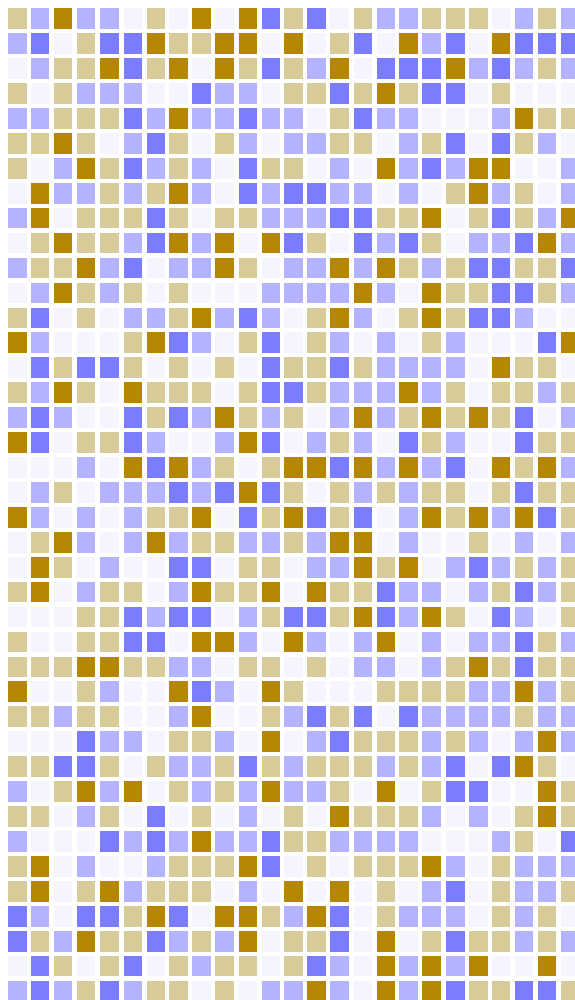


The Executive Branch: Public and Presidential Appointees Speak Out

Report
November 2003

Prepared by Princeton Survey Research Associates International
for the Annenberg Foundation Sunnylands Trust



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The federal government is not a faceless abstraction to a majority of Americans: it is a reality that does matter in their daily lives. In fact, Americans have always thought government matters, if for different and changing reasons. It was seen to matter when government sought to create the Great Society, embroiled the country in a painful war in Vietnam, enacted legislation that regulated air quality, deregulated major industries or increased taxes. And the government may matter even more since the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. It established the Department of Homeland Security to combat this new threat at home, and it is reevaluating its policies on everything from student visas to wiretapping to “rooting out” terrorists overseas—issues that matter not only to Americans, but to people around the world.

This study focuses on one particular branch of government—the Executive. We approach this research from a unique, bottom-up/top-down perspective. What do the American people think and know about the Executive Branch? And what can people who have served in the highest-level policymaking positions of government tell us about their experiences in the Executive Branch? This examination of one of the key institutions of American democracy is part of a larger study that the Annenberg Foundation’s Sunnylands Trust is conducting on *Institutions of Democracy*. Other reports will explore public and elite attitudes toward the Legislative Branch, the Judicial Branch and the educational system.

Our main research questions are: How well is the Executive Branch functioning? How does the Executive Branch compare in key areas to other major institutions in America? And how much does the American public know about the Executive Branch?

To answer these questions we conducted 1,300 30-minute interviews with a nationwide, representative sample of Americans and 501 interviews with presidential appointees who had Senate confirmation and who served in the second Ronald W. Reagan administration, or the George H. Bush, William H. Clinton or George W. Bush administrations. Interviews were conducted between August and November, 2003.

Here we summarize the many important findings of this research. A more detailed examination of the results will follow in the subsequent sections.

How Well Is the Executive Branch Functioning?

The answer to how well the Executive Branch is functioning depends on who you ask and what you ask about. Overall, the American people are more critical of the federal government’s performance than presidential appointees are. This is true for appointees who served in both Democratic and Republican administrations. Presidential appointees, perhaps because of their vantage point from the most senior positions in the government, almost always see the government in a more positive way than the public. Consequently, presidential appointees are often out of step with what the public thinks about government.

Performance Praised in Some Areas—Criticized in Others

The federal government generally gets good marks for how it runs its programs. A solid majority of Americans think the government is hard working and that it is well-run. And the government is applauded by a majority of Americans, and by most presidential appointees, for doing a good job helping people who need assistance and for being fair in its decisions.

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At the same time, Americans think the government does a better job handling some problems than others. People have more confidence in the federal government's ability to handle international problems than in its handling of social and economic problems at home. But strikingly, at a time when the US finds itself fighting terrorism around the world and is intensely engaged in Iraq, the public has less confidence in the US's ability to deal with international problems than it did in the past. Confidence in the government's handling of international problems is now as low as when the last American troops pulled out of Vietnam. In addition, today more people say they have no confidence at all in the government's ability to handle international problems than at any prior time for which data are available.

The government's handling of international problems beyond its shores apparently accounts for this dip in confidence, and it may have more to do with the US's "go it alone" approach to international relations than with specific concerns about the government's efforts to protect American soil from foreign threats. The public gives the government one of the highest ratings for the job it is doing defending against terrorist attacks, along with ensuring safety of food and medicines. And although public confidence in the newly created Department of Homeland Security is somewhat lower than in other key departments, this is in part attributable to more people saying they do not know enough about this department to rate it.

On the domestic front, Americans give the government low performance ratings in two particular areas—ensuring that every American has access to affordable healthcare and reducing poverty across the country. And these ratings matter. Distrust of government is higher among Americans who evaluate the government's performance poorly in these two areas. The public is not alone in its negative healthcare assessment. Presidential appointees concur that the government is doing a poor job providing access to affordable healthcare. However, the appointees do not share the public's negative assessment of the job the government has been doing to reduce poverty.

Right Priorities but Slow and Inefficient

Having the right priorities is intimately connected to the question of whether the government is doing a good job. Performance counts most when the government is doing what the people want. Doing a good job on a task the American people do not think is the government's responsibility may not count for much. Overall, the public and presidential appointees think the government has the right priorities. When asked whether the bigger problem is government inefficiency or having the wrong priorities, many more say government inefficiency is the issue. And despite the on-going debate about whether government services can be better performed by private industry, nonprofit organizations or faith-based organizations, this study shows that most Americans still look to the government to ensure that food and medicines are safe, to conserve the country's natural resources and to manage the economy to prevent another recession or depression.

This study also shows Americans are more critical of how the government operates than of what the government is doing. Even as Americans credit the government with having the right priorities, most say the bureaucratic machine of government moves too slowly and is inefficient. The stereotype of government workers being stifled by a lumbering bureaucracy also prevails, but these concerns matter only marginally in the public's overall opinion of government. What matters more is the belief that the federal government is not doing a good job spending its money wisely. And that hurts. Americans who think the government is wasting money are more than twice as likely to distrust the government as those who do not.

Public ire over government waste feeds another long-standing complaint of many Americans—taxes. Roughly one in two Americans say they pay too much in taxes, given what they get in return. Part of the reason for this discontent lies in the belief that government does not manage its vast treasure chest well. Americans who say the government does not spend its money wisely are more likely to feel they pay too much in taxes.

Conflicted Views about Government Power

A fundamental and long-standing question about the role government should play in society revolves around the amount of power Americans think government should exercise. The public is even more conflicted about this touchstone issue than in the past. Americans are now more likely to say either that the government has too much power or that the government exercises too little power, than to say it has the right amount of power. Presidential appointees, by contrast, are most likely to say the government is using the right amount of power. This is particularly true of Republican administrations. The Clinton appointees differ, with a plurality saying that the government needs to use its powers more vigorously to promote the well-being of all segments of society. This fundamental question plays a key role in shaping opinion toward government.

Over the last decade, the government has been scaling back many programs, particularly social service programs. At the same time, more and more Americans are calling for the government to maintain its level of services and not to cut any further. Presidential appointees also agree that programs need to be maintained and not cut any further. Moreover, when pushed to choose between a smaller government that offers fewer programs or a bigger government that offers more services, more Americans choose bigger government. A sizable minority, however, opt for smaller government and fewer programs. These data suggest a corrective swing in both the public's and presidential appointees' appetite for trimming the size of government, but it also shows that the debate about the size of government is not over.

A Divided Country: Trusters, Distrusters and Ambivalents

The public's degree of trust in the federal government is perhaps the most broad-based measure of how well the government is functioning. According to the well-known American National Election Study measure of trust in government, trust peaked at near-record highs in the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. But trust in government rather quickly slid back to pre-September 11 levels. Today, as the government fights a global war against terrorism, just four in 10 Americans express confidence in the government to do what is right.

When we include another measure of confidence in the analysis, we find that the American public breaks into three roughly even-sized groups—“truststers,” “distrusters” and “ambivalents.” This grouping helps us summarize how the public assesses the government’s functioning.¹ The “truststers” are clear supporters of government and are much more likely than “distrusters” to say that the government is well-run, that federal officials operate in the best interest of the people, that the government is responsive to public opinion and that government programs should be maintained rather than cut back. “Distrusters,” by contrast, are critics of government and are more likely to say that the federal government does a poor job running its programs, that federal officials are not trustworthy, that the government often acts without taking public opinion into account and that the government has too much power. The “ambivalents” straddle these two ends of the spectrum and often hold inconsistent views about the government’s functioning. “Ambivalents” are likely to be somewhat positive about one aspect of the government’s functioning and somewhat negative about another. Put in terms of an election campaign, many of these “ambivalents” would be seen as swing voters—those who have not made up their mind about the government.

“Truststers” and “distrusters” differ somewhat demographically. Younger Americans are more likely to trust government than older Americans. Party identification matters but not greatly. Consistent with past research, supporters of the party in the White House are more likely to say they trust the government than those out of power.

The fact that the country splits into three roughly even groups along this basic question of trust in government underscores the divided position Americans hold on issues at the core of American democracy. Questions about the amount of power the government should exercise, the role government should play in society and the relationship between the individual and government are fundamental ones that frame the debate on everything from abortion to gun control to taxes to preservation of natural resources.

Friction between Public and Government

According to presidential appointees, one of the main reasons some Americans distrust the government is because it is not seen as responsive to the public. And the public agrees. Presidential appointees think they understand how the public feels and a sizable majority say the government pays the right amount or too much attention to what the public thinks. But here the public disagrees. Just one in two Americans think that high-level government officials understand what the public thinks about the issues facing the country. Even more feel the federal government is removed from “real life,” and that people like them have no say about what the federal government does. But, to confound matters, presidential appointees are not sure how much say the public should have. A majority of appointees think the public does not know enough about the issues they face to form wise opinions about what should be done.

Some Americans question the motives for presidential appointees’ choosing to serve in government. These cynical views help explain public distrust in government. Although the public acknowledges that many high-level government officials serve to make America a better place to live and to make a difference, even more think they serve for selfish reasons—

¹ These findings are based on a series of regression analyses that included a number of possible predictors of trust in government. The main predictors are reported here. See the Appendix for details.

to have power, to make important decisions, to meet important people and to get ahead professionally. Presidential appointees tell quite a different story. A very large majority say that appointees serve out of a desire to make America a better place to live and to make a difference. Few say that having power or meeting important people figures into an appointee's decision to enter government service.

The public is even more suspicious about why civil servants enter government service. Most Americans think civil servants seek government employment more for the job security, salary and benefits than to help the public or to make a difference. At the same time, the public thinks that government workers generally try to do a good job but that the government bureaucracy keeps them from doing so. Presidential appointees take a much different view, presumably based on their experience, and conclude that civil servants work in the government to make a difference and to help the public.

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Appointees Satisfied with Their Jobs

If having a satisfied top management team is a measure of a well-functioning organization, then the government meets the mark. Overall, presidential appointees express a high level of job satisfaction and are satisfied with many aspects of their job—the quality of their professional and support staff, their ability to affect change, the level of public scrutiny they experienced and, to a lesser degree, their salary and their ability to attend to their personal life. The latter is not surprising, given that many presidential appointees leave higher paying jobs in the private sector to serve in government and do so fully aware that government service will place strains on their personal life.

Presidential appointees are uniformly dissatisfied with only one thing—the quality of news coverage of the federal government. In fact, the perception that the media exaggerates government failures is one of the top reasons presidential appointees name for why some Americans distrust the government. This concern about the media prevails among those who have served in both Democratic and Republican administrations.

The high degree of job satisfaction does not mean that these presidential appointees lacked challenges during their government service. Topping the list of difficulties were dealing with Congress and the federal budget process. One task that is apparently getting harder over time is managing a large government organization. Only a third of Reagan appointees said this was a challenge, compared to over half in the current administration. Dealing successfully with the White House is seen as less difficult than dealing with Congress. Most say mastering details of policies and procedures of their department or agency was not a problem.

Government in Comparative Perspective

Another way to assess how well the federal government is functioning is to compare the public's attitude toward the government to that of other major institutions. In this comparison, the federal government generally comes out in the middle of the pack—neither at the top nor bottom in the public's estimation.

The public has more confidence in the federal government—as well as state and local government and Congress—than it has in trade unions, the media and big business. At the top of the pack is the Supreme Court, which commands especially high levels of confidence, followed by nonprofit institutions and faith-based organizations.

Moral and Ethical Practices Fare Well in Comparison

Virtually no sector of society has escaped front-page headlines of unethical practices—ranging from the Red Cross’ handling of funds post-September 11, to the Catholic Church’s acknowledgement of child abuse, to the Clinton/Lewinsky sex scandal, to Enron and the mutual fund debacle, to doping in college sports. When scandals take place within the confines of government, they matter because perceptions of the moral character of government officials help shape the public’s attitude toward government. The good news is that Americans rate the ethical and moral practices of federal government officials as high as or higher than that of other professions. Even so, a sizable minority of Americans think the ethical and moral practices of federal officials are poor.

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When it comes to assessing those in charge of all government officials—American presidents—the findings are somewhat startling. Relatively few members of the public think American presidents are always honest: many think they are honest only sometimes. Only a handful of Americans feel this is entirely defensible, which is unsettling to many. Americans who do not think a president is justified in being dishonest with the American people are more likely to distrust the government than those who think it is at least somewhat justified.

Not only does the public have doubts about American presidents, they also consider many core institutions of American society—including the federal government—to be corrupt. The only institutions seen as less corrupt than the federal government are universities. But that is not saying much. A solid majority of Americans think at least a fair amount of corruption occurs on American college campuses too. Presidential appointees, however, do not share the public’s concern about a corrupt federal government. Very few appointees think the federal government is corrupt and this view is shared by those who served in both the Republican and Democratic administrations. It is more disturbing to learn that roughly a third of the presidential appointees think corrupt practices occur in Congress and in state and local government.

What Do Americans Know About Government?

Americans are not especially knowledgeable about their current leaders in government—half or less, for example, knows whether Donald Rumsfeld is Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense or the Attorney General. But, importantly, this does not dampen interest in government. Most Americans are interested in government and a solid majority of Americans say they know at least a fair amount about how government works. This sense of interest and knowledge helps explain why it is particularly galling to many Americans to feel that the government is not listening to them.

According to most Americans, the media is their primary source of knowledge about the government. Substantially fewer say that personal experience fills that role. Media habits, at least as measured in this survey, are related to attitudes toward the government in only a modest way. Listeners to conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh are a notable exception. Although Rush fans are somewhat more likely to distrust government than non-fans, they champion many facets of government—from its hard-working nature to skillfully managing international affairs to capably handling the conservation of natural resources. This praise is presumably for the Bush administration’s pursuit of a smaller government with fewer services—a strongly held value of many Rush fans—than for government itself.

OVERALL OPINION OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Americans continue to have a love/hate relationship with their government. Just how much confidence do Americans have in the federal government and how does it compare to other major institutions? Are Americans angry with Washington? And what can the federal government do to increase the public's trust in the government?

In this section we begin to examine these questions by 1) reviewing levels of trust in government since the 1950s. We then take a comparative perspective and 2) see how trust in government compares to trust in other key institutions. We investigate 3) why presidential appointees think there is distrust of government and 4) what the public thinks the government can do to increase trust levels.

We find that America is a divided but hopeful country when it comes to opinion of the federal government. Roughly one in three Americans trust the federal government. These "trusters" have confidence in the government to do what is right and to operate in the best interest of the American people. Slightly more than a third of Americans, however, distrust the government and lack confidence that it will do what is right or that it operates in the best interest of the people. The remaining quarter of the public are ambivalent about the government and trust it on some issues and distrust it on others. These divisions diminish over the question of whether the government can do anything to build the public's trust. A solid majority of Americans, including both "trusters" and "distrusters," say that the government can increase trust levels and that mistrust of government is not inevitable.

Confidence in Government Down Since 9/11

Since the 1950s pollsters have been asking the American public how much they trust the federal government to do what is right. In 1958, for example, 73 percent of the public said they trusted the federal government *just about always* or *most of the time* to do what is right. This stands in stark contrast to the 39 percent who currently say they trust the federal government to do what is right. This long-standing measure of overall confidence in the federal government has ebbed and flowed over the decades with historical events such as Vietnam and Watergate marking particularly pivotal changes in the public's assessment of the government. This study suggests that the tragic events of September 11, 2001 also changed the public's perception of the federal government, although the effects in this case were short-lived.

Confidence in government might have been expected to rise sharply in the post-September 11 world of terrorist threats on American shores and the public's dependence on the government to protect it from this new threat. And it did. This increase occurred among virtually all segments of American society regardless of age, gender, race or ethnicity or party affiliation. But almost as quickly confidence dropped to pre-September 11 levels. Public confidence in the government is no greater today than it was in 1998 when President Clinton was embroiled in the Lewinsky scandal.

A month after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, nearly six in 10 Americans (57%) said they trusted the federal government *just about always* or *most of the time* to do what is right. The last time confidence in the government was that high was in the late 1960s. But by May 2002—8 months after September 11—just four in 10 (40%) Americans voiced confidence in the government, a drop of 17 percentage points from October 2001 to May 2002. Public confidence has stabilized at this level, with roughly as many in October 2003 expressing confidence in the government (39%) as did in May 2002 (40%). This marks a return to confidence levels found in 1998 (40%).

Trust in government varies little by demographic group, with the exception of age and political affiliation. Age is related to trust with younger Americans being somewhat more trusting than older Americans. Party identification also matters. As has been observed since the 1960's, Americans who identify with the party of the president tend to have more confidence in the government than those who do not. Following this long established trend, Republicans in the current study are more likely to say they trust the government (51%), than Democrats (31%) or Independents (35%).

CONFIDENCE IN GOVERNMENT TO DO WHAT IS RIGHT

→ How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right? ²

	ALWAYS/ MOST OF THE TIME	ONLY SOME OF THE TIME/ NEVER
Public 2003	39%	59
May 2002	40	57
Oct. 2001	57	41
2000	44	56
1998	40	59
1996	33	67
1994	21	77
1992	29	70
1990	28	71
1988	40	58
1986	38	59
1984	44	54
1982	33	65
1980	25	73
1978	29	68
1976	33	63
1974	36	62
1972	53	45
1970	53	44
1968	61	36
1966	65	30
1964	76	22
1958	73	23

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Public More Confident in Government to Operate in Best Interest of People

Americans are somewhat more positive about the federal government when asked a more specific question. In addition to the more general question about trusting the government to do “what is right,” we asked the public how much trust they have in the federal government to “operate in the best interest of the American people.” This more specific question compliments the general trust question and aids our understanding of what the public means when they say they trust the government to do what is right.

² See the topline at the end of this report for exact question wording and references for all trend questions.

Slightly more than one in two (54%) say they trust the federal government to operate in the best interest of the American people. But that trust is not strong—just 11 percent say they trust the government a *great deal* to operate in the best interest of the American people, while a plurality (43%) say they trust it a *fair amount*. On the negative side, a sizable minority of over four in 10 (42%) say they either have not too much (27%) or no trust at all (15%) in the federal government.

CONFIDENCE IN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TO OPERATE IN BEST INTEREST OF THE PEOPLE

→ How much do you trust the federal government to operate in the best interest of the American people?

	GREAT DEAL/ FAIR AMOUNT	NOT TOO MUCH/ NOT AT ALL
→ Federal government		
Public 2003	54%	42

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Confidence Higher in Key Departments and Agencies

Americans have more confidence in specific departments and agencies of the federal government than in the federal government as a whole. The Department of Defense (78%) is most trusted, followed by the Food and Drug Administration (73%) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (70%). The Department of Homeland Security (65%) and the Environmental Protection Agency (65%) fall in the middle of the pack. Two in three Americans (65%) say they trust the Department of Homeland Security and one in four (26%) do not. Given its recent creation, it is not surprising that nearly one in ten (8%) say they do not know if they trust this Department. The Social Security Administration is the least trusted—yet a majority of nearly six in 10 (59%) say they trust this agency.

CONFIDENCE IN KEY DEPARTMENTS AND AGENCIES

→ How much do you trust the (Insert) to operate in the best interest of the American people?

	GREAT DEAL/FAIR AMOUNT	NOT TOO MUCH/NOT AT ALL
→ Defense Department		
Public 2003	78%	19
→ Food and Drug Administration		
Public 2003	73	25
→ Federal Bureau of Investigation		
Public 2003	70	27
→ Department of Homeland Security		
Public 2003	65	26
→ Environmental Protection Agency		
Public 2003	65	32
→ Social Security Administration		
Public 2003	59	38

In each of these cases, confidence in the particular department or agency is substantially higher than in the federal government overall. In part it may be easier for the public to give a more positive rating to an organization whose mission is easy to identify than to a more amorphous entity like the federal government.

One way to better understand how Americans evaluate the federal government is to compare their appraisals of the government with their opinion of other key institutions in society. We found that Americans express more confidence in the Supreme Court than any other institution we asked about. The public also has more confidence in nonprofit organizations and in religious or faith-based groups than in the federal government. But the federal government does fare slightly better than the news media and trade unions and much better than large private businesses.

