

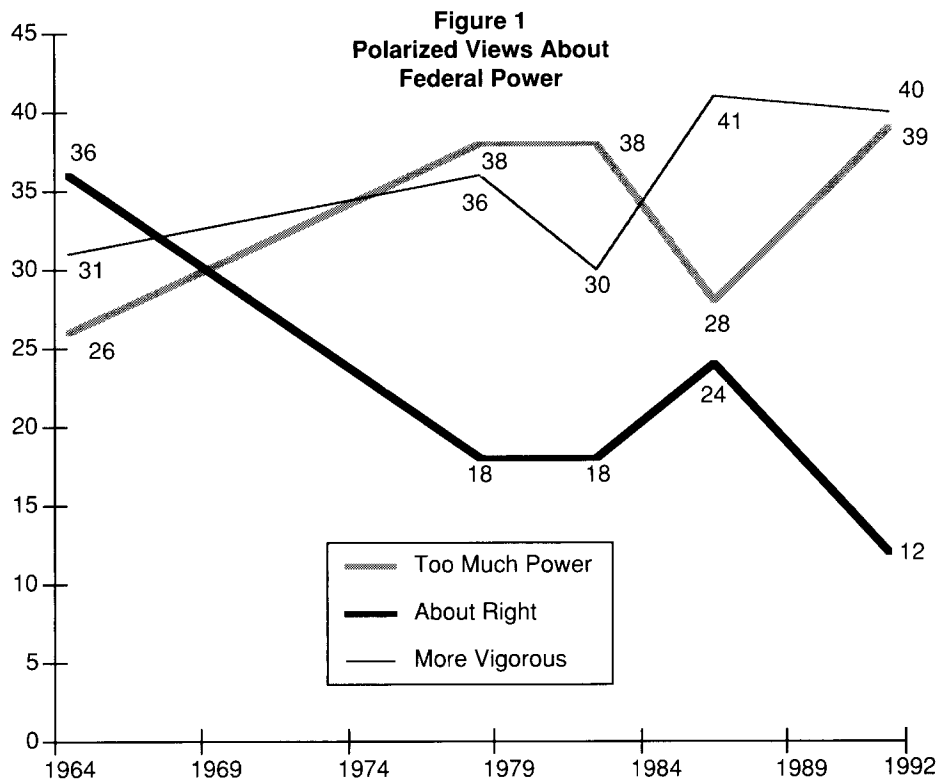
# FEDERAL, STATE, OR LOCAL? TRENDS IN THE PUBLIC'S JUDGMENT

By Timothy J. Conlan

As Governor Clinton prepares to assume the presidency, proposals for reforming the federal system are again receiving prominent attention in Washington.<sup>1</sup> That should come as little surprise, even though issues of federalism were scarcely debated during the presidential campaign. Conflicts over federal and state roles in governing the nation have

and health care? Should Washington preempt state policy making in such areas as banking, insurance, and environmental regulation? How will broad choices about levels of federal spending, taxation, and deficit reduction affect the financial condition of cities and states and the services they provide?

over the past 20 years for the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) suggest that public attitudes about the federal government's role have become more polarized in recent years. Confidence in Washington's performance has fallen sharply, though expectations remain high. State and local governments have fared better in the public's estima-



**Source:** Lloyd Free and Hadley Cantril, *The Political Beliefs of Americans*, 1967 (for 1964); Opinion Research Corporation (1978 and 1982); and the Gallup Organization for ACIR (1986 and 1992). **Note:** For question text, see footnote 2.

shaped American politics from the beginning, and such issues continue to lie just below the surface of many contemporary debates about social and economic policy. Should the federal government alter or expand its role in education, job training,

Because so many issues now under discussion have the potential to redefine our intergovernmental system, both in obvious and subtle ways, it's useful to consider what the public thinks about matters of federalism and how such views have changed over time. Polls conducted

tion, but people's expectations remain fixed on traditional state and local roles.

