

Trust in Government... *...to do what?*

By Gary Langer

In the slew of polling results that followed the September 11 terrorist attacks, one in particular slid seamlessly into the *zeitgeist*: Americans' trust in government had soared.

The Washington Post was first on the scene, testing the issue in a national poll conducted September 25-27. It asked a version of the hoary question from the University of Michigan's National Election Study—"How much of the time do you trust the government in Washington to do what is right?"—and found a 34-point jump in people saying all or most of the time.

Other polls repeated the question and confirmed the result. The finding quickly turned into a talisman: "The world has changed," went the post-September 11 buzz, and trust in government was the proof. One *Post* columnist called the change "stunning"; another, "quite startling" and a "remarkable surge."

Others went further. Citing the *Post* poll, *The Times* of London declared, "Big government is suddenly back in fashion." *The New York Times* devoted 1,700 words to the subject in a feature entitled, "Suddenly, Americans

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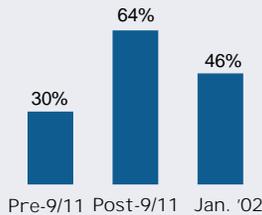
Figure 1

Spike in Trust is Transitory

Question:

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

PERCENT RESPONDING ABOUT ALWAYS OR MOST TIMES



Source: Surveys by ABC News/*Washington Post*, March 30–April 2, 2000; *Washington Post*, September 25–27, 2001; and CBS News/*New York Times*, January 21–24, 2002.

Trust Uncle Sam,” then followed three weeks later with a column headlined, “Big Government is Back in Style.” *USA Today* put the *Post* data under the headline, “Suddenly, ‘Era of Big Government’ is Not Over.” The Scripps-Howard News Service reported, “Cynicism is out and trust in government is back up to levels not seen since before the height of the Vietnam War.” As late as January 10, *The Economist* invested more than 2,500 words in the subject, saying that the “astounding” rise in trust was “the most noticeable change to have occurred in America after September 11.” All told, direct news references to polls on the subject doubled in the six months after the attacks.

And why not? It was a heck of a good story: in a sudden spasm of national crisis, decades of accumulated skepticism and downright distrust of federal authority were swept away. After 30 years in the doghouse, Washington’s downtrodden bureaucrats could clutch the data, blink into the lights like Sally Field at the Oscars, and declare: “You like me! You really like me!”

But was it so?

There’s ample room for debate. David Moore raised cogent criticism in the January/February issue of *Public Perspective*, asking

just what this question really measures. He noted that a cottage industry had sprung up around it during the past 20 years, devoted to full-time lamentation of the impending demise of democracy—yet the union seems somehow to have survived. Moore’s conclusion: the question “appears woefully inadequate for understanding American politics.”

Further cause for pause came from the transitory nature of the spike. In March and April of 2000 an ABC News/*Washington Post* poll found “trust in government” (i.e., all or most of the time) at 30% (see Figure 1). In the *Post*’s September poll, that had soared to 64%. But by January 21–24, in a CBS News/*New York Times* poll, it had lost half that gain, settling back to 46%.

And there was reason for caution earlier, right from the start. It seems implausible that as fundamental a view as trust in government could turn on a dime, even given the catastrophic events of September 11. Perhaps what had changed was not trust in government at all—but the context in which that trust was being evaluated and expressed.

The distinction is an important one, because it carries much broader implications. Customarily in trend analysis we ask a question, let time pass, ask it again—and if we see change, we report that opinion has changed.

That makes good sense when a question measures behavior, or when it gauges a specific opinion—on the death penalty, for example, or gun control, abortion, or any of the myriad such issues we test. But when we ask our respondents for a far broader, more

impressionistic assessment—often in vaguely phrased language—the issue of context looms larger.

It’s not just what we ask and how we ask it; this goes wider, to the contextual framework our respondents bring to the table, informed by the events and discourse of the day. When we leave blanks in a question, our respondents fill them in for us—and we need to be attuned to the way they do so.

Last winter the “trust in government” question looked to us like a prime candidate for this context effect. It begged a question: trust the government... to do what?

Our hypothesis was that when people answer the question, they do so based on the current agenda for governmental action. Usually that agenda is filled with social and/or economic issues—improving the economy, preserving Social Security, providing health care, improving education, and the like. Many of those are issues in which government efforts can be controversial and long have been criticized as insufficiently effective.