Three in four Americans have confidence in the Supreme Court (76%). Fewer but still a solid majority express confidence in nonprofit organizations (64%) and in religious groups, churches and other faith-based organizations (61%) to operate in the best interest of the public. Government entities besides the highly trusted Supreme Court—the federal government (54%), state government (55%) and Congress (54%)—are all trusted by slightly more than one in two Americans. Public confidence is lower in the news media (46%) and trade unions (44%) and is lowest in large private business (35%).

Many Americans may hold a general assessment of government—either to trust it or not—that they apply, with some variation, when they assess specific governmental organizations. Americans who have confidence in the federal government also tend to have confidence in Congress, state government and the Supreme Court. And, on the flip-side, those who lack confidence in the federal government also tend to lack confidence in Congress, state government and the Supreme Court.

CONFIDENCE IN MAJOR INSTITUTIONS TO OPERATE IN BEST INTEREST OF THE PEOPLE

→ How much do you trust (Insert) to operate in the best interest of the American people?		
	GREAT DEAL/ FAIR AMOUNT	NOT TOO MUCH/ NOT AT ALL
→ Supreme Court		
Public 2003	76%	22
→ nonprofit organizations		
Public 2003	64	27
→ religious organizations		
Public 2003	61	34
→ state government		
Public 2003	55	42
→ federal government		
Public 2003	54	42
→ Congress		
Public 2003	54	41
→ news media		
Public 2003	46	53
→ trade unions		
Public 2003	44	43
→ large private businesses		
Public 2003	35	60

Appointees Split on Public's Trust of Government

Presidential appointees are divided over whether the public trusts the government or not. One in two (51%) presidential appointees think the typical American basically trusts the federal government, while almost as many (44%) disagree. This is a substantial reversal from 1997 when twice as many appointees thought the public did not trust the government (62%) as thought it did (30%). The mid-1990s were a time of particular distrust of government, although the public's negative sentiment toward the government had mellowed more by 1997 than these presidential appointees realized. The current rosier view is probably due to many appointees assuming that the September 11 boost in confidence reversed some of the earlier negative sentiments toward government.

Presidential appointees in the current Bush administration (62%) and the Reagan administration (64%) are more likely to think the public trusts the government than those who served in the Clinton administrations (41%). Those who served in the Clinton administrations are slightly more likely to think that the typical American distrusts (55%) the government than trusts it (41%). Appointees who served in the George H. Bush administration divide almost evenly between those who think the public trusts the government (50%) and those who think the public distrusts the government (46%).

BASICALLY TRUST GOVERNMENT OR NOT?

→ Do you think the typical American basically trusts the federal government or not?

	YES	NO
Gov 2003	51%	44
G.W. Bush	62	35
Clinton	41	55
G.H. Bush	50	46
Reagan	64	31
1997	30	62

Distrust of Government Attributed to Many Factors

Presidential appointees were read seven possible reasons for the public's distrust in government, and a large majority of appointees thought each reason was at least somewhat important. This is a commentary in itself about the variety of factors that appointees see as influencing how Americans view the government. Even though a large majority of appointees think all seven reasons are important, three are seen as *very* important reasons by a sizable minority of appointees.

One reason squarely places blame on the government—events such as Vietnam and Watergate. Eight in 10 appointees (80%) think that government catastrophes such as Vietnam and Watergate are either a very important (38%) or somewhat important reason (42%) why there is distrust in the government. Presidential appointees in the current Bush administration are somewhat less likely than those who served in the Clinton or Reagan administrations to say this is a very important reason for distrust in the government.

The other two top reasons focus on the media or politicians, but not the government itself. Nearly nine in 10 appointees (86%) say that distrust occurs because the media exaggerates government failures. Appointees strongly hold this view with nearly one in two (49%) saying that this is a very important reason for distrust in the government. This view is held more strongly by appointees who served in the Reagan (71%) and George H. Bush (53%) administrations than by those who have served more recently in government (Clinton: 38%; George W. Bush: 42%).

REASONS FOR PUBLIC DISTRUST OF GOVERNMENT

→ How would you rate each of the following as reasons for why the public might distrust the government?

	VERY IMPORTANT	SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT	NOT TOO IMPORTANT	NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT
→ media exaggerates government failures				
Gov 2003	49%	37	10	2
G.W. Bush	42	45	8	4
Clinton	38	42	15	2
G.H. Bush	53	36	8	2
Reagan	71	21	5	0
→ criticizing government is a popular campaign theme				
Gov 2003	40	40	15	4
G.W. Bush	34	41	17	6
Clinton	47	38	10	3
G.H. Bush	30	45	20	4
Reagan	43	35	17	3
→ events such as Vietnam and Watergate				
Gov 2003	38	42	14	3
G.W. Bush	26	43	21	6
Clinton	44	44	8	1
G.H. Bush	35	43	18	2
Reagan	43	37	15	3
→ politicians promise too much				
Gov 2003	36	48	13	2
G.W. Bush	38	44	14	3
Clinton	31	54	13	2
G.H. Bush	39	45	13	2
Reagan	44	43	11	0
→ government unresponsiveness				
Gov 2003	26	60	10	1
G.W. Bush	26	59	12	1
Clinton	30	60	7	1
G.H. Bush	23	64	11	1
Reagan	20	60	15	3

A large majority of appointees think that government distrust can be at least partly attributed to the fact that criticism of the government has become a popular campaign theme. Four in 10 appointees (40%) say this is a very important reason that many distrust the government and as many (40%) say it is a somewhat important reason for distrust. This reason resonates more strongly with appointees who served in the Clinton administrations than either of the Bush administrations.

Politicians who promise more than they can deliver are also a source of distrust according to more than eight in 10 appointees (84%). Slightly more than a third (36%) think this is a very important reason for distrust and nearly half (48%) say it is a somewhat important reason why some Americans distrust the government. This concern is shared equally among presidential appointees who served in Democratic and Republican administrations.

Nearly nine in 10 (86%) appointees think that government unresponsiveness contributes to distrust in government, although just over a quarter (26%) say this is a very important reason for distrusting the government. Concern that the government is seen as unresponsive is shared by appointees from both Democratic and Republican administrations.

Other reasons for distrust in government are that the government has the wrong priorities (72%) and the belief that government is too powerful (71%).

A Divided Country: Trusters, Ambivalents and Distrusters

A closer examination of the public opinion data shows that Americans can be divided in three groups based on their views toward the federal government. A third (33%) of the public has confidence in the government to both do what is right and to operate in the best interest of the American people. We label this group government “trusters.” Slightly more (37%) are on the opposite end of the trust spectrum and say they do not trust the government to operate in the best interest of the American people and only some of the time or never trust the government to do what is right. These are government “distrusters.” The remaining quarter

REASONS FOR PUBLIC DISTRUST OF GOVERNMENT

→ How would you rate each of the following as reasons for why the public might distrust the government?

	VERY IMPORTANT	SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT	NOT TOO IMPORTANT	NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT
→ the government has the wrong priorities				
Gov 2003	18%	54	23	2
G.W. Bush	17	53	25	2
Clinton	18	59	19	2
G.H. Bush	18	49	27	5
Reagan	16	51	25	1
→ belief that the government is too powerful				
Gov 2003	17	54	23	3
G.W. Bush	13	60	20	4
Clinton	14	53	28	3
G.H. Bush	19	59	20	2
Reagan	25	47	21	3

“TRUSTERS” & “DISTRUSTERS”

TRUSTERS	AMBIVALENTS	DISTRUSTERS
33%	25	37

(25%) fall in the middle and hold inconsistent views about government. We call this group the “ambivalents” given their mixed views about government.³

“Trusters” and “distrusters” differ demographically in only a few ways from each other. Women are as likely to be “distrusters” as men, but there are some age differences with younger people more likely to be “trusters” than older people. “Trusters” are more likely to be Republicans than Democrats but “trusters” and “distrusters” do not differ greatly based on education, race/ethnicity or income. Both “trusters” and “distrusters” report voting at the same frequency, but “trusters” are more likely to say they get a sense of satisfaction out of voting than do “distrusters” Finally “distrusters” and “trusters” are both interested in what happens in the federal government and believe they know how Washington works.

Although “trusters” and “distrusters” differ little demographically they do vary greatly in their attitudes about the proper role and size of government, the performance of government, the motives civil servants and presidential appointees have for serving in government and the effect the government has in the daily lives of Americans. These differences will be highlighted in the following sections of this report.

Interestingly, “trusters” are not only more likely to have confidence in the federal government but also tend to have more confidence in a range of institutions, from nonprofit organizations to large businesses to faith-based organizations. By contrast, “distrusters” tend to be less confident in all institutions, not just the federal government. This finding, along with other research, suggests that there is an underlying dimension of basic or generalized trust that is at work in shaping attitudes toward institutions overall and the federal government in particular.

CONFIDENCE BY “TRUSTERS” & “DISTRUSTERS”

% who trust a great deal/fair amount			
		TRUSTERS	DISTRUSTERS
→ Supreme Court			
Public 2003	91%		63
→ nonprofit organizations			
Public 2003	76		56
→ religious organizations			
Public 2003	79		45
→ state government			
Public 2003	77		35
→ Congress			
Public 2003	82		25
→ news media			
Public 2003	56		37
→ trade unions			
Public 2003	51		41
→ large private businesses			
Public 2003	53		18

³ Roughly 5 percent of the cases could not be classified as either “trusters”, “ambivalents” or “distrusters.” These cases were not included in the analysis.

Americans Frustrated Rather than Angry with Government

Asked about their view of the government on a more emotive than evaluative level, Americans are much more likely to say they are basically content or frustrated with the government rather than to say they are angry with it. A sizable minority describe themselves as basically content with the federal government (32%) and one in two Americans (50%) say they are frustrated with the government. Substantially fewer (14%) express a harsher view and say they are angry with the federal government. These sentiments are virtually unchanged from 1997.

FEELINGS ABOUT FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

→ Some people say they are basically content with the federal government, others say they are frustrated, and others say they are angry. Which of these best describes how you feel?

	BASICALLY CONTENT	FRUSTRATED	ANGRY
Public 2003	32%	50	14
1997	29	56	12

Not surprisingly, those who we classified as “truststers” are much more likely to be basically content (62%) with the government than are those who are “ambivalent” (33%) or who “distrust” (6%) the government. Likewise “distrusters” are much more likely to be angry with the government (29%) than those who are “ambivalent” (8%) or who “trust” (3%) the government.

These findings clearly show that the public’s distrust of government is predicated more on frustration with the government rather than anger with it. Among those who distrust the government, more than six in 10 (63%) are frustrated with the government, a handful are basically content (6%) and almost three in 10 (29%) are angry with the government.

FEELINGS ABOUT GOVERNMENT BY “TRUSTERS” & “DISTRUSTERS”

	TRUSTERS	AMBIVALENTS	DISTRUSTERS
Content	62%	33	6
Frustrated	30	58	63
Angry	3	8	29

Americans who are angry with the government are quick to reveal their feelings when asked “what comes to mind when you hear the words the federal government in Washington.” While many Americans give a descriptive response, such as the “White House” or a neutral response, such as “power,” those who are angry with the government are three times more likely to give a negative response, such as “bureaucracy” or “crooks” than those who are content with the government.

Those who say they are angry with the government are more likely to be older, less well educated, lower income and to be Democrats or Independents. Some of this discontent may be focused more specifically at the current administration rather than a more general anger with the federal government. Over nine in 10 (93%) of those who are basically content with the government say they have confidence in President George W. Bush to operate in the best interest of the American people, and a solid majority express a *great deal* of confidence in the president (61%). Among those who are angry with the government, roughly seven in 10 (69%) say they have *not too much* (13%) or *no confidence at all* (56%) in the president to operate in the best interest of the people. These data also show that those who are angry with the government attend religious services much less often than those who are content.

Perhaps the move toward more faith-based initiatives on the part of the current administration has fueled some of this discontent.

Government Does Better Job than Often Credited with Doing

Compared to a few years ago, more Americans today believe that the government is doing a better job than it is generally given credit with doing. Currently more than four in 10 (44%) agree that the government often does a better job than it is credited with doing. In 1997, only a third of Americans (33%) shared this generous view. Even so, today about half (48%) say criticism of the government is justified; down from 1997 when a solid majority (60%) thought criticism of the government was justified. These sentiments are consistent with earlier post-September 11 evaluations of the government. In May 2002, roughly half of the American public (47%) thought criticism of the government was justified and slightly more than four in 10 (43%) thought the government often did a better job than it was given credit for doing.

BETTER JOB OR CRITICISM JUSTIFIED?

→ Some people think criticism of the way the federal government does its job is justified; others think the government often does a better job than it is given credit for. Which comes closer to your views?

	BETTER JOB	CRITICISM JUSTIFIED
Public 2003	44%	48
2002	43	47
1997	33	60
Gov 2003	75	20
1997	85	4

Predictably “truststers” in government are nearly three times as likely as “distrusters” to say that the government is doing a better job than it is given credit for doing (66% vs. 23%). And, conversely, those who distrust the government are much more likely to say that criticism of the government is justified (68%) than those who trust the government (29%).

BETTER JOB OR CRITICISM JUSTIFIED BY “TRUSTERS” & “DISTRUSTERS”

	TRUSTERS	AMBIVALENTS	DISTRUSTERS
Better job	66%	45	23
Criticism justified	29	48	68

Presidential appointees are much less critical of the government than the public. These Americans who have served in senior leadership positions are much more likely to say that the government often does a better job than it is given credit for doing (75%) than that criticism of the government is justified (20%). Overall, there is no consistent difference in opinion among the different administrations. Presidential appointees, regardless of the administration, think government deserves more credit for the job it does.

A Majority Think Government Can Increase Public's Trust

The public's trust in government has been, at best, modest for many years. But Americans do not think it has to be this way. A solid majority (69%) think there are things the government could do to increase the public's trust. There remains, however, a notable core of Americans who think people will mistrust the government no matter what (27%).

Interestingly, government "truststers" are actually less optimistic about whether people will mistrust the government than "distrusters." Those who distrust the government are slightly more likely (75%) to believe that there are things the government can do to increase the public's trust in it than are "truststers" (64%). And "truststers" (31%) are somewhat more likely than "distrusters" (23%) to think that people will mistrust the government no matter what.

Democrats (75%) are more likely than Republicans (64%) and Independents (69%) to think there is something that can be done to increase trust in government. Besides this partisan difference, views about whether people will mistrust the government do not vary by demographic group.

Americans have some basic recommendations to increase trust levels. Nearly three in 10 (28%) say that government officials need to be honest and to honor their commitments, and that this will increase trust levels. Others think that greater communication (15%) and responsiveness (13%) on the part of the government will boost trust. For nearly two in 10 Americans (17%) the cure for distrust is for the government to perform better in specific areas, such as health care, education and the economy.

MISTRUST OF FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

→ Do you think people will mistrust the federal government no matter what, or do you think there are things the government could do to increase the public's trust?

	MISTRUST NO MATTER WHAT	THINGS COULD INCREASE TRUST
Public 2003	27%	69
1997	23	75

The American people have, at best, modest trust in the government. Why? Is it because they are dissatisfied with the way the federal government is working? Do people think the government is wasting tax dollars or being too slow and inefficient to get much done? How confident are Americans in the government's ability to handle economic, social and international problems, generally speaking?

In this section we explore these issues by examining what the American public and presidential appointees think about 1) the overall performance of the federal government, 2) the efficiency of the federal government and 3) the job the federal government is doing handling major issues.

We find that while the American public is generally satisfied with the overall performance of the federal government, presidential appointees voice more enthusiasm for the job the government is doing than does the general public. Most Americans think the government is hard working and is well-run, but at the same time a good number of people believe the government wastes money and is inefficient. And nearly half of the American public say they are paying too much in taxes considering the services they get from the government. Of this list of concerns, one plays a particularly big role shaping trust in the government—overall job performance.

Positive Evaluations of the Federal Government's Job Performance

The general public is positive in its assessment of the federal government's performance. More than six in 10 Americans (64%) believe that, overall, the federal government does a good job running its programs and services.

A solid majority also believe that the federal government does a good job of being fair in its decisions (64%) and helping people who need assistance (58%). But it is important to note that relatively few Americans think the government does a very good job in these areas. Only one in 10 say the federal government performs these two tasks *very well*. Many more say the government is only doing *somewhat well*.

As might be expected, evaluation of government performance is related to overall trust in government. Government "trusters" are considerably more likely than "distrusters" to say the government is doing a good job running its programs (84% vs. 46%), helping people who need assistance (77% vs. 43%) and being fair in its decisions (89% vs. 39%).

JOB PERFORMANCE

→ All in all, how good a job does the federal government do
(Insert)

	VERY/ SOMEWHAT GOOD	SOMEWHAT/ VERY POOR
→ running its programs and services		
Public 2003	64%	34
Gov 2003	88	12
→ being fair in its decisions		
Public 2003	64	34
Gov 2003	91	6
→ helping people who need assistance		
Public 2003	58	39
Gov 2003	83	10

Education, gender and race/ethnicity also play a role in shaping attitudes toward government performance. Nearly seven in 10 of those with a high school education or less (67%) approve of the government's overall performance while only about five in 10 of those with a post-graduate education (52%) do. Women are a little more critical of the government's performance in helping those who need assistance with more women than men saying the government is not doing a good job (44% vs. 37%). Likewise, only a slight majority of African Americans (56%) think the government is fair in its decisions, compared to a more solid majority of whites (65%) and Hispanics (64%).

Party identification is also a factor. Republicans are more likely than Democrats or Independents to say the government is good at running its programs, helping people, and being fair in its decisions. Seven in 10 Republicans (71%) think the government is good at running its programs, while the same is true for six in 10 Democrats (61%) and Independents (60%). Likewise seven in 10 Republicans (72%) think the government is good at helping people who need assistance. Fewer Independents (56%) agree and even fewer Democrats (46%) think the government is good at helping those in need. And nearly eight in 10 Republicans (78%) say the government is fair in its decisions. A smaller majority of six in 10 Democrats (58%) and Independents (59%) hold this view.

Presidential appointees give the federal government even higher performance ratings than the general public. The vast majority of presidential appointees believe the federal government is fair in its decisions (91%) and does a good job running its programs and services (88%). Most also believe that the federal government helps those who need assistance (83%).

Government Handles International Issues Better than Social Issues

How well does the government handle international, economic and social issues? The public has the most confidence in the government when it comes to handling international problems (59%), followed by economic problems (53%). Slightly less than half (47%) have confidence in the governments handling of social issues (47%).

And consistent with their greater confidence in the government's handling of international issues, more people report they have a *great deal* of confidence in the government's ability to handle difficulties in the international arena (20%) than in handling domestic economic (9%) or social problems (6%).

While people may evaluate the government's ability to handle international problems as high in comparison to economic and social problems, there has been a decrease in confidence today compared to confidence levels over the last couple of decades. More than seven in 10 Americans expressed confidence in the government's ability to deal with

GOVERNMENT'S HANDLING OF DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL PROBLEMS

→ How much trust and confidence do you have in the federal government when it comes to handling...		
	GREAT DEAL/FAIR AMOUNT	NOT VERY MUCH/NONE AT ALL
→ international problems		
Public 2003	59%	39
1997	76	23
1976	56	40
1974	73	22
1972	75	22
→ economic problems		
Public 2003	53	47
→ social problems		
Public 2003	47	51

international issues in 1972, 1974, and 1997, compared to six in 10 today (59%). In fact, confidence levels are as low now as they were in 1976, following the final pullout of American troops from Vietnam. What is more, more people say they are *not at all* confident in the government's ability to handle international problems (15%) than at any prior time.

There is a strong partisan component to evaluations of government performance in handling international, economic and social issues with Republicans giving considerably more positive marks in all three areas than either Democrats or Independents. This is not surprising given that those who identify with the party currently in power—in this case the Republican Party—usually have somewhat higher levels of trust in government than those who favor another party.

When it comes to international affairs, for example, more than eight in 10 Republicans (83%) feel confident in the federal government's capabilities, compared to half of Independents (51%) and less than half of Democrats (45%). Similarly, more than seven in 10 Republicans (72%) approve of the government's job handling economic problems, compared to more than four in 10 Independents (45%) and fewer than four in 10 Democrats (38%). Finally, while a majority of six in 10 Republicans (59%) have confidence in the government to handle social problems, the same is true of more than four in 10 Independents (44%) and fewer than four in 10 Democrats (37%).

Government Well-run but Inefficient

Consistent with their overall approval of the government's performance, a majority of Americans say that well-run is an apt description of the federal government (55%). An even larger share of Americans think the federal government is hard-working (63%).

At the same time, nearly two in three describe the federal government as being slow and inefficient (63%). When analyzed together, we see there is a large contingent of people who think the government is doing a good job running its programs, but does so in a slow and

GOVERNMENT'S HANDLING OF DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL PROBLEMS BY PARTY IDENTIFICATION

→ How much trust and confidence do you have in the federal government when it comes to handling...		
	GREAT DEAL/FAIR AMOUNT	NOT VERY MUCH/NONE AT ALL
→ international problems		
Republicans	83%	15
Democrats	45	52
Independents	51	48
→ economic problems		
Republicans	72	26
Democrats	38	61
Independents	45	53
→ social problems		
Republicans	59	39
Democrats	37	59
Independents	44	55

DESCRIPTION OF GOVERNMENT

→ Does (Insert) describe the federal government very well, somewhat well, not too well or not well at all?		
	VERY/SOMEWHAT WELL	NOT TOO/NOT AT ALL WELL
→ well-run		
Public 2003	55%	41
→ hard-working		
Public 2003	63	34
→ slow and inefficient		
Public 2003	63	32

inefficient manner. A solid majority (62%) of those who think the government is doing a good job running its programs and services also believe the government is slow and inefficient.

