

Distrusting Government's Actions: Public Concerns Center on the Lack of a Proper Ethical Base

By Fred Steeper and Christopher Blunt

Political scientists and pollsters have long been asking voters how much they trust the government "to do what is right."¹ In the very beginning of this series, the American public very frequently said they trusted their national government "most of the time" or "just about always." However, the more cynical responses of "only some of the time" or "never," began a steep climb in the late 1960s, and in just a few years distrust of federal government became the majority condition. While the 1980s saw an uneven return of a more positive view of government, the 1990s have witnessed the highest levels of distrust in the five decade series. Even in the midst of high consumer confidence in December 1997, 70% of Americans said they trusted the government to do what is right "only some of the time" or "never."

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Trusting the Government: Two Meanings

To help assess what the problem might be that is producing these high levels of government distrust, assuming they are a problem and not a healthy skepticism of centralized government, we took an extensive look at the possible meanings of "to do what is right." Some could interpret "right" as a moral question about the motivations of government, while others could interpret "right" as a utilitarian question about the government's abilities. Does the public distrust government because it believes the government has immoral motivations or because it believes the government is generally inept?

Both senses of "right" could contribute to overall distrust. In this event, are both meanings equally important, or is one the major source of distrust while the other is minor? The answers to these questions can help focus what is needed to rehabilitate the federal government's image and, possibly, indicate whether or not a rehabilitation is even possible. We designed a unique set of data to quantify the moral and utilitarian meanings of trust in government. Our method consisted of asking people which adjective of 19 pairs of adjectives best fits the federal government and how well. (See the table on p. 47.) We selected adjectives to subconsciously tap into the two different meanings of "right"; some items measure the abilities or professionalism of the federal government, while others test the government's ethics or morality.

Our method did not presuppose the public would group the adjectives in the same manner that we theorized. Instead, a correlation analysis of the public's ratings of the government across the 19 adjective pairs confirmed that the public used both meanings of "right" and considered some adjective pairs as mostly representing the government's abilities while others mostly represented the government's ethical status.

A second correlation analysis, this time using summary scales for each of the two types of trust, produced a very clear answer to our basic question: *distrust of the government's motivations is the major driver of the public's generic distrust of government while perceptions of its abilities are a minor factor.*

Federal Government: Its Perceived Motivations

The ratings of the government on eight of the nineteen adjective pairs are driven by the public's underlying concerns about what motivates the federal government. These items share a strong moral component, and correspond to "right" in the ethical sense of "right or wrong."

The results for the eight pairs can be seen in the table on p. 47. They need to be interpreted in the context of the forced choice the public was given. The federal government would appear to receive a compliment with 63% labeling it "good," but this is as much a rejection of "evil" as a descriptor as an acceptance of "good" as a descriptor. Within the 63%, 47% went on to say "good" described the government just "somewhat well" compared to 16% who said it described the government "very well."

"Evil," "dictatorial," and "cruel" are rejected by about six-in-ten voters as applying to the federal government. However, about one-in-four voters *do apply* one or more of these extreme terms to the federal government (about one-in-ten believe one or more describe the government "very well").

"Dishonest," "unethical," "intrusive," and "immoral," come closer to describing the public's reservations about the motivations of the federal

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Which Word in Each Pair Best Describes the Federal Government?

Question: For each pair of words, which word in the pair describes the federal government best?
(Ranked on Net Positive)

	Positive Term Does			Negative Term Does		Total		
	Very well	Somewhat well	Neither/No opinion	Somewhat well	Very well	Positive Term	Negative Term	Net Positive
Perceived motivations of the government								
Good or Evil	16 %	14 %	14 %	14 %	9 %	63 %	23 %	40 %
Democratic or Dictatorial	24	39	8	18	11	62	29	33
Kind or Cruel	15	44	14	18	11	62	29	33
Safe or Dangerous	18	37	8	22	15	55	37	18
Moral or Immoral	12	34	9	26	19	46	45	1
Helpful or Intrusive	9	35	8	27	21	44	48	-4
Ethical or Unethical	11	31	7	27	24	42	51	-9
Honest or Dishonest	6	33	12	28	21	39	49	-10
Perceived abilities of the government								
Intelligent or Dumb	29 %	41 %	8 %	13 %	9 %	71 %	22 %	49 %
Professional or Amateurish	26	38	7	18	11	64	29	35
Strong or Weak	29	33	8	19	11	62	30	32
Modern or Out-dated	21	35	7	23	14	56	37	19
Hard-working or Lazy	19	34	11	21	15	53	36	17
Other characteristics of the government								
Competent or Inept	16 %	38 %	9 %	23 %	14 %	53 %	37 %	16 %
Predictable or Unpredictable	27	28	2	21	21	55	42	13
Competent or Incompetent	16	37	6	25	17	53	41	12
Flexible or Rigid	13	34	3	29	18	47	47	0
Tough or Weak	14	29	10	30	17	43	47	-4
Efficient or Wasteful	6	15	5	28	46	21	74	-53

government. About one-in-five believe these adjectives describe the federal government "very well" and, at least, another one-fourth believe these adjectives fit better than the positive alternative.

