



The Public Opinion Paradox

An Anatomy of America's Love-Hate Relationship
with Its Government

Ruy Teixeira June 2010

Center for American Progress



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doing
what works

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Introduction and summary

Two leading public opinion researchers in 1967 noticed a contradiction in Americans' attitude toward government: They wanted the public sector to do more but were resistant to expanding its authority. The U.S. public was “operationally liberal” and “ideologically conservative,” wrote Lloyd Free and Hadley Cantril in their book, *The Political Beliefs of Americans*.

This public opinion paradox has been one of the more enduring and frustrating features of the political landscape over the ensuing five decades. Public mistrust of politicians and bureaucrats drains support from government programs in precisely those areas where the public demands more action. Case in point: This dynamic nearly derailed recent government attempts to reform health care, with opponents warning of a coming “Faustian web of Washington bureaucracy.”

The public's jaundiced view of government will continue to endanger progressive initiatives until we finally bridge the yawning gap between what people want from their government and what they believe it is capable of.

The Center for American Progress has commissioned a national poll that explores how to align the American political psyche's contradictory impulses as part of its Doing What Works project to promote public confidence in government by improving government operations. (Survey findings will be released July 27 at a Doing What Works conference.) But we must understand the gap before we can bridge it.

This report synthesizes major public opinion research about Americans' attitudes toward government and summarizes key findings about the public's positive agenda for government and its negative outlook on government's ability to execute that agenda.

- **The positive agenda:** Surveys show Americans want more government action in key areas such as health, poverty, law enforcement, and improving the environment.

- **The negative outlook:** Polls reveal the U.S. public lacks trust and confidence in government, and believes it is inefficient, unresponsive to ordinary citizens, and often hurts more than it helps.

The paper aims to provide a richer understanding of this public opinion paradox in anticipation of the upcoming DWW poll on how to fix the problem. The appendix includes additional background on the major polls and surveys the report analyzes.

The public's positive agenda for government: Do more with more

Public opinion research shows Americans have a long and varied positive agenda for their government. The key findings from this research are examined in this section.

The public consistently believes government has a strong responsibility to achieve a wide range of social goals

Americans were asked in 2003 whether government has a “responsibility” or “strong responsibility” to accomplish social goals. They emphasized the government should secure the national defense and provide a strong military (96 percent responsibility and 84 percent strong responsibility). They also wanted government to be responsible for a long list of domestic policy priorities (see table below).¹

Americans want government to deliver on domestic priorities

Social goals and the U.S. public's beliefs about how responsible government should be for achieving those goals

Social goal	Responsibility	Strong responsibility
Protecting the environment	93 percent	69 percent
Preventing abuse by corporations and the powerful	92 percent	71 percent
Ensuring equal opportunity	88 percent	67 percent
Guaranteeing a quality public education	87 percent	70 percent
Guaranteeing health insurance for all	76 percent	60 percent
Preventing poverty	76 percent	49 percent
Helping people with unemployment and health care crises	75 percent	40 percent
Guaranteeing a secure retirement	74 percent	46 percent

Source: “Public Interests Project,” conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, 1,002 adults nationally, October 21-26, 2003.

The public wants more government involvement in key areas

A majority of Americans polled in 2008 wanted more government intervention in:

- Energy (77 percent)
- Environment (75 percent)
- Health care (72 percent)
- Economy and job growth (68 percent)
- Education (67 percent)²

A majority in 2000 also supported more specific initiatives such as providing a decent standard of living for the elderly (73 percent), ensuring food and drug safety (73 percent), ensuring access to affordable health care (73 percent), reducing poverty (69 percent), ensuring clean air and water (67 percent), and setting minimum educational standards for schools (64 percent).³

The public wants more government spending to solve national problems

Respondents to the University of Chicago’s General Social Survey have been asked since 1973 whether government spends too little, too much, or about the right amount on a series of national problems. We can derive a net spending score that gauges public demand for additional investment by subtracting the percentage of respondents who believe we spend too much from the percentage who want more spending. The latest survey in 2008 shows a strong desire for more spending in the following areas:⁴

The public wants to see more money spent on national issues

Net spending scores on domestic problems for General Social Survey respondents, 2008

