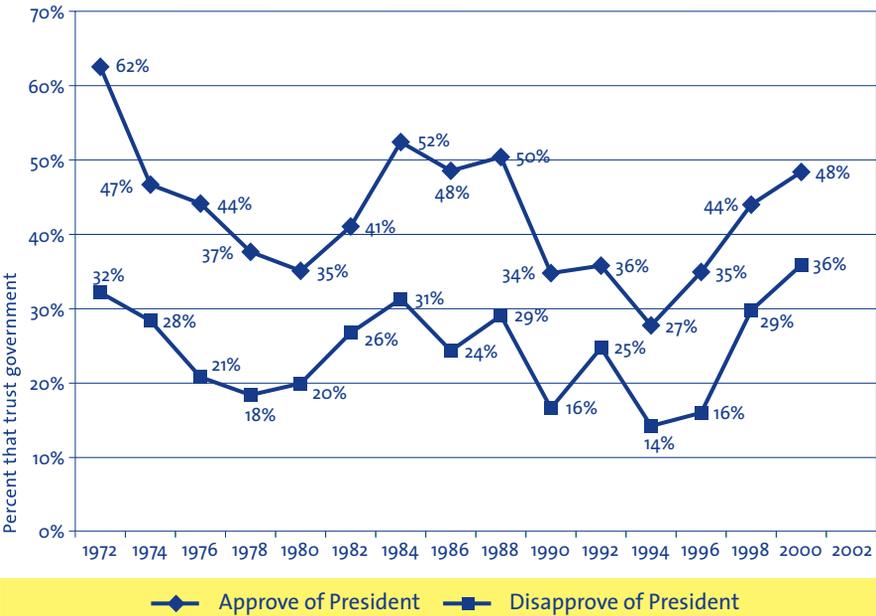


Figure 1D illustrates the strong relationship between trust in government and presidential approval. According to George Bishop, author of *Trust in the Government in Washington: Fact and Artifact*, people who approve of the way the president is performing are in turn more trusting of the government in general. And the relationship has been remarkably stable over time and across presidential administrations.

Given the importance of these political factors, it is not surprising that partisanship plays a role in shaping people’s broad views of government. Since the 1960s, Americans who identify with the party in control of the White House have had more trust in the federal government than those who identify with the other party. Nevertheless, both Republicans and Democrats

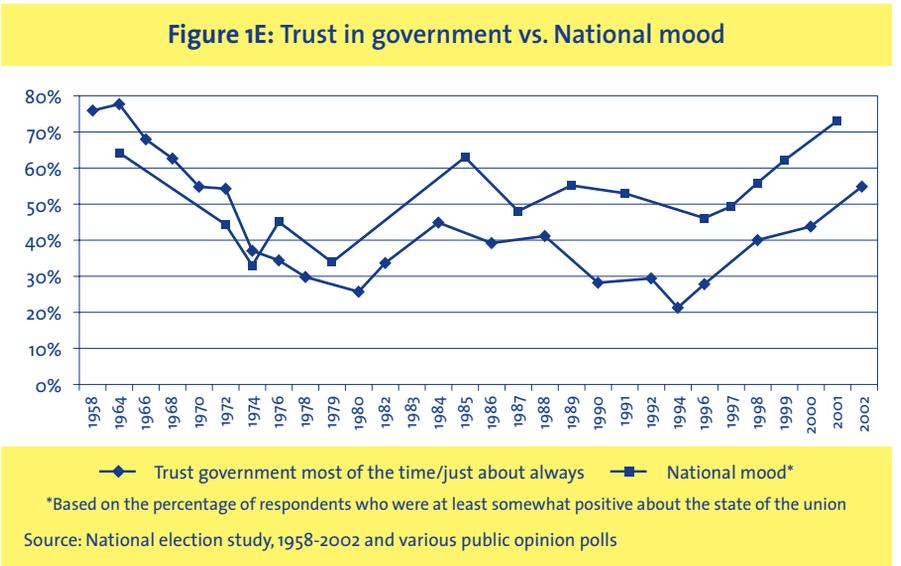
have generally moved in the same direction: trusting less and less in the federal government.

The extent to which actual economic conditions have influenced public trust in government is unclear. While trust has declined at a steady pace, the economy’s performance has been more erratic. However, it is clear that the public’s evaluations of economic conditions influence assessments of the current political leadership, which are in turn strongly linked to trust in government. Furthermore, broad economic trends, such as the rise of global markets and changes in technology, may have caused economic anxiety among some sectors of the public and impacted views about government.

People who approve of the way the president is performing are in turn more trusting of the government in general.

B) Mood of the Nation

In 1998, Andrew Kohut, director of the Pew Research Center, identified a broader influence by pointing out the remarkable parallel between how Americans view the state of the nation and how much they trust the government. Just as trust in government plummeted in the late 1960s and early 1970s, ratings of the nation fell dramatically during that time period (Figure 1E). The “mood” of the nation rebounded somewhat in the early 1980s (as did trust in government) and headed downward again in the mid-1990s. Kohut argues that a changed moral climate, influenced by concerns over crime, drugs and declining ethical standards, has taken a toll on how Americans view their country and their government.



C) External Threats

Another theory that attempts to explain the rise and fall of political trust in this country concerns the presence or absence of an external threat. In *We're All in This Together – The Decline of Trust in Government, 1958– 1996*, John Alford suggested that distrust of government may actually be the norm in America and that people are only lifted out of this state during special circumstances, such as when a national-security threat arises. He stated, “In the face of a broadly perceived national threat, competition and criticism would shift from internal targets to an external one.” Thus the public would become more trusting of the national government, albeit temporarily.

Although the ANES does not have a question specifically dealing with the perception of an external threat, it does contain an item relating to the most important problem facing the nation. Alford believes that during periods when concern over foreign policy and defense issues is high, trust rebounds. For example, in 1960 and again in the mid-1980s, public concern over foreign policy and defense issues was higher than average. During these periods, trust in government was higher as well.

The public’s response to the events of September 11, 2001 seems to support this external-threat theory. Gary Langer, writing in *Public Perspective*, suggested that the ANES trust in government question is not necessarily a reliable measure of attitudes toward government because the context in which it is asked has such an enormous impact on how the public responds. The trust question is usually answered when a domestic political agenda and seemingly intractable policy issues (e.g., Social Security, health care, education and economic downturns) are high on people’s minds. Suddenly, after 9/11, the agenda became narrowly focused on the war on terrorism, leading Langer to ask, “Was the trust that had soared specifically trust to conduct the war on terrorism?”

Some scholars believe that trust rebounds during periods when concern over foreign policy and defense issues is high.

D) The Media

Some political observers have attributed the dramatic falloff in trust in government, at least in part, to the changing role of the news media. Thomas Patterson’s research highlights how some members of the media have actually become part of the political process instead of remaining objective observers. Data from a 2003 Council for Excellence in Government study, *Government: In and Out of the News*, found that press coverage of government and in effect politics has become more negative and conflict-oriented. Television, with its dependence on dramatic pictures, has only exacerbated these tendencies. This evolving media role has coincided with

the dramatic decline in trust in government and confidence in institutions. All of this has corresponded with a burgeoning scandal culture in Washington, the rise of negative campaigning and the politics of personal destruction.

However, while the media are the main avenue through which the public gets its political news, ultimately that news is a reflection of how political leaders are performing. *In Fall from Grace: The Public's Loss of Faith in Government*, Gary Oren argued, "Nongovernmental factors [such as the media] play an important role in the erosion of public trust, but loss of faith in government probably stems as much from the actions of those steering the ship of state as from the roiling seas on which the ship sails."

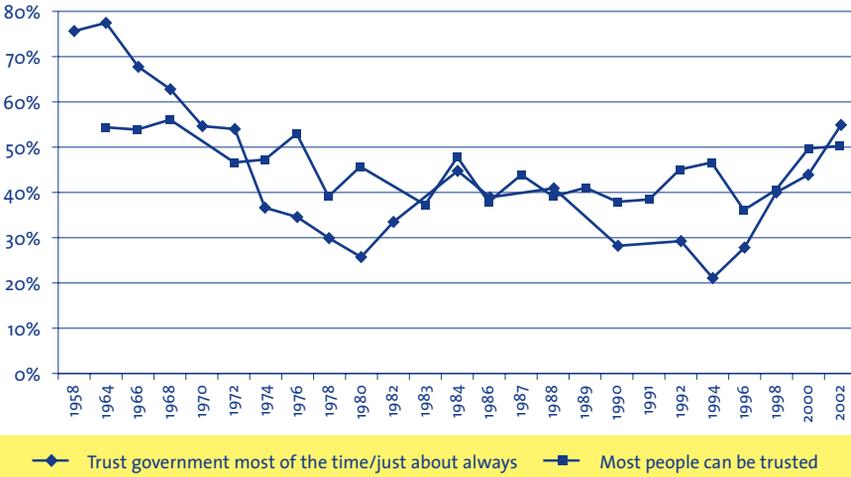
That said, the way in which the media do their job may indeed impact public views of government and add to the cynicism. Journalists cannot control what politicians do or how political institutions perform, but they can make decisions about what stories to cover and how to cover them. In recent years, the media have become more aggressive in discussing the personal lives of public figures and some news coverage has become more interpretive in style. Moreover, the competitive pressure spawned by the growth of so many different media outlets has often led to a lowest common denominator in terms of covering politics in Washington. This has undoubtedly affected the public and has more than likely contributed to declining trust in government. However, the role of the media is only one piece of a much larger puzzle.

The evolving media role has coincided with the dramatic decline in trust in government and confidence in institutions.

E) Trust in People and Trust in Government

Some scholars have noted that the decline in trust in government has been mirrored by the decline of trust between individuals. Proponents of this theory, such as John Brehm, Wendy Rahn and others, argue that when people feel better about their government, they are more willing to cooperate with each other. At the aggregate level, interpersonal trust and trust in government have tracked each other closely (Figure 1F).

Figure 1F: Trust in government vs. Interpersonal trust



Source: National election study, 1958-2002 and and the General Social Survey 1978-1991

The debate on this issue is far from settled however, Eric Uslaner, in his 2002 book *The Moral Foundations of Trust*, raised some serious doubts about the linkage between the two types of trust. He pointed out that trust in people and trust in government are not strongly correlated at the individual level. He further argued that the latter is a stable, long-term value, while confidence in government is based on transitory evaluations of government performance.