Immediately after September 11, however, the agenda was redrafted, suddenly and powerfully topped by the war on terrorism and the pressing need to deter further attacks against American citizens. Those areas were far less controversial than some of our seemingly intractable social ills, and they received hugely positive public assessments. Was the “trust” that had soared specifically trust to conduct the war on terrorism?

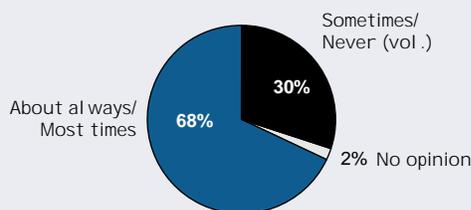
We tested this hypothesis in a split-sample last January. Half our respondents were asked how much they trusted the government, specifically, “when it comes to handling national security and the war on terrorism.” The other half were asked about their trust in government, specifically, “when it comes to handling

Figure 2

Trust... To Do What?

Question:

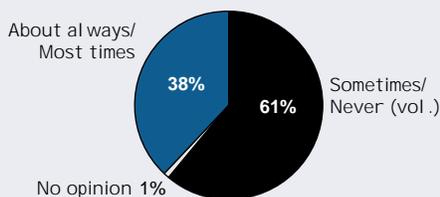
When it comes to handling national security and the war on terrorism, how much of the time do you trust the government in Washington to do what is right? Would you say just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?



Source: Survey by ABC News, January 9-13, 2002.

Question:

When it comes to handling social issues like the economy, health care, Social Security and education, how much of the time do you trust the government in Washington to do what is right? Would you say just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?



Results among political groups also suggest the contextual nature of trust in government. Among self-identified Democrats, trust rose by 19 points after September 11, compared to what it was in March-April 2000 (see Figure 4). But among independents and Republicans,

social issues like the economy, health care, Social Security and education.”

The difference was striking: 68% percent said they trusted the government to handle national security and the war on terrorism. Just 38% said they trusted it to handle social issues (see Figure 2).

That suggests that what mainly changed after September 11 was the subject—not so much the level of trust, but the focus of that trust. Before the attacks, people were chiefly expressing their low trust in government’s ability to handle social issues. After September 11, they were referring primarily to their high trust in its ability to fight terrorism.

This changed context may well have been reinforced by our own measurement instruments. In the ABC/Post poll of April 2000, which found low (30%) trust in government, the question, twenty-fourth in placement on the survey, was preceded by a variety of others about the 2000 election campaign and attendant social issues, including gun control, campaign finance reform, and education spending. In the Post poll of September 2001, by

contrast, the trust question, which was sixteenth, was preceded exclusively (except for presidential job approval) by questions on terrorism and the war. [In our split-sample test, the questions were first in the instrument.]

It’s also worth noting that the sudden rise and subsequent decline of the “trust in government” measure tracked with Gallup’s “most important problem” question (see Figure 3). Mentions of terrorism, war and national security as the MIP soared from nowhere to 64% in the days after September 11, just as “trust” soared. By January mentions of terrorism as the most important problem had subsided to 35%, just as “trust” subsided.

whose trust started far lower, the advance was much greater—35 and 48 points, respectively.

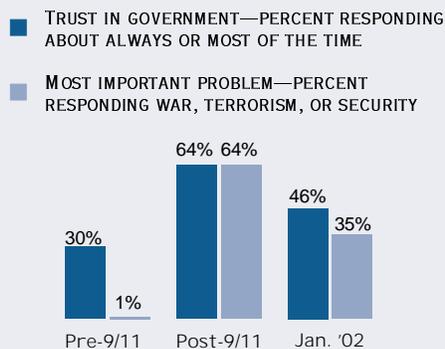
Figure 3

Trust and MIP Track Together

Questions:

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

What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today? War, terrorism, security



Source: Surveys by ABC News/Washington Post, March 30-April 2, 2000; Washington Post, September 25-27, 2001; the Gallup Organization, September 7-10, 2001, October 11-14, 2001, and January 7-9, 2002; and CBS News/New York Times January 21-24, 2002.