Problem area	We spend too little	We spend too much	Net spending score
Education	74 percent	5 percent	+68 percent
Health	76 percent	8 percent	+68 percent
Poverty	70 percent	8 percent	+62 percent
Environment	67 percent	9 percent	+59 percent
Social security	62 percent	6 percent	+56 percent
Crime	62 percent	7 percent	+55 percent
Drug addiction	57 percent	10 percent	+47 percent
Law enforcement	54 percent	9 percent	+45 percent
Mass transportation	49 percent	8 percent	+41 percent
Drug rehabilitation	50 percent	13 percent	+37 percent
Urban problems	49 percent	13 percent	+36 percent
Highway and bridges	45 percent	10 percent	+36 percent

Source: Tom W. Smith, “Trends in National Spending Priorities, 1973-2008” (National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, 2009).

The public wants a strong, active government

The Center for American Progress Progressive Studies Program ideology survey in 2009 found that the public supports government action in a number of areas. Seventy-three percent of respondents agreed that “government regulations are necessary to keep businesses in check and protect workers and consumers,” while only 12 percent disagreed. Only 9 percent disagreed that “government investments in education, infrastructure, and science are necessary to ensure America’s long-term economic growth,” compared with 79 percent who agreed. Given a choice between the two statements, “government should do more to promote the common good” and “government should do more to promote individual liberty” the public selected the common good statement by a 60 percent to 37 percent margin.

Likewise, respondents supported the statement “it’s time for government to take a larger and stronger role in making the economy work for the average American” over “turning to big government to solve our economic problems will do more harm than good” by a 62 percent to 35 percent margin.

The public also demonstrated an overwhelming preference for strong government in the 2008 University of Michigan National Election Study. Respondents said we need government to handle complex economic problems rather than relying solely on the free market by a 69 percent to 31 percent margin.⁵

The public does support select government agencies and programs

These agencies get high approval ratings from the public in public opinion polls:

- Centers for Disease Control: 90 percent
- National Institutes for Health: 80 percent
- Federal Aviation Administration: 76 percent
- Food and Drug Administration: 75 percent
- Federal Bureau of Investigations: 69 percent

And a majority of people say they have benefited a great deal or a fair amount from:

- Government roads and highways: 70 percent
- Parks and recreation programs: 66 percent
- Public schools: 65 percent
- Food and drug safety regulation: 58 percent
- Consumer safety regulation: 58 percent ⁶

Finally, the public has a “very favorable” or “somewhat favorable” view of some federal government work:

- National defense programs: 78 percent
- Environmental programs: 71 percent
- Medicare: 70 percent
- Social Security: 69 percent
- Federal education programs: 66 percent⁷

The public gives government performance the thumbs down

By and large, public support for some government agencies and appetite for more government intervention in key areas is not matched by a positive appreciation of the government's performance. Some key findings from the research on this topic are listed in this section.

The public lacks trust and confidence in government

Only 31 percent of the public said Washington can be trusted to do what's right always or most of the time in the 2008 National Election Study, or NES, compared with the 69 percent of respondents who said the government can be trusted only some or none of the time.⁸ In another ABC/*Washington Post* poll only 8 percent of respondents said they had a lot of confidence that the federal government can solve problems when it is resolved to do so. That's compared with 38 percent who had some confidence, 33 percent who expressed a little confidence, and 21 percent with no confidence.⁹

Only 16 percent of respondents to an NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll said they had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the federal government generally, while 41 percent had some and 42 percent very little confidence or none.¹⁰ About three-quarters of the public said the federal government does only a fair or poor job running its programs in a 2010 Pew survey.¹¹

The public believes government is inefficient and wasteful

Sixty-one percent of the public agreed that "government spending is almost always wasteful and inefficient" in a typical recent finding from CAP.¹² A 2009 Gallup poll found Americans estimate the federal government wastes half of all tax dollars.¹³ And 73 percent of respondents agreed that government workers "waste a lot of money we pay in taxes" in the 2008 National Election Study.¹⁴

These feelings undergird a strong American antipathy to taxes. Almost two-thirds of respondents in a 2003 Greenberg Quinlan Rosner poll agreed that “I don’t like paying taxes because the government is too wasteful and inefficient,”¹⁵ and 83 percent of survey respondents in a 2007 Greenberg poll said the federal government is more likely to waste any increase in the government coffer than spend it well.¹⁶

