



AEI PUBLIC OPINION STUDIES

# Attitudes About the Federal Government

MAJOR TRENDS

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# Attitudes About the Federal Government

## MAJOR TRENDS

**Compiled by Karlyn Bowman, Distinguished Senior Fellow Emeritus, AEI and Samantha Goldstein, Research Assistant, AEI**

In 2008, AEI released a comprehensive [Public Opinion Study](#) on attitudes about the federal government from the earliest days of polling. This new study updates some of the major trends that appeared in the 2008 report. Today, because pollsters are less focused on updating old trends, many important questions in the earlier compilation have not been updated.

## Views of Government in Polling's Early Days

In 1939, Elmo Roper, in his polling for *Fortune* magazine, asked the public about things the federal government should do. The results are shown below. Of the 16 items the pollster tested, three—providing an army and navy, providing for people with no means of subsistence, and being responsible for seeing that everyone who wanted a job had one—garnered majority support. As government grew and became more involved in everyday life, people developed more reservations about its role and power, although they still wanted the federal government to do many things. In 1959, when Gallup asked whether big business, big labor, or big government represented the biggest threat to the country in the future, 15 percent said big business, 41 percent big labor, and 14 percent big government. In 1965, 17 percent answered big business, 29 percent big labor, and 35 percent big government. The last time Gallup asked this question in 2016, 26 percent said big business, 5 percent big labor, and 67 percent big government.

*Q: People feel differently about how far a government should go. Here is a list of things which some people believe in and some don't. Let's take them one at a time. Do you think the government should or should not . . . ?*

Mar. 1939	Roper/ <i>Fortune</i>	Government should	Government should not
	Provide an army and navy	96%	2%
	Provide for all people who have no other means of subsistence	69	23
	Be responsible for seeing to it that everyone who wants to work has a job	61	32
	Regulate all public utility rates like electricity, gas, etc.	49	39
	Make all decisions in disputes between capital and labor	35	45
	Redistribute wealth by heavy taxes on the rich	35	54
	Establish a bureau to supervise what should be produced in moving pictures	32	51
	Establish a bureau to supervise what should be produced by the radio	27	60
	Control the price of farm products by controlling production	23	62
	Take over and operate all private, public, and parochial schools for children	20	72
	Make every adult male spend at least two years in the army	18	76
	Confiscate wealth over what people need to live on decently, and use it for the public good	16	76
	Establish a bureau to supervise what should be printed in newspapers and magazines	15	76
	Take over and operate all private colleges and institutions of higher learning	14	75
	Take over all the present family duties toward children	5	92
	Supervise all religious observances by establishing a national church	4	92

Note: Interviewers were told to tell respondents that this question was about the federal government, not government in general.

*Q: On the following things we have found that people differ as to the degree to which government should function. Do you think that the government should . . . ?*

Mar. 1939	Roper/ <i>Fortune</i>	Government should		
		All	Some	None
	Operate the postal and parcel post services	89%	5%	4%
	Own and operate the railroads	22	12	53
	Own and operate the country's natural resources, like mines, forests, water power, etc.	21	34	33
	Produce and sell the nation's electric power	20	24	42
	Own and operate the telephone and telegraph systems	15	14	58
	Own and operate the nation's hospital and medical services	14	59	19
	Own and operate the insurance companies	13	14	61
	Own and operate the factories producing the essentials of life, like clothes, food, etc.	7	14	70

Note: Interviewers were told to tell respondents that this question was about the federal government, not government in general.

*Q: In your opinion, which of the following do you think will be the biggest threat to the country in the future—big business, big labor, or big government?*

		Biggest threat to country in the future		
		Big business	Big labor	Big government
1959	Gallup	15%	41%	14%
1960	<i>Look</i>	15	41	14
1965	<i>Look</i>	16	28	37
1965	Gallup	17	29	35
1965	ORC	14	15	35
1966	Gallup	14	21	48
1967	Gallup	14	21	49
1968	Gallup	12	26	46
1969	ORC	12	17	44
1969	Gallup	19	28	33
1974	ORC	18	12	49
1976	Harris	11	15	33
1977	Gallup	23	26	39
1978	Gallup	19	19	47
1979	Gallup	28	17	43
1981	Harris	21	16	53
1981	Gallup	22	22	46
1981	Harris	22	15	52
1983	Gallup	19	18	51
1985	Gallup	22	19	50
1994	Roper/UConn	14	5	67
1995	Gallup	24	9	64
1998	Kaiser/Harvard/ <i>Wash Post</i>	25	11	59
1998	Gallup	24	7	64
1999	Gallup	24	8	65
2000	Gallup	22	7	65
2002	Gallup	38	10	47

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2004	Gallup	27	11	57
2005	Gallup	27	8	61
2006	Gallup	25	9	61
2008	Gallup	31	11	53
2009	Gallup	32	10	55
2011	Gallup	26	8	64
2013	Gallup	21	5	72
2015	Gallup	25	6	69
2016	Gallup	26	5	67

Note: Question wording varied slightly.