Even more to the point, the biggest jump occurred among *conservative* Republicans—a huge, 53-point swing, from 22% trust in April 2000 to 75% in September 2001. Indeed, in that September poll, “trust in government” among conservative Republicans was 20 points higher than it was among liberal Democrats.

Is it plausible that conservative Republicans suddenly and massively abandoned their longstanding skepticism of government activism? Or is it more likely that their newly expressed trust was an expression of two other, contextual factors: first, the fact that the federal government was now headed by a conservative Republican president; and second, these respondents’ trust in government to handle one new, specific and overwhelming problem—terrorism?

We checked our premise by asking another fundamental measure, one that seemed less vulnerable (albeit not invulnerable) to the post-September 11 contextual change: which do you prefer—smaller government with fewer services, or larger government with many services? We found that, unlike the trust in government question, this

had changed only very modestly after the terrorist attacks: preference for larger government gained seven points, up to 41%; preference for smaller government lost five points, down to 54%.

Much of that change occurred among Republicans, whose preference for smaller government dropped by 13 percentage points, to 62%. Did most of them truly morph into big-government aficionados? Or, instead, were they thinking not of activist government, but of a government active against terrorists?

Later post-September 11 measures underscored the question of context in “trust,” since they found other views of government essentially unchanged. In a *Washington Post* poll in February 2002, 56% gave a positive personal assessment of the way the federal government operates (“enthusiastic” or “satisfied”)—hardly different than it was in a December 2000 ABC/*Post* poll (59%).

And in an ABC News poll in April 2002, Americans on average said that out of every dollar the government collects in taxes, it wastes 47 cents—essentially the same as in an April 2000

poll (46 cents). One may wonder how one basic opinion of government could have changed, if closely related views such as these didn’t budge.

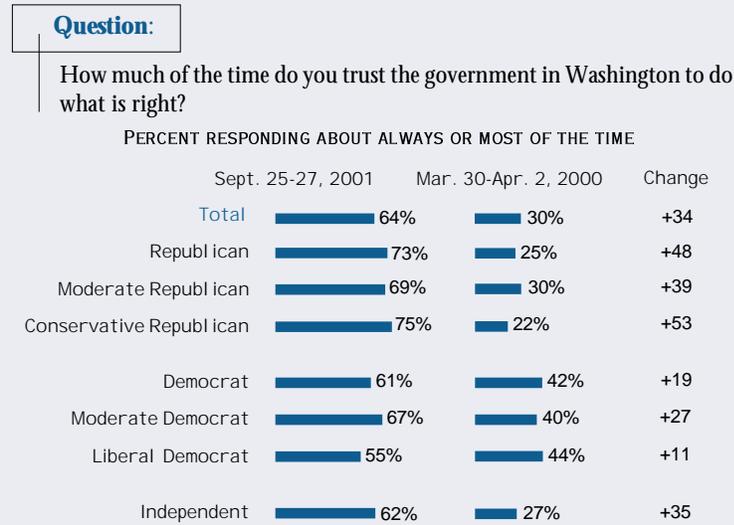
None of this is to suggest that September 11 didn’t alter some aspects of public opinion. Approval of George W. Bush and Congress soared; perceptions that elected leaders care about ordinary people advanced; expressed optimism with the nation’s direction spiked; expressions of patriotism surged. But the changes were not uniform. And what’s most important is the context in which they occurred. Fundamental opinions don’t flit around like bats, and we’d do a disservice to the public, and to our own data, to suggest otherwise.

George Bishop, writing in the May/June *Public Perspective*, reached a similar diagnosis, suggesting that post-September 11 changes in opinion represented “alterations in how respondents were interpreting the various questions in the context of 9/11.” But he carried that to a defeatist conclusion, declaring that time- or event-influenced changes were merely “an illusion of change” that “constitute one of the most serious threats to the validity of poll results in general.”

The issue to us, rather, is not one of validity, but of acuity. The data are good, as far as they go. The change is real, within the confines of the question. The challenge is in how we understand and explain it.

We’re fully capable of providing analytical context. Customarily, when we ask a broad question such as presidential approval, we back it up with more specific measures of performance, and our analysis of change includes a look at the contextual issues at hand. Our approach should be the same when we encounter changes in other broad, fundamental assessments whose meaning relies so heavily on the context of the times.

Figure 4
Trust by Political Group



Source: Surveys by ABC News and *The Washington Post*.