In addition to being generally slow and inefficient, there is a widespread perception that the government does not spend its money wisely. Nearly seven in 10 (67%) say that the federal government does not do a good job of spending its money wisely.

Views about the government's management of money vary somewhat by demographic group. Hispanics, Republicans and those with a high school education or less are less likely to be critical of the government's money management skills—even though a majority of each group think the government does not spend money wisely. “Trusters” are the only group for whom a scant majority (51%) say the government spends its money wisely.

Once again, presidential appointees are much more positive about the government than the general public. Only one in four (25%) presidential appointees think the government does not do a good job spending its money wisely. The majority of appointees (72%), rather, think the government handles its money well. Those who served the Clinton administration (81%) are particularly positive about the government's performance when it comes to spending money wisely.

The perception that the government is not spending money wisely has a much more damning effect on the overall evaluation of the government than does general slowness or inefficiency. That is, those who think the government is slow and inefficient are a little less likely to be government “trustees” than those who do not think the government is slow and inefficient (31% vs. 39%). However, those who think the government is not spending money wisely are much less likely to trust the government than those who think it is spending money in a prudent manner (24% vs. 55%).

SPENDING MONEY WISELY

→ All in all, how good a job does the federal government do spending its money wisely?		
	VERY/ SOMEWHAT GOOD	NOT TOO/ NOT GOOD AT ALL
→ spending its money wisely		
Public 2003	31%	67
Gov 2003	72	25
G.W. Bush	62	36
Clinton	81	16
G.H. Bush	71	27
Reagan	65	32

“TRUSTERS” & “DISTRUSTERS” BY EFFICIENCY

	GOV SLOW AND INEFFICIENT	GOV NOT SLOW AND INEFFICIENT
Trusters	31%	39
Ambivalents	27	23
Distrusters	40	34

“TRUSTERS” & “DISTRUSTERS” BY SPENDING MONEY WISELY

	SPENDS MONEY WISELY	DOES NOT SPEND MONEY WISELY
Trusters	55%	24
Ambivalents	26	24
Distrusters	14	49

Similarly, virtually all those who think the government is spending its money wisely say the government is doing a good job of running its programs. Nine in 10 (89%) of those who think the government spends its money wisely also think the government is doing a good job running its programs and services. By contrast, those who think the government wastes money are divided over whether the government does a good (52%) or poor (46%) job of running its programs.

SPENDING MONEY WISELY AND GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE

	SPENDS MONEY WISELY	DOES NOT SPEND MONEY WISELY
Programs well run	89%	52
Programs not well run	9	46

24

There is little difference in whether or not a person thinks the government is generally slow and inefficient and their evaluation of government programs. This further implies that people all-in-all accept, although perhaps reluctantly, that the government is slow and inefficient and this fact does little to color perceptions of whether the government is doing a good job or not.

Government Inefficiency Not Inevitable

The impression that the government is slow and inefficient prevails among the American public. However, people are not willing to write these inefficiencies off as a problem inherent in the federal government. Only one in ten Americans (10%) believe the federal government is bound to be inefficient. The vast majority of Americans (86%) think the government can become more efficient—with those under 30 most likely to hold this view.

GOVERNMENT INEFFICIENCY

→ Do you think the federal government is bound to be inefficient no matter what, or can it become more efficient?

	BOUND TO BE INEFFICIENT	CAN BECOME MORE EFFICIENT
Public 2003	10%	86
1997	7	92
Gov 2003	16	79
G.W. Bush	13	86
Clinton	6	87
G.H. Bush	26	69
Reagan	29	67

This opinion is shared by presidential appointees. Eight in 10 presidential appointees think the government can become more efficient (79%). This sentiment is particularly widespread among those with the most recent government experience.

Presidential appointees of the current George W. Bush (86%) and the Clinton administrations (87%) are more likely to think that the government can become more efficient than members of the George H. Bush (69%) and Reagan (67%) administrations.

Taxes: Split over Giving More than Getting

Consistent with past research, Americans are divided when it comes to the issue of paying taxes. Nearly half of the American public (47%) think that, considering what they get from the federal government, they are paying more than their fair share of taxes. As many (47%) think they pay the right amount into the federal coffers.

TAXES

Attitudes toward taxes are associated with overall opinion of government. As might be expected, Americans who think they pay the right amount in taxes are more likely to approve of the government’s overall job performance in running its programs and services (70%) than those who think they pay more than their fair share of taxes (56%).

→ Considering what you get from the federal government, do you think you pay more than your fair share of taxes, less than your fair share, or about the right amount?

	MORE THAN FAIR SHARE	LESS THAN FAIR SHARE	ABOUT THE RIGHT AMOUNT
Public 2003	47%	2	47
1997	52	2	45

Those who judge their tax burden to be unfair tend to be in their prime working years—between the ages of 30 to 64—and thus likely to be paying the lion’s share of taxes. By contrast, a majority of younger and older taxpayers are satisfied with the amount of taxes they pay. Race also matters with a slight majority of African Americans (55%) saying they pay more than their fair share, compared to less than half of whites (46%) and Hispanics (45%).

A certain amount of the frustration over the tax burden comes from a perception that the federal government does not spend its money wisely. Americans who say they pay more than their fair share in taxes are even more likely to say the government does a bad job of spending its money wisely (74%) than those who think they pay the right amount of taxes (60%).

Three Factors Matter Most when Evaluating Government Job Performance

An in-depth analysis shows that the public’s evaluation of the government’s job performance running its programs and services is largely shaped by three main factors.⁴ The first is whether the government is being fair in its decision-making. Americans who think the government is fair are much more likely to think the government is doing a good job. This underscores the importance the public places on fair and honest governmental actions. Second, those who think the government is spending its money wisely are more likely to say the government is doing a good job than those who say the government is not spending its money wisely. And, third, those who have confidence in the government’s handling of economic problems are more likely to say the government’s performance is good. To a lesser extent, confidence in the government’s handling of social problems, perceptions about whether taxes are being fairly levied and government responsiveness also shape opinion of performance. The perception of government inefficiency is noticeably missing as a factor that shapes public opinion on performance. The widespread charge of being slow and

⁴ These findings are based on a series of regression analyses that included a number of possible predictors of government performance ratings. The main predictors are reported here. See the Appendix for details.

inefficient does not play a role in shaping overall opinion of government performance. Likewise, the public's assessment of the government's handling of international issues does not determine how the public assesses the government's performance. The public clearly has a domestic mindset when it comes to judging how good a job the government is doing running its programs.

Mixed Marks on Specific Issues

When it comes to specific policy issues, the American public believes the government is doing a better job in some areas than in others. Majorities give the government good marks for ensuring that food and medicines are safe (78%), protecting the nation against terrorist attacks (73%) and conserving the country's natural resources (57%). On the negative side, solid majorities believe the government is doing a poor job ensuring access to affordable health care for all Americans (66%) and reducing poverty (61%).

Other issues—caring for the elderly, managing the economy and promoting honesty and morality—provoke more division. For example, half of Americans (49%) say the government is doing a poor job providing a decent standard of living for the elderly, but as many people (47%) credit the government with doing a good job in this area. The economy is another contentious issue. Half of the public (50%) say the government is doing a good job managing the economy, but nearly as many Americans (46%) disagree. Finally, there is no consensus when it comes to promoting greater honesty and stronger morals among people. Although a slim majority (52%) believe the government is doing poorly in this area, a notable minority of over four in 10 Americans (42%) believe the government is performing well.

As we might expect, government “trusters” are more positive about the government's job performance than “distrusters” on each issue. Similarly, Republicans approve of the government's handling of these specific issues at higher rates than Democrats. On some issues the opinions of Independents closely resemble those of Democrats—poverty reduction, promoting honesty and stronger morals, conservation of natural resources and access to health care. However, when it comes to

JOB PERFORMANCE IN SPECIFIC AREAS

→ What kind of job has the federal government done of (Insert)?	VERY/ SOMEWHAT GOOD		SOMEWHAT/ VERY POOR	
→ conserving the country's natural resources				
Public 2003	57%		38	
Gov 2003	71		26	
→ ensuring every American has access to affordable healthcare				
Public 2003	32		66	
Gov 2003	33		63	
→ providing a decent standard of living for the elderly				
Public 2003	47		49	
Gov 2003	80		17	
→ promoting greater honesty and stronger morals among people				
Public 2003	42		52	
Gov 2003	45		47	
→ ensuring that food and medicines are safe				
Public 2003	78		19	
Gov 2003	93		5	
→ reducing poverty				
Public 2003	35		61	
Gov 2003	61		37	
→ managing the economy to prevent another recession or depression				
Public 2003	50		46	
Gov 2003	58		39	
→ protecting against terrorist attacks				
Public 2003	73		24	
Gov 2003	74		24	

evaluating the government's job ensuring that food and medicines are safe, Independents hold views similar to Republicans. On other issues—namely care for the elderly, protecting against terrorist attacks and managing the economy—Independents stand as a distinct group neither as favorable as Republicans or as unfavorable as Democrats. The difference in approval rates by political party is most noticeable when it comes to managing the economy. Nearly seven in 10 Republicans (68%) say the government is doing a good job managing the economy while five in 10 Independents (50%) and only about three in 10 Democrats (33%) concur.

Race also makes a difference. Hispanics evaluate the government less critically than either African Americans or whites on all but two issues—ensuring that food and medicines are safe and protecting the country from terrorist attacks. On these two issues Hispanics and whites are less critical than blacks.

In five of the specific policy areas, presidential appointees give a more positive assessment of government performance than the public. The disconnect between the public and the appointees is particularly striking with regard to care for the elderly and poverty reduction. Presidential appointees are much more likely than the public to say the government does a good job providing a decent standard of living for the elderly (80% vs. 47%) and reducing poverty (61% vs. 35%). The appointees are also more likely than the public to give the government good marks for ensuring that foods and medicines are safe (93% vs. 78%) and conserving natural resources (71% vs. 57%), although in these areas the gap between public and appointee opinion is not nearly as wide. Finally, nearly six in 10 appointees (58%) give good ratings for government performance managing the economy, compared to five in 10 among the public (50%).

In the rest of the policy areas, the public and the appointees are even more likely to see eye-to-eye. More than seven in 10 ordinary Americans (74%) and a similar number of presidential appointees (73%) agree that the government is doing a good job protecting against terrorist attacks. And more than four in 10 among both the appointees (45%) as well as the public (42%) give a good rating for the government's performance promoting greater honesty and stronger morals. The one area, where both the public and the appointees are most likely to express disappointment at government performance is health care. Only about one in three presidential appointees (33%) and members of the general public (32%) say the government is doing a good job ensuring that all Americans have access to affordable health care.

Among the appointees, the Clinton administrations are more critical of the government's performance on all these key issues than are presidential appointees from the three Republican administrations. The one exception is ensuring that food and medicine are safe. In this one case, nearly all presidential appointees are in agreement that the government has done a good job.

Poor Performance Is Government's Fault

Whose fault is it if the government is not meeting the public's expectations? Critics of the government's performance—among both the general public and appointees—are more likely to say that poor performance is the government's fault than to say that the issue is too difficult or complex to solve.

There is one exception. Opinion is split on whose fault it is that the government has not done a better job promoting honesty and stronger morals. Americans are equally likely to blame the government (45%) as they are to accept the government's poor performance and say the failure is because the issue is too difficult or complex (41%). Appointees are similarly split in deciding where the blame lies, although they are more likely to accept the government's failure and say the promotion of honesty and morality is too difficult or complex of an issue, rather than say poor performance is the government's fault. Fewer than five in 10 (47%) appointees say the issue is too complex, while nearly four in 10 (36%) say the failure is the government's fault.

For some issues, Republicans within the general population, are more likely to say that poor performance is not the government's fault per se, but rather that the issue is too complex—namely in the areas of access to health care, care for the elderly, poverty reduction and managing the economy. Democrats on the other hand, are more likely to say that poor performance is the government's fault.

Perhaps not surprisingly, for each of the eight issues explored, those who think that the government's poor job performance is the government's fault, are less likely to trust the government. Those who blame the government for its poor track record on an issue are at least twice as likely to be government "distrusters" than government "trusters." Likewise, "trusters" are more likely to accept the government's poor performance and say an issue is too complex than are "distrusters"—except when it comes to combating terrorism. Here a plurality of both "trusters" and "distrusters" say poor performance is the government's fault.

REASON FOR POOR PERFORMANCE

→ [For those who said the federal government has done a somewhat or very poor job (Insert),] is this the government's fault or is it because the issue is too difficult or too complex?

	GOVERNMENT'S FAULT	ISSUE TOO BIG/TOO COMPLEX
→ conserving the country's natural resources		
Public 2003 (n=493)	62%	32
Gov 2003 (n=130)	80	12
→ ensuring every American has access to affordable healthcare		
Public 2003 (n=848)	56	34
Gov 2003 (n=313)	50	35
→ providing a decent standard of living for the elderly		
Public 2003 (n=629)	65	27
Gov 2003 (n=84)	62	26
→ promoting greater honesty and stronger morals among people		
Public 2003 (n=679)	45	41
Gov 2003 (n=240)	36	47
→ ensuring that food and medicines are safe		
Public 2003 (n=256)	58	31
Gov 2003 (n=25)	61	35
→ reducing poverty		
Public 2003 (n=801)	51	37
Gov 2003 (n=183)	51	33
→ managing the economy to prevent another recession or depression		
Public 2003 (n=605)	61	29
Gov 2003 (n=196)	70	18
→ protecting against terrorist attacks		
Public 2003 (n=327)	57	30
Gov 2003 (n=119)	57	33

The Federal Government Can Improve But Unlikely to Do So

Americans are not without ideas about how the federal government can improve. When asked “what is the one thing the federal government could do to improve the way it runs its programs and services” people are most likely to give responses related to improving how the government responds and relates to the American people. Two in 10 (20%) suggest things like the government “should be more in touch with the people,” “be more in tune with issues that effect citizens” and “be responsive to state and local needs.”

Answers such as these are not surprising considering that a majority of Americans think the government is “removed from ‘real’ life.” What is more, presidential appointees are aware of this problem. Most appointees cite the belief that government is unresponsive as an important reason for distrust in the federal government.

Other often mentioned suggestions are related to improving management techniques and other issues related to worker management and quality (14%), providing more services such as health care, job creation, and programs targeted to groups such as the poor and seniors (10%), cleaning up politics and stopping partisan bickering (10%) and using financial resources more efficiently (9%).

Overall, people are quite pessimistic regarding the likelihood that the government will make these changes, however. Only about two in 10 (22%) think it is somewhat or very likely the government will make the change they suggest. More than seven in 10 (73%) believe that it is unlikely that the government will be able to make the suggested improvement.

IMPROVING THE GOVERNMENT?

→ What one thing could the federal government do to improve the way it runs its programs and services?

	PUBLIC (2003)
Improved responsiveness	20%
Improved management and issues with workers	14
Provide more services	10
Clean up politics	10
Use money wiser	9
Improved efficiency	8
Other	8

LIKELIHOOD OF GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

→ How likely is it that the federal government will do [what respondent said could improve the way the federal government runs its programs and services]?

	VERY/ SOMEWHAT LIKELY	NOT TOO/ NOT AT ALL LIKELY
Public 2003 (n=1063)	22%	73

For centuries Americans have been grappling with questions about the role of government in society and how much of a presence the federal government should have in our lives. Do we now feel that government has the right amount of power or are some of us fearful of a Leviathan government that has too much power? Should the size of the government be scaled back? What areas should the federal government take primary responsibility for and which areas should be left to state and local governments or even to private individuals and groups?

In this section, we examine views about 1) governmental power today—does the government have the right amount of power, too much power, or does it not use the powers it has robustly enough, 2) the proper size of government—should the government be cut back even if this means sacrificing existing programs and 3) the proper scope of government—what should be the responsibilities of the federal government.

We find that the American public is increasingly torn over the amount of power government should have. Roughly as many think the government should use more power as think the government has too much power. Perhaps most strikingly, over the last 40 years, fewer and fewer Americans have been saying the government is using the right amount of power. And, despite the current trend towards outsourcing government services, the public thinks the federal government should shoulder primary responsibility for most key areas.

Public Torn over Role of Government

The American public is more conflicted today about the amount of power government should exercise than it has been in the past. People are split between those who say the government has too much power (32%) and those who say it should use its powers more to promote the well-being of all Americans (35%). Only about a quarter of the public (28%) think the government is now using about the right amount of power for meeting today's needs.

There has been a shift in how the public has answered this question over the last forty years or so. Fewer people today say the government is using about the right amount of power than when the question was first asked in 1964. In 1964, a plurality (38%) approved of the extent of the government's power. By 1997, this percent had dropped to a little more than three in 10 (32%)—today it stands at less than three in 10 (28%).

Not surprisingly, views of governmental power are dependent on how trustworthy one thinks the government is. Government “trustees”

GOVERNMENTAL POWER

→ Which one of the following statements comes closest to your view about government power today? The federal government today has too much power. The federal government is now using about the right amount of power for meeting today's needs. The federal government should use its powers more vigorously to promote the well-being of all segments of society.

	TOO MUCH POWER	RIGHT AMOUNT OF POWER	SHOULD USE POWER MORE
Public 2003	32%	28	35
1997	33	32	33
1964	26	38	29
Gov 2003	27	47	24

are more likely to say the government has either the right amount of power (44%) or that the government should use more power (40%). Few “trusters” think the government currently has too much power (13%). By contrast, “distrusters,” more than any other group, would like to see governmental power scaled back. One in two (49%) “distrusters” feel that the government today has too much power. “Ambivalents,” on the other hand, are equally divided across the three categories. Around one in three “ambivalents” (35%) thinks the government has too much power, about one in three (31%) think the government has about the right amount of power, and about one in three (31%) thinks the government should use more power.

Opinions about government power also vary somewhat by demographic group, with women, the unemployed, blacks and Hispanics more likely to say the government should use its powers more vigorously to promote the well-being of the people.

The American public is less satisfied today with the amount of power the government exercises than it was four decades ago, yet no consensus has emerged about what should be done regarding the exercise of government power. Likewise, the public is equally conflicted about the desired size of the federal government and the reach of its programs. Asked to choose between a smaller government that provides fewer services and a larger government that provides more services, equal numbers report they would prefer a bigger government with more services (46%) and a smaller one with fewer services (46%).

BIG VS. SMALL GOVERNMENT

→ In general, government grows bigger as it provides more services. If you had to choose, would you rather have a smaller government providing fewer services, or a bigger government providing more services?

	SMALLER GOVERNMENT	BIGGER GOVERNMENT
Public 2003	46%	46

Although the population is divided on the size and power of government, people’s personal views are largely consistent. That is, most individuals themselves are not ambivalent about the topic. Rather the population as a whole is divided over the proper size and scope of the government. As would be expected, six in 10 (61%) of those who think the government should use its powers more vigorously would also prefer a bigger government with more services. Similarly, of those who think the government has too much power, approximately six in 10 (63%) would prefer a smaller government that offers fewer services. Those who think the government has the right amount of power are evenly split in choosing between a larger government with more services (47%) and a smaller government with fewer services (46%).

Predictably, views about the size of government follow ideological divisions—Democrats are more likely than Republicans to favor a bigger government over a smaller government with fewer services. Nearly six in 10 (57%) Democrats would choose a bigger government over a smaller one with fewer services. Conversely, the majority of Republicans (57%) would choose a smaller government with fewer services. Independents stand somewhat closer to the Republicans than to Democrats. About four in 10 Independents (42%) would choose a bigger government, while five in 10 (50%) would prefer a smaller government with fewer services.

Views on the size of government also vary by education, income levels and race and ethnicity. Americans who are less well educated, have lower incomes and are Hispanic or black are more likely to favor a bigger government with more services. Also, in line with their higher levels of trust in government, younger people tend to choose a bigger government with more services. Likewise, more than half of “truststers” (57%) choose more services over a smaller government, while relatively few “distrusters” (33%) want a bigger government.

When asked to rate themselves on a 1 to 6 scale with one being someone who thinks government programs should be cut back to reduce the power of the government and 6 representing someone who feels that federal government programs should be maintained, public opinion has been shifting in favor of maintaining government programs. In 1995, just over half of the American public (53%) wanted to maintain programs. In 1997, this number was almost six in 10 (57%). Today more than six in 10 (63%) say that government programs should be maintained. As government programs are being trimmed more and more people are wanting to maintain the programs that remain.

CUTTING VS. MAINTAINING GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

→ If 1 represents someone who generally believes that, on the whole, federal government programs should be cut back greatly to reduce the power of government, and 6 represents someone who feels that federal government programs should be maintained to deal with important problems, where on the scale of 1 to 6 would you place yourself?

	CUTBACK PROGRAMS (1-3)	MAINTAIN PROGRAMS (4-6)
Public 2003	31%	63
May 2002	35	62
Oct. 2001	30	64
July 2001	38	57
1997	41	57
1997	41	59
1995	45	53
1995	45	53
Gov 2003	35	63

With this said, Republicans (40%) would prefer further cuts more often than Democrats (23%). Similarly, men (38%) want to cut programs more often than women (25%). However, there are no consistent differences by race and ethnicity, income or education.

Presidential Appointees Split along Party Lines over Governmental Power

Similar to the general public, perceptions of governmental power among presidential appointees are divided. However, presidential appointees are generally much happier with the current level of government power. A plurality of appointees (47%) believe the government today has about the right amount of power, compared to fewer than three in 10 (28%) among the public. The rest are nearly equal split between those who believe the government has too much power (27%) and those who think it has too little power (24%).