The public believes the government is not accountable

Three-quarters of the public said a lack of government accountability for spending was a very serious or serious problem in the 2007 Greenberg poll. And by a 58 percent to 36 percent margin in that same poll, the public preferred that Congress prioritize cutting wasteful spending and making government more accountable over investments in public priorities such as health care, education, and energy.¹⁷

The public believes the government is unresponsive to ordinary citizens

About 70 percent of the public believes government is run by a few big interests and not for the benefit of all citizens, according to the 2008 NES. What’s more, 60 percent of those respondents agreed with the sentiment, “Public officials don’t care much what people like me think.”¹⁸ Two years earlier, 64 percent of those surveyed by the National Opinion Research Center endorsed the idea that “most public officials are not really interested in the problems of the average man.”¹⁹ And in 2003, 55 percent of those surveyed by Pew said dealing with a federal government agency is often not worth the trouble.²⁰

The public sees the government as more of a hindrance than a help to getting ahead in life

Respondents in the 2007 Greenberg poll thought government makes it harder rather than easier to get ahead in life by a 2-to-1 margin.²¹ And a plurality in a 2009 Pew poll said government does more to hurt than help people trying to move up the economic ladder.

But a telling demonstration of the paradox of American public opinion on government is found in the very same Pew poll. Despite the respondents' negative view of government cited above, the poll showed strong majorities endorsing a wide range of proposed government actions as "very effective" in promoting economic mobility: making college more affordable, reducing the cost of health care, expanding job training programs, and making it easier to save for retirement.²²

Conclusion

Americans display a love-hate relationship with their government, and their contradictory views are, of course, interrelated and mutually reinforcing. A Pew Center study of the public's views on government found that the strongest predictor of a person's mistrust of government was a poor rating of government's performance.²³ Another Kaiser/NPR/Harvard study on the same subject found 73 percent citing the inefficiency and wastefulness of the federal government as a major reason for their distrust of government.²⁴

These attitudes cause the public to resist spending increases for the very programs they favor. This creates an under-resourced public sector, which makes it less likely government can succeed in achieving its objectives, which in turn only reinforces the lack of confidence and trust in government. It's a vicious cycle with a vengeance.

The forthcoming CAP Doing What Works survey will point to ways we can break this cycle—and the stakes are high. On the one hand, a substantial strengthening of public trust and confidence in government could result if the public's perceptions of government performance improve at a time of large-scale Obama administration initiatives in such areas as health care and energy.

On the other hand, a significant opportunity for rehabilitating active government over the long term will likely be lost if the cycle is not broken. The public's fear of government spending and sensitivity to government debt may moderate as the country's economic situation improves and unemployment comes down. But a fundamental lack of confidence in government will persist and undercut support for an active and well-resourced public sector if the Obama administration's initiatives in particular and the government in general are viewed as functioning no better than in the past after the storm passes.

Further, demographic shifts in the country underscore how vital the current opportunity to build government support is. By and large, growing groups like

Hispanics, professionals, and single women hold the most positive views of government and its potential. And the burgeoning segment of white college graduates, though not as positive as these groups, is nevertheless significantly more supportive of government than the declining white working class.

Perhaps most important, we must pay special attention to the so-called Millennial generation, those born after 1978. Millennials are much more likely than older generations to have a positive attitude toward government's potential to solve problems. But their cynicism about government effectiveness is also striking.²⁵

- Millennials are less trusting of the federal government than other young adults have been on average during the last 50 years. And they're far less trusting than young adults in the 1950s and 1960s.
- Millennials especially distrust elected officials. Fifty-four percent of Millennials believed that quite a few, rather than not many, government officials were crooked in the 2008 National Election Study.
- Sixty-three percent of Millennials describe themselves as less likely than previous generations to trust government and political leaders.
- A whopping 93 percent of Millennials agree that "government is dominated by special interests and lobbyists, who give millions of dollars in campaign contributions to politicians, who in turn give even more back to those special interests, while the rest of us are left holding the bag."

These findings make it all the more critical to strengthen confidence in government. A generation that might have supported more active government may instead mimic their parents' cynicism if the above views are reinforced by initiatives deemed wasteful and inefficient.