At the aggregate level, interpersonal trust and trust in government have tracked each other closely.

Another element of this discussion is the impact of declining “social capital” – defined most simply as the connections among individuals that lead them to work together and develop certain bonds. In his 1995 article *Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital*, Robert Putnam has pointed to a decline in social capital over time. He made a connection between lower membership in voluntary groups of all kinds and the decline of interpersonal trust, which in turn has had a negative impact on civic engagement and political participation. Uslaner rebutted Putnam’s argument by saying that civic engagement does not produce trust, because trust is a moral value. However, he did concede that a trusting citizenry can lead to better government.

2. Beyond Trust: How Americans View Government

MEASURING PUBLIC TRUST in government gives us a general sense of how Americans feel about a very complex set of institutions, processes and leaders. Trust is, in a sense, a composite measure of the many factors and facets of government. This section will explore more specific public opinions and evaluations of government. What role should government play in our lives? How does the public evaluate political leaders and the political process? How do Americans view the various components of government – the executive, legislative and judicial branches and the many agencies and departments that serve the public? How do views of state and local government differ from evaluations of the federal government? What grades does the public give the government for its performance – both overall and for specific functions? Finally, which of these factors has the greatest influence on overall opinion about government?

WHY DON'T AMERICANS TRUST THEIR GOVERNMENT?

In a survey conducted by National Public Radio, the Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government in 2000, respondents were asked to rate a list of reasons why *they* sometimes don't trust the federal government. The number one response, cited by 80% of the public as a "major" reason, was that "government leaders tell us what they think will get them elected, not what they really believe." Other top reasons cited included: government is inefficient and wasteful, there is too much partisan bickering, special interests have too much influence and elected officials are dishonest and lack integrity.

In a 1997 survey by Peter Hart and Robert Teeter for the Council for Excellence in Government (CEG), respondents were similarly asked to name the biggest problems in government. Most of the criticisms centered on political leaders. Respondents pointed to claims of politicians' dishonesty and corruption, tendency to bicker rather than get things done and disregard for what the public wants. Other problems cited by the public were wasteful spending and government being too big and intrusive.

The same CEG/Hart-Teeter study found that nearly half of the public (47%) said government programs and policies do more to hinder them in trying to achieve the American dream, 38% said government programs do more to help and 15% were not sure. In their 1995 survey, also for the Council for Excellence in Government, Hart and Teeter found that 72% of Americans believed government creates more problems than it solves.

Many scholars and journalists have interpreted widespread public distrust as anger toward government. But a 1998 Pew Research Center study entitled

Deconstructing Distrust – How Americans View Government showed that this distrust does not necessarily translate into anger or hostility. In fact, only 12% of the public said they were “angry” with Washington. And while a majority (56%) described itself as frustrated, a sizable minority (29%) was basically content with the federal government.

A 1995 Council for Excellence in Government/Hart-Teeter survey found that 72% of Americans believed government creates more problems than it solves.

YIN AND YANG

To say that Americans’ views about government are complex, even contradictory, is quite the understatement. Americans want balanced budgets, yet they want more spending on government programs. They hate Congress, but love their own representatives. They don’t want the government to interfere with free enterprise, yet they want the health and safety protections that government regulations afford.

The report on the 2000 NPR/Kaiser/Harvard study led off with this headline: “Americans Distrust Government, But Want It to Do More.” In this study, only 29% of respondents said they trusted the federal government to do what is right and 56% said criticism of the way the federal government does its job is justified. Even more (60%) agreed that “government has gone too far in regulating business and interfering with the free-enterprise system.”

Although a majority of Americans said it distrusts government, most respondents said they “want more government involvement and more government regulation to solve the nation’s problems” (Figure 2A). Overwhelming majorities wanted to see the federal government become more involved in a host of policy areas, including the environment, health care, education and poverty. And very few wanted to see less regulation in areas such as automobile safety, food and drug safety, child pornography and prescription drugs. Even on the controversial issues of tobacco and firearms, a plurality of the public said there was not enough government regulation.

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

According to the U.S. Constitution, the role of government is to establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty. Most Americans agree with these basic premises. However, over the course of history, these broad parameters have inevitably expanded to a myriad specific functions and a federal government of enormous size, scope and influence.

Figure 2A: Competing views of government

Trust the government in Washington...

	%
Always/Most of the time	29
Some/None of the time	70
Don't know	1
Criticism of the government is justified	56
Government does a better job than it's given credit for	39
Don't know	5

Government has gone too far in regulating business...

Agree	60
Disagree	36
Don't know	4

Government should do...

	More	About the same	Less/ Nothing
Ensuring safety of food and medicines	73	22	4
Providing for the elderly	73	20	7
Ensuring access to affordable health care	73	13	13
Reducing poverty	69	14	16
Ensuring clean air/water	67	24	9
Setting educational standards	64	17	18
Promoting values and morality	50	15	34
Protecting public lands	54	27	18

Source: NPR/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard Univ. (2000)

Some scholars have argued that the decline in trust in government may be attributable, at least in part, to the federal government's growth and the extent to which it has failed to solve the problems it has taken on. Writing for *Public Perspective* in 1998, Tom Mann of the Brookings Institution pointed out that the social and political turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s coincided with a major expansion of the public agenda:

“The government, especially the federal government, came to be seen as a critical instrument to right unacceptable wrongs, to grapple with deep seated social problems, to reduce risks of physical harm and financial destitution... It is no surprise, therefore, that the credibility of government itself has been damaged. Doing more, looking worse, and producing disappointing economic and social results, government came to be seen by many Americans as more the problem than the solution.”

While often critical of government performance, the American public continues to expect the federal government to respond to just about every pressing economic and social need. This is what makes opinion about the role of government so interesting.

In 1964, the Gallup organization asked, “Which of the following statements comes closest to your views about governmental power today? The federal government today has too much power; the federal government is now using about the right amount of power for meeting today’s needs; or the federal government should use its powers even more vigorously to promote the well-being of all segments of the people.” At the time, the public divided fairly evenly among the three responses, though a plurality (38%) held the moderate point of view – saying the government was using about the right amount of power.

Some scholars have argued that the decline in trust in government may be attributable, at least in part, to the federal government’s growth and the extent to which it has failed to solve the problems it has taken on.

Pew asked the question again in 1997 and found the public still evenly divided among the three positions (Figure 2B). One third said the government has “too much power,” another third said the government is using “the right amount of power,” and the remaining third said the government “should use its powers even more vigorously.” As Pew researchers reported, “While the proportion saying the government has too much power has increased (from 26% in 1964 to 33% today) the balance of opinion has not shifted markedly – in spite of the beating government has taken over the last three decades.”

Figure 2B: Views on government power, 1964 vs. 1997

	<i>Government...</i>			
	Has too much power %	Uses right amount of power %	Should use even more power %	Don't Know %
1964	26	38	29	7
1997	33	32	33	2

Source: Pew Research Center (1998)

SUPPORTING THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET

In some respects, attitudes toward government are a reflection of certain core values. One of these values – now a central tenet of the American political system – is that there should be a social safety net for those citizens who

cannot help themselves. The Pew Research Center has consistently found the American public to be supportive of a strong federal role in helping the needy. In 2003, for instance, the Center discovered that 66% of Americans agreed that “it is the responsibility of the government to take care of people who can’t take care of themselves.” Even in 1994, when anti-government sentiment was at an all-time high, 57% of Americans held this view.

Similarly, in 2003, the Pew Research Center found that 65% of the public believed the government should guarantee every citizen enough to eat and a place to sleep. And in a 1998 survey conducted by *The Washington Post* /Kaiser/Harvard, a strong majority (70%) agreed with the statement, “The federal government has a responsibility to do away with poverty in this country.”

Surveys by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) have shown how divisive these issues can be when the question goes beyond subsistence for the poor. In 1996, NORC asked, “On the whole, do you think it should be the government’s responsibility to reduce income differences between the rich and the poor?” Just less than half (49%) said this should *not* be the government’s responsibility, compared with 45% who said it should. And when asked whether the government should be responsible for providing a job for everyone who wants one, 58% said no and 38% said yes.

Clearly there are limits to the public’s compassion. The 2003 Pew Research Center study showed that Americans were somewhat divided over whether the government should help more needy people even if it means going deeper into debt (54% agreed that the government should do so; 42% disagreed). This survey also revealed that most Americans (71%) thought poor people had become too dependent on government assistance programs. Roughly ten years earlier, the Gallup organization found that 64% of respondents thought welfare programs make people too dependent (only 25% said these programs give people a chance to stand on their own two feet).

Figure 2C: Public views about the role of government

	Agree %	Disagree %	Don't know %
<i>Government...</i>			
Regulation makes the workplace much safer than it would be if left to business++	72	26	2
Has a responsibility to try to do away with poverty in this country*	70	28	2
Should guarantee every citizen enough to eat and a place to sleep+	65	33	2
Regulation of business does more harm than good+	53	39	8
Controls too much of our daily lives+	56	42	2
Should run only those things that can't be run at the local level+	71	24	5

Sources: + Pew Research Center (2003),

* *Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard* (1998), ++ CEG/Hart-Teeter (1995)

GOVERNMENT REGULATIONS

While the public strongly supports many specific governmental activities, there remains widespread skepticism about government control and regulation. In its political values studies, the Pew Research Center has found that a majority of Americans believes the federal government controls too much of their daily lives. In 2003, 56% held this view (as many as 69% felt this way in 1994). Also in 2003, more than half of Americans (53%) said that government regulation of business does more harm than good, and 71% said the federal government should only run those things that cannot be run at the local level.

But, as is often the case in public opinion surveys, how the questions are asked can greatly influence the results. For example, the 1998 *Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard* study asked respondents to choose between the following statements: “Government regulation of big business and corporations is necessary to protect the public, or government regulation of big business and corporations does more harm than good.” A slim majority (53%) said government regulation is necessary, while 40% said it does more harm than good.

THE GOVERNMENT’S RESPONSIBILITIES

The 1995 CEG/Hart-Teeter survey asked Americans who should have the primary responsibility for a range of policy areas (Figure 2D). Government was seen as having the primary responsibility in five of the ten areas tested: illegal immigration, income assistance to the poor, education, crime and the economy. Community leaders were thought to be most important in promoting culture, and individuals were viewed as mainly responsible for improving moral values, strengthening families and creating opportunities for minorities.