There are predictable differences in how appointees from the different administrations view governmental power. Presidential appointees who served in the Clinton administrations are much more likely than those who served in one of the three Republican administrations to say the government should use its powers more vigorously. More than four in 10 Clinton appointees (45%) say the government should use its powers more vigorously to promote the well-being of all segments of the people, compared to about one in 10 among the other administrations.

Similar to the general public, a majority of presidential appointees (63%) want to maintain government programs as opposed to cutting them back (35%). This overall number, however, conceals some important differences between the administrations. Appointees from the Clinton administrations almost unanimously (91%) feel that federal government programs should be maintained. The percentage of Republican appointees who agree among is much smaller. Within the Republican administrations, however, there are further differences. Appointees serving in the George W. Bush administration are much more likely than their Republican counterparts in the George H. Bush and Reagan administrations to want preserve the size of the federal government. Six in 10 in the current administration (60%) want to maintain programs and four in 10 (39%) want to see programs scaled back. By contrast, fewer than four in 10 in the George H. Bush (39%) and Reagan (36%) administrations think government programs should be maintained. Instead a majority of six in 10 Reagan (61%) and George H. Bush (59%) appointees think federal government programs should be cut back to reduce the power of the federal government.

Inefficiency Bigger Problem than Wrong Priorities

The American public and presidential appointees believe that the bigger problem with the federal government today is that it runs its programs inefficiently—not that it has the wrong priorities. More than half of the general public think that inefficiency (56%) is a bigger problem, compared to only a third who say wrong priorities (31%). However, the split among appointees is a much narrower one—43 percent of appointees think the bigger problem is inefficiency while 37 percent say it is that government has the wrong priorities.

Further analysis reveals that views on this topic are divided along party lines. Appointees who served in the Clinton administrations are much more likely than those who served in one of the three Republican administrations to say that the government has the wrong priorities. More than six in 10 Clinton appointees (66%) say the bigger problem facing government is that it has the wrong priorities compared to fewer than two in 10 among the Republican administrations.

These same party differences occur within the general population. Democrats (38%) are more likely to say the government has the wrong priorities than Republicans (19%). And while majorities from both camps think inefficiency is a bigger problem than having the wrong priorities, Republicans (66%) hold this view more often than Democrats (51%). The views of Independents closely match those of the Democrats. Approximately five in 10 Independents

WRONG PRIORITIES VS INEFFICIENCY

→ What do you personally feel is the bigger problem with the federal government? The federal government has the wrong priorities, OR the federal government has the right priorities but runs programs inefficiently?

	WRONG PRIORITIES	INEFFICIENT IN RUNNING PROGRAMS	BOTH	NEITHER
Public 2003	31%	56	5	3
May 2002	29	56	5	3
Oct. 2001	20	63	4	4
July 2001	28	61	3	2
1997	29	61	5	2
Gov 2003	37	43	4	12
G.W. Bush	18	57	2	21
Clinton	66	23	3	4
G.H. Bush	18	56	5	19
Reagan	17	57	7	13

(53%) say the government runs its programs inefficiently, while almost four in 10 (36%) think the bigger problem is that government has the wrong priorities.

Levels of trust in government, race and ethnicity and education also influence one's views. Government "trustors" (75%) are more likely to name inefficiency as the bigger problem than "ambivalents" (56%) and "distrusters" (43%). The better educated are more likely to say that wrong priorities are the bigger problem than those with less education. And Hispanics (62%) are more likely than blacks (50%) to say the main problem is that the government runs its programs inefficiently, while whites stand in between (56%).

Explaining Opinions Toward Government Power

Use of governmental power is core to the debate about the proper role of government in society. An in-depth statistical analysis confirms that those who think the government should use its powers more vigorously also favor a bigger government that provides more services or, at least, the maintenance of the current level of services.⁵

Additionally, this analysis offers insight into why some people favor reducing government power and others favor expanding it. A link exists between an individual's sense of political efficacy and their assessment of the proper use of governmental power. Those who feel ordinary people like themselves can do little to affect change in Washington are more likely to look to the government to provide more services, while those who feel that people can affect change are more likely to say that governmental power should be reduced. Perceptions of the public's ability to affect the government apparently result in either shunning government power as unneeded or welcoming it as a corrective to the feeling of political impotence.

Another piece of the puzzle is uncovered with the question about whether wrong priorities or inefficiency is the bigger problem with government. Those who think the government has the wrong priorities, not surprisingly, want to reduce the government's power—why give the government more power to pursue the wrong priorities. By contrast, those who think the bigger problem is inefficiency favor a more robust use of government powers. Presumably more power is needed to compensate for the government's inefficiencies.

Demographics play a small role in shaping opinion about governmental power. Men Republicans and those with more education are more likely to say that the government's power should be scaled back, whereas women, Democrats, and those with less education are more likely to call for the government to use its powers more vigorously.

⁵ These findings are based on a series of regression analyses that included a number of possible predictors of perception of government power. The main predictors are reported here. See the Appendix for details.

Federal Government Should Be Responsible for Handling Key Issues

In reaction to the 1960s era of “big government,” the 1980s and 1990s were a period of slimming down. There was a great amount of enthusiasm and optimism about the ability of the private sector and non-profit and faith-based groups to provide many of the same services that “big government” had been providing but in a more efficient and cost-effective manner. This movement resonated with the public as people generally trust non-profits and religious organizations more than they do the federal government.

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The desire to outsource government services is clearly visible in data collected over the years. Between 1962 and 1997, there was a noticeable shift in what entity the public thought should be primarily responsible for handling key issues, with movement away from the federal government, and in favor of individuals and community and religious groups.

In the 2003 data, however, we see a corrective swing. Many Americans who were optimistic about the ability of the private and the non-profit sector to manage key areas have once again started to look to the federal government. Majorities agree the federal government should be primarily responsible for all the key areas we asked about—save one.

Most Americans agree that the federal government should be primarily responsible for protecting against terrorist attacks (88%)—only a small minority thought this responsibility should fall to state and local governments (5%).

The American public is similarly decisive in believing that the federal government should be primarily responsible for ensuring that food and medicines are safe (80%) and managing the economy to protect against another recession or depression (76%). Only a small minority, just over one in 10, assign responsibility for these two issues to state and local governments.

A solid majority of Americans also believe that the federal government should have primary responsibility for ensuring that every American has access to affordable health care (66%) and conserving the nation’s natural resources (63%). However, a sizeable minority, two in 10, think state and local governments should mainly be responsible for both of these issues.

WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY?

→ In your opinion, who should be primarily responsible for (Insert)?

	FED GOV'T	STATE/ LOCAL GOV'T	PRIV. INDUS.	INDIV/ COMM/ RELIG
→ protecting against terrorist attacks				
Public 2003	88%	5	*	2
→ ensuring that food and medicines are safe				
Public 2003	80	12	2	2
1997	73	14	6	5
→ managing the economy to prevent another recession or depression				
Public 2003	76	11	5	2
1997	68	13	7	7
1962	81	8	6	4
→ ensuring every American has access to affordable health care				
Public 2003	66	20	3	5
1997	58	22	8	10
→ conserving the country's natural resources				
Public 2003	63	22	3	7
1997	52	21	5	18
1962	65	27	4	4
→ providing a decent standard of living for the elderly				
Public 2003	58	24	1	11
1997	46	30	2	19
1962	55	31	7	7
→ reducing poverty				
Public 2003	53	25	3	13
1997	34	27	6	26
→ promoting greater honesty and stronger morals among people				
Public 2003	32	14	2	44
1997	16	9	1	71
1962	13	10	1	76

A somewhat smaller majority of Americans hold that the federal government should be responsible for providing a decent standard of living for the elderly (58%) and for reducing poverty (53%). About a quarter of the public look to state and local governments to handle these two issues. Perhaps surprisingly, many fewer people think that individual and community leaders should be responsible for reducing poverty (13%) than did just five years ago in 1997 (26%). It is noteworthy to point out that despite a movement to look to private alternatives to social security, only one in 10 (11%) think that care for the elderly should fall to individuals or community and religious groups, and a very small number of Americans (1%) think that private industry should be responsible.

Promoting greater honesty and stronger morals is the only issue for which a clear majority does not look to the federal government for leadership. A plurality of more than four in 10 Americans (44%) think individuals and community and religious leaders should be chiefly responsible. Somewhat fewer (32%) think the federal government should have primary responsibility for promoting greater honesty and stronger morals among people. While a majority of Americans may not look to the federal government for moral leadership, an increasing percentage of people are. About twice the number of people (32%) today think the federal government should be primarily responsible for promoting greater honesty and stronger morals as did in 1997 (16%) and 1962 (13%). The shift towards government is even clearer when the comparison is made between government on the one hand—whether federal, state or local—and private individuals and groups on the other. Close to half (46%) look to government to promote stronger morals compared to just about a quarter in 1997 (25%) and 1962 (23%).

Demographics and Government Responsibilities

Race and ethnicity plays a major role in who an individual thinks should be responsible for promoting greater honesty and morals. A plurality of Hispanics think this task belongs to the domain of the federal government (42%) whereas a plurality of whites look to individuals, community and religious groups (47%). Blacks are more evenly split between the federal government (34%) and private individuals and groups (37%), but a notable minority of blacks think state and local governments should be in charge of this task (25%).

Because the federal government is often thought of as the guardian of minority rights, one might expect that more blacks and Hispanics than whites look to the federal government to assume primary responsibility for social welfare issues. But this is not the case. Rather a sizable majority of all Americans, regardless of ethnic or racial background, look to the government to be responsible for such social welfare issues as access to affordable health care, a decent standard of living for the elderly and safe food and medicines. The one exception is reducing poverty. Blacks (60%) and Hispanics (62%) are more likely to want the federal government to be in charge of poverty reduction than whites (51%).

On several key issues, Republicans are less likely to look to the federal government for leadership than Democrats. Republicans look to state or local governments more often to conserve natural resources. They are also less likely to appoint primary responsibility for caring for the elderly to the federal government—instead giving this domain over to individuals and community groups. And, Republicans are more likely to look to state and local governments to reduce poverty.

We know how the public sees the federal government overall and how it evaluates government performance in specific areas. But does any of this matter? Do people think the actions of the federal government have a significant effect on their day-to-day lives? And is this effect largely positive or negative? What about presidential appointees—do they think the public’s opinion matters? Why do top officials sometimes make decisions that are not in sync with popular opinion? Are they under the influence of special interest groups, following their own conscience, or do they make unpopular decisions because they feel they are acting in the best interest of the public?

In this section we examine 1) the effect the government has on the day-to-day life of American people, 2) how well the government understands the lives of those it represents, 3) whether or not people feel they can influence the workings of the federal government, 4) the motivations that drive the decisions of top decision-makers and 5) whether top government officials pay enough attention to what the public thinks about issues facing the country.

We find that both the public and presidential appointees think the federal government matters in daily lives and that its effect is largely positive. However, the general public does not feel that the federal government is as in tune with their lives as presidential appointees believe they are—most people say the federal government is “removed from ‘real’ life.” And while people want to believe that the average person can influence government, most say the federal government is too complicated for someone like them to understand.

Heeding special interests is the reason picked by the largest number of Americans for why officials in Washington make decisions that do not match public opinion. At the same time, almost as many people think officials are following their own conscience. Presidential appointees, however, are most likely to say that officials act in what they ultimately believe is the best interest of the American public. Most presidential appointees also believe that the government pays the right amount of attention to what the public thinks about the issues.

Government Effects Daily Lives in Largely Positive Way

Most Americans say the federal government and its activities effect their day-to-day life (81%). Three in 10 believe the federal government has a *great* effect on their life (30%), while five in 10 (51%) say the government's activities have *some* effect on their day-to-day life. Substantially fewer (17%) say that the federal government has no effect *at all* on their day-to-day life.

Presidential appointees are even more convinced than the public that the government affects the day-to-day life of virtually all Americans. More than half think the government has a *great* effect (52%) and nearly as many say it has *some* effect on the life of Americans (47%). Practically no appointees think the federal government has no effect on the daily lives of Americans.

What is more, presidential appointees are much more likely to believe the federal government has a positive effect on the daily lives of Americans than does the general public. Over eight in 10 (83%) presidential appointees believe the effect of the government is positive. Roughly half (52%) of those in the general public who think the government influences daily life, agree with this assessment. Presidential appointees from the current Bush administration are even more likely to believe government has a positive influence than appointees from any of the other administrations.

While both government “trusters” and “distrusters” largely agree that the government influences their day-to-day life, the two groups disagree when asked whether this influence is positive or negative. Eight in 10 (79%) “trusters” think the government has a positive effect while the same is true for about two in 10 “distrusters” (22%). Among “ambivalents” more than half (57%) think the government has a positive effect while a quarter (26%) think it has a negative effect.

EFFECT OF GOVERNMENT ON DAILY LIFE

→ How much effect do the federal government's activities—the programs it runs and so on—have on your day-to-day life

	GREAT EFFECT	SOME EFFECT	NO EFFECT
Public 2003	30%	51	17
1997	36	54	9
1960	41	43	11
Gov 2003	52	47	*
G. W. Bush	53	47	0
Clinton	58	42	0
G. H. Bush	45	55	0
Reagan	48	51	1

EFFECT OF GOVERNMENT POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE

→ In general, is the federal government's effect on your day-to-day life positive or negative?

	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
Public 2003 (n=1050)	52%	33
Gov 2003 (n=499)	83	11
G. W. Bush	92	3
Clinton	85	10
G. H. Bush	77	15
Reagan	74	19

TRUST AND EFFECT OF GOVERNMENT ON DAILY LIFE

→ In general, is the federal government's effect on your day-to-day life positive or negative?

	TRUSTERS	AMBIVALENTS	DISTRUSTERS
Positive effect	79%	57	22
Negative effect	9	26	61

The effect one thinks the government has on daily life also differs by race and ethnicity and age. Hispanics are more likely to think the government has a positive effect (61%) than whites (51%) and blacks (51%). And younger people are more likely to think that government has a positive effect than are older people. More than half of those aged 18-49 think government has a positive effect compared to roughly four in 10 of those who are 50 or older. Interestingly, the less educated are more likely to believe the government has no effect—positive or negative—on their daily life than those with more education.

Government Out of Touch—Appointees Disagree

The general public feels that the federal government is not as in tune with their lives as presidential appointees believe they are. Only half of the general public (50%) believe that high-level government officials in Washington understand what the public thinks about issues facing the country. By contrast, nearly eight in 10 presidential appointees (77%) believe that high-level government officials understand what the public thinks. Moreover, two in 10 presidential appointees (20%) say high-level officials understand the public very well. Only one in 10 Americans agree (11%) that high-level officials understand the public *very well*.

In a similar manner, nearly two in three Americans (64%) think the federal government is “removed from ‘real’ life.” A full quarter (25%) say that “removed from ‘real’ life” describes the federal government *very well*.

“Distrusters” See Government as Most Out of Touch

Six in 10 “trusters” (61%) and “ambivalents” (60%) believe the federal government is removed from real life. Somewhat more “distrusters” (71%) share this view. The real difference, however, is the intensity with which this view is held. More than twice as many “distrusters” (41%) as “ambivalents” (18%) and “trusters” (13%) feel that “removed from ‘real’ life” describes government very well.

“Distrusters” are also much more likely to feel that the government does not understand what the public thinks about issues facing the country. Government “distrusters” (73%) are more than three times more likely than “trusters” (22%) to think the government does not understand the public’s viewpoint on issues. “Ambivalents” fall in between these two groups. Nearly half of “ambivalents” (47%) think the government in Washington does not understand what the public thinks about issues facing the county.

Party preferences also make a difference. Democrats are more likely than Republicans to think the government is out of touch. More Democrats (29%) than Republicans (16%) say that “removed from ‘real’ life” describes the government very well. Similarly, a little more than four in 10 Democrats (43%) think that government officials

GOVERNMENT UNDERSTANDS

→ In general, how well do you think high-level government officials in Washington understand what the public thinks about the issues facing the country?

	VERY/ SOME- WHAT WELL	NOT TOO/NOT WELL AT ALL
Public 2003	50%	48
Winter 2001	49	49
Gov 2003	77	21
G. W. Bush	83	16
Clinton	75	25
G. H. Bush	79	17
Reagan	76	21

→ Does “removed from ‘real’ life” describe the federal government very well, somewhat well, not too well or not well at all?

	VERY/ SOME- WHAT WELL	NOT TOO/NOT WELL AT ALL
Public 2003	64%	29

understand *very well* or *somewhat well* what the public thinks about issues, compared to more than six in 10 Republicans (66%).

Americans Powerless in the Shadow of Government?

Do Americans feel powerless in the shadow of the government? The answer is mixed. While many Americans believe they can make a difference, nearly as many describe the government as so complicated that it is hard to figure out what is going on.

Nearly eight in 10 Americans agree that, in general, people can make a difference in what happens in Washington (77%). Although, in practice, this ideal appears to be hard to realize. When the question is personalized to refer to people like them, seven in 10 Americans (70%) think that sometimes the federal government seems so complicated that one cannot really understand what is going on. Similarly, about six in 10 agree that ordinary people like them do not have any say about what the federal government does (62%).

Americans are losing confidence in their ability to affect change. They have less certainty in their ability to influence the federal government than they did just a few years ago. Moreover, only once within the past fifty years have as many Americans felt powerless as do today. In 1952, only one in three (31%) agreed that “people like me don’t have any say about what the federal government does” and two in three (68%) disagreed. Today, these percentages have almost reversed—close to two in three (62%) think that they do not have any say about what the federal government does, while about one in three (35%) disagree.

Democrats, those who have less formal education and those who make less money are more likely to feel unable to influence government. These groups are more likely than others to feel strongly that the complexity of the government makes it hard to understand the government and that ordinary people like them have no influence over what goes on in the federal government.

The feeling that government is beyond the grasp of many people is matched by a similar sentiment among presidential appointees. Over

ABILITY TO AFFECT GOVERNMENT

→ I’m going to read you a few statements some people have made about the federal government. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?

	STRONGLY/ SOMEWHAT AGREE	SOMEWHAT/ STRONGLY DISAGREE
→ people can make a difference in what happens in Washington		
Public 2003	77%	21
→ sometimes the federal government seems so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what is going on		
Public 2003	70	29
→ people like me don’t have any say about what the federal government does		
Public 2003	62	35
1999	47	52
1997	46	53
1994	54	46
1993	52	47
1992	50	49
1991	50	49
1990	57	42
1989	62	37
1988	55	44
1987	52	46
1984	32	68
1982	45	52
1980	39	59
1978	45	53
1976	41	56
1974	40	57
1972	40	59
1970	36	64
1968	41	58
1966	34	60
1964	29	70
1960	27	72
1956	28	71
1952	31	68

six in 10 presidential appointees (63%) think the American public does not know enough about the issues faced by senior people in government to form wise opinions about what should be done.

Government Not Following Public Wants

When high-level officials make decisions that do not coincide with public opinion, the public attributes these actions to both positive and negative motivations. On the negative side, many Americans think government officials are catering to the needs of special interest groups. Five in 10 (51%) Americans believe this is a *major* reason. An additional three in 10 (33%) say that following what special interests want is a *minor* reason for making decisions that are not supported by a majority of the public.

Many Americans think that officials diverge from public opinion because they do not think the public is very knowledgeable about policy issues. Nearly four in 10 Americans (37%) say that officials thinking the public is not informed enough is a major reason, and as many count this as a minor reason (38%).

On a more positive note, many Americans think that officials make decisions the public does not support because they are following their own conscience. Nearly half of the public (45%) believe this is a major reason, and an additional third (35%) consider it to be a minor reason.

Also on the positive side, some Americans say that officials choose to do what is ultimately in the best interest of the public. However, only a third (33%) consider this a major reason—about four in 10 (42%) say it is a minor reason.

Republicans are less cynical about the motivations behind the decisions of top officials than are Democrats. More Republicans than Democrats say officials doing what they personally think is right (50% vs. 39%) and officials doing what they think is in the best interest of the public (40% vs. 32%) are major reasons behind why government officials sometimes make decisions that do not mirror popular opinion. The views of Independents on this issue are mixed. As many Independents (50%) say that officials doing what they personally think is right is a major reason as Republicans (50%). Yet, Independents do not say officials acting in the public interest is a major reason as often as Republicans do (29% vs. 40%). On this, Independents are closer to Democrats.

REASONS OFFICIALS MAKE UNPOPULAR DECISIONS

→ Sometimes officials in Washington make a decision that isn't supported by a majority of Americans. Do you think that (Insert) is a major reason, a minor reason or not a reason at all for their decision?

	MAJOR REASON	MINOR REASON	NOT A REASON AT ALL
→ officials doing what they personally think is right			
Public 2003	45%	35	14
Gov 2003	8	58	30
→ officials not believing the public is informed enough on the issues			
Public 2003	37	38	18
Gov 2003	47	38	10
→ officials choosing to follow what special interests want			
Public 2003	51	33	11
Gov 2003	43	46	6
→ officials doing what they believe is ultimately in the best interest of the public			
Public 2003	33	42	20
Gov 2003	71	22	3

Officials Acting in Best Interest of Society

Presidential appointees are less likely than the general public to think that high-level officials are following their own conscience when they make decisions that contradict public opinion. Fewer than seven in 10 (66%) say that “officials doing what they personally think is right” is a reason that officials go against public opinion, compared to eight in 10 (80%) among the general population. What is more, while a plurality of Americans (45%) think this is a *major reason*, substantially fewer appointees concur (8%).

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Rather than following their personal consciences, a vast majority of appointees (93%) believe that when high-level officials make unpopular decisions, they do so with the confidence that they are acting in the best interest of society. A smaller majority of the public (75%) agrees this is a reason. Presidential appointees are much more likely to believe that acting in the best interest of society is a *major* reason for going against public opinion than does the general public (71% vs. 33%).

Many appointees think that officials sometimes do not follow public opinion because they do not believe the public is informed enough on the issues—47 percent cite this as a major reason and an additional 38 percent believe this is a minor reason.

