

MEMO

To: Jeremy Gunn
From: Nabeena Chatterjee
Subject: Survey of Public Opinion on Government Competence
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Public perception of government competence from WWII to 1998

The public's opinion of government efficiency is predicated on two things : whether politics is too complicated and whether people feel that they can influence the government's actions. In the aftermath of World War II, a significant proportion of the public agreed that politics was too complicated. In 1952, 71% believed that the process was too complex to understand what was going on.¹ During the course of the mid-fifties however, public understanding of the government increased such that in 1956, only 64% percent of people thought the government was too complicated.² In addition, the public believed that it had a voice in government decisions as is evidenced by the fact that a mere 31% thought they had no say in 1952. By 1956, this percentage had dropped still further to 28%.³ Finally, the majority had faith in public officials. Whilst 35% responded that public officials don't care what people think in 1952, the number decreased by nine percentage points in four years with only 26% giving this response in 1956.⁴ Public confidence in its own voice, in government officials, and in the system itself was manifested in the political efficacy index generated from responses to questions about the complexity of government and faith in public officials. Belief in political efficacy soared throughout the 1950's, reaching 74% in 1960, its highest point in forty years.⁵

¹The National Election Studies, University of Michigan, 13 May 1998. "Politics is Too Complicated."

²Ibid.

³Ibid., "People Don't Have a Say in What the Government Does."

⁴Ibid., "Public Officials Don't Care What People Think."

⁵Ibid., External Political Efficacy Index 1952-1996.

The following decade saw the erosion of this belief in political efficacy by a staggering 18 percentage points. One way of understanding how this occurred is by determining what kinds of people supported the government in the fifties and their reasons for withdrawing that support in the sixties. In 1956, more men and whites believed in government efficacy than women and blacks. Similarly, the vast majority of support for the government came from upper income college graduates, with a discrepancy of 40 percentage points between the highest and lowest income brackets.⁶ During the course of the sixties however, white support declined 10 percentage points, from 74% in 1956 to 64% in 1966.⁷ The corresponding increase in black support from 46% to 50% was not enough to make up for the large decrease in white support. Looking at replies according to income distribution shows that support from top income earners decreased from 91% in 1956 to 81% in 1966. The decrease was even larger in other income percentiles.

⁶Ibid., table 5B.4.1.

⁷Ibid.

Although belief in political efficacy is in large part motivated by the complexity of the government and confidence in public officials, the trend towards less belief in the sixties was due to other factors, such as distrust, wastage of tax money, and perceived corruption of the government. Men and women alike distrusted the government. Even though 75% of men and 71% of women trusted the government most of the time in 1958, by 1968, the numbers dropped to 62% and 61% respectively.⁸ Support declined through the mid-sixties without regard to education or income, the most notable decrease being that of white voters from 74% in 1958 to 61% in 1968. Government wastage of tax money evidently angered many potential supporters as well. A bare plurality of 43% agreed that the government wasted a lot of tax money in 1958, but by 1968, this percentage became 59%, well over a majority of the public.⁹ Respondents were further alienated by a rise in the number of crooked government officials, and by the domination of a few big interests. When asked in 1968 whether government was run for the benefit of all, 40% responded that it was run by a few big interests. Within two years, the percentage had risen to 50%.¹⁰ Increasing distrust compounded by corruption and wastage led to a 61% score on the government responsiveness index in 1970, compared to the 78% score the government received in 1966.¹¹ Together with government complexity and a feeling of having less say in government decisions, the lower opinion of government responsiveness yielded a political efficacy score of 58% in 1970, marking a 16 percentage point drop from 1960 as opposed to the 8 percentage point increase from 1952 to 1960.¹² The federal government was never able to recover from the downturn in public opinion concerning its efficacy.

Dissatisfaction with government was at a high point in the early 1970's. In 1973 for

⁸Ibid., Trust the Federal Government 1958-1996, table 5A.1.2.

⁹Ibid., "Do People in Government Waste Tax Money?"