Appendix: Key studies on public views of government

The People and Their Government: Distrust, Discontent, Anger and Partisan Rancor

Pew Research Center, April 2010

This study is based on a March 2010 survey of 2,505 adults, probing their attitudes toward government and comparing these responses to earlier surveys done in the late 1990s by Pew. According to the study:

- While a majority also distrusted the federal government in those [earlier] surveys, criticism of government had declined from earlier in the decade. And the public's desire for government services and activism was holding steady. This is not the case today. Just 22 percent say they can trust the federal government almost always or most of the time, which is among the lowest measures in half a century. About the same percentage (19 percent) say they are “basically content” with the federal government, which is largely unchanged from 2006 and 2007 but lower than a decade ago.
- Opinions about elected officials are particularly poor. In a follow-up survey in early April 2010 just 25 percent expressed a favorable opinion of Congress, which was virtually unchanged from March's 26 percent prior to the health care reform bill's passage. This is the lowest favorable rating for Congress in a quarter century of Pew Research Center surveys. Over the last year, favorable opinions of Congress have declined by half, from 50 percent to 25 percent.
- Federal agencies and institutions also are viewed much more positively than Congress. Nonetheless, favorable ratings have fallen significantly since 1997-1998 for 7 of 13 federal agencies included in the survey. The declines have been particularly large for the Department of Education, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Social Security Administration, as well as the Environmental Protection Agency, NASA, and the Centers for Disease Control. In terms of job performance, majorities give positive ratings to just 6 of the

15 agencies or institutions tested, including the military (80 percent gave it a good-excellent rating) and the Postal Service (70 percent).

- The survey also finds an increase in the percentage saying the federal government negatively affects their day-to-day lives. Fifty percent said the federal government had a positive effect on their daily lives in October 1997 compared with 31 percent who said its impact was negative. Currently, 38 percent see the federal government's personal impact as positive while slightly more (43 percent) see it as negative.
- Americans' feelings about the federal government, however, run more toward frustration rather than anger despite the recent attention paid to demonstrations and other expressions of antigovernment sentiment. Fifty-six percent in the current survey say they are frustrated with the federal government, 21 percent say they are angry, and 19 percent say they are basically content. Majorities have expressed frustration with the federal government since October 1997, with a single notable exception: Just 34 percent said they were frustrated with the federal government two months after the 9/11 attacks, in November 2001.
- Finally, a majority of the public (56 percent) says that if they had a child just getting out of school they would like to see him or her pursue a career in government despite the frustration most Americans feel with government. And 70 percent say the government is a good place to work, which is unchanged from October 1997.

[The State of American Political Ideology, 2009](#)

[The Political Ideology of the Millennial Generation](#)

[New Progressive America](#)

[New Progressive America: The Millennial Generation](#)

Progressive Studies Program, Center for American Progress, March-May 2009

These studies include substantial sections on Americans' views of government based on an original poll plus extensive reviews of public data. The most relevant findings from these studies include:

- The greatest consensus on government's role is found on the importance of government investment to the nation's long-term economic health. Americans agree by almost a 9-to-1 margin that "government investments in education, infrastructure, and science are necessary to ensure America's long-term economic growth" (79 percent agree, 12 percent neutral, 9 percent disagree).

- The public also shows broad agreement on government’s responsibility to provide financial support for the neediest in our society. More than two in three Americans agree that “government has a responsibility to provide financial support for the poor, the sick, and the elderly” (69 percent), while 15 percent are neutral and another 15 percent disagree.
- The strongest conservative position and the most effective critique against a more active role for government is the attack on the wastefulness of government spending. Overall, 61 percent agree that “government spending is almost always wasteful and inefficient,” while another 16 percent are neutral and 23 percent disagree.
- Growing groups hold the most positive views of government. In the 2008 election exit poll, Millennial (18- to 29-year-old) voters felt by 69 percent to 27 percent (compared to 51 percent to 43 percent overall among all voters) that government should be doing more to solve problems rather than government is doing too many things best left to businesses and individuals. Similarly, on the Progressive Studies Program survey’s progressive government index, Millennials scored 56.3, compared to 54 for the public as a whole. Hispanics scored even higher at 59.9. Professionals and single women also had high scores, 57.2 and 56.2, respectively. White college graduates scored slightly lower than the overall average (53.4) but still significantly higher than the declining white working class (51.5), chiefly because white college graduates are much less persuaded by conservative counterarguments on government.
- Millennials want government to play a strong and positive role in today’s economy, but a disjuncture exists between Millennials’ views on how government should work and their views on current government institutions and most elected officials. Millennials trust the federal government less than other young adults have on average during the 50 years this question has been asked (46 percent), and they are far less trusting than young adults in the 1950s and 1960s when more than 70 percent of young people thought they could trust the federal government to do what is right most or all of the time.

