Just One Question

By David W. Moore

The myth and mythology of trust in government

In the wake of the events of September 11th, polls show Americans expressing a level of trust in the government and its leaders that has not been measured since sometime before the Watergate scandal, which culminated with the resignation of President Richard Nixon in the fall of 1974. It is not clear, however, that this resurgence of trust means very much for democracy.

Despite the lamentations of numerous journalists, academics, and other political analysts over the years, a lack of public trust in government in this country was never shown to be inimical to the functioning of democracy. Indeed, the levels of trust found by polls appear to be more an artifact of question wording than a real, substantive measure of how much Americans support their government. Since the allegedly low levels of trust of the past 17 years or so did not appear to hurt democracy, there is little reason to believe that higher levels will now help.

The conventional wisdom, that Americans distrust government and that low levels of trust represent a potential threat to American democracy, seems to have gained real momentum in 1983 with

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the publication of *The Confidence Gap: Business, Labor, and Government in the Public Mind*, by Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider. Lipset and Schneider asserted that a "confidence gap" had emerged as an outgrowth of public disillusionment with the Vietnam War and Watergate and, more importantly, was persisting long after the events which had presumably caused the gap to open up. The revised edition of the book published four years later found that in the Reagan years, confidence rose temporarily with the better economic times but then quickly fell in the wake of the Iran-Contra controversy. The authors concluded that "the confidence gap has been renewed."

While Lipset and Schneider made a compelling case that certain measures of trust in government, business and labor had declined during the 1960s and '70s, they never demonstrated that the decline really mattered. The term "confidence gap" itself was not defined in any operational sense, and, indeed, was used interchangeably with the word "decline." Implicitly, the "gap" referred to the difference between what the level of confidence actually was and what it *should* be, though the authors never attempted to define the latter.

In the last chapter of the original edition of *The Confidence Gap*, the authors addressed whether the lower level of trust signified a legitimacy crisis. They could not make up their minds, and instead essentially said yes—and no:

> Our conclusion is that the decline of confidence has both real and superficial aspects. It is real because the American public is intensely dissatisfied with the performance of their institutions. It is also to some extent superficial because Americans have not yet reached the point of rejecting those institutions.

Although the authors used the word "yet" in the last sentence, implying that Americans were on their way toward that point of rejection, they also cited with approval Everett Ladd's contention in the Winter 1976-77 issue of *Public Opinion Quarterly* that "available data surely do not sustain the argument that the US has experienced any sort of legitimacy crisis—or that the country is at the beginning of one." In fact, Lipset and Schneider added, "Nor is there any evidence to suggest that Americans feel there are fundamental defects in their systems of democratic government or free enterprise."

With that assertion, the reader might have expected the authors to conclude that the decline in trust was much ado about nothing. But they did not. Instead they sounded an alarm bell, or, perhaps more accurately, an alarm clapper—one that made noise, but not too much:

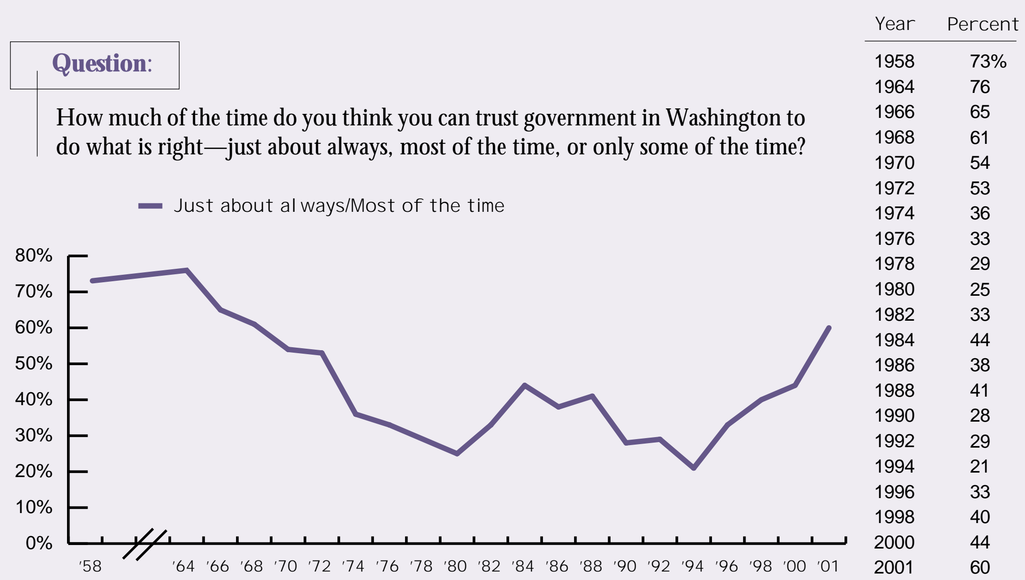
> Although we have pointed to evidence that Americans retain faith in their social system, it would be wrong not to indicate our belief that the situation is much more *brittle* that it was at the end of the 1920s, just before the Great Depression, or in 1965, immediately preceding the unrest occasioned by the Vietnam War and the outbreak of racial tension.