## Government: Bigger or Smaller?

Below are some of the major questions that have been asked over time about public preferences for a bigger or smaller government. There are two main types of these questions. One asks people if they favor a smaller government providing fewer services or a larger government providing more services. The lowest percentage favoring a smaller government providing fewer services in the ABC News/*Washington Post* trend that began in 1978 was 40 percent; the highest was 67 percent in 1993. In April 2021, 48 percent said they favored a smaller government, while 45 percent favored a larger one. In a July 2021 Pew poll, those responses were 48 and 50 percent, respectively.

In many askings, Americans said they preferred a smaller government providing fewer services (in some years by a 20-point margin) over a bigger one with more services. However, in late 2020 and early 2021, this gap narrowed significantly, and some polls showed bigger government surpassing smaller government (see Pew data below). This may have been a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the rising demand for tests, stimulus checks, and rental assistance from the federal government.

When Fox pollsters introduce the idea of taxes, more people say they would rather pay lower taxes and have a smaller government that provides fewer services than pay more in taxes for a larger government with more services. In Fox's most recent poll from April 2021, 56 percent said they would rather pay lower taxes with a smaller government and fewer services, while 36 percent said they would rather pay higher taxes for a larger government with more services.

The second kind of question in this area asks whether government should do more to solve problems and help meet people's needs or whether government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals. In NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* questions from 2014 on, half or more have said government should be doing more to solve problems. In Gallup's trend, with one exception, adults say government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals.

*Q: Would you say you favor smaller government with fewer services, or larger government with many services?*

		Favor	
		Smaller govt./ Fewer services	Larger govt./ Many services
Jan. 1978	<i>Wash Post</i>	40%	39%
Jul. 1984	ABC/ <i>Wash Post</i>	49	43
Jul. 1988	ABC/ <i>Wash Post</i>	49	45
Jul. 1992	ABC/ <i>Wash Post</i>	55	38
Feb. 1993	ABC/ <i>Wash Post</i>	67	30
Aug. 1996	ABC/ <i>Wash Post</i>	63	32
Jul.–Aug. 1998	Kaiser/Harvard/ <i>Wash Post</i>	59	35
Jun.–Aug. 1999	Kaiser/Harvard/ <i>Wash Post</i>	58	36
Mar.–Apr. 2000	ABC/ <i>Wash Post</i>	56	38
Jul. 2000#	ABC/ <i>Wash Post</i>	59	34
Oct. 2000*	ABC/ <i>Wash Post</i>	58	32
Oct. 2000	Kaiser/Harvard/ <i>Wash Post</i>	60	32
Sep.–Oct. 2000*	ABC	58	33
Nov.–Dec. 2000	Kaiser/Harvard	42	47
Jan. 2002	ABC/ <i>Wash Post</i>	54	41
Jul. 2002	ABC/ <i>Wash Post</i>	53	42
Aug.–Sep. 2002	Kaiser/Harvard/ <i>Wash Post</i>	46	47
Sep. 2002	<i>Wash Post</i>	54	39
Oct.–Nov. 2002+	ABC	62	34
Oct.–Nov. 2002+	ABC	60	35

Jun. 2004	ABC/Wash Post	50	46
Oct.–Nov. 2007	ABC/Wash Post	50	44
Jun. 2008	ABC/Wash Post	50	45
Jan. 2009	ABC/Wash Post	53	43
Jun. 2009	ABC/Wash Post	54	41
Jan. 2010	ABC/Wash Post	58	38
Apr. 2010	ABC/Wash Post	56	40
Oct. 2010*	ABC/Wash Post	57	37
Aug.–Sep. 2011	ABC/Wash Post	56	38
Jul.–Aug. 2012	Kaiser/Wash Post	55	40
Aug. 2012	ABC/Wash Post	56	38
Apr. 2021	ABC/Wash Post	48	45

Note: Question wording varied slightly. \*Question asked registered voters. #Question asked of a half sample. +Question asked of likely voters.