Federal Government: Its Perceived Abilities

The ratings of the government on five of the nineteen adjective pairs are driven by the public's single underlying attitude about the federal government's

abilities. These items share a strong effectiveness component, and correspond to "right" in the utilitarian sense of being able to get the job done.

On this dimension, the federal government does considerably better than on the ratings of its motivations. Majorities perceive the government as "intelligent," "professional," "strong," "modern," and "hardworking." Only "modern/outdated" and "hard working/lazy" uncover reservations held by more

than one-third of the public. Moreover, nearly three-in-ten voters believe "intelligent" and "strong" describe the federal government "very well," and over one-in-four believe "professional" is a very good description.

Federal Government: Other Perceptions

The public's ratings of the federal government on the remaining adjectives are either unrelated to the motivation

and abilities dimensions or have a very unexpected relationship. The most important of these is the result for "efficient/wasteful." By far, this pair elicits the most negative rating of all our pairs: not only do 74% choose "wasteful" over "efficient" as fitting the federal government, but 46% also go on to say "wasteful" describes the federal government "very well." Of the 38 adjectives in the study, positive and negative, "wasteful" is clearly the one that has the widest public agreement.

The "efficient/wasteful" pair was included in our test as a possible abilities measure. To our surprise, the correlation analysis places it with the motivational adjectives. Indeed, its three highest correlations are with "ethical/unethical," "moral/immoral," and "honest/dishonest." However, it still does not seem to be a description of the government's motivations or intentions.

Our interpretation, instead, is that the public sees efficiency or wastefulness as the byproduct of government's motivations. For many Americans, the government is wasteful because of its dishonesty and immorality and not because of its stupidity and unprofessional behavior. The public believes the government has the ability to be efficient; it just is not properly motivated to do so.

Explaining Trust in Government

The public's perceptions of the federal government's intentions and abilities are strongly related to overall trust in government "to do what is right," as we theorized in the beginning.... Those who rate the motivations or abilities of the federal government lowest are the most likely to say they can trust the government "only some of the time" or "never." By contrast, those who are most positive about the government's motivations and abilities are the most likely to say they trust the government "most of the time" or "just about always."

Both sets of perceptions seem to influence the public's overall trust in government. Moreover, the ratings on

motivations and abilities are, themselves, highly correlated. Those who rate the government positively on one dimension tend to rate the government positively on the other dimension; the same is true for those giving negative ratings. This raises the important question of whether the public's perceptions of the government's motivations or its abilities are driving overall trust in government—or whether both sets of perceptions are making important contributions.

We used multiple regression analysis to measure the impact of one set of

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ratings while controlling for the ratings on the other set. In so doing, we found that *the public's ratings of the government's motivations are over three times more powerful than ratings of the government's abilities in driving overall trust in government.*

Using a sports analogy, this is equivalent to explaining a losing streak by doubting the motivations of the players rather than their abilities. At the professional level, this takes the form of

believing the players, while good at what they do, are more interested in their salary levels than winning games. This has caused some to turn away from the game, itself—not just the current team. The political equivalent would be the people who have become permanent nonvoters—turning their backs on our democratic system, not just the current political players, because they believe the process, itself, is "dirty" and corrupt.²

The sports analogy, also, suggests another side. Some professional sports and individual teams continue to flourish in spite of the new cynicism about the players' underlying motivations and loyalties. Why? Because, as a sport, the participants in it perform well and some individual teams win. The suggestion here is that our political system could turn around the voters' cynicism by producing better results even while the motivations of the political players are impugned. However, in the sports world, self-interest in higher salaries and superior performance can be mutually supporting. For government, it is difficult to believe that dishonest, unethical, and immoral intentions can lead to superior public policy.

Conclusion

The public distrusts the federal government more because of its reservations about the *motivations of government* than the *abilities of government*. Most Americans do not go so far as to think the government's intentions can be characterized as evil and dangerous, but many do believe the government's intentions are, nevertheless, dishonest and unethical.