Consistent with the opinion of most Americans (84%), nine in 10 (89%) appointees think officials follow what special interests want when they make a decision that is not consistent with public opinion. Roughly four in 10 appointees (43%) believe this is a major reason.

Not only do a majority of presidential appointees believe officials make decisions based on what they think is ultimately in the best interest of the public—even when the decision is not a popular one—but a majority also think top government officials pay the right amount of attention to what the public thinks (57%) about issues. About one in 10 (12%) appointees think top government officials pay too much attention to what the public thinks. Nearly three in 10 appointees (28%) think high-level officials do not pay enough attention to what the public thinks. These views are consistent with what presidential appointees thought in 1997.

ATTENTION PAID TO WHAT PEOPLE THINK

→ Do you think top government officials pay too much attention to what the public thinks, the right amount of attention, or not enough attention to what the public thinks?

	TOO MUCH	RIGHT AMOUNT	NOT ENOUGH
Gov 2003	12%	57	28
1997	14	53	27

Government “truststers” and “distrusters” give somewhat different reasons for why government officials make decisions that contradict popular opinion. Government “distrusters” (58%) are more likely to think this happens because of special interests than government “truststers” (46%) and are less likely to think it is because officials are doing what they personally think is right (38% vs. 53%) or doing what is in the best interest of the public (21% vs. 51%). “Distrusters” (33%) are also less likely than “truststers” (45%) to think officials make a decision that is not supported by a majority because the public is ill informed on the issue.

Explaining Government
Unresponsiveness

Government responsiveness or the lack thereof, is a refrain that is often heard from the public. In fact, more than any other issue, Americans bring up improved responsiveness as the one thing the federal government could do to improve its performance.

To be responsive, however, government officials need to understand how the public feels about issues facing the country.

In-depth statistical analysis shows that trust in the high-level officials who run federal departments and agencies is the strongest predictor of whether the public thinks high level government officials understand.⁶ These findings are based on a series of regression analyses that included a number of possible predictors of perception of government power. The main predictors are reported here. See the Appendix for details. Those who do not trust high-level officials are more likely to think that these officials do not understand how the public feels about the issues facing the country. In the same vein, Americans who think that high-level officials do not understand are *less* likely to think that officials have the best interest of the public at heart when they go against the public’s wishes.

One’s perceived relationship to government power makes a difference, although a relatively small one. Those who feel voiceless and politically alienated from government are

REASONS OFFICIALS MAKE UNPOPULAR DECISIONS BY “TRUSTERS” & “DISTRUSTERS”

→ Sometimes officials in Washington make a decision that isn’t supported by a majority of Americans. Do you think that (Insert) is a major reason, a minor reason or not a reason at all for their decision?

TRUSTERS AMBIVALENTS DISTRUSTERS

→ officials doing what they personally think is right

Major reason	53%	50	38
Minor reason	34	34	37
Not a reason at all	9	13	21

→ officials not believing the public is informed enough on the issues

Major reason	45	36	33
Minor reason	37	42	40
Not a reason at all	12	17	23

→ officials choosing to follow what special interests want

Major reason	46	50	58
Minor reason	42	37	24
Not a reason at all	8	10	14

→ officials doing what they believe is ultimately in the best interest of the public

Major reason	51	28	21
Minor reason	36	53	42
Not a reason at all	8	15	33

⁶ These findings are based on a series of regression analyses that included a number of possible predictors of perception of government responsiveness. The main predictors are reported here. See the Appendix for details.

also less likely to feel that high-level officials understand what the public thinks. This alleged lack of understanding is not because the public thinks that government officials believe they are ill informed, but because the public thinks high-level officials are divorced from *their* reality. There is the perception that the government is unable to understand what the public thinks because it is “removed from ‘real’ life.”

Age and party identification also play a role in forming the public’s opinion on this issue. Younger people and Republicans are more likely to think the government does understand what the public thinks than older Americans and Democrats.

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Having been through numerous media exposés and scandals involving the private and public lives of government officials—trials, lies and cover-ups—how much faith do Americans have left in the ability of their government to operate according to a set of ethical and moral standards? Do Americans view those who have taken an oath to serve the country as trustworthy or untrustworthy? What about high-level current and former government leaders appointed by the president—do they have a different opinion?

In this section, we examine 1) whether the public considers most federal government officials to be trustworthy, 2) how the public and presidential appointees rate the ethical and moral practices of federal government officials and other leaders in society, 3) whether the public and presidential appointees believe that government workers and others can be trusted to operate in the best interest of the American people, and 4) how much corruption the public and presidential appointees think is going on in federal agencies and other institutions.

We found that the top people selected to serve the president are considerably more likely than the American public to have faith that government officials and federal agencies are doing their work following high ethical and moral standards. The public has not lost its trust in government officials to follow high ethical and moral standards either, although following a pattern established in past research, most choose to remain cautious.⁷ Among both the public as well as the appointees, the moral and ethical practices of federal officials are seen as better than or as good as the practices of other prominent members in society, such as state and local government officials, journalists, and business leaders. But there is also cause for concern. Although presidential appointees tend to disagree, a notable number of Americans believe that a great deal of corruption takes place within federal agencies.

Appointees More Complimentary of Government Officials than the Public

Many Americans express trust in federal officials, but only to a degree. While a modest majority of Americans (56%) consider most government officials to be trustworthy, many of them only somewhat agree (47%) with this sentiment. In the same vein, two in three Americans (66%) rate the ethical and moral practices of federal government officials as good, but again most (59%) qualify this by saying they are only *somewhat* good. And although a majority of Americans (61%) say they trust cabinet members and high-level federal officials to operate in the best interest of the American people, only one in 10 (10%) have a *great deal* of trust in these officials.

Public opinion of government officials has a bearing on Americans' view of the government as an institution. In other words, if the public does not trust the people running the institutions, it will be difficult to sustain trust in the institutions themselves. A large majority of government "trustees" (78%) and a somewhat smaller majority of "ambivalents"

⁷ The Brookings Institution—Trust in Government 2002: nearly six in 10 Americans (58%) said they had a fair amount of trust in the people who work in the federal government in Washington, but fewer than one in 10 (7%) said they had a great deal of trust.

(57%) agree that most government officials are trustworthy. However, a solid majority of “distrusters” (63%) do not see most government officials as trustworthy. Similarly, “trusters” (88%) and “ambivalents” (70%) are much more apt to give federal government officials a good rating for their ethical and moral practices than “distrusters” (46%).

We also find that Democrats are less likely to have a positive opinion of government officials than Republicans. Seven in 10 Republicans (69%) consider most government officials to be trustworthy, compared to a much slimmer majority of Democrats (52%) and fewer than half of Independents (48%). Republicans are also more likely than Democrats to rate the ethical and moral practices of federal government officials as good (76% vs. 60%) and to have at least a fair amount of trust in cabinet members and high-level federal officials to operate in the best interest of the American people (77% vs. 56%).

Those who have held high-level positions in many of these very same departments and agencies present a different view from that offered by the public. Nearly all presidential appointees (93%) rate the ethical and moral practices of federal government officials as good, with roughly half (48%) believing them to be *very* good.

Similarly, a vast majority of presidential appointees (83%) trust cabinet members and high-level federal officials to operate in the best interest of the American people—four in 10 (39%) say they have *a great deal* of trust, compared to the one in 10 among the general public. However, it should be noted that presidential appointees who have served in the George W. Bush administration (61%), the Reagan administration (59%), or the George H. Bush administration (48%) are significantly more likely to trust high-level officials *a great deal* than appointees who served under President Clinton (13%).

OPINION OF FEDERAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

→ Most federal government officials are trustworthy.

	STRONGLY AGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
Public 2003	9%	47	28	14

→ Generally, how would you rate the ethical and moral practices of federal government officials?

	VERY GOOD	SOMEWHAT GOOD	SOMEWHAT BAD	VERY BAD
Public 2003	7	59	23	8
Gov 2003	48	45	5	*

→ Generally speaking, how much do you trust cabinet members and high-level federal officials in Washington who run the different departments and agencies of the government to operate in the best interest of the American people?

	GREAT DEAL	FAIR AMOUNT	NOT TOO MUCH	NOT AT ALL
Public 2003	10	51	26	10
Gov 2003	39	44	12	2
G.W. Bush	61	36	3	0
Clinton	13	53	23	5
G.H. Bush	48	45	5	1
Reagan	59	33	5	0

Ethical and Moral Practices of Federal Officials Fare Well Compared to Others

The ethical and moral practices of federal government officials hold up well when they are compared to the practices of other professionals, such as journalists, state and local government officials and leaders of large private businesses. This is especially true for presidential appointees who hold other government officials in particularly high regard. As we detailed in the previous section, nearly all presidential appointees (93%) give a positive evaluation of the ethical and moral practices of federal government officials, and half (48%) praise them as *very good*. A solid majority of ordinary Americans (66%) also evaluate the ethical and moral practices of federal government officials as good, although fewer than one in 10 (7%) say they are *very good*.

Presidential appointees—although positive—do not feel as strongly about state and local officials as they do about their colleagues working in federal government. Presidential appointees report that the ethical and moral practices of state and local officials (20%) deserve a *very good* rating less often than the practices of federal officials (48%).

But as is the case when evaluating the ethical and moral practices of federal officials, presidential appointees' overall evaluation is positive, with eight in 10 appointees (81%) rating the ethical and moral practices of state and local officials as at least somewhat good.

The public's assessment of state and local officials is very similar to their opinion of federal officials. Roughly two in three Americans (68%) rate the ethical and moral practices of state and local government officials as good, with most again adding the qualifier *somewhat* (60%). But despite the fact that Democrats are less likely than Republicans to give a good rating to federal officials, Americans from both parties are equally likely to give a good rating to state and local officials, regardless of party identification. This may reflect a less partisan nature of state and local politics than national politics in the current political climate.

When it comes to those working outside the government realm—business leaders and the media—federal government officials fare well in comparison. Presidential appointees are somewhat less likely to hold leaders of large private businesses and journalists in high regard than their fellow government officials working in the federal or state level. Nevertheless, a solid majority of the appointees believe that ethical and moral practices of journalists (66%) and leaders of large private businesses (70%) are also good.

The general public tends to agree with presidential appointees when it comes to journalists but is slightly more split in the case of large business leaders. While a majority of

ETHICAL AND MORAL PRACTICES

→ Generally, how would you rate the ethical and moral practices of (Insert)?

	VERY GOOD	SOMEWHAT GOOD	SOMEWHAT BAD	VERY BAD
→ federal government officials				
Public 2003	7%	59	23	8
Gov 2003	48	45	5	*
→ state and local government officials				
Public 2003	8	60	21	8
Gov 2003	20	61	12	0
→ journalists				
Public 2003	9	51	24	12
Gov 2003	10	56	23	7
→ leaders of large private businesses				
Public 2003	3	48	30	14
Gov 2003	9	61	22	5

Americans (60%) rate the moral and ethical practices of journalists as very or somewhat good, only about half (51%) say the same about business leaders. Interestingly, governmental “distrusters” are not only critical of the government, but are also less likely than others to rate the moral and ethical practices of business leaders (37%) as good. However, a majority of “distrusters” (58%) do have a positive impression of the ethical and moral standards followed by journalists. Likewise, we find that Democrats (70%) are more likely to give a good rating to journalists than Republicans (49%).

Presidents Not Always Honest

What about the practices of the head of the federal government? The general public does not always perceive American presidents as honest. In fact, fewer than one in 10 members of the general public (7%) believe that presidents are always honest with the American people. Seven in 10 (70%) say presidents only tell the truth some of the time, and two in 10 (20%) believe presidents rarely or never tell the truth. Democrats (29%) are considerably more likely to be of the opinion that presidents are rarely or never honest than Republicans (10%).

But in the defense of American presidents, more than half of those who think that presidents are not always honest (56%) believe that presidents are at least somewhat justified in not always being completely forthcoming. Nonetheless, a sizable minority (42%) say presidents are not justified in resorting to dishonesty, and among those who say it is justified, only 7 percent say it is very justified. Many Americans appear to accept the reality, but do not appear to be totally comfortable with it.

PRESIDENTIAL HONESTY

→ In general, do you think presidents are always, sometimes, rarely or never honest with the American people?

	ALWAYS	SOMETIMES	RARELY	NEVER
Public 2003	7%	70	15	5

→ To what extent do you think it is justified that a president is not honest with the American people?

	VERY	SOMEWHAT	NOT TOO	NOT AT ALL
Public 2003 (n=1176)	7	49	19	23

As might be expected, government “distrusters” are considerably more likely to say that presidential dishonesty is not justified (60%) than either “ambivalents” (36%) or “trusters” (25%). Likewise, roughly half of Democrats (48%) say lying is not justified, compared to a third of the Republicans (33%).

Federal Agencies Corrupt

Despite the moderately positive assessment of the ethical and moral standards of federal officials, a startling number of Americans think that federal agencies in Washington are plagued by corruption. Roughly three in four Americans (73%) say that at least a fair amount of corruption goes on in federal agencies; fully one in four (25%) believe there is a great deal of corruption.

CORRUPTION IN FEDERAL AGENCIES

→ How much corruption do you think occurs today in federal agencies in Washington?

	GREAT DEAL/ FAIR AMOUNT	NOT TOO MUCH/ NOT AT ALL
Public 2003	73%	23
Gov 2003	8	89

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By contrast, presidential appointees could not disagree more. Fewer than one in 10 presidential appointees (8%)—in any of the five administrations—believe that the federal agencies in Washington are corrupt. Most presidential appointees (89%) assert that not too much or no corruption at all occurs in federal agencies.

Why the discrepancy between the public and the appointees? It will certainly strike many as surprising that so many Americans believe their government agencies are corrupt when according to international comparisons, the US has one of the lowest corruption ratings in the world?⁸ Even among government “truststers,” close to two in three (63%) maintain that a fair amount or a great deal of corruption occurs in Washington’s federal agencies, although as might be expected, even more “ambivalents” (75%) and “distrusters” (82%) believe that federal agencies are corrupt.

CORRUPTION BY “TRUSTERS” & “DISTRUSTERS”

	TRUSTERS	AMBIVALENTS	DISTRUSTERS
Great deal/ fair amount of corruption	63%	75	82
Not too much/ no corruption at all	33	23	15

Other noteworthy differences exist between those who think the government is corrupt and those who do not. As might be expected, those who have qualms about government performance in general are somewhat more likely to believe that there is a fair amount or a great deal of corruption than those who think the government is doing better. For example, those who do not think that words such as well-run (83% vs. 67%) and hard working (81% vs. 69%) are good descriptors of the federal government are more likely to believe the government is corrupt than those who think these adjectives describe the government well. Similarly, those who think the government is not doing a good job spending money wisely see the federal agencies as corrupt more often than those who think the government is doing a good job (78% vs. 65%). Not surprisingly, those who perceive the government as corrupt (49%) are more likely to favor a smaller government providing fewer services over a larger government with more services than those who do not believe the federal government is corrupt (36%).

⁸ Transparency International—Corruption Perceptions Index 2002: the US ranks 16th out of 102 countries.

Opinion of the presidency and other government officials also matters. Those who think that presidents are rarely or never (84%) honest with the American people are more likely to think federal agencies are corrupt than those who think presidents are honest at least sometimes (71%). And those who rate the moral and ethical practices of federal government officials as somewhat or very bad (87%) are more likely to think federal agencies are corrupt than those who think the practices are at least somewhat good (67%). Those who think that federal agencies are corrupt are more likely to feel that high-level officials do not understand the public (53%) than those who do not believe the federal government is corrupt (37%).

But it should be noted that these differences are not large. We can only conclude that a majority of Americans believe the federal agencies in Washington are places where corruption occurs, but that this belief does not preclude one from having a positive view of the government in other regards, as demonstrated by the fact that even government “trustees” and those who rate the ethical and moral practices of government officials as good tend to think that at least a fair amount of corruption occurs in federal government. Apparently most Americans think that corruption—like slowness and inefficiency—is just part and parcel of the way the federal government operates. As such, what many Americans mean when they say the federal government is corrupt must have a more benign meaning than is often associated with government corruption—bribes, kick-backs and patronage. If this were not the case, it would be hard to understand how so many government “trustees” could say that the federal government is corrupt.

Federal Government Not Corrupt Alone

When it comes to corruption, federal agencies are not the only institution with this problem, according to the American public. A solid majority of Americans believe that at least a fair amount of corruption goes on in large private businesses (83%), state and local government (77%), Congress (77%), and the news media (74%). And even universities are considered corrupt by more than half of the American public (58%).

But again, presidential appointees are considerably less likely to believe these institutions are corrupt. Only about a third or fewer say that a great deal or a fair amount of corruption occurs in large private businesses (35%), state and local government (31%), Congress (26%), the news media (23%), or universities (15%). Nonetheless, the fact that a third of high-level government leaders selected to serve the president believe that Congress and state and local governments are corrupt may catch many by surprise.

CORRUPTION

→ How much corruption do you think occurs today in (Insert)?		
	GREAT DEAL/ FAIR AMOUNT	NOT TOO MUCH/ NOT AT ALL
→ federal agencies in Washington		
Public 2003	73%	23
Gov 2003	8	89
→ large private businesses		
Public 2003	83	14
Gov 2003	35	60
→ state and local government		
Public 2003	77	21
Gov 2003	31	62
→ Congress		
Public 2003	77	19
Gov 2003	26	71
→ news media		
Public 2003	74	24
Gov 2003	23	70
→ universities		
Public 2003	58	33
Gov 2003	15	78

The President Most Trusted

Despite the fact that many Americans believe federal agencies are corrupt, a majority of the public say they trust the leaders of government to keep the public's best interest in mind. However, Americans are somewhat more apt to trust the current President a great deal than cabinet members or other high-level federal officials to operate in the best interest of the American people. President Bush also tops the presidential appointees' list as the most trustworthy.

Majorities express trust in the nation's current President, but the appointees are considerably more likely than the public to say they have a *great deal* of trust in the President to operate with the best interest of Americans in mind. Half of the presidential appointees (49%) say they have a great deal of trust in President Bush to operate in the best interest of Americans, while an additional two in 10 (19%) have a fair amount of trust. However, three in 10 presidential appointees (30%)—mostly Clinton appointees—disagree and say they do not have much trust or have no trust at all in President Bush. More than seven in 10 presidential appointees who served in a Republican administration express a great deal of faith in the nation's President, compared to fewer than one in 10 Clinton appointees.

The public is split in equal thirds between those who trust the President a great deal (33%), those who trust him a fair amount (32%), and those who do not trust that the President has their best interest at heart (33%). We also found that government “trustors” (53%) are much more likely to say they have a great deal of trust in President Bush than “ambivalents” (38%) or “distrusters” (11%). A majority of “distrusters” (59%) say they do not have much trust or have no trust at all in President Bush to operate in the best interest of the American people. As might be expected, we also find a party difference with nearly all Republicans (91%) expressing trust in President Bush compared to fewer than half of Democrats (42%).

TRUST TO OPERATE IN THE BEST INTEREST OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

→ Generally speaking, how much do you trust (Insert) to operate in the best interest of the American people?

	GREAT DEAL	FAIR AMOUNT	NOT TOO MUCH	NOT AT ALL
→ President George W. Bush				
Public 2003	33%	32	13	20
Gov 2003	49	19	18	12
G.W. Bush	78	20	0	1
Clinton	8	21	40	28
G.H. Bush	71	20	5	2
Reagan	80	12	5	0
→ cabinet members and high-level federal officials				
Public 2003	10	51	26	10
Gov 2003	39	44	12	2
→ state and local government officials				
Public 2003	10	52	26	10
Gov 2003	21	66	11	*
→ members of Congress				
Public 2003	8	54	26	9
Gov 2003	13	55	26	5
→ religious or spiritual leaders				
Public 2003	17	43	20	15
Gov 2003	21	44	22	9
→ leaders of non-profit/non-governmental organizations				
Public 2003	15	51	20	9
Gov 2003	5	44	38	6
→ executives of large private businesses				
Public 2003	5	33	35	25
Gov 2003	4	38	43	11

Presidential appointees are also more likely than the public to have faith that the actions of their fellow government officials in the cabinet or in other high-level federal positions and in state and local government are in line with the public interest. Among the public, roughly six in 10 say they trust high-level federal officials (61%) and state and local officials (62%) to operate in the best interest of the people, although only one in 10 say they have a great deal of trust and over a third disagree altogether. Among the presidential appointees on the other hand, only a little over one in 10 say they do not trust either federal (14%) or state and local (11%) officials. However, those who have a great deal of trust in federal officials (39%) outnumber those who have a great deal of trust in state and local officials (21%) by about two-to-one.

The public's trust in cabinet members and other high-level federal officials is related to their evaluation of the ethical and moral practices of federal officials. Those who rate the ethical and moral practices of federal officials as good (76%) are much more likely to have at least a fair amount of trust in government officials to act in their best interest than those who rate them as bad (32%).

Party identification also matters among the general population. Nearly eight in 10 Republicans (77%) express trust in cabinet members and other high-level officials, compared to a much slimmer majority among Democrats (56%).

When asked about members of Congress, expressed trust levels are remarkably similar among the public and the presidential appointees. Solid majorities in both groups—public (62%) and appointees (68%)—express trust in Congressmen and women but most have only a fair amount of trust. And roughly a third of the public (35%) and the appointees (31%) say they do not trust members of Congress to operate in the best interest of the American people.

Looking outside the government, solid majorities among both the public (60%) and presidential appointees (65%) say they have at least a fair amount of trust that religious or spiritual leaders take the public interest into account. However, when it comes to leaders of non-profit or non-governmental organizations, the public is more positive than the appointees. A solid majority of the public (66%) trust leaders of non-profit organizations to act in the public's interest, but only half of the appointees (49%) agree with this assessment. Nearly as many appointees (44%) disagree, saying they do not have much trust or no trust at all in these leaders to operate with the public's best interest in mind.