Figure 2D: Domains of responsibility

	Gov’t	Community		All/ Combination	Don’t know	
	Business	Leaders	Individuals			
	%	%	%	%	%	
<i>Who should have primary responsibility for...</i>						
Illegal immigration	90	2	2	2	3	1
Assistance to the poor	57	3	20	10	6	4
Education	44	2	25	19	8	2
Jobs/economy	43	35	9	5	7	1
Crime	39	1	25	22	11	2
Air & water pollution	31	20	11	27	9	2
Opportunities for minorities	22	11	22	35	7	3
Culture	15	11	44	19	6	5
Moral values	5	2	14	73	5	1
Strengthening families	4	1	11	81	2	1

Source: CEG/Hart-Teeter (1995)

Regardless of how Americans feel about government, there is no denying that they hold government responsible for a great deal of what goes on in this nation. The 2000 NPR/Kaiser/Harvard study asked the public to name the main thing that was going right in the nation and the main thing that was going wrong. The respondents were then asked how much credit they gave the federal government for the good things and how much blame they assigned the government for the bad things. Fully 69% said the government deserved credit for the good things that were happening, and 80% said the government deserved at least some blame for the bad things.

The 1999 CEG/Hart-Teeter survey asked people their opinions about the roles government should play in the future (Figure 2E). Interestingly, a plurality of Americans (41%) said that the government should play a more important role in the 21st century, 38% said it should play an equally important role and only 15% said the government should play a less important role. By exploring 15 issue areas, researchers concluded that the public wanted government to “focus attention on core responsibilities and competencies and play a medium or minor role on other issues.”

Figure 2E: The future role of government

In the future, government should play..

	Major role %	Medium role %	Minor role %	Don't know %
Maintaining strong national defense	77	15	6	2
Improving education	70	15	13	2
Making college affordable	68	18	11	3
Helping senior citizens	67	22	9	2
Finding cures for AIDS	67	18	11	4
Reducing violence	66	17	14	3
Cleaning up environment	63	24	11	2
Expanding health care coverage	58	18	20	4
Fighting discrimination	57	23	16	4
Reducing poverty	57	21	19	3
Supporting scientific research	53	32	13	2
Improving moral values	46	20	30	4
Helping people buy homes	38	30	29	3
Exploring outer space	30	28	38	4
Aiding poor nations	21	34	41	4

Source: CEG/Hart-Teeter (1999)

For instance, 77% of respondents said the government should play a large role in maintaining a strong national defense in the future. They also saw the government playing a major role in improving education, making college affordable, providing for senior citizens, finding cures for AIDS and other diseases, reducing violence and cleaning up the environment.

Smaller majorities said the government should assume a major role in expanding health-care coverage, fighting discrimination, reducing poverty and supporting scientific research. There was significantly less support for strong government involvement in improving moral values, helping people become homeowners, space exploration and foreign aid. It is important to note that while the question was framed in terms of the future, it most likely reflects people's views about current government involvement as well.

**A POLITICAL TYPOLOGY:
CLASSIFYING AMERICANS BASED ON VIEWS OF GOVERNMENT**

The 1999 CEG/Hart-Teeter survey included a special analysis whereby people were grouped according to their views on government. Respondents were read a series of paired statements – each tapping into an attitude or perspective on government. They were asked to choose which statement best reflected their views and were then grouped with like-minded respondents.

In the end, six groups of Americans emerged, each with a distinct set of attitudes toward government.

Three groups (constituting 43% of the population) had a generally positive orientation toward government, while three groups (57% of the population) had a mostly negative view of government.

Pro-Government Groups

Advocates (15%): This group, which expressed the highest level of confidence in the federal government, was the most likely to believe government serves the public interest rather than special interests. In addition, advocates strongly supported the idea that “I don’t mind paying taxes when I consider what government does.”

Personal Beneficiaries (13%): These Americans were distinguished by their personal perspective on government. Fully 93% agreed that “government programs have helped me and my family,” and 87% said that government policies reflected their values.

Reluctant Supporters (15%): This group had a mixed view of government – 67% viewed government positively but most believed government was too big and intrusive.

Anti-Government Groups

Disappointed (20%): These Americans believed the government had let them down. While they thought government was doing more to help average people, they questioned the government’s ability to solve problems and didn’t believe government had helped them personally.

Engaged Critics (21%): This group believed government was relevant but had very low trust and confidence in the federal government.

Deeply Alienated (16%): As the name suggests, this group was the most likely to feel disconnected from the government. Moreover, 78% of this group said the government was ineffective.

THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Widespread distrust toward government is often tied to cynicism about the political process. Americans seem to have a love-hate relationship with their system of government (see Figure 2F). Most wouldn't trade it for any other system in the world, yet criticism of the system abounds. In a 1996 ABC News/*Washington Post* poll, 85% of the public agreed that, "Whatever its faults, the U.S. still has the best government in the world." That same year, NORC found strong support for our system of democracy, as 67% of Americans said our political system works well but needs some changes (only 28% said the system was in need of major changes).

On the other hand, a 1997 PSRA study for the Center for Responsive Politics showed that a 57% majority felt very or mostly dissatisfied with the way the country's political system was working. And in a 1996 PSRA study for Knight-Ridder, a similar proportion (56%) characterized the way the government and the political system operated as one of the most important problems facing the nation.

Part of the problem may be that Americans feel *disconnected* from their government. Pollsters for the 1999 CEG/Hart-Teeter study focused on the public's relationship with government and concluded that "from the vantage point of the average American, government appears to be very distant and remote." Only 30% of those surveyed agreed with the statement "I feel close and connected to government" while 64% said they felt "distant and disconnected from government."

Americans are divided about the extent to which the government works for the public interest. In a 2003 study, the Pew Research Center found that nearly half of Americans (47%) agreed with the statement, "People like me don't have any say about what the government does." Only 52% agreed that government is really run for the benefit of all the people.

*Americans seem to have a love-hate relationship
with their system of government.*

Furthermore, the 1999 CEG/Hart-Teeter survey found that only 25% of Americans believed the government pursues the people's agenda, while 67% felt government pursues its own agenda. Similarly, only 25% of respondents agreed that government serves the public interest, while 63% said government serves special interests.

Figure 2F: Views on the American political system

	%
<i>Whatever its faults, the United States has the best system of government in the world.</i>	
Agree	83
Disagree	15
Don't know	2
<i>How well does our system of democracy work?</i>	
Works well, needs no changes	4
Works well, needs some changes	67
Does not work well, needs lots of changes	24
Does not work well, needs to be completely changed	4
Don't know	1
<i>Which statement do you agree with more?</i>	
Government serves the special interests	63
Government serves the public interest	25
Neither/Both	10
Don't know	2
<i>How satisfied are you with the way the political system is working?</i>	
Very/Mostly satisfied	40
Mostly/Very dissatisfied	57
Don't know	3

Source: Multiple surveys

Political Leadership

Negative views about political leaders are at the root of public cynicism about government. In a 1996 *Washington Post*/Kaiser/Harvard study, an overwhelming majority of Americans (89%) believed politicians tell voters what they want to hear rather than what they will actually try to do if elected. More than two thirds said public officials don't care what people like them think. And in a 2005 Pew Research Center study, 75% believed that elected officials lose touch with the people pretty quickly, and 63% said it was time for Washington politicians to step aside and make room for new leaders.

Not only do Americans see politicians as self-serving and out of touch, many view them as immoral and unethical. Fully 59% of respondents in the 1997 PSRA/Center for Responsive Politics survey agreed that "a decline in moral and ethical standards among people in politics and government" was a major problem for the federal political system. And fewer than half of those surveyed (44%) in the 1998 Pew Research Center study said they believe that most elected officials are trustworthy. Moreover, only 31% in the Pew survey gave federal government officials excellent or good ratings for their ethical and moral practices (68% gave them only fair or poor ratings). The Center's

researchers pointed out that cynicism about political leaders is strongly linked to distrust of government more broadly – 80% of those who distrusted politicians also distrusted government.

The 1997 CEG/Hart-Teeter survey also found a strong link between the perceived failures and shortcomings of political leaders and reduced public confidence in government. Fully 63% of respondents said that elected officials who pursue their own agendas are a major cause of reduced confidence in government. A similar proportion said elected officials who don't keep their promises are a major cause, while nearly half (46%) pointed to low ethical standards among elected officials.

In that same survey, respondents were asked to evaluate today's government officials in terms of certain leadership qualities (Figure 2G). Leaders did not receive a strong endorsement from the public. Very low percentages said that leaders spend tax dollars wisely (13%), tell the truth (14%) and put politics aside in order to do what is right (15%). And only 28% thought their leaders showed compassion toward those who are less fortunate.

Figure 2G: Leadership qualities

	Have this quality	Need a little more	Need somewhat more	Need a lot more	Don't know
	%	%	%	%	%
<i>Today's leaders...</i>					
Spend tax dollars wisely	13	7	12	64	4
Tell people the truth	14	10	13	59	4
Put politics aside to do what's right	15	8	16	58	3
Are honest/have integrity	21	8	11	55	5
Understand average people	20	9	16	53	2
Work with opposing party	24	8	17	46	5
Deal with long-term problems	27	9	15	44	5
Are compassionate	28	10	19	38	5
Take on special interests	34	11	15	34	6

Source: CEG/Hart-Teeter (1997)

Americans seem to have a much more positive view of non-elected government officials and civil servants than they do of their elected leaders. The 1998 Pew Research Center study asked respondents who they trust more to do the right thing – politicians who lead the federal government or civil service employees who run the federal government departments and agencies. The public chose civil servants over politicians by a margin of 67% to 16%.