*Q: If you had to choose, would you rather have a smaller government providing fewer services, or a bigger government providing more services?*

Pew	Rather have	
	Smaller govt./ Fewer services	Larger govt./ Many services
Jan. 2007	45%	43%
Nov. 2007	47	42
Oct. 2008	42	43
Mar. 2009	48	40
Sep.–Oct. 2009	51	40
Feb. 2010	50	40
Apr. 2010	50	39
Aug.–Sep. 2010	50	42
Feb.–Mar. 2011	50	42
Sep.–Oct. 2011	48	41
Jan. 2012	52	39
Jan.–Mar. 2012	49	43
Sep. 2012	51	40
Feb.–Jun. 2013	38	54
Apr. 2013	43	56
Sep. 2013	51	40
Sep. 2014	50	42
Feb.–Apr. 2015	52	45
Sep. 2015	53	38
Apr. 2017#	45	48
Jun.–Jul. 2017	45	48
Apr.–May 2018	45	46
Mar. 2019	47	47
Sep. 2019	48	46
Jul.–Aug. 2020#	45	52
Jul. 2021	48	50

Note: Question wording varied slightly. #Question asked of a half sample.



Q: *Would you say you favor smaller government with fewer services, or larger government with many services?*

		Favor	
		Smaller govt./ Fewer services	Larger govt./ Many services
Jun. 1993	LAT	60%	29%
Jan. 1995	LAT	63	27
Sep. 1995	LAT	62	27
Oct. 1995	LAT	68	23
Apr. 1996	LAT	62	28
Sep. 2000+	LAT	59	26
Mar. 2001	LAT	59	29
Nov. 2001	LAT	48	41
Jan. 2005	LAT	52	36
Jan. 2006	LAT/Bloomberg	49	38
Aug. 2007+	Zogby	57	31
Aug.–Sep. 2008	PRRI	45	49
Feb. 2009	Fox	50	38
Mar. 2009	PSRA/Newsweek	44	44
Oct.–Nov. 2009	AP/GFK	55	39
Feb. 2010	Fox	58	35
Aug.–Sep. 2010	AP/GFK	55	42
Apr.–May 2011	PRRI	41	50
May 2012	Fox	37	53
Aug.–Sep. 2012	AP/GFK	53	39
Oct. 2013	AP/GFK	60	35
Aug. 2014	Reason/Rupe	54	42
Apr. 2021	Ipsos	51	46
Oct. 2021	AP/NORC	47	52

Note: Question wording varied slightly. +Question asked of likely voters.

Q: *If you had to choose, would you rather have a smaller government providing fewer services, or a bigger government providing more services?*

		Rather have	
		Smaller govt./ Fewer services	Larger govt./ More services
Apr. 1976	CBS/NYT	40%	44%
May 1976	CBS/NYT	41	43
Jun. 1976	CBS/NYT	42	43
Sep. 1976	CBS/NYT	48	38
Oct. 1976	CBS/NYT	48	41
Nov. 1976	CBS/NYT	44	44
Jun. 1978	CBS/NYT	53	36
Mar. 1980	CBS/NYT	54	32
May 1988	CBS/NYT	43	44
Oct. 1988	CBS/NYT	45	38
Jan. 1989	CBS/NYT	41	48
Oct. 1991	CBS/NYT	42	43
Feb. 1996	CBS/NYT	61	30
Sep. 1999	CBS	46	43
Oct. 2000	CBS	57	32

Nov. 2000	CBS/NYT	55	32
Jan. 2001	CBS	51	36
Oct. 2001	CBS/NYT	48	39
Jan. 2002	CBS/NYT	46	40
Jul. 2003	CBS/NYT	48	40
Nov. 2003	CBS/NYT	45	42
Mar.–Apr. 2008	CBS/NYT	43	43
Apr. 2009	CBS/NYT	48	41
Feb. 2010	CBS/NYT	56	34
Apr. 2010	CBS/NYT	50	37
Sep. 2010	CBS/NYT	53	34
Apr. 2011	CBS/NYT	55	33
Aug. 2012	CBS/NYT	50	37
Jul.–Aug. 2014	CBS	56	35
Oct. 2016	CBS	46	42

Note: Question wording varied slightly.

*Q: Which of the following statements do you agree with more? I'd rather pay higher taxes to support a larger government that provides more services, or I'd rather pay lower taxes and have a smaller government that provides fewer services?*

Fox

	Rather pay	
	Lower taxes/ Smaller govt./ Fewer services	Higher taxes/ Larger govt./ More services
Jun. 1997	58%	31%
Apr. 1998	58	30
Oct. 2000	52	32
May 2003	50	34
Jan. 2004	45	38
Jan. 2006	52	34
Mar. 2009	55	35
Apr. 2021	56	36

Note: Question asked of registered voters.