Big business is clearly the least accountable group when it comes to serving the public interest, according to both the public and presidential appointees. Six in 10 ordinary Americans (60%) and a slimmer majority of the presidential appointees (54%) say that executives of large private businesses cannot be trusted to operate with the public's best interest at heart. Clinton appointees are particularly likely to say they do not trust business executives (70%).

This assessment is consistent with the public's somewhat lower ratings of the ethical and moral practices of business leaders. In fact, there is a relationship between trust in business executives to care about the public interest and assessment of the moral and ethical practices of business leaders. Those who say they trust big business at least a fair amount (79%) also tend to rate the ethical and moral practices of business leaders as good much more often than those who do not trust business executives (34%).

Demographics Matter Little

It appears that party identification is more important than other demographic variables, when Americans evaluate federal government officials. Assessments of the ethical and moral practices of federal government officials varies little by demographic group, although a few distinctions can be made based on age, race or ethnicity and income.

First off, older people are more likely to think that government officials are trustworthy. Six in 10 or more among those 50 or older agree that most government officials are trustworthy, compared to roughly half of people under age 50. It is noteworthy that younger people are also more likely to be government “trusters” than older people. This suggests that younger people have somewhat more confidence in government as an institution, while older people have somewhat more confidence in the people that comprise the institution.

TRUSTWORTHINESS OF GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS BY AGE

→ Most federal government officials are trustworthy.

	STRONGLY/ SOMEWHAT AGREE	STRONGLY/ SOMEWHAT DISAGREE
18-29	49%	51
30-49	53	44
50-64	60	40
65+	66	29

Some differences can also be detected between Americans of different ethnic and racial backgrounds, with African Americans in particular reporting somewhat higher distrust in government officials. Black Americans (42%) are almost twice as likely as Hispanic (23%) or white (22%) Americans to believe that there is a great deal of corruption in federal agencies. Black Americans (36%) are also more likely than Hispanic (26%) or white (16%) Americans to believe that presidents are rarely or never honest with the American people or that the nation’s current President does not operate in the best interest of the American people—blacks (52%), Hispanics (32%) and whites (30%).

When it comes to presidential dishonesty, differences are also evident among Americans from different financial backgrounds. Americans in lower income brackets are more likely to believe that presidents are rarely or never honest with the American people than Americans who are better off financially.

What motivates high-level government officials and government workers in general to enter public service? And after deciding to take this path, are these people satisfied with their choice?

In this section we first 1) ask both the public and presidential appointees what they think motivates high-level government workers and government workers in general to work in government. We then ask the presidential appointees 2) if they have been satisfied with their positions and 3) what they have found to be the most challenging aspects of their jobs.

Not only do presidential appointees have a more positive impression of the ethical and moral standards aspired to by federal government officials than the general public, they are also notably more likely than the public to believe that their fellow federal officials are motivated by a desire to improve the lives of others rather than just their own. But regardless of their motivations for entering public service in the first place, both current and former high-level government leaders appointed by the president express unanimous and overwhelming satisfaction with their jobs overall as well as with most aspects of their jobs.

Public More Likely to Think Motivations Selfish

Presidential appointees are considerably more likely than the public to think that high-level officials serve in government for all the “right” reasons. Three in four presidential appointees believe that when people choose to serve a president, the desire to make America a better place to live (75%) and the chance to make a difference through working in government (74%) play a very big role. Many fewer think that the desire to have power and make important decisions (29%) or the desire to meet important people and get ahead professionally (16%) play a big part.

The public is less likely to believe that appointees’ charitable motivations are a major factor when they choose to serve a president. Although past research has shown that a solid majority of Americans have a favorable opinion of both high-level officials appointed by the president as well as of federal government workers in general,⁹ many Americans believe that federal workers follow this particular career path because it happens to suit their personal interests—they do not necessarily enter public service out of a desire to help others.

Although the percentage of those who saw government officials and their motivations in a more positive light surged briefly shortly after September 11, public opinion today is similar to what researchers found before September 11.

⁹ The Brookings Institution—Trust in Government 2002: six in 10 or more of Americans said they have a favorable opinion of federal officials the president selects to help run the different departments and agencies of the government, according to surveys conducted in 2002 (69%), October 2001 (79%) and July 2001 (60%). Similarly, at least two in three Americans said they had a favorable opinion of federal government workers in 2002 (69%), October 2001 (76%) and July 2001 (69%).

The month following the September 11 terrorist attacks, six in 10 Americans (61%) believed that the desire to make America a better place to live plays a very big role when people agree to serve a president. However, similar to survey results just prior to September 11, fewer than half of Americans (45%) currently think that the desire to make America a better place to live or the chance to make a difference (37%) play a very large role in the decision to serve in government. And as many or more people attribute high-level government officials' decision to serve the president to more self-centered motives. Roughly half or more observe that the desire to have power and make important decisions (54%) or the desire to meet important people and get ahead professionally (48%) play a very big role in the decision to serve.

Democrats are somewhat more likely than Republicans to believe that high-level government officials are motivated primarily by expected private gains than the public interest. Democrats are more likely than Republicans to believe that high-level officials choose to serve the president because of the desire to meet important people and get ahead professionally (55% vs. 44%) and are less likely to think that the chance to make a difference through working in government (36% vs. 46%) plays a big role. When it comes to evaluating motives of high-level government officials, the opinions of Independents resemble the views of Democrats more than Republicans.

MOTIVATION OF HIGH-LEVEL OFFICIALS TO SERVE A PRESIDENT

- PUBLIC: Now thinking about the high-level people the president selects to help him run the government, such as the Secretary of State or the Secretary of Defense. How big of a role do you think (Insert) plays in a person's decision to serve in the government?
- GOVERNMENT: Now thinking about the many high-level people the president selected to help him run the government|when you were serving in government. How big of a role do you think (Insert) plays|played in others' decision to serve the president?

		VERY BIG ROLE	MODERATE ROLE	SMALL ROLE	NO ROLE
→ desire to make America a better place to live					
Public 2003	45%	35	12	5	
Oct. 2001	61	30	6	2	
July 2001	44	35	14	4	
Gov 2003	75	20	2	1	
→ chance to make a difference through working in government					
Public 2003	37	42	13	3	
Oct. 2001	44	42	8	2	
July 2001	31	43	18	4	
Gov 2003	74	21	2	1	
→ desire to have power and make important decisions					
Public 2003	54	30	9	3	
Oct. 2001	52	37	7	1	
July 2001	52	35	7	2	
Gov 2003	29	48	16	3	
→ desire to meet important people and get ahead professionally					
Public 2003	48	32	12	4	
Oct. 2001	44	33	14	5	
July 2001	55	30	8	4	
Gov 2003	16	43	33	5	

The public is even more likely to believe that federal workers in general—not just those appointed to high-level positions—are motivated by self-interest more than the desire to serve the public. Three in four Americans think that federal workers choose to work in government because of the job security (76%) and the salary and benefits (75%) rather than because they want to help the public or get a chance to make a difference.

Presidential appointees are not as cynical about government workers as the general public. A majority of appointees say that junior and mid-level federal employees they have worked with were motivated by the chance to make a difference (63%) and the desire to help the public (52%).

But even though federal workers are thought to be looking after their own needs, the public still thinks they can do a good job. Although only about one in 10 Americans (13%) praise federal workers for generally doing a good job, a solid majority of Americans (63%) believe that federal government workers try to do a good job, but the government bureaucracy makes it hard for them to do so. Only two in 10 (20%) say that federal workers generally do not do a good job because they know that their jobs are secure.

The public's opinion of the government as an employer has improved and held steady over the last two years. Nearly as many respondents say they would recommend a grown son or daughter take a job with the federal government (37%) as would recommend going into private business (44%). This is consistent with findings immediately after September 11 when roughly as many said they would recommend taking a position with the government (39%) as private business (42%). Just prior to September 11, opinion clearly tilted toward the private sector (53%) and away from public service in the government (30%).

MOTIVATION OF FEDERAL WORKERS TO SERVE IN GOVERNMENT

- PUBLIC: Now thinking about federal employees in general, not the ones selected by the president to help him run the government. Do you think most federal government workers choose to work in government because of (Insert) or because (Insert)?
- GOVERNMENT: Now thinking about the junior and mid-level federal employees you work with|worked with when you were serving in government. Do you think most of these federal government workers choose|chose to work in government because of (Insert) or because (Insert)?

	JOB SECURITY	HELP THE PUBLIC
Public 2003	76%	16
Oct. 2001	68	26
July 2001	70	22
Gov 2003	32	52
	SALARY AND BENEFITS	MAKE A DIFFERENCE
Public 2003	75	19
Oct. 2001	64	31
July 2001	68	24
Gov 2003	25	63

GROWN CHILDREN WORKING IN GOVERNMENT

- Now imagine you had a grown son or daughter who had two job offers, one to work in the federal government and one to work in private business, which job would you recommend he or she take?

	GOVERNMENT	PRIVATE BUSINESS	DEPENDS
Public 2003	37%	44	13
Oct. 2001	39	42	13
July 2001	30	53	11

Demographic Background Makes a Difference

When Americans ponder the motivations of those employed by the federal government, their responses vary somewhat depending on their background—particularly their finances, education and race or ethnicity.

Among the public, those with less education and a lower income are less likely to believe government officials are motivated by job security or the salary and benefits than those with more education and higher incomes. For example, fewer than six in 10 of those who have not graduated from high school say that most federal government workers have chosen this career path because of the job security, compared to more than seven in 10 of those who have attained more education. Similarly, roughly seven in 10 with household incomes below \$25,000 believe federal workers are motivated by job security, compared to nearly nine in 10 among those making \$75,000 or more.

We also find that Hispanics and African Americans more often than whites think that federal officials are motivated by a desire to make America a better place. Hispanic (55%) and black (51%) Americans are more likely than white Americans (41%) to believe that when high-level people choose to serve the president the desire to make America a better place to live plays a very big role. And when it comes to federal workers in general—not just the high-level officials—white Americans are more likely to believe that government employees choose to work in government because of the job security and salary and benefits than Hispanic or African Americans.

Finally, although age does not matter most of the time, older Americans over age 65 are less likely to believe that high-level officials are motivated by the desire to meet important people and get ahead professionally. Roughly half of those below the age of 65 believe this plays a very big role, compared to four in 10 among those over age 65.

Appointees Satisfied with their Jobs

Past surveys have found that federal workers in general tend to be at least somewhat satisfied with their jobs. In 2002, roughly four in 10 federal workers (43%) reported being very satisfied with their jobs, while most of the rest (47%) said they were somewhat satisfied.¹⁰ Presidential appointees report equally high levels of satisfaction.

All in all, presidential appointees in all five presidential administrations have been overwhelmingly satisfied with their jobs. More than nine in 10 presidential appointees (96%) say they were satisfied with their job overall, with only two percent expressing dissatisfaction.

When asked about different aspects of their jobs, staffers are particularly likely to receive praise. Roughly nine in 10 appointees say they were satisfied with the quality of their professional staff (95%) and support staff (89%). Only one in 10 presidential appointees (9%) express dissatisfaction with the quality of the support staff and even fewer with the quality of their professional staff (3%).

Given that most of the appointees believe that a desire to make a difference drives people into government service, it is important to note that a large majority of eight in 10 appointees (79%) express satisfaction in their ability to affect change, suggesting that the appointees are getting what they want out of their positions. Fewer than two in 10 appointees (16%) say they were dissatisfied with this aspect of their jobs.

It is also interesting to note that even though the appointment process requires revealing many personal and financial details, seven in 10 appointees (70%) say they were satisfied with the level of public scrutiny. Recent efforts to streamline the appointment process may be bearing results, as appointees serving in the current Bush administration (79%) are somewhat more likely to be satisfied with this aspect than Clinton appointees (67%).

And although one might imagine that the demands on presidential appointees are extensive, a majority of them do not complain about their compensation or personal time. Nearly six in 10 appointees say they have been satisfied with their salary (58%) and ability to attend to their personal lives (57%). But at the same time, notable minorities of about four in 10 appointees express dissatisfaction over these aspects of their positions.

JOB SATISFACTION AMONG PRESIDENTIAL APPOINTEES

		How do you feel about When you were serving in government, how did you feel about (Insert)?	
		SATISFIED	DISSATISFIED
→ job overall			
	Gov 2003	96%	2
→ quality of professional staff			
	Gov 2003	95	3
→ quality of support staff			
	Gov 2003	89	9
→ ability to affect change			
	Gov 2003	79	16
→ level of public scrutiny			
	Gov 2003	70	20
→ salary			
	Gov 2003	58	38
→ ability to attend to personal life			
	Gov 2003	57	39
→ news media coverage			
	Gov 2003	39	56

¹⁰ The Brookings Institution—The Troubled State of the Federal Public Service 2002

Only when asked about the media do dissatisfied presidential appointees outnumber those who are satisfied. A majority of presidential appointees (56%) say they were dissatisfied with the quality of news media coverage of the government overall—only about four in 10 (39%) say they were satisfied.

Appointees Cite Difficulties Too

Even though presidential appointees have been satisfied with their jobs overall, these positions do come with certain difficulties and challenges. When asked to name the most challenging aspect of their job, a plurality of appointees (37%) talk about negotiating the political system, such as working with Congress or trying to reach a consensus among multiple stakeholders.

In addition to asking the appointees to tell us what was most challenging about their position, we asked about several specific aspects of working in government and whether the appointees considered them to be difficult.

The two items topping the list are both in one way or another related to money. First, the institution holding the purse strings—Congress—is cited by many as difficult to deal with. Whether it is due to its budget powers alone or other reasons, nearly six in 10 appointees (57%) had difficulties dealing with Congress.

Second, presidential appointees found the budget process to be challenging. A majority of appointees (55%) say that mastering the federal budget process was difficult.

Many appointees also did not find it easy to be in charge of a large government apparatus. Roughly four in 10 appointees (43%) found managing a large government organization or program difficult. Moreover, two in 10 appointees (21%) bring up management aspects when asked to name the most challenging part of their job.

It looks as though the government has gotten harder and harder to manage over time. A majority of George W. Bush appointees (52%) have found it difficult to manage a large government organization or program, compared to only about a third of those who were selected to serve under the Reagan administration (35%). Those serving in the Clinton administrations (45%) or the first Bush administration (40%) fall between the two extremes.

DIFFICULTIES

→ In your job, how difficult do/did you find it to master (Insert)?

	VERY/ SOMEWHAT DIFFICULT	NOT TOO/ NOT AT ALL DIFFICULT
→ dealing successfully with Congress		
Gov 2003	57%	42
G.W. Bush	53	46
Clinton	58	41
G.H. Bush	61	38
Reagan	59	39
2000	49	48
→ mastering the federal budget process		
Gov 2003	55	42
G.W. Bush	58	40
Clinton	50	47
G.H. Bush	58	41
Reagan	60	36
2000	51	44
→ managing a large government organization or program		
Gov 2003	43	55
G.W. Bush	52	48
Clinton	45	54
G.H. Bush	40	60
Reagan	35	58
2000	43	55

The White House is generally not considered as hard to handle as Congress. A majority of the appointees (64%) say that dealing successfully with the White House was not difficult. Only about a third of the appointees (34%) disagree. However, not every White House is deemed equally easy. Nearly half of Clinton appointees (47%) found it difficult to deal with the White House, followed by the George H. Bush administration (37%), Reagan (22%) and the George W. Bush administration (20%).

Although a quarter of the appointees (26%) say that the job itself was the most challenging aspect when they were serving in government, most appointees did not find it hard to master the substantive details of the policies they dealt with (67%) or to master the decision making procedures of the particular department or agency (66%). Only about three in 10 appointees found these aspects somewhat or very difficult.

DIFFICULTIES

→ In your job, how difficult do|did you find it to master (Insert)?

→ dealing successfully with the White House

Gov 2003	34%	64
G.W. Bush	20	75
Clinton	47	53
G.H. Bush	37	61
Reagan	22	74
2000	36	57

→ mastering the substantive details of the policies dealt with

Gov 2003	33	67
G.W. Bush	31	70
Clinton	29	70
G.H. Bush	34	66
Reagan	40	58
2000	31	67

→ mastering the decision making procedures of the department or agency

Gov 2003	33	66
G.W. Bush	33	65
Clinton	38	61
G.H. Bush	23	75
Reagan	30	66
2000	40	59

61

We know that the American public believes that government matters and that many Americans trust the government to operate in their best interest. We also know that the public is often critical of the way the government operates. But how do these opinions come about? Where do Americans get information they need for forming their opinions? And how much do Americans know about government?

In this section we begin by asking the presidential appointees 1) how much they think the public knows about issues facing the government. We then go on to ask the public 2) whether they are interested in what happens in the federal government, 3) what information sources they turn to in order to educate themselves about government and 4) how much they think they know about government. We also ask both the public as well as presidential appointees 5) how they see the media and its performance keeping the public up-to-date on current events.

We find that the presidential appointees do not view the American public as very informed, saying that they do not know enough to form wise opinions about important issues. Despite this rather grim assessment by the appointees, a majority of Americans say that they are interested in what happens in the federal government, that they pay attention to news stories and articles about the federal government and that they know at least a fair amount about how the federal government works. But both the public and the presidential appointees are critical of media performance. The appointees in particular are dissatisfied with media coverage of the federal government, saying that the media exaggerates government waste and failures and that it contributes to distrust of government among the public.

Appointees Say Public Lacks Knowledge

Do Americans know enough to form intelligent opinions about issues of public interest? No, according to presidential appointees. A solid majority of the appointees (63%)—from all five administrations—do not think the American public knows enough about the issues faced by senior people in government to form wise opinions about what should be done about these issues. Only a third of the appointees (33%) believe the public does have enough knowledge. This is consistent with the view held by nearly half of the appointees that when officials in Washington make a decision that is not supported by a majority of Americans, officials having a better understanding and more information about the issues is a major reason for going against public opinion.

PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE OF POLICY ISSUES

→ Do you think the American public knows enough about the issues faced by senior people in government to form wise opinions about what should be done about these issues?

	YES	NO
Gov 2003	33%	63

Americans Interested in Government

Any shortage of knowledge Americans may have does not appear to be because of a lack of interest. An overwhelming majority of the American public—“trusters,” “ambivalents” and “distrusters” alike—express interest in government. Nine in 10 Americans (91%) say they are interested in what happens in the federal government, with about half (48%) saying they are *very* interested. Fewer than one in 10 Americans (8%) say they are not too interested or not interested at all in what happens in the nation’s capital.

On the surface, all Americans regardless of party identification—Republicans (96%), Democrats (94%) and Independents (87%)—express similarly high levels of interest in what happens in the federal government. However, the most ardent Independents—those who do not even “lean” toward one of the two major parties—are less likely to say they are interested (75%). Interestingly, we also find that Americans who feel angry with the government are somewhat more likely to say they are *very* interested in what happens in federal government (56%) than those who are content with the government (45%).

Besides being interested, the vast majority of Americans say that they pay attention to what goes on in Washington. Almost eight in 10 Americans (76%), regardless of their opinion of government, say they pay at least a fair amount of attention to news stories and articles about what federal government officials are doing in Washington, with nearly three in 10 (27%) saying they give these news a *great deal* of attention. But at the same time, a minority of more than two in 10 Americans (23%) say they do not pay much attention to news coverage on public issues. Some of these people may not be paying attention because they do not trust the news media. Those who do not trust the news media to act in the best interest of the American people (26%) are more likely to say they do not pay attention than those who trust the media (19%).

INTEREST IN GOVERNMENT

→ How interested are you in what happens in the federal government?

	VERY/ SOMEWHAT INTERESTED	NOT TOO/ NOT AT ALL INTERESTED
Public 2003	91%	8

63

ATTENTION TO NEWS ABOUT GOVERNMENT

→ How much attention do you pay to news stories and articles about what federal government officials are doing in Washington DC?

	GREAT DEAL/ FAIR AMOUNT	NOT TOO MUCH/ NOT AT ALL
Public 2003	76%	23

What about actual participation in the political process? Do Americans transform their interest in government into practice? When it comes to the most basic way to participate in the democratic process a solid majority of over six in 10 Americans (65%) identify themselves as regular voters, remaining consistent with past trends. These people say that they vote always (43%) or almost always (22%). An additional one in 10 (10%) say they vote

part of the time. On the negative side, however, a sizable minority of Americans (24%) admit that they seldom (13%) or never (11%) vote.

While trust in government does not make a difference when it comes to frequency of voting—“trustees,” “ambivalents” and “distrusters” are equally likely to be regular voters—party identification does. First off, Republicans (77%) and Democrats (70%) are more likely to be regular voters than Independents (54%). Second, those Independents who do not even lean toward one of the major parties are considerably more likely to say they never vote (33%) than those who identify with or lean toward the Democrats (9%) or Republicans (5%). Only four in 10 of these staunch Independents (39%) say they vote always or almost always.

We also find that potential voters’ sense of political efficacy makes a difference in whether they show up at the polling booth on election day. Americans who believe that people can make a difference in what happens in Washington (68%) are more likely to be regular voters than those who do not think people can make a difference (58%). And those who say that sometimes the federal government seems so complicated that they can not really understand what is going on (61%) are less likely to vote regularly than those who do not feel this way (75%).

And why do those who do vote choose to do so? Consistent with past research, a majority (57%) of those who vote—even if only seldom—say they get a feeling of satisfaction from it. About a third (32%) say they do it only out of duty. Government “trustees” (66%) are more likely to get a feeling of satisfaction from voting than “ambivalents” (56%) or “distrusters” (51%). Furthermore, Republicans (65%) are more likely to get satisfaction from voting than either Democrats (56%) or Independents (52%).