Findings from a National Survey and Focus Groups on Economic Mobility
Economic Mobility Project, Pew Charitable Trusts, March 12, 2009

This study looks at American attitudes toward economic mobility, including the government’s role in facilitating mobility. The key findings on government’s role are:

- Americans believe the government hurts people more than it helps them move up the economic ladder. But they believe a range of policies would be effective at encouraging upward mobility. Americans believe by a 46 percent to 36 percent margin that the government does more to hurt than help people move up the economic ladder, which reflects past research by the Economic Mobility Project that shows that while there is federal investment in mobility-enhancing policies, it more often benefits upper-middle- and upper-income households. But large majorities believe the government could adopt mobility-enhancing policies that would be effective, including making college more affordable and supporting job training and early childhood education.

Trends in National Spending Priorities, 1973-2008

Tom W. Smith, National Opinion Research Center, February 10, 2009

This study analyzes 35 years of General Social Survey data on the public's preferences for government spending in a wide range of policy areas. Data were collected from respondents by asking them whether we are spending too much money, too little money, or about the right amount in each area, with the figures for too much minus too little forming a net spending score. In the study's own words:

- Despite a dislike of taxes (in 2008, 57 percent said their own federal income tax was too high), more people have always favored increases in spending than cuts. In 2008, as in most years since the 1970s, people have backed more spending in about three-quarters of the areas and less spending in only the bottom quarter. Moreover, the number of areas with positive net spending scores not only outnumbered areas with negative scores, but are also larger. In 2008, the largest negative score (-52.3 for foreign aid) was bested by the top six positive scores (health +68.1, education +68.4, assistance for the poor +62.1, environment +58.7, Social Security +55.7, and halting crime +55.5).
- The level of support has, however, waxed and waned over the decades. From 1993 to 2000 it showed an upswing with overall spending scores approaching the record levels of the late 1980s and early 1990s. After a drop in 2002 support for spending was higher in 2004-08.
- Currently education and health are clearly the public's top two spending priorities with very high scores (both +68) that are consistently above even other very popular areas like assistance to the poor, the environment, Social Security, halting crime, assistance for child care, and dealing with drug addiction (+47 to +62).

Change You Can Believe in Needs a Government You Can Trust

William Galston and Elaine Kamarck, Third Way, November, 2008

This study extensively reviews National Election Study data on distrust of government and other negative public views of government and relates these data to difficulties building support for transformational change. According to the study:

- A remarkable 76 percent of people in 1964 said that they trusted the federal government to do the right thing just about always or most of the time. As late as 1972, 53 percent still felt that way despite turmoil at home and an unpopular war. By 1980 only 25 percent did, a number that rose through much of the 1980s as the economy grew and inflation declined. By the end of that decade, however, trust began to erode again and hit rock bottom at 21 percent in 1994, presaging huge Republican gains in the off-year election. Trust slowly climbed with peace and prosperity through the rest of the decade and the Clinton administration's efforts to reinvent government and balance the budget, and it then got an added boost from the "rally around the flag" effect of 9/11 and the early military success of the Iraq invasion. After the 2004 election, trust declined again, with a precipitous decline occurring around the time of the disastrous governmental response to Hurricane Katrina. It now stands at only 17 percent—the lowest ever recorded. Absent unforeseen events, the next president will confront levels of trust still at or near their nadir.
- Finer-grained questions help identify more specific reservations Americans have about their national government. Sixty-four percent of Americans in 1964 believed that government is run for the benefit of all, versus only 40 percent in 2004 (a figure that was itself up substantially from the lows recorded in the early 1980s and again in the early 1990s). Forty-seven percent in 1964 believed that people in government waste a lot of taxpayers' money, a figure that peaked at 79 percent in 1980 and still stood at more than 60 percent in 2004. And 32 percent in 1964 felt that government listened to the people "a good deal" versus only 16 percent in 2004. Not surprisingly, an index measuring the extent to which citizens felt that they shaped the agenda and concerns of the federal government dropped from 67 percent in 1964 to 47 percent in 2004.
- Over the past four decades, public attitudes have changed for the worse not toward government as a whole, but only toward the federal government. The federal government actually enjoyed more public trust and confidence than did either state or local governments until the early 1970s. The federal government

ranked last by a considerable margin by 1992, as it does today. By contrast, the percentage of Americans expressing either a great deal or fair amount of trust and confidence in their state and local governments actually rose substantially between 1972 and 2007. The federal government's favorability rating in the current decade has slumped to only 37 percent versus 54 percent on the eve of the 2000 election, while state and local governments hold steady in public esteem.