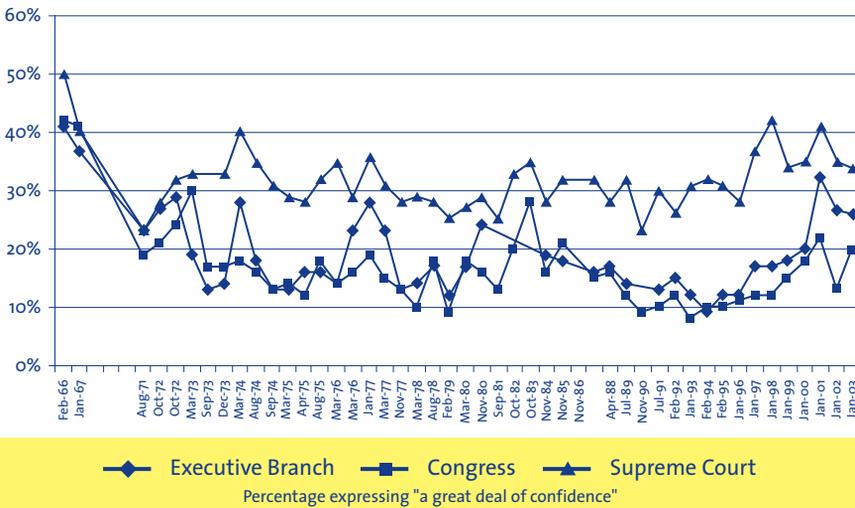
GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

Americans have much more favorable views of some parts of the government than they do of others. As a general rule, opinion tends to grow more positive as the categories become more specific. In the 1998 Pew Research Center study, only 38% of the public held a favorable opinion of the federal government. But a majority of respondents had favorable views of the departments and agencies of the federal government (nearly 60%), Congress (53%) and the Supreme Court (77%).

Making matters even more complex, the public relies on different cues to evaluate the different branches of government. Leaders of the executive branch, especially the president, are evaluated primarily on the basis of partisanship and performance. In *Public Confidence in the Leaders of American Government Institutions*, Lilliard Richardson, David Houston and Chris Sissie Hadjiharalambous argued that people who belong to the same party as the president and have a positive view of economic conditions are most likely to give the president high marks.

Public confidence in the major branches of government has fluctuated over time but has generally followed a downward trend similar to trust in government overall (Figure 2H). The leaders of the Supreme Court have consistently received the highest ratings from the public. Ratings of executive

Figure 2H: Confidence in institutional leadership, 1966-2002



Source: Harris and NORC Surveys 1966 to 2002

and congressional leaders have constantly flip-flopped – at certain times the public has expressed more confidence in the executive branch, at other times the legislative branch has received higher ratings. Nonetheless, the public’s

opinions about these governmental leaders have followed a remarkably similar pattern over the past several decades.

Generally speaking, the public has not held Congress in particularly high regard. In the 1999 CEG/Hart-Teeter survey, only 19% of the public had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in Congress (Figure 2I). Greater proportions of respondents expressed a great deal or a lot of confidence in the military (59%), the Supreme Court (43%) and even large business corporations (22%).

Figure 2I: Ratings of major institutions

How much confidence in each?

	Great deal/Quite a lot %	Some/Very little %	None/Don't know %
Military	59	37	4
Small business	56	40	4
Supreme Court	43	53	4
Large corporations	22	71	7
Congress	19	80	1
News media	18	81	1

Source: CEG/Hart-Teeter (1999)

Congress's approval rating has averaged an anemic 31% since the Gallup Organization first started tracking it in 1974. In fact, as David Brady and Sean Theriault pointed out in *A Reassessment of Who's to Blame: A Positive Case for the Public Evaluation of Congress*, there has never been a time when a majority of Americans has approved of the way Congress was doing its job. Some scholars have argued that the institution's low ratings stem from unpopular policies and unhappiness with conditions (primarily economic) in the nation. Others believe that Congress is unpopular because the public lacks an understanding and appreciation for the complex and contentious nature of the legislative process. Most scholars, however, agree that evaluations of Congress are influenced by partisan leanings and economic evaluations but not to the extent that they affect evaluations of the president.

While most politicians bemoan this public cynicism, many observers have pointed out that politicians themselves are often the harshest critics of the political system. It has long been recognized that candidates often run for Congress by campaigning against the institution itself. In *On Red Capes and Charging Bulls: How and Why Conservative Politicians and Interest Groups Promoted Public Anger*, Amy Fried and Douglas Harris noted that challengers often hope to lead voters to reject the ruling majority by attacking those in power as corrupt and out of touch. For example, Newt Gingrich used anti-Congress rhetoric in a coordinated effort to attack the Democratic Congress in the 1980s and early 1990s. This approach led to the GOP's historic

takeover of Congress in 1994. But, of course, such negative politics add to the existing reservoir of public distrust.

Confidence in the judicial branch is completely unrelated to the factors that affect trust in the other branches. Richardson, his colleagues and others demonstrated that people who are well-educated and most knowledgeable about the judicial process tend to express the highest level of confidence in the Supreme Court.

As the 1998 Pew study points out, the federal government as an abstraction elicits a much more negative reaction than do specific federal agencies or departments (Figure 2J). At least three quarters of respondents had a favorable opinion of the Postal Service, the National Park Service, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Defense Department and the Food and Drug Administration. And roughly seven in ten had a favorable view of NASA, the Federal Aviation Administration, the EPA, the Department of Agriculture and the FBI. Only the IRS drew a more negative than positive rating.

Figure 2J: Ratings of federal agencies

	Favorable %	Unfavorable %	Can't Rate %
Postal Service	89	11	0
Park Service	85	9	6
CDC	79	11	10
Defense	76	19	5
FDA	75	22	3
NASA	73	20	7
FAA	70	15	15
EPA	69	27	4
Agriculture	68	18	14
FBI	67	25	8
SSA	62	34	4
Education	61	37	2
Veterans Admin.	59	26	15
Commerce	58	22	20
Justice	56	39	5
FTC	53	28	19
HUD	51	40	9
CIA	51	32	17
IRS	38	60	2

Source: Pew Research Center (1998)

FEDERAL VS. STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

When evaluating government, the public clearly differentiates between federal, state and local government. Recent surveys have consistently found that Americans are more trusting of their state government than they are of the federal government. The 1996 *Washington Post*/Kaiser/Harvard study

found that while 25% of respondents said they trusted the government in Washington just about always or most of the time, 35% said they trusted their state governments. Furthermore, when asked which they trusted to do a better job, 61% chose their state government and only 24% chose the federal government. Those who chose their state government over the federal government were then asked why. The top reasons included: state government is more responsive to the needs of people, it can solve problems more quickly and it is more likely to spend money on the right things.

Recent surveys have consistently found that Americans are more trusting of their state government than they are of the federal government.

Similarly, the 1995 CEG/Hart-Teeter survey asked which theory of government Americans favor more – concentration of power in the federal or in state governments. Respondents chose state government by more than a two-to-one margin. The survey also found that 75% of the public would favor giving states more responsibility for programs currently managed by the federal government. Most believed that the quality of these programs would improve under state management.

Americans tend to view their state and local governments as more efficient than the federal government. In the 2000 NPR/Kaiser/Harvard survey, more than half of the public (55%) said they pay more than their fair share of taxes considering what they get from the federal government. By contrast, only 40% believed they pay more than their fair share in state taxes, and a similar proportion (39%) thought they pay too much in local taxes. That same survey found that the public views the federal government as more corrupt than state and local government. When asked to chose which is most corrupt, 59% of respondents pointed to the federal government, 13% chose their state government and 15% said their local government.

Americans have not always thought this way (Figure 2K). Data from the Gallup Organization shows that in 1972, Americans actually had more confidence in the federal government than in their state and local governments. Fully 70% said they had a great deal or a fair amount of confidence in the federal government when it came to handling domestic problems. Slightly fewer (63%) expressed an equal level of trust and confidence in their state and local governments when it came to handling state and local problems. In recent years, however, state and local governments outpace the federal government when it comes to trust and confidence.

In the 1998 Pew survey, 60% of Americans expressed a great deal or a fair amount of trust and confidence in the federal government, compared with 81% for state government and 78% for local government.

Figure 2K: Trust and confidence

Federal, State and Local Government

How much trust and confidence?

	Great deal/ Fair amount %	Not very much/ None at all %	Don't know %
<i>Federal</i>			
1997	60	40	*
1976	49	49	2
1972	70	29	1
<i>State</i>			
1997	81	18	1
1976	72	26	2
1972	63	33	4
<i>Local</i>			
1997	78	21	1
1976	65	32	3
1972	63	33	4

Source: Pew Research Center (1998)

There are important partisan differences underlying these evaluations of federal and state government. According to the 1998 Pew Research study, Republicans expressed much less trust and confidence in the federal government than Democrats. A bare majority of Republicans (56%) had a great deal or a fair amount of confidence in the federal government, compared with 70% of Democrats. Since 1972, trust in the federal government has fallen off 24 percentage points among GOP loyalists. There has been very little change among Democrats over that same time. But when it comes to state government, Republicans expressed slightly more confidence than did Democrats: 85% of Republicans had a great deal or a fair amount of trust and confidence in their state government, compared with 79% of Democrats.

Despite their greater trust in state and local government, there is no denying that Americans rely on the federal government to deal with most of the major policy issues of the day. A 1995–96 NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll showed that the public would prefer to see the federal government have more responsibility than state governments when it comes to dealing with the economy, protecting civil rights, protecting the environment and improving the health care system (Figure 2L). Americans would like to see the state take the lead in dealing with public education, crime and job training.

Figure 2L: Views of federal vs. state government responsibilities

	Federal Government %	State Government %
<i>Who should have more responsibility in...?</i>		
Strengthening the economy	64	23
Protecting civil rights	68	27
Protecting the environment	50	39
Improving the health-care system	48	40
Reforming welfare	41	42
Providing assistance to the poor	39	42
Providing job training	32	55
Reducing crime	25	69
Improving public education	24	71

Source: NBC News/Wall Street Journal (1994-1995)

Finally, whether they like it or not, Americans feel that the federal government has a greater impact on their daily lives than either state or local government. In the 2000 NPR/Kaiser/Harvard study, 41% of respondents said the federal government has a lot of impact on their daily lives, while only 30% said the same of their state and local governments.

GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE

Many studies suggest that Americans expect a lot from the federal government, but are often dissatisfied with what they get. According to the 2000 NPR/Kaiser/Harvard study, more than half of Americans (56%) said criticism of the way the federal government does its job is justified, while 39% said government does a better job than it is given credit for.

In 1998, the Pew Research Center reported that an overwhelming majority of Americans (74%) said the government does a fair or poor job managing its programs and providing services, and nearly as many (64%) said that programs run by the federal government are usually inefficient and wasteful.