*Q: I'm going to read you two statements about the role of government, and I'd like to know which one comes closer to your point of view. Government should do more to solve problems and help meet the needs of people, or government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals.*

		Govt. should do more to solve problems and help meet the needs of people	Govt. is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals
Jul.–Aug. 1995	NBC/WSJ	25%	68%
Dec. 1995	NBC/WSJ	32	62
Dec. 1997	NBC/WSJ	41	51
Jan. 2002	NBC/WSJ	45	43
Mar. 2007	NBC/WSJ	52	40
Sep. 2007	NBC/WSJ	55	38
Jul. 2008*	NBC/WSJ	53	42
Sep. 2008*	NBC/WSJ	48	42
Oct. 2008*	NBC/WSJ	47	45
Feb.–Mar. 2009	NBC/WSJ	51	40
Apr. 2009	NBC/WSJ	47	46
Sep. 2009	NBC/WSJ	45	49
Oct. 2009	NBC/WSJ	46	48
Dec. 2009	NBC/WSJ	44	47
Jan. 2010	NBC/WSJ	43	48
Jun. 2010	NBC/WSJ	47	49
Aug. 2010	NBC/WSJ	47	47
Oct. 2010*	NBC/WSJ	45	50
Feb. 2011	NBC/WSJ	51	46
Jun. 2011	NBC/WSJ	51	46
Jun. 2012	NBC/WSJ	49	47
Jun. 2013	NBC/WSJ	48	48
Oct. 2013	NBC/WSJ	52	44
Jun. 2014	NBC/WSJ	46	50
Nov. 2014	NBC/WSJ	52	46
Jul. 2015	NBC/WSJ	50	46
Apr. 2017	NBC/WSJ	57	39
Jan. 2018	NBC/WSJ	58	38
Feb. 2019	NBC/WSJ	55	41
May–Jun. 2020*	NBC/WSJ	57	38
Apr. 2021	NBC	55	41

Note: \*Question asked of registered voters.

*Q: Some people think the government is trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and businesses. Others think that the government should do more to solve our country's problems. Which comes closer to your own view?*

Gallup	Govt. should do more	Govt. is doing too many things
Aug.–Sep. 1992*	43%	50%
Sep. 1992	47	46
Oct. 1992*	44	48
Mar. 1993	49	45
Apr. 1993	45	49
Dec. 1993	38	55
Jan. 1994	39	54
Oct. 1994	37	57
Nov. 1994	37	55
Dec. 1995	32	60
Jan. 1996	35	58
Jan.–Feb. 1997	33	58
Apr. 1998	33	59
Oct. 1998	38	50
Sep. 1999	39	55
Aug. 2000	38	54
Sep. 2000	37	50
Sep. 2001	36	55
Oct. 2001	50	41
Sep. 2002	43	50
Sep. 2003	43	51
Oct. 2003	40	52
Sep. 2004	41	49
Nov. 2004	36	55
Sep. 2005	44	50
Sep. 2006	44	47
Sep. 2007	43	49
Jun. 2008	43	50
Sep. 2008	41	53
Mar. 2009#	42	47
Mar. 2009	42	50
Aug.–Sep. 2009	38	57
Jun. 2010	39	53
Sep. 2010	36	58
Sep. 2011	39	56
Jul. 2012	34	61
Sep. 2012	39	54
Sep. 2012	34	57
Sep. 2013	40	53
Sep. 2014	41	54
Sep. 2015	40	55
Sep. 2016	41	54
Sep. 2017	45	50
Sep. 2018	44	50
Sep. 2019	47	49
Aug.–Sep. 2020	54	41
Sep. 2021	43	52

Note: \*Question asked of registered voters. #Question asked of a half sample.

*Q: Overall, do you feel like the government is doing too much and is too involved in things better left to individuals and businesses, or should the government do more to solve the problems facing the country today?*

Fox	Govt. should do more	Govt. is doing too much and is too involved
Oct. 2010	40%	50%
Oct. 2012	37	49
Dec. 2016	44	43
Nov. 2021	49	34

Note: Question asked of registered voters.