The authors provided no evidence to justify this assertion, relying instead on their "belief" that it was true. They went on to say that as a result of the strains of the previous decade and a half, "our institutional structure is less resilient than in the past," and that "serious setbacks in the economy or foreign policy, accompanied by a fail-

Figure 1
National Election Studies' Trust Measure Shows Deficit

Question:

How much of the time do you think you can trust government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?



Year	Percent
1958	73%
1964	76
1966	65
1968	61
1970	54
1972	53
1974	36
1976	33
1978	29
1980	25
1982	33
1984	44
1986	38
1988	41
1990	28
1992	29
1994	21
1996	33
1998	40
2000	44
2001	60

Source: Surveys by the Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, latest that of 2000, and by Gallup/CNN/*USA Today*, using the NES trust measure, October 5-6, 2001.

ure of leadership, would raise greater risks of a loss of legitimacy now than at any time in this century."

Again, they provided no evidence that supported their historical comparison, and, given the lack of relevant comparative polling data, one might wonder how they could have reached such a conclusion.

Since the publication of *The Confidence Gap*, other observers have echoed its conclusions, reinforcing the myth of a continually alienated public. In recent years, in fact, a small cottage industry has emerged to address this phenomenon, a kind of national therapy with each therapist expounding a different theory to explain why Americans had succumbed to political malaise.

It's because our political ideologies are presenting false choices (E.J. Dionne, Jr.), the people don't have a proper sense of civic republicanism (Michael J. Sandel), the whole system itself is corrupt and failing the people (William Greider), the elites are betraying democracy (Christopher Lasch), our economic growth rates have declined and we are at the end of affluence (Jeffrey Madrick), the two major parties have lost touch with the people (Gordon S. Black and Benjamin D. Black), or Americans are crybabies—they have become used to entitlements and don't appreciate how well off they really are (Robert J. Samuelson).

For many pundits, the presidential election of 1996 pushed this issue to the background of American politics, since the election was widely interpreted as a vote for the status quo, and it was difficult to argue that the people would vote for the status quo if they were so "discontented."

Still, the polling evidence cited by the above authors had not recovered to the 1960s levels, and in 1997, Harvard University weighed in with its assessment of the problem in a book entitled, *Why People Don't Trust Government*. The following year, the Pew Research Center distributed its monograph on how Americans view government, and in early 1999, after the House impeachment of President Clinton, *Washington Post* columnist David Broder wrote that

> we have gone through a cycle of declining trust in the institutions of our democracy. The presidency, Congress, the courts, the political parties have all been weakened by a crossfire of attacks on their integrity. Cynicism about government has rarely been greater.

One reason so many people got it wrong about public trust in government is that they focused on the declining trend without being able to specify how much trust actually existed at any given point or how much was necessary for a democracy to function as it should. In fact, there was no single definition about what "trust" actually means; the analysts relied instead on various questions pollsters have used to measure the concept.

But different questions will elicit different levels of expressed trust in government, and while the questions may all reveal roughly the same trend over time, they do not necessarily present a similar picture about how many people trust the government.

The most frequently cited measure of governmental trust, perhaps because it was one of the first ever used and has such a long trend line, was the biennial question included in the University of Michigan's National Election Studies (NES) since 1958: "How much of the time can you trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?" Notice that "none of the time" was not among the options, although today it definitely would be included.

As shown in Figure 1, that NES question found a very high level of trust existing in 1958, with 73% of Americans saying they trusted the government either just about always (16%) or most of the time (57%). Another 23% said they trusted government only some of the time—an answer that has been treated over the decades since the question was first asked as indicating *no* trust. That interpretation contributed to the verbal hand-wringing cited earlier, as the number of people choosing that option increased over the years.

Using the first two options as the NES trust measure, one can see that trust was slightly higher in 1964 than when it was measured in 1958, but it declined significantly over the next 10 years during a period of increasing controversy over the Vietnam War, followed by the Watergate scandal and the resignation of President Richard Nixon.

Over the next six years, trust continued to fall, coincident with the economic decline that started in Nixon's second term. The downturn persisted through the tenures of Presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter and was finally reversed by the second year of Ronald Reagan's first term of office.