In a similar study from 1996, the Center for Survey Research at the University of Virginia found that only 4% of respondents had a lot of confidence in the federal government's ability to solve problems. Thirty-five percent had some confidence and 60% had a little or no confidence. When asked why they have so little confidence in the federal government's ability to solve problems, most people participating in the 1993–94 ABC/*Washington Post* polls pointed to government incompetence. Only a few respondents said that the problems government deals with are difficult to solve.

Public criticism of government performance extends to more specific areas as well. The 1996 *Washington Post*/Kaiser/Harvard survey tested six broad policy areas where the federal government has invested significant amounts

of resources in recent decades (Figure 2M). Very few respondents believed there had been improvements in any of these areas. Only 18% said that air quality has improved compared with 20 years ago, 15% said poverty among the elderly had decreased, 11% thought the gap between rich and poor had been reduced, 3% thought children were less likely to grow up in single-parent homes and 2% said violent crime had decreased.

These responses are especially striking considering the measurable progress that has been made in several of these areas, such as air quality and poverty among the elderly. As the survey stated, “Even when things are – objectively – much improved, most Americans perceive things as getting worse, not better.”

Figure 2M: Judging government performance

Government programs have...

	Helped make things better %	Made things worse %	Not had much effect either way %	Don't know %
<i>Program areas:</i>				
Air quality	44	15	38	3
Poverty among senior citizens	23	32	39	6
Income gap between wealthy & middle-class	11	49	36	4
Children growing up in single-parent homes	11	37	48	4
Violent crime	10	34	54	2

Source: Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard (1996)

Even when respondents were asked specifically what effect federal programs had in these problem areas, the government received only marginal credit. Forty-four percent said federal government programs have helped improve air quality, but only 23% said government programs had helped reduce the number of older Americans living in poverty. Roughly one in ten credited federal programs with reducing the rate of violent crime. Finally, a majority of those who believed the economy was not improving blamed the federal government.

The 1997 CEG/Hart-Teeter survey asked the public to evaluate the extent to which the federal government had been successful in working toward a longer list of goals (Figure 2N). As the researchers pointed out, the government received its highest ratings for policy areas traditionally considered to be in the domain of the national government. Respondents said the federal government had been most successful in promoting space exploration, providing for the national defense and keeping the nation at

peace. The public recognized the federal government’s successes in the areas of economic growth, environmental protection and medical research. However, most Americans said the government had been fairly successful in these areas. Fewer than one in five said it had been very successful. The government received the least credit for dealing with intractable social problems such as poverty, crime and drug abuse.

Figure 2N: Rating government performance

	<i>Successful</i>		<i>Unsuccessful</i>		<i>Don't know</i>
	<i>Very</i>	<i>Fairly</i>	<i>Fairly</i>	<i>Very</i>	
<i>How successful has gov't been in working toward these goals?</i>					
Promoting space exploration	44	41	6	5	4
Providing for national defense	39	43	6	5	7
Keeping the nation at peace	33	47	9	9	2
Maintaining economic growth	18	58	13	7	4
Protecting the environment	10	60	19	7	4
Supporting medical research	18	51	16	8	7
Providing health care for seniors	15	52	18	9	6
Regulating business to protect consumers and employees	11	53	15	13	8
Protecting civil rights	13	50	19	14	4
Preventing discrimination based on race or sex	11	51	17	17	4
Supporting public education	13	36	25	22	4
Reducing poverty	5	27	33	30	5
Reducing crime	4	25	31	38	2
Improving moral values	3	26	29	36	6
Controlling immigration	4	21	22	50	3
Reducing drug abuse	2	20	31	45	2

Source: CEG/Hart-Teeter (1997)

The 1999 CEG/Hart-Teeter survey included a series of questions focusing on the effect specific government services have had on people’s lives (Figure 2O). The survey demonstrated that Americans recognized many of the benefits they receive from the government. They felt the greatest benefit from education and infrastructure programs. Fully 65% said they had benefited a great deal or a fair amount from public schools, and even more (70%) said they had benefited from roads and highways. Smaller majorities acknowledged the benefits of various regulatory programs relating to food and drug safety, consumer safety, workplace health and safety, and environmental protection. Americans were less enthusiastic about the direct benefits they have enjoyed from police and law enforcement and medical research.

Nonetheless, even after they were asked about all these government services and programs, 53% of those surveyed said the government had a

positive effect on their lives overall, 34% said the effect was neither positive nor negative and 11% said the effect had been negative.

Figure 20: Direct benefits of government

Yes, have benefited...

	A great deal %	A fair amount %	Just a little %	Not sure how much %	Have not benefited %	Don't know %
<i>Government programs:</i>						
Public schools	45	20	8	1	25	1
Roads & highways	41	29	11	2	14	3
Parks and recreation	37	29	12	1	19	2
Food & drug safety	30	28	14	4	20	4
Consumer safety	27	29	13	3	24	4
Workplace regulations	28	27	12	3	28	2
Public universities	28	22	9	3	35	3
Environmental laws	23	27	14	4	30	2
Medical research	26	22	11	6	31	4
Police and courts	20	23	14	3	36	4
Social Security	23	19	7	2	47	2
Medicare	24	14	9	1	50	2
Student loans	22	11	7	1	57	2
Anti-discrimination laws	13	13	8	2	60	4
Veterans' benefits	13	8	7	2	68	2
Disaster assistance	11	7	7	4	68	3

Source: CEG/Hart-Teeter (1999)

Whether the public's perceptions are accurate or not, poor performance ratings are strongly linked to distrust of government. People who believe the government does a good job running its programs are much more likely to express high levels of trust in government than are people who give the government low marks for performance.

THE IMPACT ON TRUST

Many of these specific views about government discussed in this section greatly influence people's trust in government more broadly. Those who believe the federal government is too powerful are less trusting of government in general. And those who support a more activist government tend to be more trusting. Cynicism about political leaders and the political process is strongly linked to distrust. In addition, those who are highly critical of the federal government's performance are also highly distrustful of government. Similarly, criticism of government priorities is linked to distrust of government.

But which of these factors are the strongest predictors of distrust? Through a multivariate analysis, the 1998 Pew Research Center study concluded that ratings of government performance and opinion of political leaders were the

strongest predictors of trust in government. These factors were more strongly linked to trust in government than were views about government power, a desire for an activist government or satisfaction with government priorities.

Some studies have found that ratings of government performance and opinion of political leaders were the strongest predictors of trust in government.

There may be cause for optimism. Although Americans are critical of their government, they tend to be optimistic that it can work better if certain reforms are put in place. In the 1997 CEG/Hart-Teeter survey, 77% of respondents said the federal government could be more effective if it were better managed, while only 19% said it is bound to be ineffective no matter what.

The survey also focused on several proposed policy and procedural reforms, asking the public to evaluate 12 steps that have been suggested to help make the federal government work better. Balancing the budget topped the list (60% said this would be very effective in making the federal government work better). Reforming campaign finance laws to reduce the influence of special interests was close behind (57%), as was merit-based pay for government employees (55%). Working in partnership with business to solve problems was also strongly endorsed by nearly half of the public (47%). Less than half of the public believed the other suggested reforms would be very effective.

Although Americans are critical of their government, they tend to be optimistic that it can work better if certain reforms are put in place. In the 1997 CEG/Hart-Teeter survey, 77% of respondents said the federal government could be more effective if it were better managed.

The 1999 CEG/Hart-Teeter survey revealed that Americans believe they themselves can improve government through greater citizen involvement. When asked which group has the greatest potential to improve government in the 21st century, the public chose itself (51%) over elected officials (26%), the media (18%), public interest groups (16%), political parties (10%) and government employees (4%).

The pollsters also asked the public about the changes or approaches that could make government work better. Of the top six suggested reforms, four centered on greater citizen involvement. Fully 73% said having more people vote in elections would be very effective in making the government work better. Other citizen-oriented approaches receiving strong endorsements included teaching young people more about government and the importance

of getting involved in their communities (65%), having people become more involved in their local schools (63%) and having people take time to express their views to elected officials (52%). The only two reforms among the top six that did not involve citizen engagement were having leaders who put politics aside to do what's right for the country (71%) and reforming the campaign finance laws to reduce the influence of special interests (55%).

3. The Demographics of Distrust

We now know what percent of Americans generally trust the federal government to do what is right and how that trust has fluctuated over time. But who trusts the government the most and who are the least trusting? Furthermore, what differences do demographic groups express when it comes to views about the role of government and evaluations of government performance?

WHO TRUSTS THE GOVERNMENT?

Generally speaking, demographic factors such as gender, age and socio-economic background are not strongly linked to trust in government. Men and women, young and old, rich and poor all tend to express similar levels of trust in government. Moreover, the fluctuations of trust over time have been apparent across most major demographic groups. As the 1998 Pew Research Center study pointed out, the increase in trust from its low point in 1994 to 1997 occurred across all major demographic groups.

Data from a July 2003 *New York Times*/CBS News survey confirms this pattern, but with some notable exceptions (Figure 3A). In that poll, men and women expressed nearly identical levels of trust in the federal government: 36% of both men and women said they trust the government in Washington to do what is right just about always or most of the time. Further, 62% of men and 64% of women said they trust the government only some of the time or never. Many previous polls and studies (e.g., the 1998 Pew Research Center and the 2000 and 2002 ANES) also found that men and women have generally expressed similar levels of trust, although there have been occasional fluctuations.

The 1998 Pew Research Center study found similar consistency along racial lines. Both black and white Americans trusted government in equal proportions: only 39% of people in both groups said they trusted the government just about always or most of the time. Hispanics were slightly more trusting, with 44% saying they trusted the government.

Yet the 2003 *New York Times*/CBS News poll found that only 22% of non-Hispanic blacks trust the government to do what is right, compared with 38% of non-Hispanic whites. This current divide may be a reflection of George W. Bush's low job-approval ratings among African Americans. In another recent survey (Pew Research Center, September 2003 New Interest Index), only 23% of African Americans approved of the way Bush was handling his job as president, while 60% of whites said they approved.

Although the *New York Times*/CBS News poll found that Hispanics were again the most trusting (46%), there are differences among Latino groups by ethnicity and by region of the country. Latinos of Puerto Rican descent, for

Figure 3A: Who trusts the government?