- Obama should use his [2010] budget to demonstrate that he is serious about cutting appropriations for inefficient programs and terminating those that have outlived their usefulness. He should frame budget and programs in the clear language of performance goals, including concrete standards governing how citizens can expect to be treated when they deal with the public sector.
- The federal Government Performance and Results Act will be 16 years old when the next president takes office. The act has generated a wealth of data on how different parts of the government actually perform. But it is largely ignored by politicians or used to disparage only those programs to which they are ideologically opposed. Performance standards should be used as intended—as a means of managing the government and communicating with the public.

Attitudes Toward the Federal Government

Karlyn Bowman, American Enterprise Institute, June 2008

This study is essentially a compendium of time-series data on public views toward the federal government. Full question wording and results are provided for almost all relevant questions. The study notes:

- Contemporary polls show that Americans believe the federal government can have a positive impact on people's lives. But only small proportions believe the government is playing that role today. Perhaps more damaging, significant numbers believe the government creates more problems than it solves. Large majorities do not trust the government to do what is right. People believe Washington is too big, inefficient, and wasteful. They do not have a high regard for politicians.
- Americans today still want the federal government to do many things. But they are critical of government performance. There is no evidence of a legitimacy crisis. Americans think their government is the best in the world despite its faults.

Getting the Public to Listen

Democracy Corps, February 27, 2007

This study is based on a national survey done in the aftermath of the 2006 election to examine public dissatisfaction with government and whether Democratic control of Congress was mitigating that dissatisfaction. As summarized in the study:

- The core of the problem is a fundamental belief that government and the politicians who lead it refuse to be held accountable for the way they conduct business—how they spend money, whom they listen to when setting their priorities, and how they conduct themselves. The severity of this problem cannot be overstated, and the public’s belief that government and its leaders are simply not accountable and do not take responsibility colors the public’s willingness to support government efforts on issues. When initiatives and proposals are introduced in focus groups, even the most popular ones are greeted with laughter and the inevitable question, “but will they actually do it?”
- Americans now view government as more of a barrier than a helping hand, and its failure to be accountable in a way that produces results is central to these doubts. Voters perceive government as slow, cumbersome, and unable to move at a fast pace and keep up with the rest of the world. Accountability sits at the core of the problem, and is comprised of three key dimensions on the survey. First, the public has virtually no confidence in Washington to spend money in a way that gets results. Perhaps the most stunning finding in the survey is that just 13 percent believe the federal government would spend additional money well while 83 percent say it would be wasted.
- The second dimension—and a very important one—is the notion that the people who run government operate by a different set of rules, and they do not take responsibility for their actions or for what they say. Simply put, people are sick and tired of politicians who not only operate by a different set of rules but also refuse to talk straight, take responsibility, and admit a mistake when something goes wrong.
- Third, people believe that Washington listens to the wealthy and powerful and not to them in determining the priorities and focus of government.

- The electorate wants government to play a major role on a range of issues, but it lacks confidence that government will do what is needed to get results. Government receives a positive job approval rating of over 50 percent on only 1 issue of 10 tested (national security), and its ratings for nearly every issue range between the high 20s and high 30s.

By, or for, the People?: A Meta-Analysis of Public Opinion on the Government
Meg Bostrom, Demos, January 2005

This study reviews a wide range of data on public views of government. It uses an approach called “Strategic Frame Analysis,” which seeks to illuminate the stories or “frames” the public uses to think about an institution like government. The data reviewed are, however, quite useful with or without the framing approach.