¹⁰Ibid., "Is the Government Run for the Benefit of All?" 1964-1996.

¹¹Ibid., Government Responsiveness Index 1964-1996.

¹²Ibid., External Political Efficacy Index 1952-1996.

example, a significant proportion of the population (66%) was generally displeased with the way the nation was being governed.¹³ By 1974, the situation had been exacerbated by Watergate issues, causing 7% of those polled to say that they believed lack of trust in the government to be the most important problem facing the country.¹⁴ Accordingly, “big government” surfaced as the dominant issue in the 1976 presidential campaign, indicative of public desire to cut back spending. Even in May 1979, 43% of respondents feared that the federal government, not labor or big business, would pose the greatest threat to the country in the future.¹⁵

Biggest Threat to Nation

	Big Government	Big Labor	Big Business	No Opinion
June 1979	43%	17%	28%	12%
Jan. 1977	39%	26%	23%	12%
Aug. 1968	46%	26%	23%	12%
Jan. 1967	49%	21%	14%	16%
Oct. 1959	14%	41%	15%	30%

(Gallup Report, 1979)

¹³Gallup Poll, 1973.

¹⁴Gallup Poll, August 16-19, 1974.

¹⁵Gallup Poll, 1979. When comparative polls were first taken in 1959, the majority (41%) feared big labor as the largest threat to the future of the country, while few feared big business (15%) or government (14%). During the sixties however, big government supplanted the place of labor, leading to a situation in 1967 where 49% feared big government and 21% big labor, the exact converse of the 1959 poll. Out of the new 35% voicing fear of government, 20% had switched from big labor while the remaining 15% were those who previously had no opinion.

Unlike the sixties, the decline in perception of political efficacy in the seventies was not because a significantly larger number of people thought that the system was too complicated, but rather because they felt that they had much less input in the government's actions. Compared to 36% with this belief in 1966, 41% held this belief in 1976, paving the way for increases in later decades.¹⁶ Public opinion of government officials remained fixed throughout the 1970's.¹⁷ Thus, the only reason for a lower political efficacy score in 1980 than in 1970 could have been too little public involvement and therefore too much government.¹⁸

Despite a long period of time in the seventies and early eighties when the public was equally divided on the question of how much power the federal government should exercise, a majority in 1986 clearly favored a more active government. Non-whites were more likely to encourage greater federal involvement while college graduates tended to support the status quo.

¹⁶The National Election Studies, "People Don't Have a Say in What the Government Does."

¹⁷Ibid., "Public Officials Don't Care What People Think."

¹⁸Ibid., External Political Efficacy Index 1952-1996.

During the eighties, a significant sector of the polled population began to believe that the “federal government should use its powers more vigorously to promote the well-being of all segments of the people.”¹⁹ Although this sector in 1982 was only 30%, within four years, it comprised 41% of people. At the same time, the percentage of those who felt that the government exercised too much power fell from 38% to 28%. By 1986, there was a 13% gap in favor of the government wielding more power compared to the 2% gap in 1978 in favor of less government intrusion.²⁰

Public Opinion : Amount of Government Power

	Too much	Too little	Just right	Don't know
1978	38%	36%	18%	8%
1982	38%	30%	18%	14%
1984	35%	34%	25%	--
1986	28%	41%	--	--

Although the 1980's was a decade in which the public expressed a desire for a larger federal role, the basic distrust of the government and its abilities that was present in the 1970's resurfaced in the eighties. When asked to compare big government, big business and big labor, most Americans chose big government as the paramount threat to the well-being of the country. The public accused the federal government of creating more problems than it solved and of being the least capable of the three levels of government of solving its difficulties.²¹ Many Americans trusted the federal government to act correctly only some of the time. Regardless of whether the government is actually corrupt or not, the public believed that it catered to big interests rather than looking out for the average person. Finally, “Americans [worried] that government officials waste many tax dollars. Those at the federal level are accused of being the most profligate; those

¹⁹Denis A. Gilbert, “Compendium of American Public Opinion.” (New York, NY:Facts on File Publications), 1988.