	Trust %	Distrust %
<i>Total Gender</i>	36	62
Male	36	62
Female	36	64
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		
White, NH	38	61
Black, NH	22	78
Latino	46	50
<i>Age</i>		
18-29	45	53
30-44	39	60
45-64	30	68
65+	27	71
<i>Education</i>		
College grad.	32	68
Some college	36	62
High school	35	64
< High school	46	51
<i>Income</i>		
Less than \$15k	34	64
\$15k to \$30k	33	66
\$30k to \$50k	36	63
\$50k to \$75k	36	62
More than \$75k	36	62
<i>Census Region</i>		
Northeast	32	67
North Central	36	63
South	40	59
West	35	62

Source: New York Times/CBS News Poll (July 2003)

example, expressed significantly lower levels of trust than any other Latino origin group.

Trust in government has generally also been stable across different age groups. In the 1998 Pew Research Center study, for example, young and old Americans expressed similar levels of trust. Senior citizens were slightly more trusting. The 2000 ANES study revealed a similar pattern. However, studies have indicated that young people may be becoming more trusting. The September 2002 *Washington Post* survey showed people under 30 were significantly more trusting than their older counterparts. In the 2003 *New York Times*/CBS News survey, those under age 45 expressed a higher level of trust in the federal government than people 45 and older. Specifically, 45% of the 18-to-29 age bracket and 39% of people ages 30 to 44 said they could trust the government in Washington to do what is right just about always or most

of the time. By contrast, only 30% of people ages 45 to 64 said they could trust the federal government, and even fewer (27%) of those age 65 and older said the same.

In many surveys, differences in trust in government across levels of educational attainment are minimal. In the 2003 New York Times/CBS News survey, however, those holding a college degree expressed the least trust in government, while those with less than a high school diploma expressed greater levels of trust. There are little or no discernable differences in trust based on income level or region of the country, either. In short, the fluctuations of trust over time have generally been seen across all major demographic groups.

Party identification, on the other hand, is strongly linked to trust in government. In fact, the extent to which partisanship drives trust in government may be even more pronounced today than during the Clinton Administration. In the *New York Times*/CBS News poll, 53% of Republicans said they could trust the government in Washington to do what is right just about always or most of the time, while 45% said they could not trust the government in Washington (Figure 3B). Among Democrats, only 27% said they could trust the government, while fully 73% said they could not. Independents fell in between, but closer to the Democrats (31% trusting, 66% not trusting). In the 1998 Pew Research Center survey – conducted while Clinton was still president – Democrats showed greater trust in government than did either Republicans or Independents. However, the partisan gap was not nearly as wide as it is today.

Figure 3B: Trust in government by party identification

	1998		2003	
	Trust %	Distrust %	Trust %	Distrust %
Democrat	48	52	27	73
Independent	35	65	31	66
Republican	33	67	53	45

Sources: Pew Research Center (1998)
New York Times/CBS News (July 2003)

Demographics and the Role of Government

While trust in government is fairly consistent across demographic groups, there are significant demographic fault lines related to the proper role of government. Gender, race and age are all strongly linked to views about the size and scope of government. The 1998 Pew Research Center study showed that men are more likely than women to believe the federal government has too much power (40% vs. 27%, respectively). A plurality of women (40%)

would prefer to see the government use its powers more vigorously. Only 27% of men share this view. While the gender gap is not this large on the question of trust in government per se, it is present on most other issues dealing with politics and policy and has become central to understanding public attitudes toward government (Figure 3C).

Figure 3C: The gender gap and attitudes toward government

	Men %	Women %
<i>Role of government:</i>		
Too powerful	40	27
Right amount of power	32	31
Should use more power	27	40
Don't know	1	2

Source: Pew Research Center (1998)

Race and ethnicity are also strongly linked to attitudes about the proper role of government. Although non-Hispanic whites are fairly evenly divided on this issue, both non-Hispanic blacks and Latinos would like to see a more activist federal government (Figure 3D). In the 2003 *New York Times*/CBS News poll, a majority of black and Latino respondents said they would rather have a larger government that provides more services than one that provides fewer. Specifically, 75% of Latinos and 60% of non-Hispanic blacks supported the idea of a bigger government providing more services. Whites, on the other hand, said they would prefer a smaller government providing fewer services over a larger one by a margin of 52% to 35%. This reinforces the finding that Latinos and non-Hispanic blacks are more likely to support a larger, more activist government than are non-Hispanic whites.

Figure 3D: Race and ethnicity and attitudes toward government

	White NH %	Black NH %	Latino %
<i>Role of government:</i>			
Too powerful	35	25	22
Right amount of power	33	25	30
Should use more power	31	47	46
Don't know	1	3	2

Source: Pew Research Center (1998)

Age is another important demographic variable related to views of government. In 1998, the Pew Research Center found that younger Americans (ages 18 to 29) were most in favor of a more activist government, with 38% saying that the government should use more power. Those age 50 to 64 were

the most critical – 39% said the government has too much power. Senior citizens were among the most likely to believe the government uses about the right amount of power. These findings suggest that young people may be the most receptive to a government that uses its power more frequently to affect national circumstances.

Other national surveys reveal similar findings. In a 2002 study entitled *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait*, Scott Keeter, Cliff Zukin, Molly Andolina and Krista Jenkins found that young people generally see a greater role for government than do their older counterparts (Figure 3E). Specifically, 64% of young people between the ages of 15 and 25 said that the “government should do more to solve problems,” while only 38% of adults 57 and older felt the same way. Similarly, 65% of young people vs. 53% of their older counterparts said that “government regulation of business is necessary to protect the public interest.”

Young people are also more likely to have positive views of the potential of government and politics. In the survey by Keeter and his colleagues, 42% of respondents ages 15 to 25 said “the political system works to ensure equal opportunity for everyone,” while roughly 30% of those ages 26 to 56 felt this way, as did 39% of those older than 57. And in the 1999 CEG/Hart-Teeter survey, young people expressed greater faith in government to solve policy problems than did their older counterparts, and were more likely to say the government works better than it is given credit for.

Figure 3E: Generational differences in attitudes toward government

Age	15-25 %	26-37 %	38-56 %	57+ %
<i>Government</i>				
Should do more to solve problems	64	51	43	38
Does too many things better left to business/individuals	31	41	50	50
<i>Government regulation of business:</i>				
Is necessary to protect the public interest	65	60	54	53
Usually does more harm than good	29	30	34	34
<i>The political system works:</i>				
To ensure equal opportunity for everyone	42	33	30	39
To give special favors to some at the expense of others	54	59	64	53

Source: *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation* (2002)

There is also a strong link between partisanship and attitudes toward government power. In 1998, a plurality of Democrats favored a more activist

government, while Republicans said the government is too powerful. As the Pew Research Center’s analysis shows, partisan views in this area have remained remarkably stable over the years (Figure 3F).

Figure 3F: Partisanship and views on governmental power 1964 vs. 1997

	Repub		Democ		Indep	
	64	'97	'64	'97	'64	'97
Role of government:	%	%	%	%	%	%
Too powerful	48	45	13	18	30	38
Right amount of power	31	29	41	39	40	28
Should use more power	17	25	37	42	26	32
Don't know	4	1	9	1	4	2

Source: Pew Research Center (1998)

The 2000 NPR/Kaiser/Harvard study echoed these findings, as Democrats were much more likely than Republicans to want more government involvement in a host of activities, such as ensuring access to affordable health care and making sure that food and medicines are safe. In addition, the study found that Republicans are much more likely than Democrats to say the government has gone too far in regulating business (73% vs. 47%, respectively).

Demographics and Evaluations of Government Performance

Views about government performance vary widely across demographic groups (Figure 3G). The 1998 Pew Research Center survey asked respondents, “All in all, how good a job does the federal government do running its programs?” Overall, only 25% gave the federal government excellent or good ratings. But men were harder on the government than were women. Only 22% of men said the government does an excellent or good job running its programs, 52% rated the government’s performance only fair and 25% said government does a poor job. Among women, 29% gave the government excellent or good ratings, 54% said the government’s performance is only fair and 16% rated the government’s performance poor.

Figure 3G: Evaluating government performance

	Excellent/ Good %	Only Fair %	Poor %
Total	25	53	21
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	22	52	25
Female	29	54	16
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>			
White, NH	24	54	21
Black, NH	33	47	18
Latino	40	41	16
<i>Age</i>			
Under 30	30	57	12
30-49	25	50	24
50-64	19	53	27
65+	27	58	14
<i>Party ID</i>			
Republican	20	50	28
Democrat	37	52	10
Independent	19	56	24

Source: Pew Research Center (1998)

Non-Hispanic whites were less likely than either non-Hispanic blacks or Hispanics to say that the government does an excellent or good job running its programs. And in the 2002 Keeter survey, young people gave the government slightly higher performance evaluations than did their older counterparts. Moreover, 65% of respondents ages 15 to 25 said “government often does a better job than people give it credit for,” while only 44% of those over the age of 57 felt the same way.

Party identification also plays a role in evaluations of government performance. For example, in the 1998 Pew Research Center study – administered when Clinton was in the White House – 37% of Democrats said the government does an excellent or good job running its programs compared with 20% of Republicans. Republicans were also almost three times as likely as Democrats to say the government does a poor job running its programs (28% vs. 10%, respectively). But Republicans’ attitudes have softened since the party has taken control of Congress and the White House. In a 2003 Pew survey, 59% of Republicans said the government is wasteful and inefficient, down nearly 20% from 1997.

4. The Consequences of Distrust

Scholars have consistently warned about the potentially dire consequences of distrust in government ever since the confidence gap first emerged in the late 1960s. Decades have passed, trust in government has continued to decline and social scientists and other observers are still waving red flags. In *Fall from Grace: The Public’s Loss of Faith in Government*, Gary Orren wrote, “today’s discontent is neither transient nor shallow and it holds profound (and negative) consequences for governance.”

Yet distrust in government doesn’t seem to have dampened our patriotic spirit. In a 2003 Pew Research Center survey, 91% of respondents agreed with the statement, “I am very patriotic.” And in the 1998 Pew study (Figure 4A), almost an equal percentage of people who do and don’t trust the government said they are very patriotic (91% and 86%, respectively).

Figure 4A: Trust and patriotism

	<i>Trust the Government</i>	
	Always/Most of the time %	Hardly ever/ Never %
<i>I am very patriotic</i>		
Agree	91	86
Disagree	8	12
Don’t know	1	2

Source: Pew Research Center (1998)

Nor has distrust in government fostered lawlessness. According to the 1998 Pew Research Center survey, people who distrust the government are just as likely as those who trust the government to respect and obey the law. However, the survey did find a modest relationship between trust in government and a willingness to take violent action against the government. Among those who distrusted the federal government, 30% said that, in some situations, violence against the government may be justified. Only 21% of those who said they trusted the government agreed that violence is sometimes justified.