The study covers both views on citizens’ role in governance (“by the people”) and on what government actually does for citizens (“for the people”). The study finds:

- The public states that government serves the special interests and pursues its own agenda when asked whether or not government serves the public interest. The public firmly believes that government would be better if it more truly represented the majority’s desires.
- When people think of government as a service provider they are likely to react as consumers would and consider whether or not they benefit from government programs and services and whether the programs are worth the money they pay in taxes. Frequently they respond negatively and determine that government is wasteful and inefficient. They hope, however, that government can use its services to solve problems.
- Government fairs poorly as a service provider when people are considering government programs overall, and people rate government services poorly without specific examples to remind them of their interactions with government. People are more likely to report that “government programs have not really helped me and my family” (52 percent) rather than say they have helped (41 percent). But when they’re reminded of the government’s wide range of services and programs significant majorities report that they have benefited personally from government programs and services. And reminding people of specific government programs and services appears to improve ratings of government’s effect on people’s lives.

Taxes, Government and the Obligations of Citizenship

Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, November 12, 2003

This study is based on a national survey that was conducted to investigate the possibility of moving tax debates away from a focus on tax cuts. Among the study's findings:

- People believe government has a strong role in ensuring all people have equal opportunity to acquire the skills they need to succeed in life. And people see their taxes as the contribution every citizen makes to ensure that we have basic services such as public education, national defense, and a clean environment.
- Americans do not dislike government because they think it gives handouts to the undeserving. Rather they are skeptical that government spends tax dollars well, and they believe it wastes money or works in a way that is mired in inefficiencies. This belief does not negate the fact that people expressed support for government, but we cannot advance a positive vision of government without sensitivity toward government elitism and indifference to taxpayer money.

Americans Distrust Government, but Want It to Do More

NPR/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard Kennedy School, June 2000

This study is based on a large sample survey devoted solely to examining Americans' attitudes toward government. According to the study summary of key findings:

- Americans like what government does but hate the way they think it does it. In many ways, Americans' love-hate relationship with government is the difference between the specific, which they "love," and the general, which they "hate." For instance, 60 percent of Americans say government has gone too far in regulating business and interfering with the free enterprise system. But when asked about specific areas that the government now regulates or could regulate—from automobile safety to health care to television content—Americans are much more likely to say there is not enough regulation than they are to say there is too much.
- Indeed, most Americans have positive views about many federal government programs, from education programs (66 percent) to drug enforcement (59 percent) to food stamps (53 percent). In many areas they want more government involvement—for example, to reduce poverty (69 percent), to ensure clean

air and water (67 percent), and to set minimum education standards (64 percent)—and very few Americans want less or no government involvement in the areas surveyed. But Americans have extremely negative views when asked general questions about government. Only 29 percent trust the federal government to do what is right almost always or most of the time. And a majority of Americans (55 percent) considers government corruption a very important problem. Another 34 percent think corruption is a somewhat important problem, and only 9 percent think it is not very important or not important at all.

- Americans offer a wide range of reasons for why they don't trust the federal government. A majority points to government waste and inefficiency (73 percent), partisan bickering (68 percent), special interests having too much influence (65 percent), a lack of honesty and integrity among elected officials (64 percent), and high taxes (57 percent). Given a list of 11 possible reasons for distrust, fewer than 20 percent said any one of them was not a reason.
- Americans say that the federal government has more impact on their daily lives than their state or local governments, which is contrary to common wisdom. Indeed, more Americans (41 percent) say that the federal government has a lot of impact on their daily lives than either their state (30 percent) or local (30 percent) governments. This impact may not be positive for everyone, either, as three in five people (61 percent) who say that the federal government has a lot of impact also say it is a threat to their personal liberties. But Americans feel the federal government has more impact even though they also believe their voice is more likely to be heard by state or local officials and even though they trust their state and local governments more.

Deconstructing Distrust: How Americans View Government

Pew Research Center, March 10, 1998

This study is based on a series of original surveys and focus groups that were intensively analyzed to examine why Americans distrust government. Among the most important findings:

- Americans are drawing sharper distinctions between federal, state, and local governments than they once did. More people trust their state and local governments than the federal government. But it was not always that way. Twenty-five years ago people were more confident in the federal government than in those

closer to home. Since then confidence in Washington has eroded while faith in state and local government has actually grown.