²⁰Ibid., 200.

²¹Ibid, 202. Gallup Poll, June 27, 1985.

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at the local level, the least.”²²

²²Ibid.

The low opinion (53%) of government efficacy in 1980 and subsequent drop to 35% in 1990 was an offshoot of problems present in previous decades. In the sixties and the seventies, level of trust surfaced as a major determinant of government responsiveness and therefore of political efficacy. In 1966, about 16% of Americans almost always trusted the Washington government to do what is right.²³ A further 57% believed that the government could be trusted most of the time. By 1968, the proportion of Americans trusting the federal government most of the time had slipped to 54%.²⁴ The year marked the last time a majority of Americans trusted the government most of the time. After 1968, public trust declined steadily, reaching an absolute minimum of 22% in 1980. Although the percentage had increased to 43% in 1983, it leveled off at 37% in 1986.²⁵ At the same time, the proportion of people almost always trusting the government slipped considerably. Between 1966 and 1968, this group fell seven percentage points, from 17% to 10%. The numbers continued to fall such that in 1974, the proportion was 3%, something that lasted until 1978. After a short peak at 7% in 1983, it dropped once again to 5% in 1985. The most dramatic change however, occurred in the segment of the population trusting the government only some of the time. Between 1964 and 1980, the proportion rose from 22% to 69%. Despite a decrease to 46% in 1983, it increased again in 1986 to 54%.

²³Ibid. ABC News/Washington Post Poll, February 1985.

²⁴Ibid., 203.

²⁵CBS News/New York Times Poll, January 1986.

As in the 1960's, one of the catalysts in the erosion of public trust in the eighties was the belief that the government responds to the needs of a few select interests rather than to the masses. In 1958, 82% of those polled agreed that “government is run for the benefit of all people” compared to 18% who thought “government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves.”²⁶ Since then confidence in the federal government has dropped, falling under a majority to 45% in 1970. One decade later, the level of confidence reached a trough as less than a quarter of Americans, 23%, believed that “the government served the interests of the many.” The proportion increased to 32% in 1982, and to 40% in 1984, but fell back to 36% in 1985.²⁷ Distrust of government reached a peak in 1980, when 77% of the public agreed that a few big interests occupy the government.²⁸ The popularity of that view declined to 49% in 1984, but once again became the majority (55%) in 1985. By 1988, Americans believed by a margin of 50% to 44% that “most public officials in Washington are really not interested in the problems of the average citizen.” Part of the reason for this belief is that in 1985, 77% of people felt daunted by the complexity of the government. Secondly, in a choice between political parties and interest groups, 45% thought that their interests are best met by “organized groups concerned with specific issues such as business, labor, environmental and civil rights groups.”

Other than lack of appropriate responsiveness, distrust of the government stemmed from the government wasting tax dollars. In 1985, 69% of Americans, over two-thirds of the public, thought that “people in the government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes.”²⁹ An additional 25 % believed that at least some of the money is wasted. However such beliefs did not always predominate. In 1964 for example, the proportion of people saying that the government wastes a lot of tax money, 47% was almost matched by 44% who argued that the government

²⁶Gilbert, 204.

²⁷Ibid., 205.

²⁸Ibid., 206.

²⁹Ibid., 208.

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wastes only some tax money. By 1974 however, distrust had grown to the point where 75% asserted that the government wastes much of taxpayers' money. In 1978, public distrust peaked at 78%, as opposed to 17% contending that only some tax dollars were being wasted. Between 1983 and 1985, roughly 66% of people were asserting considerable waste in government.³⁰

³⁰Ibid., 209.

