Americans Have Adjusted Their Views on Government's Role Within the Context of Traditional Values

An Interview with Richard B. Wirthlin

Public Perspective: How have we changed our minds (if we have) about government—about how much of it we want, what it should and shouldn't do, how well it's doing?

Richard B. Wirthlin: Over the past 30 years, a number of changes have occurred in how we think about government. Looking at the span from the 1960s to the millennial year which is close upon us, I am impressed by how consistent Americans have been in supporting the values and the aspirations that underlie our governmental system. We keep reaffirming basic values of governance. Historically, Americans have had an almost romantic preference for a set of values that center around confidence in the individual and individuals' capacity to manage and improve society through spontaneous and voluntary efforts.

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This preference expresses itself in philanthropy, plays out with voluntarism, and is evident in other forms of individual initiative that are indispensable in shaping our future. Today's commitment to less government and more individual responsibility is all part of this package. Significantly, as people become more doubtful about what government can do, their reliance on their own initiative increases. Our historic values remain in tact and drive much of what we are seeing in current public opinion about the size and role of government.

During the New Deal era, Americans' stronger inclination toward government solutions was a result of the extreme economic discomfort they experienced during the Great Depression. At that time, more than one in five seeking a job were unable to find employment. We had never faced such an economic crisis. It is not surprising that, given these conditions, we were more inclined to look to government for assistance. But today, things have changed. The tide turned in the early 1970s when Watergate combined with the deep frustration bred of the Vietnam war to plant new seeds of cynicism and distrust. Since then, confidence in the efficacy of government action has plummeted.

Apart from this, we had "mega issues" in the 1970s and 1980s—considerable concerns about inflation, unemployment, interest rates, and taxes. In 1981 when we asked the open-ended question, "What is the most important problem facing the United States today?," 70 percent of responses focused on the economy. The other big issue was foreign policy, specifically the real threat of nuclear holocaust. Now all this has changed in a fashion that makes governance more difficult. When the "mega issues" dominated, a leader who dealt with those specific items in a credible fashion could guide the agenda. But today, issues are not so focused.

It is true that social issues have now become more dominant. A study we did late last year showed that 53% of Americans tagged some social issue as the most important problem facing the United States. But that statistic is misleading. "Social issues" covers everything from crime and drugs to health care, welfare, and education. Because interest in these various issues has been diffused, it has become much more difficult for leaders to manage expectations about what government can and cannot do. As a rule, state governors have done a better job than federal officials in responding to this new, fractured, policy environment. When we look to education, school choice, tax reform, term limits, and welfare, we see that a lot of innovative ideas and their implementation have come out of the states.

That said, Americans continue to believe that the federal government has many important things to do. In a study we completed in January 1998, we asked respondents: "Which is the better mechanism for solving the problem you've mentioned as most important—federal, or state and local government?" The federal government received the most mentions on tax code reform, balancing the budget, gun control, social security, environmental matters, and affirmative action. Contrarily, we found a definite emphasis on state and local solutions in such areas as teachers' salaries, school choice, and drug enforcement. We found the public almost equally divided as to federal-state involvement in three critical areas: welfare, health care, and crime.

To give more perspective on the issue of federal versus state and local government we can look back to data collected over the past two decades. In December 1975, we asked: "Some people favor transferring their responsibility and authority to run such government programs as welfare, community development, education, health from the federal government to state and local governments. Others oppose the idea

personally. Do you favor or oppose transferring the authority and responsibility for such programs to the state and local governments?" Fifty-nine percent endorsed that transfer, 31% opposed it, and 11% said they did not know. We find today that "new federalism" is not only alive and well, but it has deep roots.

In 1981 we asked: "Where are problems you think are most pressing best handled—at the federal, state, or local levels?" At that time, 23% said federal, 25% state, and 38% the local level. But in October 1995, 19% said they had greatest trust in the federal government, while 34% said the state government and 43% local government. In other words, by the mid-1990s, a full 77% put more confidence in local and state government, compared to just 19% who place more confidence in Washington.

PP: We Americans are a people with high standards and expectations. We want a lot done. Some times we look to government to do it, and at times we say that government can't do it or is messing up. There is a tension between our individualism and our sense that government can reach too far and attempt too much and perform inadequately, on the one hand, and our insistence that problems get solved and our willingness to listen to governmental solutions. Are we doing anything to resolve this tension?

RBW: It will always be with us—and it's beneficial. Americans explicitly recognize the value and power of government. But today, there is no question that the tension is being pulled toward the side of the individual rather than the government. Clinton's statement, "the era of big government is over," reflects this.

PP: Which political party is positioning itself best given the mix of values and commitments on government that we've been discussing?

RBW: In a study we completed in January 1998, we asked which party is best in terms of reducing taxes and balancing the budget. The numbers were very close. Neither party enjoys a clear advantage here. Of interest is the finding that on the one hand, Democrats hold a large perceptual advantage in changing the health care system. On the other hand, whenever the health care issue is posed in a way that suggests enhancing the power of the federal bureaucracy, Americans express a great deal of concern. Fifty-seven percent oppose a government-administered health care plan that involves paying a direct tax like social security. On the question of whether Clinton's 1993-94 health care proposals would create too much government involvement, 47% said they would, only 34% thought they were about right. So even health care, which appeared to offer an attractive opening in Clinton's early years in the presidency, has proved adverse in this important regard. While Americans want a better health care system, we do not want one that imposes further government control and bureaucracy.

PP: If you were to offer advice to the Democrats on the public's thinking about government, its role and its performance—from a purely political standpoint—what would you say? Do just about what Clinton has done?

RBW: I do not think the Democrats can maintain the duality of the Clinton positions forever. He has chosen to walk two roads—seeking at the same time to enlarge government and to curb it. In the next election, whoever leads the Democratic party must reconcile the competing approaches that Clinton has adroitly managed to straddle. Ultimately the Party has to decide which side of the fence it's going to come down on.

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PP: What about the Republicans?

RBW: They must do two or three things. First, they need to recognize that issues, while important components of the vote decision, do not drive it as strongly as the emotionally-charged consequences or benefits that Americans associate with these proposals. Republicans need to come back to a basic strength of their ideology that is evident when we look at how attitudes toward governance have changed over the last 30 years—an increased emphasis on individual freedom and responsibility. Finally, they must affirm that government must always be even-handed, even if it does not always support the programs that any one particular group might like.

For both parties, I would say the most critical electoral factor is who will lead the country into the next millennium. More important than the issues, in many ways, is the matter of how strong that individual is, how consistent, and whether he or she has a clear idea of what they want to do. They must also have a record to prove their ability to advance that vision. In other words, both parties need to recognize the core dimension of governance called leadership. Additionally, character really does matter. Take the example of Colin Powell prior to the 1996 election. In our polls we ran him against other Republicans as well as Democrats, and he always won by large margins. Public polls showed the same thing. Undoubtedly Powell's role in the Iraq conflict afforded him visibility and stature. But at least as important was the fact that he was seen as a man of honesty, integrity, and fundamental decency—the character element that Americans strongly desire in their public leaders.

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