So the question remains: How, exactly, has distrust impacted American society?

ON PUBLIC SERVICE

Widespread distrust of government may negatively affect its ability to attract people to work in the public sector. The 1998 Pew Research Center study suggested a moderately strong relationship between trust in government and opinions about jobs in politics and government (Figure 4B). Those who distrusted the federal government were less likely than those who trusted

government to believe government is a good place to work, to say they would like to see a son or daughter go into politics, to recommend that young people start their careers in politics or government or to say they would prefer working for government over business.

Figure 4B: Trust and public service

	Total %	Trust gov't %	Distrust gov't %
<i>Is government a good place to work?</i>			
Yes	71	80	65
No	23	15	29
Don't know	6	5	6
<i>Would you like to see your son or daughter go into politics?</i>			
Yes	27	30	25
No	67	60	71
Don't know	6	10	4
<i>Would you recommend that young people start their careers in politics/government?</i>			
Yes	40	46	36
No	54	46	59
Don't know	6	8	5
<i>Would you prefer government or private business as an employer?</i>			
Government	23	29	20
Private business	70	61	76
Don't know	7	10	4

Source: Pew Research Center (1998)

Despite this relationship and the plummet in trust since the 1960s, interest in public service has remained relatively stable. In 1955, the Gallup Organization found that 26% of Americans would like to see their sons or daughters go into politics as a life's work. In 1965, after John F. Kennedy sparked new interest in public service, 36% said they would like to see their children go into politics. And as recently as 1997, 27% of Americans held this view.

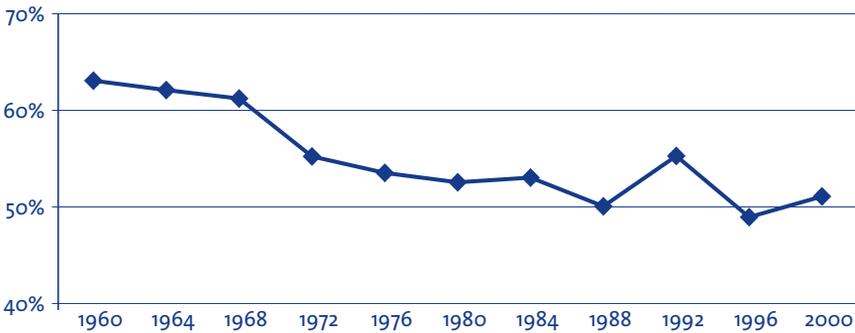
In their 1997 survey for the Council for Excellence in Government, pollsters Peter Hart and Robert Teeter found that young people were fairly enthusiastic about public service. More than one third (36%) of those under age 30 said they would be very or fairly likely to consider a job in government service; another 28% said they would be somewhat likely to do so. When asked what

would appeal to them most about government service, 38% of these young people said the opportunity to help people and make a difference, 32% pointed to the salaries and benefits, 27% cited job security and 22% said the ability to work on important issues facing society. In follow-up surveys in 2002 and 2004, CEG/Hart Teeter pollsters found little variation in these numbers.

DISTRUST AND VOTER TURNOUT

The long-term decline in trust in government has mirrored the decline in voter turnout. The link between the two, however, is indirect at best. In 1960, nearly 63% of those eligible to vote exercised that right in the presidential election. Turnout decreased for each subsequent election through 1984 (Figure 4C). In 1992, when voters elected the first Democratic president since the 1970s, turnout increased from 50% in 1988 to just over 55%. Yet it fell back below 50% in 1996 and only reached 51% in the closely contested election of 2000. Turnout for mid-term elections has been even lower, falling from nearly 50% in the early and mid-1960s to less than 40% throughout most of the 1990s.

Figure 4C: Voter turnout, presidential election years, 1960 to 2000



Source: Committee for the Study of the American Electorate

Although voter turnout was up modestly in the presidential election of 2000, Curtis Gans, of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, wrote, “Nothing in this turnout picture indicates that we have turned the corner on declining voter turnout. We are still at levels 25% below what turnout was in the 1960s and each succeeding generation of young potential citizens is voting at an ever lower rate.”

Various non-trust factors have contributed to the decline in voter turnout – perhaps none more than changing generational patterns. The youngest people eligible to vote have traditionally been the least likely to participate in elections. The passage of the 26th Amendment in 1972 and the influx of the baby-boom generation into the electorate swelled the ranks of very young

voters, thereby depressing overall turnout. As Steven Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen pointed out in *Mobilization, Participation and Democracy in America*, roughly one quarter of the electorate was under age 35 in 1960; by 1984 four in ten eligible voters fell into this age group.

Various non-trust factors have contributed to the decline in voter turnout – perhaps none more than changing generational patterns.

While the decline in turnout has occurred across all age groups, the falloff has indeed been more dramatic among young people. As Peter Levine and Mark Lopez of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) pointed out in a 2002 article, voter turnout among those under age 25 has declined nearly 15% since 1972, while turnout among those age 25 and older has declined only slightly (Figure 4D).

Figure 4D: Voter turnout in presidential election years, 1972-2000



Source: Levine and Lopez, "Youth Voter Turnout Has Declined by Any Measure"

Because of these patterns, older voters have a disproportionate impact on elections. The 2002 *Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard* study pointed out that in the 1974 mid-term election, younger voters (those under age 30) outnumbered those age 65 and older. By 1988, however, older voters outnumbered younger ones by more than a two-to-one margin. And if current trends continue, older voters could outnumber their younger counterparts by a margin of four to one by 2022, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Changing generational patterns are but one factor contributing to declining voter turnout. Rosenstone and Hansen underscored the impact of a decreased sense of political efficacy among the public, weakened social involvement and a growing detachment from political parties. They also pointed to a decline in electoral mobilization, arguing that, over time, political parties have done less one-on-one canvassing, elections have become less competitive, campaign resources have been spread too thin and social movement activity has declined.

Considering the measurable impact of these factors, Rosenstone and Hansen concluded that there is no evidence linking the decline in public trust to the decline in voter turnout. Ruy Teixeira echoed this point in his book *The Disappearing American Voter*. Using data from the National Election Studies from 1964 through 1988, Teixeira showed that distrust and cynicism have “no significant independent effect on an individual’s likelihood of voting...despite the intuitive plausibility...” Furthermore, data from the ANES shows that people who distrust the government were just as likely as those who trust the government to have voted in the 2000 presidential election and the 2002 mid-term election (Figure 4E).

Figure 4E: Trust in government and voter turnout

	Trust government %	Distrust government %
2000		
Voted	74	72
Didn't Vote	25	28
2002		
Voted	59	58
Didn't Vote	41	43

Source: American National Election Study (2000, 2002)

THE IMPORTANCE OF FEELING CONNECTED

Teixeira and other scholars have argued that declining voter turnout may be the result of weakening social and political connectedness. So while trust in government may not have contributed to the falloff in voter turnout per se, feelings about the responsiveness of the political system and its leaders may indeed be linked to this trend.

The 1999 CEG/Hart-Teeter survey explored the relationship between political connectedness and political participation, revealing that relatively few Americans felt connected to their government. Only three in ten agreed with the statement, “I feel close and connected to government,” while nearly two thirds (64%) agreed that “I feel distant and disconnected from government.”

The CEG/Hart-Teeter survey also found that young people were more likely than their older counterparts to feel disconnected from government (Figure 4F). In fact, 69% of respondents ages 18 to 34 said they felt distant and disconnected from government rather than close and connected to it. People ages 35 to 49 were somewhat less disconnected (63% distant /disconnected) while those ages 50 to 64 were even more positive about their relationship to government (58% disconnected). Senior citizens felt the most connected to government (56% connected).

Figure 4F: Who feels connected to government?

Age	18-34 %	35-49 %	50-64 %	65+ %
<i>I feel...</i>				
Close/connected to government	31	37	42	56
Distant/disconnected from government	69	63	58	44

Source: CEG/Hart-Teeter (1999)

Hart and Teeter argued that these age-related differences in connectedness – which they labeled “the new generation gap” – have important implications for political engagement. Analysis of the survey data showed that citizens who feel disconnected from government are much less likely to participate in politics (Figure 4G). For example, while 50% of those who feel connected to government vote regularly, only 28% of “disconnected” people do the same. In addition, 57% of those who feel connected to government have contacted an elected official in the past two years versus 38% of those who feel disconnected. And 58% of connected Americans have attended a public hearing in the past two years, compared with only 39% of those who feel disconnected.

Figure 4G: Connection and participation

<i>I feel...</i>	Connected to government	Disconnected from government
	%	%
Vote regularly	50	28
Contacted elected official in last year	57	38
Attended public hearing in past 2 years	58	39

Source: CEG/Hart-Teeter (1999)

Given these generational patterns, it’s not surprising that young people are less likely than older people to participate in politics and government. Hart and Teeter voiced their concern over this issue:

“This generational pattern of younger adults feeling more disconnected would seem to have worrisome implications for the future of the American polity. If each new generation continued to form a weaker attachment to government than the one before, the country would fairly soon find that only a small minority of citizens was connected to and involved in government.”

How does all of this relate to trust in government? Not surprisingly, people who feel disconnected from government also tend to be more distrustful of government. In the 1999 CEG/Hart-Teeter survey, only 23% of those who felt disconnected from government trusted the federal government to do what is right (Figure 4H). By comparison, 38% of those who felt connected to government also trusted the federal government. Similarly, only 15% of those who felt disconnected from government said they had confidence in the federal government, compared with 30% of those who felt connected.

People who feel disconnected from government also tend to be more distrustful of government. In the 1999 CEG/Hart-Teeter survey, only 23% of those who felt disconnected from government trusted the federal government to do what is right.

Figure 4H: Disconnection and distrust

I feel...

	Connected to government %	Disconnected from government %
Trust the government	38	23
Have confidence in the federal government	30	15

Source: CEG/Hart-Teeter (1999)

OTHER FORMS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

While voter turnout has declined over the past several decades, other forms of political participation have remained more stable or, in some cases, actually increased. In their book *Voice and Equality: Civic Volunteerism in American Politics*, Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry Brady explore trends and patterns of citizen participation. Using data from the 1967 Participation in America survey and the 1987 General Social Survey, the

authors showed that while voter turnout had fallen, citizens remained active in many other ways (Figure 4I).