Despite high government waste and lack of responsiveness in the eighties and a low political efficacy score of 35% in 1990, according to a survey taken in July of that year, public dissatisfaction with government was at an absolute minimum. When asked to identify the most important problem facing the country, only 1% of Americans responded “dissatisfaction with government.”³¹ However, statistics reveal that some skepticism about the competence of government must have been present. For example, a 21% plurality replied that the failure to balance the budget was the most important problem.³² This is evidenced by a poll taken in November 1991 in which the same question was asked. Dissatisfaction with government had risen to 5%.³³ The trend continued so that in March 1992, polls determined that the proportion had reached 8%, the same proportion whose chief concern was drug abuse.³⁴

Studies on American public opinion in the early nineties exhibit not only an increasing dissatisfaction with the government, but also growing distrust. When asked how much of the time they could trust the government in Washington, 71% of respondents replied “some of the time.”³⁵ The selected national trend below shows that public trust of the government initially faltered in 1968, when only 7% always trusted the government compared to 17% in 1966.

Selected National Trend

	<i>Always</i>	<i>Most of the time</i>	<i>Some of the time</i>	<i>Never</i>
1990.....	3%	25%	68%	2%
1988.....	4%	37%	56%	2%
1986.....	3%	35%	58%	2%
1984.....	4%	40%	53%	1%
1982.....	2%	31%	62%	2%
1980.....	2%	23%	69%	4%

³¹Gallup Poll, July 19-22, 1990.

³²Ibid.

³³Gallup Poll, November 21-24, 1991.

³⁴Gallup Poll, March 26-29, 1992.

³⁵Gallup Survey for CNN/USA Today, June 4-8, 1992.

1978.....	2%	27%	64%	4%
1976.....	3%	30%	62%	1%
1974	2%	34%	61%	1%
1972.....	5%	48%	44%	1%
1970.....	7%	47%	44%	--
1968.....	7%	54%	37%	--
1966.....	17%	48%	28%	3%
1964.....	14%	62%	22%	--
1958.....	16%	57%	23%	--

(Based on American National Election
Study of the University of Michigan)

By 1974 however, trust had suffered a fatal blow. Although in 1972 48% trusted the government most of the time compared to 44% some of the time, in 1974 the ratio was 36% to 61%. The trend has continued steadily until 1990, distrust increasing by 7% in 15 years.

Despite the change of administration in 1992, distrust of the Washington government increased until in 1993, 75% said they trusted the government only some of the time.³⁶ After a peak of 78% in April 1995, the proportion leveled off at 71% in August of that year.³⁷ Yet just as the 1990 poll showed that a low level of dissatisfaction with the government does not necessarily imply trust in government, the 1995 polls show that the converse is true as well. When asked whether they were satisfied with the way in which democracy is working in the U.S., 50% were either somewhat or very dissatisfied.³⁸ Since 51% of Americans believe that the U.S. grants the greatest possible amount of individual freedom to its citizens, dissatisfaction with or lack of trust in the federal government cannot be attributed to abridgement of liberty.

³⁶Gallup Poll, March 22-24, 1993.

³⁷Gallup Poll, January 16-18, 1995.

³⁸Gallup Poll, August 11-14, 1995.

What then are possible explanations for increasing distrust and dissatisfaction? Lack of responsiveness and waste contribute to the image of an incompetent government. Westerners for example believe the federal government to be the least efficient level.³⁹ However, different regions of the country express contradictory views on the government's efficiency, making it unlikely that this is the main reason for increasing public distrust. One phenomenon which may explain the trend is the low amount of confidence in American institutions in general. Even a cursory glance at the level of confidence in major institutions from 1966 to 1981 will yield the following conclusion: confidence in every major institution (for which results are documented) has decreased without exception. Thus while the plethora of polls on distrust of the government indicates a 17% point drop in confidence, the same is true of all other institutions, notably in medicine , higher education, and the military.⁴⁰

Confidence in the executive branch has been tainted by scandals and the inability of some presidents to clearly articulate their plans and policies.⁴¹ Yet Congress has suffered a decline in its reputation as well. In May 1989, 32% believed that "most members of Congress have engaged in the kinds of ethical misconduct allegedly committed by [Speaker] Wright."⁴² Even the Supreme Court has not emerged unscathed. Its 61% favorability score in 1989 was a marked decline from the 79% rating it received in 1988.⁴³ Therefore increasing distrust of the federal government is not concentrated in one branch but rather a problem common to all three.⁴⁴

The fact that increasing distrust appears to be common to all institutions and all three

³⁹"Opinion Perspective," Group Attitudes Corporation, Spring 1982, 17.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Gallup Report, May 1989. "Dissatisfaction with Washington on the Rise; Bush 'Honeymoon' with Public May Be Over."