## Opinion on Federal Government's Power Becomes Sharply Polarized

In some respects, attitudes about the several levels of American government

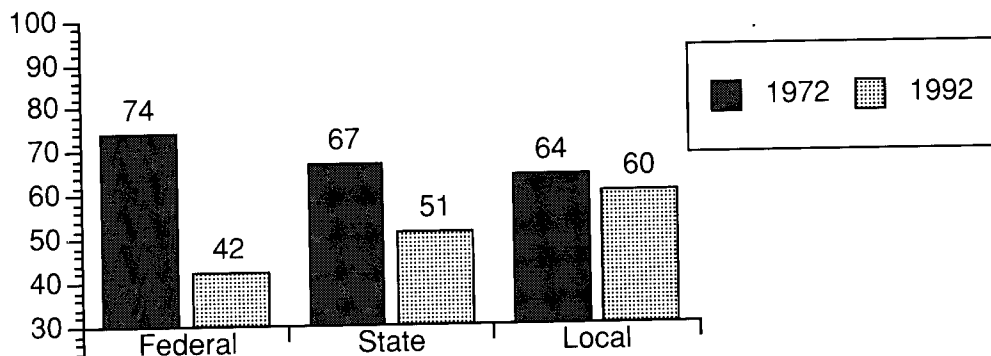
have evolved in ways that parallel the dramatically different visions of American federalism advanced by Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan. In 1964, on the eve of the Great Society's expansion of federal responsibilities, slightly more Americans (31%) expressed support for a vigorous national government than agreed with the states' rights position that the federal government was exercising "too much power" (26%). At that time, a plurality of Americans (36%) believed that the balance of power between the levels of government was "about right." (See Figure 1.) Public opinion on this question became more polarized in subsequent years, however, as the federal

during his first two years in office, but support for his decentralist agenda eroded during his second term. By 1986, for the first time, a sizable plurality (41%) of the population supported a more vigorous national government. Since that time, the percentage supporting an activist federal government has remained virtually unchanged: It stood at 40% in 1992. What has changed since 1986 is the percentage believing that the federal government has grown too powerful. It reached 39% in 1992, compared to just 28% six years earlier. Now, as in the 1970s, the American public is evenly divided on this question of federal power.

same time, a new question addressing which level of government gives citizens the *least* for their money showed a pronounced rise in negative attitudes toward Washington. In 1992, 49% of respondents said that the federal government gave them the least for their money, up from 36% in 1989.

A similar story emerges when people are asked to assess their confidence in government's ability to solve problems. In 1972, roughly three-quarters of those polled felt a "great deal" or "fair" amount of confidence that Washington would do a good job in meeting its domestic and international responsibilities.<sup>3</sup> Only 42%

**Figure 2**  
Confidence in Federal Government in Sharp Relative Decline



**Question:** Overall, how much trust and confidence do you have in... [the federal/your state/your local government] to do a good job in carrying out its responsibilities? A great deal, a fair amount, not very much, none at all. (Percentages shown are the combined total of "a great deal" and "a fair amount" responses.)

**Source:** Surveys by the Opinion Research Corporation (1972) and the Gallup Organization (1992) for the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations.

government's responsibilities expanded and became increasingly controversial. Anticipating the Reagan "revolution", the percentage of Americans agreeing that the national government had grown too powerful increased substantially between 1964 and 1978, from 26% to 38%. The percentage supporting a more vigorous national government also increased slightly, while the proportion adopting a moderate, "about right," position declined dramatically—from 36% to 18%.<sup>2</sup>

Ronald Reagan appeared to consolidate public concern over big government

### Confidence in "Washington" Declines

Recent increases in the percentage of Americans suspicious of federal power may be related to contemporaneous declines in public approval of Washington's performance. Since 1972, opinion polls conducted for the ACIR have asked respondents to evaluate which level of government gives them the *most* for their money. Throughout the 1980s, about one-third of those polled consistently said they got the most from the federal government, but this proportion fell between 1989 and 1991, from 33% to 26%. At the

of the public expresses such confidence today, while a majority expresses little or no confidence in Washington.<sup>4</sup>