- Americans give the government dismal performance ratings. An overwhelming majority of the public says that the government does a fair or poor job managing its programs and providing services (74 percent). Almost as many agree that when a program is run by government it is usually inefficient and wasteful (64 percent). These low marks do not come up significantly when people are asked about federal handling of specific tasks. For instance, 52 percent of Americans say the government is doing only a fair job providing for the elderly. Twenty percent describe the effort as poor.
- Americans express mixed views on why the federal government's performance is so lackluster. When asked what the government's biggest problem is—its priorities or inefficiency—61 percent choose inefficiency. But when people look more closely at specific issues government takes on, many acknowledge the complexity of the issues. Among those who give the government low marks on health care, for example, 48 percent blame the complexity of the issue compared to 45 percent who blame the government.
- Whatever the reason, the government's perceived performance failures significantly undermine trust. Fully 70 percent of those who give the government a fair or poor rating say they basically distrust government. The inverse is also true: Seventy-six percent of those who are satisfied with government performance basically trust the government.
- One reason performance factors so prominently in trust is that Americans have high expectations for the role government should play in public life. Fully 72 percent of Americans believe the government should see to it that no one is without food, clothing, or shelter in this country—as many as felt that way in the 1960s. Many Americans also say it is the federal government's responsibility to manage the economy (68 percent), conserve natural resources (52 percent), and provide for the elderly (46 percent).

Endnotes

- 1 Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, "Public Interests Project," conducted by October 21-26, 2003.
- 2 Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, "Getting the Public to Listen," conducted February 28, 2007..
- 3 NPR, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and the Kennedy School, "Attitudes toward Government," conducted by ICR/International Communications Research, May 26, 2000-June 25, 2000.
- 4 Tom W. Smith, "Trends in National Spending Priorities, 1973-2008" (University of Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, 2009).
- 5 Author's analysis of 2008 National Election Study.
- 6 Meg Bostrom, "By, or for, the People?: A Meta-Analysis of Public Opinion on the Government" (Washington: Demos, 2005), pp. 33, 35, and Pew Research Center, "The People and Their Government: Distrust, Discontent, Anger and Partisan Rancor," conducted April 18, 2010. Where there is more than one rating available, the highest rating is used.
- 7 NPR, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and the Kennedy School, "Attitudes toward Government," conducted by ICR/International Communications Research, May 26, 2000-June 25, 2000.
- 8 Author's analysis of 2008 NES data. Since the 2008 election, responses to this trust question have been even less positive. A spring 2010 survey by the Pew Research Center, "The People and Their Government: Distrust, Discontent, Anger and Partisan Rancor," found just 22 percent saying the government in Washington can be trusted to do what's right all or most of the time.
- 9 Karlyn Bowman, "Attitudes Toward the Federal Government" (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 2008) p. 10, latest poll cited for question.
- 10 Ibid. p. 18.
- 11 Pew Research Center, "The People and Their Government: Distrust, Discontent, Anger and Partisan Rancor," conducted April 18, 2010.
- 12 John Halpin and Karl Agne, "The State of American Political Ideology, 2009" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2009).
- 13 Gallup poll, 2009
- 14 Author's analysis of 2008 NES data.
- 15 Greenberg Quinlan Rosner "Public Interests Project," conducted October 21-26, 2003.
- 16 Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, "Getting the Public to Listen," conducted February 28, 2007.
- 17 Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, "Getting the Public to Listen," conducted February 28, 2007..
- 18 Author's analysis of 2008 NES data.
- 19 Bowman, "Attitudes Toward the Federal Government," p. 29-30, latest poll cited for question.
- 20 Pew Research Center, 2,528 adults nationally, July 14, 2003-August 5, 2003.
- 21 Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, "Getting the Public to Listen," conducted February 28, 2007..
- 22 Pew Economic Mobility Project, survey of 2100 adults, January 27-February 8, 2009.
- 23 Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Deconstructing Distrust," conducted September 25, 1997-October 31, 1997.
- 24 NPR, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and the Kennedy School, "Attitudes toward Government," conducted by ICR/International Communications Research, May 26, 2000-June 25, 2000.
- 25 David Madland and Ruy Teixeira, "New Progressive America: The Millennial Generation" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2009).

About the author

Ruy Teixeira is a Senior Fellow at both The Century Foundation and American Progress. He is also a guest scholar at the Brookings Institution, where he recently co-directed a joint Brookings-American Enterprise Institute project on political demography and geography, “The Future of Red, Blue and, Purple America,” and wrote a series of reports with William Frey on the political geography of battleground states in the 2008 election.

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