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Susan Mitchell, "The Official Guide to American Attitudes." (Ithaca, NY : New Strategist Publications, Inc.) 1996, 18.

branches of the federal government does not completely explain the trend. Aside from perceived waste of tax dollars and apathy of government officials towards public interests, there is one more way in which the federal government contributes to the demise of public confidence. A majority of Americans (54%) felt in 1994 that the amount of government secrecy is inappropriate.⁴⁵

In the past two years, businessmen and economists alike have focused on the question of how to restore confidence in the efficacy of the government. In his article on restoring trust in the government, Dana Mead highlights one reason for the downward spiral in public trust:

...the dissatisfaction with the size and intrusiveness of government has somehow spilled over into a basic distrust of the people who do the job of government. This in turn has tainted the notion of public service and created even lower expectations of government effective-

⁴⁵Ibid., 67.

ness, which can lead to even lesser government effectiveness.⁴⁶

Mead provides three solutions to the problem at hand. First, he advocates government hiring of policy wonks. The reason why this has not succeeded so far is that “too many business leaders discourage their good employees from taking a turn in government work...[because] the highest levels of government aren’t very business friendly.”⁴⁷ Second, Mead is a proponent of more measures of accountability: “In government, it is much more difficult to measure --and to hold people accountable for--their actions. That doesn’t mean it is not done, but it’s frequently done on a purely political calculus. This is not really being accountable for results.”⁴⁸ Mead raises one very important point: “the problem of attracting, retaining and motivating more talent to serve for at least a while in government.”⁴⁹ He even lists the advantages of the government over businesses such as dedication, commitment and sense of contribution. Finally, Mead stresses the need for leaders who will define their objectives clearly and then go on to accomplish them.

⁴⁶Dana G. Mead, Directorship, “Restoring trust in government: the private sector role.” Vol. 23 No.8 September 1997, 2.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid., 3.

⁴⁹Ibid., 4.

Although there is a consensus on the gravity of the problem of distrust in the government, businessmen and economists disagree on the solution. In a recent article in *The Economist*, polls depict the “proportion of respondents expressing confidence in the federal government [rising] sharply--albeit from 15% to just 22%” in the past two years.⁵⁰ The author considers a slightly different dilemma from Mead: “At first, broad attacks on the state can attract votes; but, after a while, the attackers have to offer specific way of cutting the state, and then their popularity fades.”⁵¹ Yet the article offers three reasons for optimism on this front. Dislike of and distrust in the federal government can be countered first by having a balanced budget for the first time in thirty years. “In the past, failure to balance the books seemed to symbolise a more general incompetence, and it set discussions of policy against a background of perpetual financial crisis.” Second, the Clinton administration has succeeded in cutting the size of the government. Therefore even if government spending remains high, “firms bid to carry out tasks that the government wants done, which promotes competition and efficiency....” Finally, the article draws on the success of welfare policy. “The welfare rolls have fallen during the past year, partly because of case-workers’ success in finding jobs for their charges. A hated programme that gave government a bad name has been turned into a popular success that enhances government’s reputation.”⁵² A balanced budget coupled with a smaller government workforce and greater use of public opinion in forming social policy presages a better public opinion of the efficacy of government in the years to come. It is worthwhile to note however, that too much trust in the federal government will not generate greater efficacy. As the article in *The Economist* concludes, “It is true, as Mr. Clinton and the new Republican activists argue, that there are some jobs only government can do. ..But it is also true that there are things which governments should not do.”⁵³

⁵⁰The Economist, “American Politics: He believes in government, so why doesn’t America?” January 24-30, 1998, 19.

⁵¹Ibid., 20.

⁵²Ibid., 21.

⁵³Ibid.

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