FREQUENCY OF VOTING

→ How often would you say you vote?

	ALWAYS	NEARLY ALWAYS	PART OF THE TIME	SELDOM	NEVER
Public 2003	43%	22	10	13	11
1999	41	27	14	10	1
1997	51	23	11	10	5
1996	41	30	12	12	4
1995	42	29	12	11	6
1994	40	30	14	11	5
1992	47	26	10	11	5
1991	38	37	13	9	3
1990	33	35	12	10	8
1989	45	30	10	8	6
1988	39	33	12	8	6
1987	34	37	11	6	9

64

REASONS FOR VOTING

→ When you vote do you usually get a feeling of satisfaction from it, or do you only do it because it's your duty?

	SATISFACTION	OUT OF DUTY
Public 2003	57%	32
2000	66	30
1997	63	29

Those Independents who do not lean toward one of the major parties are the least likely group (38%) to feel satisfied after casting their ballot. Given that a majority of these staunch Independents vote only out of duty, their low voter turnout is not surprising.

Information about Government Comes from the Media

The media plays an important role in influencing public opinion of the federal government. Consistent with past research, a majority of Americans (55%) say that what they have read, heard or seen in the media has most influenced their impression of the American government. Fewer than three in 10 (27%) say their personal experiences with the government have been most influential.

And what types of media are Americans drawn to to satisfy their thirst for news? According to past research, TV tops the list of news sources, with about seven in 10 Americans (72%) saying that they regularly watch news on television.¹¹ This current study also finds that TV maintains its place as the number one source for keeping up with current events. Local TV news is particularly popular, followed by daily newspapers, cable news, national network news and online sources.

IMPRESSION OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

→ What has most influenced your impression of the federal government... what you've heard, read or seen in the media, or things you've personally experienced?

	FROM MEDIA	FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE
Public 2003	55%	27
1997	62	20

¹¹ The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press—Deconstructing Distrust 1998

Local TV news, such as Eyewitness News or Action News, remains the most used source of news for the American public. Consistent with survey results from three years ago, Americans, on average, watch local TV news 4.1 times a week.

Daily newspapers are also maintaining their place as an important news source for many Americans. Similar to 2000 survey results (3.8), Americans read the daily papers 3.6 times per week on average. More than seven in 10 Americans (76%) read a newspaper at least once a week.

Cable news, such as CNN, Fox News and MSNBC, is also becoming increasingly popular. Americans are now more likely to catch their news on a cable channel than to watch national network news on ABC, CBS or NBC. They tune into one of the cable channels for news 3.2 times a week on average, compared to 2.7 times for national network news. As recently as 2000, Americans watched network news (3.1) more often than cable news (2.5). This decline in viewership of network news is part of a long-term trend documented by past research. Ten years ago, in 1993, a majority of Americans (58%) reported watching network news regularly, but by 1999 this figure had dropped to 40 percent.¹²

The Internet is also becoming an information source for those interested in news on the government. Americans who have access to the Internet go online to get information about current issues, public issues or politics 2.5 times per week on average. When looking at all Americans—not just those with Internet access—more than four in 10 (42%) go online for news at least once a week. As recently as 1997, only one in 10 Americans (11%) said they regularly used a computer to go online to get information about current events, public issues, or politics.¹³

AVERAGE WEEKLY MEDIA EXPOSURE

→ Now I would like to ask about where you got your news during the past week. Please tell me how many days in the past week, if any, you did each of the following.

Average number of days viewed in the past week

→ Local TV news

Public 2003	4.1
2000	4.1

→ Daily newspaper

Public 2003	3.6
2000	3.8

→ Cable news

Public 2003	3.2
2000	2.5

→ National Network News

Public 2003	2.7
2000	3.1

→ Online

Public 2003 (n=939)	2.5
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¹² The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press—Retropolitics: The Political Typology Version 3.0 (1999)

¹³ The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press—Deconstructing Distrust 1998

What about the radio? Has its time passed? The radio remains alive and well, according to the American public. In 1999, five in 10 Americans (50%) said they regularly listened to the news on the radio and nearly two in 10 (18%) said they regularly listened to talk radio shows that invite listeners to call in to discuss current events, public issues, and politics.¹⁴ Currently, a third of Americans (32%) say they listen to talk radio weekly, and a majority of Americans (54%) listen to talk radio at least once a month. More than two in 10 Americans (26%) listen to NPR every week; one in 10 say the same about Rush Limbaugh (10%).

LISTENING TO THE RADIO

→ How often, if at all, do you (Insert)?

	EVERY WEEK	TWICE A MONTH	ONCE A MONTH	NEVER
→ listen to radio shows that invite listeners to call in to discuss current events, public issues or politics				
Public 2003	32%	8	14	45
→ listen to National Public Radio, or NPR				
Public 2003	26	4	11	57
→ listen to Rush Limbaugh				
Public 2003	10	3	7	78

Americans also express interest in politics by watching certain TV shows that in one way or another touch on current events, but are clearly not the “news.” Roughly a third of Americans watch late-night shows with Jay Leno (36%) or David Letterman (34%) once a month or more often, and a quarter of Americans (24%) watch the *Daily Show* on Comedy Central at least monthly. Nearly two in 10 Americans (18%) say they watch the fictional TV show the *West Wing*, the story line of which centers on people working at the White House.

WATCHING TV SHOWS

→ How often, if at all, do you (Insert)?

	EVERY WEEK	TWICE A MONTH	ONCE A MONTH	NEVER
→ watch Leno				
Public 2003	16%	8	12	63
→ watch Letterman				
Public 2003	11	9	14	66
→ watch the Daily Show on Comedy Central				
Public 2003	10	6	8	76
→ watch the West Wing				
Public 2003	7	4	7	82

Party identification matters when it is time to choose a news source. Both local and network TV news are more popular among Democrats than Republicans or Independents. Democrats, on average, watch local TV news 4.7 times a week, compared to the Republicans’ 3.9 times or the Independents’ 3.7 times. Similarly, Democrats watch network news 3.1 times per week on average, whereas Republicans watch them only 2.4 times and Independents 2.5 times.

¹⁴ The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press—Deconstructing Distrust 1998

Talk radio, on the other hand, is more popular among Republicans and Independents. A majority of Republicans (60%) and Independents (60%) listen to talk radio at least monthly, compared to fewer than half of Democrats (46%). More than a third of Republicans (39%) and Independents (36%) listen to talk radio every week. When it comes to specific programs, nearly a quarter of Republicans (22%) listen to Rush Limbaugh every week and more than a third (37%) at least once a month. Two in 10 Independents (20%) also listen to Limbaugh at least once a month. However, fewer than one in 10 Democrats (9%) ever listen to Rush Limbaugh's show. Party identification also shows among NPR listeners. Independents (34%) are more likely to listen to NPR weekly than either Democrats (25%) or Republicans (22%). Four in 10 Republicans (40%) and Democrats (41%) and nearly half of Independents (47%) listen to NPR at least once a month.

What about the Internet—often advertised as the great equalizer? We find that Republicans (78%) and Independents (77%) are more likely to have Internet access than Democrats (68%). However, among those who have Internet access, the frequency of accessing news online does not vary by party identification.

Does Media Source Matter?

What is perhaps most important to note about the public's media habits is that a vast majority of Americans access at least one news source regularly. Although nearly a quarter of Americans (23%) say they do not pay much attention to news coverage on public issues, more than eight in 10 Americans, on average, watch or read the news at least three times a week—whether it is via local, cable or network TV, online or newspapers. We also find that many of those who pay attention to news regularly use multiple sources. For example, a majority of those who watch network news regularly (3 to 7 times a week) also watch local (88%) or cable (65%) TV news or read a daily newspaper (66%) regularly. Similarly, a majority of those who regularly read daily newspapers also watch local (75%), cable (61%) or network news (54%).

Perhaps because Americans are exposed to such a wide variety of news, their perceptions of the federal government vary little by any one particular news source. For example, those who regularly watch network (31% vs. 34%), cable (34% vs. 31%), or local news (33% vs. 29%) are no more likely to be government “trustees” than those who do not. Similarly, those who regularly go online for news are no more likely to be “distrusters” (37%) than those who do not (39%).

The differences we do detect are mostly minor. Regular network news viewers are slightly less likely to believe that the government is well-run and hard-working than those who do not watch network news as often. Regular newspaper readers also differ from those who do not read newspapers in a few respects. For example, those who read newspapers at least three times a week are somewhat less likely to say the government has a positive effect on their day-to-day life (48%) than those who never read newspapers (57%). They are also somewhat less likely to be content with the government (29% vs. 37%) and are more likely to prefer a smaller government with fewer services (51% vs. 33%).

Interestingly, we also find that those who listen to Rush Limbaugh's radio talk show tend to differ in many ways from those who do not listen to the show. Predictably, Limbaugh listeners are more likely to prefer a smaller government with fewer services (63% vs. 42%) and to believe that existing government programs should be cut (42% vs. 29%).

But at the same time, Rush fans are fairly positive about the government and the way things are going in the country. Limbaugh listeners are presumably confident that under Republican leadership the government is trimming perceived waste from its programs and is shoring up any abuses or inefficiencies in how these programs are run. The following findings lend support to this assumption.

Limbaugh listeners are more likely than non-Rush fans to have a great deal of trust in President Bush (54% vs. 27%), to be satisfied with the way things are going in the country (57% vs. 35%) and are slightly less likely to be government “distrusters” (31%) than those who do not listen to the show (39%). They are also more likely to think the federal government is well-run (67% vs. 53%) and hard-working (70% vs. 61%). And they are less likely to think the government is slow and inefficient (56% vs. 65%).

The differences are even more notable when we examine attitudes on more specific issues. Rush fans are more likely to have a great deal of confidence in the government to do a good job dealing with international affairs (34% vs. 16%) and to have a great deal of confidence in the Defense Department (51% vs. 28%). In many other policy areas too, the government is more likely to receive praise from Limbaugh listeners—conserving natural resources (70% vs. 54%), helping people who need assistance (67% vs. 56%), managing the economy (65% vs. 45%), taking care of the elderly (56% vs. 45%), and ensuring access to affordable health care (40% vs. 30%).

Naturally, we should not conclude that Rush Limbaugh changes people’s political views. It is just as likely that those who already agree with his more conservative views—a majority of Limbaugh listeners are Republicans (51%) and Independents (31%)—are drawn to listen to the show. Limbaugh listeners are also more likely to be interested in politics. They say they are very interested in what happens in federal government more often than others (56% vs. 45%) and are more likely to be regular voters (83% vs. 61%). They are also more likely to be able to identify prominent cabinet members—Donald Rumsfeld (70% vs. 44%), Colin Powell (61% vs. 46%) and John Ashcroft (42% vs. 27%).

Although the level of trust Americans have in government does not appear to vary much by their news source (with the exception of Rush Limbaugh) trust in media as a whole does make a difference. Those who trust the news media to act in the best interest of the American people are also more likely to be government “trusters” (41%) than those who do not have trust in the media (27%). But in addition to the higher likelihood of trust in the federal government, media trusters are also more likely to have trust in private businesses, trade unions, Congress, non-profit organizations and their state government, suggesting that having trust in one institution may get generalized to trust in other institutions.

Americans Know about Government

Does all this exposure to media coverage of current events produce results? Despite the fact that many presidential appointees believe the public does not know enough about policy issues, a solid majority of Americans (68%) believe they know how the federal government works. More than half (57%) say they know a fair amount about how the federal government works, although only one in 10 (11%) say they know a great deal. Republicans (75%) are somewhat more likely to say they know at least a fair amount than Democrats (67%). Notably, a third of Americans (32%) admit they do not know too much or know nothing at all about the workings of government.

KNOWLEDGE OF FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

→ How much would you say you know about how the federal government works?

	GREAT DEAL/ FAIR AMOUNT	NOT TOO MUCH/ NOTHING AT ALL
Public 2003	68%	32

70

Furthermore, when asked to identify prominent cabinet members, roughly half or more of Americans get it wrong. While half of Americans are able to correctly identify Colin Powell as Secretary of State (49%) and Donald Rumsfeld as Secretary of Defense (49%), as many people do not know the right answer. And only three in 10 Americans (30%) correctly identify John Ashcroft as Attorney General.

ABILITY TO IDENTIFY CABINET MEMBERS

→ Now we have a couple of questions some people can answer and some people cannot so just tell me if you don't know the answer. Do you know if (Randomly choose from: Colin Powell, John Ashcroft, Donald Rumsfeld) is Secretary of State, the Attorney General or Secretary of Defense?

	SECRETARY OF STATE	SECRETARY OF DEFENSE	ATTORNEY GENERAL	DK/ REFUSED
→ Colin Powell				
Public 2003 (n=429)	49%	30	2	19
Oct. 2001 (n=357)	37	34	6	24
July 2001 (n=343)	36	35	4	25
→ Donald Rumsfeld				
Public 2003 (n=431)	11	49	5	36
Oct. 2001 (n=325)	6	40	3	52
July 2001 (n=335)	7	20	9	65
→ John Ashcroft				
Public 2003 (n=440)	12	13	30	45
Oct. 2001 (n=351)	8	16	40	36
July 2001 (n=325)	8	11	33	49

The good news is that Americans are somewhat more likely to be aware of which party controls Congress. Nearly seven in 10 Americans (68%) correctly identify the Republicans as the party with most members in the House of Representatives. Only a little over one in 10 say the Democrats (12%), while two in 10 (20%) admit that they do not know. In this case, both Republicans (73%) and Democrats (72%) are more likely to know the correct answer than Independents (63%). And fewer than half of Americans (44%) who express no party preference at all are able to identify the Republicans as the majority party.

Media Criticized

Whose at fault for this lack of knowledge? Although the media clearly can not be held directly responsible, both the public and presidential appointees express doubts about how well the media works as the main source of political information for a majority of the American public.

Presidential appointees are especially critical of the media. A majority of presidential appointees (56%) indicate that during their service in public office, the quality of news media coverage of the government was poor. More than half of the appointees rate the media's coverage of federal government in general (51%), federal departments and agencies (55%) and government workers in general (60%) as not too good or not good at all.

Many appointees imply that media coverage of government affairs is outright misleading. Two in three appointees (68%) complain that the media exaggerates the amount of waste in the federal government. And most appointees (86%) believe that news media exaggerating government failures is a very or somewhat important reason for why the public might distrust the government. The good news is that the latter complaint may be losing steam. Majorities among the appointees serving in the Reagan (71%) and George H. Bush (53%) administrations believe media exaggerating government failures is a very important reason for public distrust, compared to roughly four in 10 among those who served in the Clinton administrations (38%) or the current George W. Bush administration (42%).

Many ordinary Americans are also critical of the news media. Most (74%) believe that at least a fair amount of corruption occurs in news media, and a slim majority (53%) say they do not trust the news media too much or at all to operate in the best interest of the American people. Democrats (53%) and Independents (46%) are more likely to have trust in the media than Republicans (36%).

Interestingly, when asked about the people working in the news media, the tone changes slightly. Majorities among both the general public (60%) as well as presidential appointees (66%) rate the moral and ethical practices of journalists as somewhat or very good. Among the presidential appointees, we find again that the more recent appointees are more likely to think highly of the media. George W. Bush (72%) and Clinton (74%) appointees are more likely to say the moral and ethical practices of journalists are good than those serving in the George H. Bush (56%) or the Reagan (57%) administrations.

MEDIA COVERAGE

→ Overall, how would you rate the media's coverage of (Insert)?

	VERY/ SOMEWHAT GOOD	NOT TOO GOOD/ NOT GOOD AT ALL
→ Federal government in general		
Gov 2003	48%	51
→ Federal departments and agencies		
Gov 2003	44	55
→ Government workers in general		
Gov 2003	37	60

MEDIA EXAGGERATION OF GOVERNMENT WASTE

→ How much, if at all, do you think the media exaggerates the amount of waste in the federal government?

	GREAT DEAL/ FAIR AMOUNT	NOT TOO MUCH/ NOT AT ALL
Gov 2003	68%	31

Interest in Government Varies by Demographics

Interest in and knowledge about government varies depending on one's demographic background, such as age, education, income and race. Demographic background also matters when choosing a news source. Perhaps of most concern to many will be the lack of interest in governmental affairs among younger Americans between the ages of 18 and 29.

Younger Americans—regardless of whether they are “truststers”, “ambivalents” or “distrusters”—do not express nearly as much interest in public affairs as older Americans. Fewer than four in 10 Americans 18 to 29 years of age say that they are very interested in what happens in federal government (37%), compared to roughly half or more of those over 30.

Younger Americans are also less likely to participate in the political process. Only four in 10 Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 say they vote always or almost always (40%), compared to twice as many among Americans over 50 years old (80%). Moreover, young people who do vote are less likely to say they get satisfaction from voting than older Americans.

Not only are younger Americans less apt to vote, they also pay less attention to current events. Even though having Internet access is more common among the younger generations, young Internet users are no more likely to catch the news online than are older Internet users. And Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 report watching local, cable and network news and reading daily newspapers less often, on average, than the older generations. Not surprisingly, considering this lack of interest and attention, younger Americans are also the least knowledgeable age group when it comes to identifying prominent cabinet members and the majority party in the House of Representatives.

INTEREST IN AND KNOWLEDGE OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS BY AGE

	VERY INTERESTED	VOTE ALWAYS OR ALMOST ALWAYS	SATISFACTION FROM VOTING	INTERNET ACCESS
18-29	37%	40	48	84
30-49	47	64	55	81
50-64	51	80	63	71
65+	57	80	63	39
	LOCAL NEWS	CABLE NEWS	NEWSPAPERS	NETWORK NEWS
18-29	3.6	2.7	2.5	1.9
30-49	3.7	2.9	3.2	2.3
50-64	4.3	3.6	4.5	3.0
65+	5.2	4.1	5.1	4.4
	SECRETARY OF STATE	SECRETARY OF DEFENSE	ATTORNEY GENERAL	HOUSE OF REPS
18-29	41	31	19	59
30-49	45	50	31	66
50-64	64	63	35	74
65+	52	46	39	74

In addition to age, education level also matters when it comes to keeping up with the latest news from Washington. Although a majority of Americans express at least some interest in governmental affairs regardless of education level, interest in and knowledge of the federal government increase with education.

Six in 10 Americans with graduate degrees say they are very interested in what happens in the federal government, compared to fewer than half among those with less than a graduate degree. Education matters even more when it comes to news attention. Just six in 10 among those without a high school degree say they pay a fair amount or a great deal of attention to what federal government officials are doing, compared to roughly eight in 10 among those who have graduated from high school or gone even further.

The more educated Americans are also much more likely to be regular voters than those who have acquired less formal education. Nearly nine in 10 college graduates say they vote always or almost always, compared to fewer than six in 10 among those who have not pursued education beyond a high school degree and fewer than half of those who have not graduated from high school. Those with more education are also more likely to get a sense of satisfaction from practicing their right to vote.

Education also makes a difference when it comes time to choose a news source. More educated Americans are more likely to have access to the Internet and to use the Internet to get information about current events. They also read daily newspapers more often on average.

And as we might expect, more education leads to greater likelihood of having knowledge about government affairs. Only about four in 10 Americans with less than a high school education feel that they know at least a fair amount about how the federal government works, compared to roughly twice as many among college graduates. The more educated are also considerably better able to correctly identify prominent cabinet members and the party in charge of the House of Representatives.

INTEREST IN AND KNOWLEDGE OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS BY EDUCATION

	VERY INTERESTED	GREAT DEAL/FAIR AMOUNT ATTENTION	VOTE ALWAYS OR ALMOST ALWAYS	SATISFACTION FROM VOTING
Less than HS	43%	60	44	46
HS Grad	49	79	58	58
Some Col	45	79	65	52
Col Grad	42	77	85	66
Grad	58	80	88	66
	KNOW GREAT DEAL/ FAIR AMOUNT	INTERNET ACCESS	GET NEWS ONLINE	NEWSPAPERS
Less than HS	42	33	0.8	2.6
HS Grad	64	64	1.8	3.6
Some Col	72	88	2.6	3.7
Col Grad	79	92	3.1	4.1
Grad	88	94	3.5	4.1
	SECRETARY OF STATE	SECRETARY OF DEFENSE	ATTORNEY GENERAL	HOUSE OF REPS
Less than HS	19	33	11	52
HS Grad	43	34	29	64
Some Col	50	59	27	71
Col Grad	65	63	39	73
Grad	76	65	61	84

Income tends to be closely associated with level of education. It is therefore not a surprise that we find that income also matters. Although Americans tend to express a roughly similar level of interest regardless of income and report paying roughly similar amounts of attention to news stories about the federal government, Americans with different financial backgrounds differ when it comes to voting practices, news attention and knowledge about the government.

Americans with higher incomes are much more likely to be regular voters than Americans faring less well financially. Only about half of those with household incomes below \$25,000 say they vote always or almost always, compared to nearly eight in 10 among those making more than \$50,000 per year. Those with higher incomes are also considerably more likely to say they know a great deal or a fair amount about how the federal government works.

Although no income differences emerge when we ask Americans how much attention they generally pay to news stories about the government, financial background does make a difference when we get more specific. First off, low-income Americans are less likely to watch cable news and to read newspapers than those with higher incomes. Second, internet access is dependent on income level. Only half of Americans making less than \$25,000 a year have access to the Internet, whereas almost all of those with household incomes above \$75,000 have Internet access. Moreover, low-income Americans who do have Internet access are less likely to use it to access news. We also find that low-income Americans are less likely to be able to identify prominent cabinet members or the majority party in the House of Representatives.