Trust increased during the good economic times of the Reagan years, then declined again in the early 1990s as the country suffered a recession. During the sustained economic recovery of the Clinton presidency, it recovered once more, although not to pre-Watergate levels.

And then, after the terrorist attacks, the NES measure of trust (replicated by Gallup in an October 5-6 survey) surged to its highest level in over 30 years.

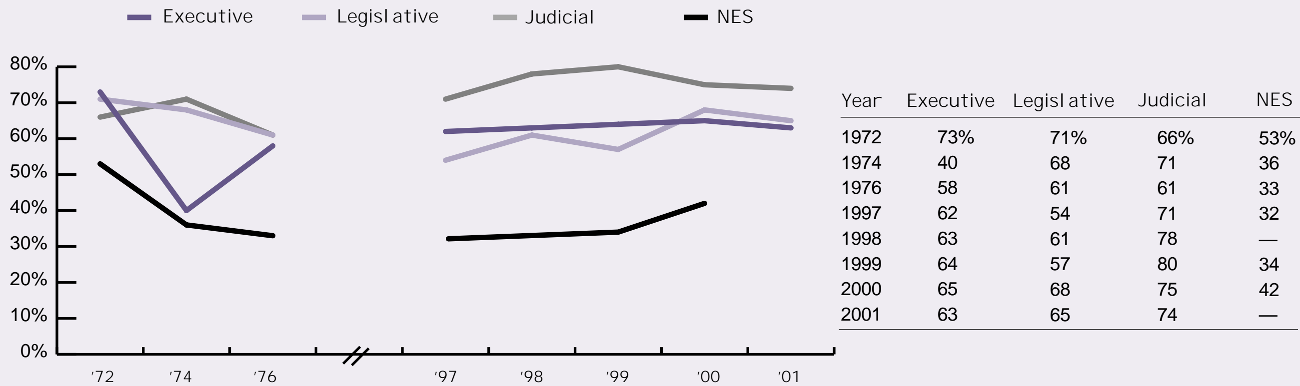
In 1972, Gallup began asking questions whose preface—"How much trust and confidence do you have in...?"—was followed by each of the three branches of government. The

Figure 2

Gallup and NES Tell Different Stories Prior to 9/11

Questions:

Gallup: How much trust and confidence do you have at this time in the... branch [of the government]?
NES: How much of the time do you think you can trust government in Washington to do what is right?



Year	Executive	Legislative	Judicial	NES
1972	73%	71%	66%	53%
1974	40	68	71	36
1976	58	61	61	33
1997	62	54	71	32
1998	63	61	78	—
1999	64	57	80	34
2000	65	68	75	42
2001	63	65	74	—

Note: For Gallup measure, percent saying a great deal or fair amount of trust is shown; for NES measure, percent saying just about always or most of the time is shown.
Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization, latest that of September 7-10, 2001 (Gallup trust measure), and the Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, latest that of 2000. The 2001 NES trust measure, asked by Gallup/CNN/*USA Today*, is not shown because the survey went into the field after the terrorist attacks.

response options were "a great deal," "a fair amount," "not very much," and "none at all." Unfortunately, Gallup stopped asking these questions after 1976 and did not resume until they were rediscovered two decades later. Had they been asked regularly over the years, the country might have been spared the collective moaning about the lack of public trust in government.

If the first two options (great deal and fair amount) are equated with "trust," then the amount of trust in government is perceived as much higher throughout the two periods than that portrayed in *The Confidence Gap* and other publications. As shown in Figure 2, the Gallup measures for all three branches of government were significantly higher than the NES measure. The Gallup executive branch question showed a nosedive in 1974, the year Nixon resigned, but the level rebounded significantly in 1976 when Gerald Ford was president. In 1997, trust was very healthy, with over six in ten Americans giving the high ratings—almost double the number giving low ratings.

Trust in the legislative branch also showed a decline in the 1970s and was somewhat lower when measured again in 1997, but still more than a majority of Americans expressed a high level of trust. Indeed, the results indicate that for all the measures in the 1990s, over half expressed high rather than low confidence in the legislature, with some margins exceeding two to one.

As for the Supreme Court, public trust appears to have been high both in the 1970s and '90s (with margins of two to one or more between high and low ratings), although the latter period showed on average somewhat higher levels than the former.

Apart from the trust measures, other questions suggested great loyalty to country on the part of the American public. A 1998 Pew Research Center report, *Deconstructing Distrust: How Americans View Government*, presented data showing that from 1987 to 1997, between 88 and 91% of Americans consistently agreed with the statement, "I am very patriotic."

