



The Public Opinion Paradox

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

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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.

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