Although declining confidence in American institutions has been a pervasive pattern in public opinion over the past quarter century, the trend has been less pronounced for other levels of government (Figure 2). Washington began this period with the highest levels of trust and confidence; it now has the lowest. Confidence in state government performance also fell between 1972 and 1992,

although a slim majority of the public still retain a great deal or fair amount of confidence that states will effectively perform their responsibilities. Most consistent have been attitudes toward local governments. Sixty-four percent of the public expressed confidence in local governments two decades ago, and 60% still do so. As a result, local governments—which evoked the least amount of public confidence in 1972—now summon the most. Local governments are also rated highly when it comes to governmental responsiveness. When people were asked

federal regulation of interstate banking practices.

The 1989 ACIR survey found a substantial plurality trusting Washington to deal most effectively with air pollution and drug abuse. In contrast, Americans tend to favor state or local responsibility for services and functions—including education—that traditionally have been the province of such governments or which have smaller spillover effects (Table 1). Similarly, 72% of those polled in 1992 believed that the location and building of

<sup>2</sup>The question is worded: “Which one of these statements comes closest to your own views about governmental power today? (1) Federal government has too much power; (2) Federal government is using about the right amount of power for meeting today’s needs; (3) Federal government should use its powers more vigorously to promote the well being of all segments of the people.”

<sup>3</sup>The precise question asked in 1972 was: “How much trust and confidence do you have in our federal government when it comes to handling domestic problems in general/international problems: a great deal, a fair amount, not very much, or none at all?” Seventy-one

**Table 1**  
**Who Should Do What?**

**Question:** In which level of government do you have the most trust and confidence to handle each of the following problems most effectively?

	Fed'l	State	Local	All or None	NA/DK
Clean up Air Pollution	47%	30%	9%	18%	3%
Fight Drugs	39	18	21	17	4
Improve Schools	12	42	32	8	3
Recycle Trash	9	28	50	5	4

**Source:** Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, *Changing Public Attitudes on Government and Taxes—1989* (Washington, DC: ACIR, 1989), s-18, p. 9.

in 1989 which level of government “responds best to your needs,” 40% chose local, compared to 21% state and only 18% federal.<sup>5</sup>

### But Support For Federal Activism Remains Strong

Although confidence in the national government has fallen sharply relative to other governmental institutions, this is only part of the story. As we have seen, many Americans also say they would like to see a more vigorous federal government. And when it comes to specific problems that are deemed to be national or regional in scope—such as health care, poverty, and pollution—Americans continue to support federal activism and leadership—often by large majorities. For example, in the most recent ACIR surveys, 75% of the public endorsed federal preemption of food labeling standards, 71% backed federal water pollution standards, 61% supported federal Medicaid mandates, and 50% favored expanded

low-income housing—a controversial zoning decision—should continue to be locally determined. Many of these attitudes regarding the assignment of governmental functions appear to be relatively stable over time.

### Conclusion

The new president will answer to a public that is both ambivalent about and divided over issues of federalism. Americans are concerned about the federal government’s performance and trustworthiness, but many still want aggressive federal action on a broad range of issues. The public retains more confidence in state and local governments, but it appears to prefer that these institutions continue to focus on their traditional services and functions.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Alice Rivlin, *Reviving the American Dream* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1992).

percent of respondents reported a great deal or fair amount of confidence in the handling of domestic issues, versus 77% in international problems. The combined average is 74%. See William Watts and Lloyd Free, *State of the Nation: 1973*, as cited in Mavis Mann Reeves and Parris Glendening, “Areal Federalism and Public Opinion,” *Publius*, Spring, 1976, p. 150.

<sup>4</sup>The question no longer distinguishes between domestic and international affairs. It is worded: “Overall, how much trust and confidence do you have in the federal government to do a good job in carrying out its responsibility?” Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, *Changing Public Attitudes on Government and Taxes—1992*, (Washington, DC: ACIR, forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup>Idem, *Changing Public Attitudes on Government and Taxes—1989* (Washington, DC: ACIR, 1989), s-18, p. 4.

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