For political participants and observers who believe our democracy would be healthier if the public were less cynical about politics and more trusting of its government, these findings point to the need for a hard look at *what* the public thinks motivates government. Government, in the cynical view, is run for the benefit of "the few" rather than for the benefit of the "many." For some people, the "few" is so narrow as to

mean for the financial gain of the lawmakers and regulators, themselves, and/or their friends and families.³ For others, "the few" is a broader concept, referring to "special interests" of various sizes. For over six decades now, part of declaring oneself a Democrat has meant accepting, as a matter of faith, that government would be run in the interests of Big Business if good Democrats were not placed in office. Republicans are equally convinced Big Labor would run amok if good Republicans did not stand in the way. Indeed, the fear that government would be run for the benefit of the few goes all the way back to James Madison's warning of "factions" threatening the newly formed Republic.

So, what's new? Maybe, not a thing. Distrust of government might be the normal state of affairs and that the 1950s and early 1960s, when the "trust in government" survey question began its series, were a uniquely positive period in our history. It may have been a positive period in a more profound way than we have appreciated when interpreting the beginning of this time series. Thinking back, what had the government accomplished that might weigh heavily on people's minds when asked about their confidence in the government "to do what is right?" How about winning a world war and ending an economic depression! These successes had occurred a decade and more before the questions series began, but World War II and the Great Depression were the supreme national events of most adult Americans when their trust in government was first quantified in 1958. It may be that Americans had suspended their cynicism about politics and government because of these two monumental achievements of its government.

Then came the challenges of the civil rights movement and the Vietnamese conflict. The government's re-

sponses to both challenges alienated many people on all sides of these issues. Trust in government plummeted from the mid-Sixties to the mid-Seventies. For an encore to its civil rights and Vietnam War performance, the government then presents the public the spectacle of Watergate with the energy crises thrown in for good measure. These are followed by high inflation, high unemployment, and high interest rates; not to mention an alarming rise in violent crime throughout this 1964 to 1982 time period.

Some have interpreted this "bad period" as if it were a run of bad luck for the government, similar to a losing streak by an otherwise competent and well-intentioned sports team.⁴ This view drew support when the economic recovery of the mid-1980s appeared to produce a corresponding rebound in political trust. That rebound ended with the Iran-Contra scandal and the 1991 recession. What must be very perplexing to the performance theorists of government distrust is why distrust of government has remained so high over the past several years.⁵ There was, after all, the successful end of the Cold War which, by itself, should have had some positive fallout for government. Even though its strength is debated, there has been a remarkably long economic recovery in the 1990s that also should have produced some renewed trust in government. It has not happened. The more time passes, the more 1958-1964 appears to be the aberration.

Americans during the Great Depression and World War II watched their government put aside special interests in order to tackle two enormous challenges. In both cases, the government had an overriding goal, and all its resources were marshaled, first, to end the Great Depression, and, then, to win the War. To be sure, there was opposition to

the Roosevelt economic policies and even to America's entry into the War. But, what was *unique* was the perception that the government, whether successfully or not, was acting to benefit the many. Politics—seeking personal gain or the bargaining of special interests—became secondary to protecting the national interest. The memories of that shining time for government is what 72% of Americans had in mind in 1958 when they responded that you could trust the government to do what is right.

Since that time long ago, it may be that government has simply returned to its normal political mode, and the public should be *credited* for recognizing that you can trust the government to act in the best interests of the many, neither "most of the time" nor, certainly, "just about always."

Endnotes

¹The National Election Studies (University of Michigan) pioneered and institutionalized the use of this measure of trust in government. In its 1958 survey, an extraordinary 72% said they trusted the government "just about always" or "most of the time."

²While this negative perception of politics no doubt causes some citizens not to vote, the overall relationship between trust in government and voting is weak.

³One of the authors has concluded from his campaign polling experience that the scandal of suing public office for personal gain deserves a special place in political analysis. It is the one scandal that most often leads to defeat of an incumbent. The personal gain scandal is far more serious for incumbents than scandals involving sex or alcohol.

⁴See, for example, Jack Citrin, "Comment: The Political Relevance of Trust in Government." *American Political Science Review*, 1974, Vol. 68: 973-988.

⁵Twenty-four years after Citrin's original article, many (such as Andrew Kohut, at the Pew Research Center) still argue that distrust of the government is largely based on contemporary events and performance.



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