Gallup polls in 1994 (one of the lowest points of trust measured by the NES question) and in 1999 found similar levels of expressed patriotism. Sixty-five percent of respondents in each poll said they were either extremely or very patriotic, while another 28% said they were somewhat patriotic.

If people remain committed to their country, even though they believe the government does what is right "only some of the time," what's the problem?

Indeed, one of the enduring mysteries about the myth of American distrust is that for all of the punditry's angst about the allegedly "low" levels of trust, there appear to have been no demonstrable consequences to the operation of democracy in America. That could be the case because, as the Gallup and Pew patriotism questions suggest, most people did trust the government and felt a strong sense of loyalty to their country, the NES trust measure notwithstanding.

In any case, whatever the "true" level of public trust in government, Lipset and Schneider could find no consequences of the "low" trust they measured and, as pointed out earlier, they emphatically reaffirmed that there was no evidence of a loss of legitimacy. But that did not prevent the authors from sounding their alarm clapper. They were too mesmerized by the 30 to 40% trust level produced by the NES question to accept the counter-evidence that Americans found no "fundamental defects in their system of democratic government."

Andrew Kohut, Director of the Pew Research Center, seemed equally fixated on the NES trust number. In the introduction to *Deconstructing Government*, he wrote that

> at its most benign, a certain skepticism about government seems almost central to our national character, an admirable quality Americans employ to keep Washington in check. But during the 1960s and early 1970s, this healthy skepticism deteriorated into an outright distrust that in the 1990s has appeared as rigid cynicism.

Oddly enough, the report noted a significant upward movement in trust from the early 1990s, belying the notion that there was "rigid" cynicism. But the report did rely on the NES measure to assert that "only 34% basically trust the government."

Still, the conclusion was noteworthy:

> Distrust of government and discontent with the country notwithstanding, there is no indication that these attitudes are near a crisis stage. Public desire for government services and activism has remained nearly steady over the past 30 years. And distrust of government is not fostering a disregard for the nation's laws, eroding patriotism or discouraging government service.

The Harvard book, *Why People Don't Trust Government*, also asserted a problem with distrust that could not be demonstrated. Garry Orren wrote in one chapter that

> Today's cynicism... is not just the latest manifestation of traditional skepticism toward government, nor is it simply a response to the unpopularity of particular incumbents or parties. Today's cynicism is fueled by a deeper set of accumulated grievances with political authority, institutions, and processes in general grievances that cut across party and ideology. Not just a temporary slump, the ensuing cynicism has lasted for three decades, during which time mild discontent has for many citizens turned to outrage and loathing.

Orren gave no specifics about the deleterious effects of this cynicism-cum-outrage and loathing, and in a later chapter the editors, Joseph Nye, Philip Zelikow and David King, essentially dismissed the allegations. They first noted that if mistrust becomes too great, it could undermine the legitimacy of the government, causing citizens to "withdraw voluntary compliance with the system, including voluntary compliance with other laws, and thus set in motion the downward spiral of worsening performance and more withdrawal from collective action of all kinds."

But they quickly added that "there is not yet notable evidence that such a downward spiral has begun, although political scientists have been writing about the coming 'crisis of democracy' for more than twenty years." Why then, they asked rhetorically, should there be any concern? The answer was, "We are unsure."

They went on to say that

> we feel a bit like doctors who have encountered a patient with an irregular heartbeat. We do not know if the problem is really threatening. We do not know if it will be self-correcting, will require medication, or will require more severe intervention. We do know that the symptom commands attention....

In 1987, Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott pointed to the difficulties in measuring public opinion and concluded that no accurate measure of any aspect of it could ever be obtained. The only practical solution "requires giving up the hope that a question, or even a set of questions, can be used to assess preferences in an absolute sense...." The solution must rely instead "on describing changes in responses over time and differences across social categories. The same applies to *all* survey questions, including those that seem on their face to provide a picture of public opinion."

For over 30 years, analysts have been misled in their evaluation of public trust by a single question whose "absolute" measure of that concept appears woefully inadequate for understanding American politics. Other measures suggest that a much higher level of citizen loyalty to government existed during those years, which helps to explain why researchers could find no consequences to democracy from the "low" levels of trust they thought prevailed.

Today, in the wake of the September 11 attacks, "trust" may have increased, but we still do not know in an absolute sense how much actually exists, nor how much public trust democracy needs. We do know, however, that whatever its varied levels over the years, trust has never fallen so low as to threaten the legitimacy of the governmental system.

It's time we put the public distrust myth to bed.