INTEREST IN AND KNOWLEDGE OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS BY INCOME

	VOTE ALWAYS OR ALMOST ALWAYS	KNOW GREAT DEAL FAIR AMOUNT		
<25K	52%	56		
25K-35K	53	69		
35K-50K	70	72		
50K-75K	78	77		
75K+	78	79		
	CABLE NEWS	NEWS- PAPERS	INTERNET ACCESS	GET NEWS ONLINE
<25K	2.8	3.0	50	2.1
25K-35K	3.1	3.7	69	1.8
35K-50K	3.2	3.2	78	2.4
50K-75K	3.3	4.2	90	2.7
75K+	3.8	4.3	96	3.0
	SECRETARY OF STATE	SECRETARY OF DEFENSE	ATTORNEY GENERAL	HOUSE OF REPS
<25K	32	26	11	58
25K-35K	51	43	20	65
35K-50K	40	53	33	69
50K-75K	54	76	51	78
75K+	73	68	48	76

In addition to age, education and income, racial and ethnic background makes a difference. Black and white Americans are more likely than Hispanics to say they are very interested in the federal government and are more likely to be regular voters. Only a third of Hispanics say they are very interested in politics (34%) or that they vote always or almost always (33%). Among those who do regularly cast their election ballots, white voters (61%) are more likely to feel satisfied after doing so than either African American (49%) or Hispanic (44%) voters. White Americans are also most likely to say that they know a great deal or a fair amount of politics.

INTEREST IN AND KNOWLEDGE OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS BY RACE AND ETHNICITY

	VERY INTERESTED	VOTE ALWAYS OR ALMOST ALWAYS	SATISFACTION FROM VOTING	KNOW GREAT DEAL/ FAIR AMOUNT
White	48%	71	61	73
Black	55	59	49	59
Hispanic	34	33	44	47
	LOCAL NEWS	CABLE NEWS	NETWORK NEWS	NEWSPAPERS
White	4.2	3.3	2.8	3.9
Black	4.8	3.3	3.1	3.5
Hispanic	3.0	2.4	1.9	2.4
	SECRETARY OF STATE	SECRETARY OF DEFENSE	ATTORNEY GENERAL	HOUSE OF REPS
White	51	55	35	71
Black	45	22	20	66
Hispanic	24	44	14	50

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When it comes to following news, Hispanic Americans tune in less frequently than white or black Americans. Whether it is watching local, cable or network news or reading daily newspapers, Hispanic Americans, on average, do so less frequently than others. And when it comes to demonstrating knowledge by identifying prominent cabinet members and the majority party in the House of Representatives, white Americans do better than either black or Hispanic Americans.

Regression Analysis of “Trusters” and “Distrusters”

Advanced statistical analysis shows that the public’s level of trust in government rests on four main factors—government performance, government leadership, government responsiveness and the role of government.

In this analysis, there are three measures of government performance—how well-run the government is, how well the government handles social problems and whether the government often does a better job than it is given credit for doing. Government “trusters” are more likely than “distrusters” to say that the government is doing a better job on each of these performance measures.

Perceptions of government leadership also play a major role in shaping trust levels. Americans who think high-level federal officials are operating in the best interest of the American people, who think federal officials are trustworthy and who reject the idea that high-level official serve in government to have power and make important decisions, are more likely to be government “trusters” than “distrusters”.

The third major driver of trust levels is public perceptions of government responsiveness. To be responsive, government officials need to understand how the public feels about issues facing the country. Americans who believe that people in high-level positions in Washington understand what the public thinks about issues facing the country and who do not think that “removed from ‘real’ life” describes Washington officials are more likely to trust the federal government.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF GOVERNMENT “TRUSTERS”		
n=1110		
	UNSTD. COEFF.	STD. COEFF.
Performance		
Government well-run	.178	.192***
Handles social problems well	.100	.096**
Better job than given credit for	.164	.095
Leadership		
Operate in best interest of people	.204	.190***
Federal officials trustworthy	.142	.141***
Not serving for power and making important decisions	.065	.059
Responsiveness		
High-level officials understand how public feels about important issues	.118	1.26***
High-level officials not removed from ‘real life’	.054	.061**
Role of Government		
Bigger government with more services	.154	.090***
Maintain current level of services	.034	.056*
Demographics		
Political Party (Republican)	.097	.097***
Age	-.006	-.110***
Black	-.102	-.037
Hispanic	-.151	-.057
White	-.004	-.002
Education	-.004	-.010
Gender (women)	-.046	-.027
(constant)	.462*	---
Adj. R ² = .476***		
*p>.05; **p>.01; ***p>.001		

The last major factor that shapes the public's attitude toward government is whether the government should play a bigger or smaller role. Members of the public who favor a bigger government providing more services and who do not want government to cut back on its programs and services tend to trust the government more than those who prefer a smaller government and a cut back in government programs.

In addition, party identification and age differentiate “trustees” from “distrusters.” Younger Americans and Republicans are more likely to be “trustees” than older Americans and Democrats. “Trustees” and “distrusters” do not differ by gender, education, and race/ethnicity, however.

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SECTION 2: REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE		
→ All in all, how good a job does the federal government do running its programs and services?		
n=1225		
	UNSTD. COEFF.	STD. COEFF.
Handles economic problems well	.110	.120***
Handles social problems well	.069	.074*
Spends money wisely	.197	.223***
Pay right amount in taxes	-.137	-.088***
Not fair in decisions	.258	.267***
High-level officials understand how public feels about important issues	.082	.097***
Political Party (Republican)	.049	.055*
Education	.033	.095***
Black	-.019	-.007
Hispanic	-.043	-.491
White	-.021	-.013
Gender (women)	-.019	-.012
Age	.001	.006
(Constant)	.678***	---
Adj. R ² = .388***		
*p>.05; **p>.01; ***p>.001		

SECTION 3: REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF GOVERNMENT POWER

→ Which of the following statements comes closest to your views about governmental power today? The federal government today has too much power, the federal government is now using the right amount of power for meeting today's needs, or the federal government should use its powers even more vigorously to promote the well-being of all segments of the people.

n=1131

	UNSTD. COEFF.	STD. COEFF.
Gov slow and inefficient	.021	.024
Bigger problem inefficiency	.108	.085**
Maintain current level of services	.058	.098**
People can make a difference	.089	.094***
Bigger government more services	.387	.230***
Political Party (Republican)	.092	.093**
Gender (women)	.156	.093***
Age	.002	.039
Black	-.009	.003
Hispanic	-.005	-.002
White	-.073	-.040
Education	-.037	-.099**
(Constant)	1.282***	---
Adj. R ² = .137***		
*p>.05; **p>.01; ***p>.001		

SECTION 4: REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF GOVERNMENT RESPONSIVENESS		
→ In general, how well do you think high-level government officials in Washington understand what the public thinks about the issues facing the country?		
n=1154		
	UNSTD. COEFF.	STD. COEFF.
High-level officials not removed from 'real life'	.061	.065*
People can make a difference in what happens in Washington	.073	.070**
People like me have a say in what government does	.068	.077**
Federal officials operate in best interest of people	.381	.332***
Go against public opinion because believe public not informed	.076	.061*
Go against public opinion because doing what it ultimately in public's best interest	.273	.217***
Political Party (Republican)	.105***	-.099***
Gender (women)	-.069	-.038
Age	-.003	-.052*
Black	-.133	-.045
Hispanic	.019	.007
White	-.066	-.032
Education	.014	.033
(Constant)	.709***	---
Adj. R ² = .314***		
*p>.05; **p>.01; ***p>.001		

Summary

The public portion of the Executive Branch Survey, sponsored by the Annenberg Foundation Sunnylands Trust, conducted telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,300 adults living in continental United States telephone households. The interviews were conducted in English and Spanish by Princeton Data Source, LLC from August 19 to November 4, 2003. Statistical results are weighted to correct known demographic discrepancies. The margin of sampling error for the complete set of weighted data is $\pm 3.3\%$.

This examination of the executive branch of the federal government is part of a larger study that the Annenberg Foundation's Sunnylands Trust is conducting on *Institutions of Democracy*. Details on the design, execution and analysis of the public portion of the Executive Branch Survey are discussed below.

Sample Design

The sample was designed to generalize to the U.S. adult population in telephone households and to allow separate analysis Americans between the ages 18-29 and of African-American and Hispanic respondents. This design uses random-digit dialing (RDD) methods, where telephone numbers are drawn disproportionately from area code-exchange combinations with higher than average densities of African-American and Hispanic households. This method increases the proportion of respondents in these target groups, but special weighting adjustments are required to restore the overall representativeness of the sample.

The telephone sample was provided by Survey Sampling International, LLC (SSI) according to PSRAI specifications. The sample was drawn using standard *list-assisted random digit dialing* (RDD) methodology. *Active blocks* of telephone numbers (area code + exchange + two-digit block number) that contained three or more residential directory listings were equally likely to be selected; after selection two more digits were added randomly to complete the number. This method guarantees coverage of every assigned phone number regardless of whether that number is directory listed, purposely unlisted, or too new to be listed. After selection, the numbers were compared against business directories and matching numbers purged. A total of 1,071 interviews were completed from the RDD sample.

To help boost the incidence of key demographic groups while keeping costs in check, 229 interviews were conducted from callback sample. The households included in this sample were recently interviewed as part of PDS' Demographic Omnibus survey, and were likely to have an African-American or Hispanic respondent.

Contact Procedures

Interviews were conducted from August 19 to November 4, 2003. As many as 10 attempts were made to contact every sampled telephone number. Sample was released for interviewing in replicates, which are representative subsamples of the larger sample. Using replicates to control the release of sample ensures that complete call procedures are followed for the entire sample.

Calls were staggered over times of day and days of the week to maximize the chance of making contact with potential respondents. Each household received at least one daytime call in an attempt to find someone at home. In each contacted household, interviewers asked to speak with the youngest male currently at home. If no male was available, interviewers asked to speak with the oldest female at home. This systematic respondent selection technique has been shown to produce samples that closely mirror the population in terms of age and gender.

Weighting and Analysis

Weighting is generally used in survey analysis to adjust for effects of the sample design and to compensate for patterns of nonresponse that might bias results. The weighting was accomplished in two stages: a first stage sampling weight to adjust for the designed oversampling in minority areas, and a second stage adjustment to account for demographic distortions due to non-response.

First Stage—Sample Design Weight

All completed interviews were given a first stage sample weight based on the level of disproportionality imposed by the sample design. Telephone exchanges were divided into *strata* defined by African-American and Hispanic household densities associated with each exchange. The first stage weight for each stratum is the approximate proportion of active blocks in each stratum divided by the proportion obtained in our sample. The weighted distribution of cases interviewed across strata will no longer show effects of the designed oversampling. Table 1 documents design parameters and survey returns across strata.

Table 1: First-Stage Weight Calculation

Strata	Active Blocks		Completes		weight
1	1391901	53.8%	445	34.2%	1.5718
2	643846	24.9%	260	20.0%	1.2444
3	132389	5.1%	102	7.8%	0.6522
4	145340	5.6%	167	12.8%	0.4373
5	273496	10.6%	326	25.1%	0.4216

Second Stage—Demographic Adjustment

In the second weighting stage, the demographic composition of the final sample was weighted to match national parameters for sex, age, education, race/ethnicity and region (U.S. Census definitions). These parameters came from a special analysis of the March 2003 Current Population Survey (CPS) that included all households in the continental United States that had a telephone.

This stage of weighting, which incorporates each respondent's first stage weight, was accomplished using Sample Balancing, a special iterative sample weighting program that simultaneously balances the distributions of all variables using a statistical technique called the *Deming Algorithm*. The second stage weight adjusts for non-response that is related to particular demographic characteristics of the sample. This weight ensures that the demographic characteristics of the sample closely approximate the demographic characteristics of the national population. Finally, weights from this stage were *trimmed* to prevent individual interviews from having too much influence on the final results. Table 2 compares weighted and unweighted sample distributions to population parameters.

Table 2: Sample Demographics

	Parameter	Unweighted	1st-Stage Weight	Final Weight
<u>Gender</u>				
	Male	47.9	51.2	52.1
	Female	52.1	48.8	47.9
<u>Age</u>				
	18-24	12.6	13.4	11.2
	25-34	18.2	19.6	19.2
	35-44	20.7	20.7	20.9
	45-54	19.1	18.4	18.4
	55-64	13.1	14.6	16.0
	65+	16.4	13.4	14.2
<u>Education</u>				
	Less than HS Grad.	15.6	11.5	9.6
	HS Grad.	35.8	33.9	33.0
	Some College	23.3	26.2	27.0
	College Grad.	25.3	28.4	30.4
<u>Region</u>				
	Northeast	19.4	14.8	16.8
	Midwest	23.1	16.6	21.7
	South	35.8	40.4	37.4
	West	21.6	28.2	24.2
<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>				
	White/not Hispanic	71.9	53.3	64.8
	Black/not Hispanic	10.7	16.5	11.7
	Hispanic	11.8	25.7	19.4
	Other/not Hispanic	5.5	4.6	4.1

Effects of Sample Design on Statistical Inference

Post-data collection statistical adjustments require analysis procedures that reflect departures from simple random sampling. PSRAI calculates the effects of these design features so that an appropriate adjustment can be incorporated into tests of statistical

significance when using these data. The so-called "design effect" or *deff* represents the loss in statistical efficiency that results from a disproportionate sample design and systematic non-response. The total sample design effect for this survey is 1.46.

PSRAI calculates the composite design effect for a sample of size n , with each case having a weight, w_i as:

$$deff = \frac{n \sum_{i=1}^n w_i^2}{\left(\sum_{i=1}^n w_i \right)^2} \quad \text{formula 1}$$

In a wide range of situations, the adjusted *standard error* of a statistic should be calculated by multiplying the usual formula by the square root of the design effect (\sqrt{deff}). Thus, the formula for computing the 95% confidence interval around a percentage is:

$$\hat{p} \pm \left(\sqrt{deff} \times 1.96 \sqrt{\frac{\hat{p}(1 - \hat{p})}{n}} \right) \quad \text{formula 2}$$

where \hat{p} is the sample estimate and n is the unweighted number of sample cases in the group being considered.

The survey's *margin of error* is the largest 95% confidence interval for any estimated proportion based on the total sample—the one around 50%. For example, the margin of error for the entire sample is $\pm 3.3\%$. This means that in 95 out every 100 samples drawn using the same methodology, estimated proportions based on the entire sample will be no more than 3.3 percentage points away from their true values in the population. It is important to remember that sampling fluctuations are only one possible source of error in a survey estimate. Other sources, such as respondent selection bias, questionnaire wording and reporting inaccuracy, may contribute additional error.

Response Rate

Table 3 reports the disposition of all sampled telephone numbers ever dialed from both telephone number samples. The response rate estimates the fraction of all eligible respondents in the sample that were ultimately interviewed. At PSRAI it is calculated by taking the product of three component rates:¹⁵

¹⁵ PSRAI's disposition codes and rate formulas are consistent with the American Association for Public Opinion Research standards.

- Contact rate – the proportion of working numbers where a request for interview was made¹⁶
- Cooperation rate – the proportion of contacted numbers where a consent for interview was at least initially obtained, versus those refused
- Completion rate – the proportion of initially cooperating and eligible interviews that were completed

Thus, combining the two samples, the response rate for this survey was 40 percent.

Table 3: Sample Disposition

	<u>RDD</u>		<u>Callback</u>		<u>Total</u>	
Total Numbers dialed	5257		613		5870	
Business	561		6		567	
Computer/Fax	436		26		462	
Other Not-Working	1082		99		1181	
Additional projected NW	241		0		241	
Working numbers	2937	55.9%	482	78.6%	3419	58.2%
No Answer	54		0		54	
Busy	26		2		28	
Answering Machine	196		14		210	
Callbacks	40		6		46	
Other Non-Contacts	223		64		287	
Contacted numbers	2398	81.6%	396	82.2%	2794	81.7%
Initial Refusals	184		9		193	
Second Refusals	968		137		1105	
Cooperating numbers	1246	52.0%	250	63.1%	1496	53.5%
No Adult in HH	27		4		31	
Language Barrier	43		17		60	
Eligible numbers	1176	94.4%	229	91.6%	1405	93.9%
Interrupted	105				105	
Completes	1071	91.1%	229	100.0%	1300	92.5%
Response Rate		38.6%		51.9%		40.5%

¹⁶ PSRAI assumes that 75 percent of cases that result in a constant disposition of “No answer” or “Busy” over 10 or more attempts are actually not working numbers.

Summary

The government portion of the Executive Branch Survey, sponsored by the Annenberg Foundation Sunnyslands Trust, conducted telephone interviews with 501 presidential appointees who served in the second Ronald W. Reagan administration, or the George H. Bush, William H. Clinton or George W. Bush administrations in an Executive Level I-IV position requiring Senate confirmation. The interviews were conducted by Princeton Data Source, LLC from August 25 to November 10, 2003. The margin of sampling error for the complete set of weighted data is $\pm 4.4\%$. The margin of error is $\pm 9.7\%$ for the sample of 104 George W. Bush appointees, $\pm 7.1\%$ for the 190 Clinton appointees, $\pm 8.6\%$ for the 132 George H. Bush appointees and $\pm 11.4\%$ for the 75 Reagan appointees. Details on the design, execution and analysis of the government portion of the Executive Branch survey are discussed below.

Sample Design

The government portion of the Executive Branch Survey focused on presidential appointees who had served in at least one of five presidential administrations between 1984 and 2003. Every effort was made to ensure that the lists of presidential appointees were as exhaustive as possible.

Past Administrations: 1984-1999

The sample of appointees who served between 1984 and 1999 included appointees who served in either a cabinet department or one of six independent agencies: the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the Small Business Administration (SBA), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) or the United States Information Agency (USIA).

PSRAI identified the population of 1984-1999 appointees in three stages: First, using the list of presidential appointments published every four years in *U.S. Government Policy and Supporting Positions*, PSRAI culled the titles of Executive Level I-IV presidential appointee positions requiring Senate confirmation. Again, this was limited to cabinet departments and six independent agencies. Second, using the *U.S. Government Manual*, PSRAI matched these titles with the names of those who held them. Third, using a variety of search strategies, including Who's Who and Internet directories, PSRAI matched names with addresses and telephone numbers.

Current Administration: 2000-2003

For the sample of presidential appointees serving in the current George W. Bush administration, PSRAI used the *Federal Leadership List* by the Leadership Directories, Inc. The *Federal Leadership List* provides contact information for leaders in the 14 cabinet-level departments and over 70 independent agencies and identifies positions that require

presidential appointment. The *Federal Leadership List* is updated quarterly with publication of the *Federal Yellow Book*. Following the design for earlier administrations, PSRAI selected only presidential appointees with Senate confirmation who served in a Cabinet department or one of five independent agencies: the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the Small Business Administration (SBA), or the United States Information Agency (USIA).

Contact Procedures

PSRAI sent letters to presidential appointees on behalf of the Annenberg Foundation explaining the purpose of the survey. Interviews were conducted by highly qualified elite interviewers from August 25 to November 10, 2003. Over 20 attempts were made to contact every sampled appointee. Calls were staggered over times of day and days of the week to maximize the chance of making contact with potential respondents.

Weighting

Weighting is generally used in survey analysis to adjust for effects of the sample design and to compensate for patterns of nonresponse that might bias results. The sample of presidential appointees was adjusted to give equal weight to each of the five administrations. Table 1 compares weighted and unweighted sample parameters.

Table 1: Weight Calculation

Administration	Unweighted		Weighted		Weight
Reagan	75	20.80%	100	20%	1.33
G.H. Bush	132	26.30%	100	20%	0.76
Clinton	190	37.90%	201	40%	1.06
G.W. Bush	104	20.80%	100	20%	0.96

Respondents who served in more than one administration are classified based on the last administration they served in. At the outset of each interview, we confirmed with the respondent that they were in fact a presidential appointee of the presumed administration. Later on, we asked the appointees if they had served in any other administrations. The fact that we classified appointees based on the last administration they served in may partly account for the lower incidence of Reagan appointees in the final sample.

Margin of Error

The survey's *margin of error* is the largest 95% confidence interval for any estimated proportion based on the total sample—the one around 50%. For example, the margin of error for the entire sample is $\pm 4.4\%$. This means that in 95 out every 100 samples drawn using the same methodology, estimated proportions based on the entire sample will be no more than 4 percentage points away from their true values in the population. The margin of error is $\pm 9.7\%$ for the sample of 104 George W. Bush appointees, $\pm 7.1\%$ for the 190 Clinton appointees, $\pm 8.6\%$ for the 132 George H. Bush appointees and $\pm 11.4\%$ for the 75 Reagan appointees.

It is important to remember that sampling fluctuations are only one possible source of error in a survey estimate. Other sources, such as respondent selection bias, questionnaire wording and reporting inaccuracy, may contribute additional error.

Response Rate

Table 2 reports the disposition of all sampled telephone numbers dialed. The response rate estimates the fraction of all eligible respondents in the sample that were ultimately interviewed. At PSRAI it is calculated by taking the product of three component rates:

- Contact rate – the proportion of working numbers where a request for interview was made
- Cooperation rate – the proportion of contacted numbers where a consent for interview was at least initially obtained, versus those refused
- Completion rate – the proportion of initially cooperating and eligible interviews that were completed

Thus, the response rate for this survey overall was 45 percent. As we expected, the response rate varied by administration with the appointees of the current George W. Bush administration (24%) considerably less likely to participate than appointees who served in the Clinton (55%), George H. Bush (56%) or Reagan (55%) administrations.

Table 2: Sample Disposition

Total Numbers dialed	1702	
Wrong number	168	
Disconnects	36	
Working numbers	1151	
No Answer	5	
Busy		
Left Voice Mail	73	
Callbacks	215	
Other Non-Contacts		
Contacted numbers	842	73%
Gatekeeper Refusal	78	
Respondent Refusal	219	
Cooperating numbers	545	65%
Ineligible	19	
Eligible numbers	526	
Interrupted	25	
Completes	501	95%
Response Rate	45%	