Figure 4I: Changes in civic participation over time

	1967	1987	Absolute Change	Relative Change
	%	%	*	%
<i>Voting</i>				
Regular voting in presidential elections	66	58	-8	-12
Always vote in local elections	47	35	-12	-26
<i>Campaign</i>				
Persuade others how to vote	28	32	+4	+14
Actively work for party or candidate	26	27	+1	+4
Attend political meeting or rally	19	19	0	0
Contribute money to party or candidate	13	23	+10	+77
Member of political club	8	4	-4	-50
<i>Contact</i>				
Contact local official: issue-based	14	24	+10	+71
Contact state or national official: issue-based	11	22	+11	+100
Contact local official: particularized	7	10	+3	+43
Contact state or national official: particularized	6	7	+1	+17
<i>Community</i>				
Work with others on local problem	30	34	+4	+13
Active membership in community problem-solving organization	31	34	+3	+10
Form group to help solve local problem	14	17	+3	+21

* This column represents the change in percentage points.
Source: Verba, Scholzman, Brady, Voice and Equality (1995)

The data clearly revealed a decline in reported voter turnout for presidential elections, from 66% in 1967 to 58% in 1987. The falloff for local elections was even steeper (47% in 1967; 35% in 1987). At the same time, however, there was an increase in certain campaign-related activities, such as persuading others to vote a certain way, actively working for a party or candidate and contributing money to a party or candidate (this form of participation nearly doubled from 1967 to 1987). There were also substantial increases in the rates at which citizens contacted elected officials. For instance, while 11% of the public reported having contacted a state or national official with an issue-based concern in 1967, 22% reported having done so in 1987. Additionally, several forms of community-based participation increased over this 20-year period.

Verba, Scholzman and Brady also discussed the many factors that can create varying rates of participation across the population. They concluded that education, income, civic skills, citizenship and political engagement are good predictors of overall political participation.

Political engagement is measured in part by a citizen’s sense of efficacy (defined as the extent to which a person feels the government is responsive to his or her needs and the extent to which a person feels he or she is able to influence local or national government decisions). People who express a high level of efficacy feel strongly connected to their government and its leaders. And a stronger sense of efficacy leads to greater participation in a host of political activities.

In their 2002 study, *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation*, Scott Keeter and his colleagues found that citizens who feel they can make a difference in working to solve problems in their local communities are more likely to vote and follow news about politics and government (Figure 4J). Feeling connected, even on a local level, has very real implications for citizens’ broader political behavior.

Figure 4J: Efficacy and participation

Feel you can make a difference?

	Yes %	No %
Always vote	57	45
Have worked with others to solve a community problem	32	12
Follow news about politics and government most of the time	51	39

Source: *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation* (2002)

A 2002 survey of young adults (ages 15 to 25) conducted for the Council for Excellence in Government and CIRCLE entitled *Trust Matters: Is Anyone Listening?*² also found a strong link between efficacy and political involvement. Among the young Americans surveyed, those who felt a stronger connection to the government were more likely to be engaged in civic and political life.

BOWLING ALONE AND OTHER TRENDS

While some scholars have found encouraging signs in the data on civic participation, others paint a less optimistic portrait of civic life in America. In his 2000 book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam looked at trends in group membership for political, social, cultural and other types of civic organizations and concluded that Americans have gradually withdrawn from community life:

“For the first two-thirds of the Twentieth century, a powerful tide bore Americans into ever deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago – silently, without warning – that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century.”

Putnam, who examined different data sources than Verba and his colleagues, carefully charted the falloff in various forms of political participation, from signing a petition to actually running for office. He also demonstrated that, compared with the late 1950s and early 1960s, fewer people are joining churches or attending religious services. Moreover, American workers are less likely today to join unions and professional associations than they were 30 or 40 years ago. Putnam even noted a falloff in informal social interaction such as entertaining friends at home or playing cards. And, of course, he cited the sharp decline of league bowling.

Putnam’s research showed that for almost every form of civic engagement, the decline over time has been concentrated more heavily among the younger cohorts. Using a composite measure of 12 different forms of civic involvement, he demonstrated the dramatic falloff in involvement among 18- to 29-year-olds from the early 1970s to the early 1990s (Figure 4K). He concluded, “Much of the decline in civic engagement in America during the last third of the twentieth century is attributable to the replacement of an unusually civic generation by several generations that are less embedded in community life.”

Figure 4K: Youth and civic disengagement

Age	18-29 %	30-44 %	45-59 %	60+ %
<i>Took part in any of 12 forms of civic life*</i>				
1973-74	56	61	54	37
1993-94	31	42	42	33
Relative change	-44	-31	-22	-11

* The 12 activities included the following: wrote Congress, wrote letter to editor, wrote magazine article, gave speech, attended rally, attended public meeting, worked for political party, served as officer or as committee member of local organization, signed petition, ran for office, belonged to good-government organization.

Source: Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (2000)

While younger generations appear to be less involved in these traditional forms of civic engagement, they are not absent from civic life altogether. Recent research has shown that young people are actually more likely than their older counterparts to volunteer in their communities. Since the late 1980s, freshmen entering college have reported growing rates of community volunteering. Similarly, volunteerism is up among high school seniors, high school sophomores and eighth graders over the past 10 years. *In Volunteering among Young People*, Mark Lopez argued that new high school and college requirements for community service have helped drive this increase.

While young people are more likely to report ever volunteering, they are no more likely than their older counterparts to engage in regular volunteer

activities (Figure 4L). As Keeter and his colleagues reported, 40% of respondents ages 15 to 25 said they had volunteered in the past year, compared with 32% of those ages 25 to 56 and 22% of those age 57 and older. But only 22% of those ages 15 to 25 said they volunteer regularly, compared with roughly one quarter of those 26 to 56 and 19% of those age 57 and older.

Figure 4L: Volunteerism in the past year (2002)

Age	15-25 %	26-37 %	38-56 %	57+ %
Any volunteering	40	32	32	22
Regular volunteering	22	25	26	19

Source: The Civic and Political Health of the Nation (2002)

FACING THE CONSEQUENCES

The consequences of declining trust in government extend beyond the individual citizen to the workings of government itself. Public cynicism has made it more difficult for political leaders to lead. Highly distrustful of politicians and their motives, Americans are less likely to embrace bold policies that might require public sacrifice. Furthermore, the widespread perception that the government has performed poorly in the past is making it more difficult to garner public support for some new government initiatives.

Political scientist Jack Citrin has argued that this public cynicism may actually alter the “strategic incentives” of political leaders. In short, a distrustful citizenry is less likely to give its leaders the leeway they need to make innovative policy decisions. As a result, politicians may be motivated to enact popular yet short-sighted solutions to complicated problems.

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As part of their 1996 study of trust in government, *The Washington Post*, Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University interviewed political leaders about what it was like to govern in an era of unprecedented public cynicism. Former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell said that the rise of distrust has made it easier for politicians to “lead people by dividing them.” A highly distrustful public is indeed more receptive to negative messages about political opponents and less interested in finding areas of agreement.

When former Senator Bill Bradley left the Senate in 1996, he attributed his decision to leave in part to the changed political climate:

Being part of a government in a time of distrust like this is like walking across terrain where there are camouflaged pits with sharpened poles at the bottom, where at any moment you might fall through and be impaled. So you

govern tactically, by the latest focus group, the latest poll. You never pull back and try to figure out the bigger narrative, where the story is going and where it ought to go.

In a broader sense, public distrust of government – coupled with politicians’ distrust of each other – has had a negative impact on the deliberative process. Members of opposing political parties are becoming less and less likely to see each other as partners in governance. As Eric Uslaner put it in *The Moral Foundations of Trust*, “We are increasingly likely to deny that our political opponents are part of our moral community. And this has made political life more contentious.” This lack of comity has often led to political and legislative stalemate.

SUMMING UP

In many ways, skepticism is healthy for a democracy – it encourages vigilance on the part of the public and accountability on the part of its leaders. Nevertheless, a sustained period of distrust can lead to a culture of cynicism, which may turn citizens away from government and make it harder for leaders to govern effectively.

The consequences of public distrust of government are sometimes subtle and indirect. Distrust of government does not make people less patriotic, nor does it make them less likely to respect and follow the law. Moreover, widespread distrust is not the cause of declining voter turnout. What seems to be more important is the connection people feel toward their government, the degree to which they believe government leaders are responsive to their needs and the degree to which they believe they can affect change. People who feel disconnected from government are less likely to vote or participate in the political system in other ways.

If we agree that political engagement is an important component of a healthy democracy, special attention should be given to the attitudes and behaviors of young people in this country. Numerous surveys have suggested that they are among the least likely to feel connected to the government and are less likely than their older counterparts to participate in the political process. It is important to note, however, that young people are not disengaged from civic life altogether. Rather, they tend to focus on non-political activities related to their communities or their own individual concerns.

So the question becomes: How can young people start feeling more connected to government? Research has suggested that the seeds of political efficacy and involvement are sown at a very early age. The 2002 *Trust Matters* survey found that young people who have grown up discussing politics with their parents are more likely to trust the government, feel political leaders are responsive to their needs, believe voting is important and register to vote.

In addition to noting the importance of the home environment, the Keeter study found that civic education can play a key role in fostering efficaciousness among young people. It highlighted that students who received civic instruction in high school and participated in open discussion and debate about political and social issues were more likely to be involved in a host of civic activities. Unfortunately, only about half of the high school students surveyed reported that they regularly participate in these types of discussions.

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American public opinion toward government is a complicated web of attitudes – sometimes ill-informed and sometimes contradictory. Underpinning these attitudes is an ever-changing domestic political landscape and an unpredictable world. At certain times, the government will overreach, and the public will respond by withdrawing its support for the party in power. At other times, politicians will abuse the public trust, and the people will become more cynical about their leaders. And of course, as we were reminded on September 11, 2001, there will be times when the public will rely wholeheartedly on the government and the nation’s leaders, reminding all of us how strong and resilient our democratic system really is.

Through it all, fostering a strong connection between the public and their political leaders remains a vital goal. When citizens feel their voices are being heard and that their leaders are responsive to their needs, they will participate in the political system and contribute to the civic health of the nation.

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