### Exit Polls of Voters

*Q: Would you rather have: government provide more services but cost more in taxes, government cost less in taxes but provide fewer services?*

		Rather have government	
		Provide more services but cost more in taxes	Cost less in taxes but provide fewer services
Nov. 1992	Voter Research Service (VRS)	36%	55%

*Q: Which comes closer to your view: Government should do more to solve national problems or government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals?*

		Govt. should do more	Govt. is doing too many things
Nov. 1994	Voter News Service (VNS)	42%	59%
Nov. 1996	VNS	44	56
Nov. 2000	VNS	43	52
Nov. 2002	VNS	47	53
Nov. 2004	National Election Pool (NEP)	46	49
Nov. 2008	NEP	51	43
Nov. 2012	NEP	44	51
Nov. 2016	NEP	45	50

Note: The name of the exit poll consortium of the networks changed over time. These are all polls of the consortium.

*Q: Which comes closer to your views? The government should do more to solve problems, the government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals*

		Govt. should do more	Govt. is doing too many things
Nov. 2018	AP VoteCast	54%	44%
Nov. 2020	AP VoteCast	57	41

Note: Sample is self-identified voters from online and telephone polls taken in the lead up to the election and on Election Day.

In the Roper/*Fortune* question from 1939 shown above, 69 percent said government should provide for all people who have no other means of subsistence. In the questions below, people are asked whether it is the government’s responsibility to take care of people who can’t take care of themselves. Majorities agree with this proposition, with around two in 10 agreeing completely.

*Q: Please tell me if you agree with the following statement, mostly agree with it, mostly disagree with it, or completely agree with it. It is the responsibility of the government to take care of people who can't take care of themselves.*

		It is the responsibility of the govt. to take care of people who can't take care of themselves			
		Completely agree	Mostly agree	Mostly disagree	Completely disagree
Apr.–May 1987	Gallup	21%	50%	20%	4%
May 1988	Gallup	26	48	17	6
May 1990	PSRA	23	44	23	6
May–Jun. 1992	PSRA	28	41	20	8
May 1993	PSRA	19	43	26	9
Jul. 1994	PSRA	20	37	26	15
May–Jun. 1996	Gallup	20	40	24	13
Nov. 1997	Pew	23	38	26	11
Sep.–Oct. 1999	Pew	20	42	21	14
Jul.–Oct. 2002	Pew	22	39	24	11
Jul.–Aug. 2003	Pew	25	41	20	11
Dec. 2006–Jan. 2007	Pew	27	42	20	8
Jan.–Feb. 2008	Pew	19	38	27	12
Mar.–Apr. 2009	Pew	24	39	22	11
Aug. 2011	PRRI	20	40	27	10
Sep. 2011	Pew	23	33	26	15
Apr. 2012	Pew	26	33	24	12
May–Jun. 2013	PRRI	20	42	23	12

Note: Question wording varied slightly.

*Q: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? It is the responsibility of the government to take care of people who can't take care of themselves.*

		It is the responsibility of the govt. to take care of people who can't take care of themselves	
		Agree	Disagree
Dec. 1994	CBS/NYT	65%	29%
Feb. 1995	CBS/NYT	63	30
Apr. 1995	CBS/NYT	61	30
Oct. 1995	CBS/NYT	63	30
Oct.–Nov. 1995	CBS/NYT	62	32
Dec. 1995	NYT	64	30
Dec. 1995	CBS/NYT	63	29
Aug. 1996	CBS/NYT	61	32
Aug. 1996*	CBS	60	33
Sep. 1996*	CBS/NYT	56	35
Oct. 1996	CBS	64	30
Sep. 1999	CBS	69	26
Oct. 2010	CBS	54	39

Note: \*Question asked of registered voters. Question wording varied slightly.

## Concerns About Federal Government Size and Power

Using a variety of different question wordings, Gallup has asked people about their views of the federal government's size and power. The high levels of overall satisfaction at the beginning of this century reflect, in part, good economic times. Attitudes soured at the time of the financial crisis. Since 2005, half or more have said the federal government has too much power.

*Q: Do you think the federal government today has too much power, has about the right amount of power or has too little power?*

Gallup

	Federal government today has		
	Too much power	About the right amount of power	Too little power
Sep. 2002	39%	52%	7%
Sep. 2003	43	49	7
Sep. 2004	42	49	7
Sep. 2005	50	43	6
Sep. 2006	52	40	6
Sep. 2007	56	36	6
Sep. 2008	52	40	6
Aug.–Sep. 2009 <sup>^</sup>	51	39	8
Mar. 2009	50	42	7
Sep. 2010	59	33	8
Sep. 2011	57	35	8
Sep. 2012	51	40	8
May 2013 <sup>^</sup>	54	36	8
Sep. 2013	60	32	7
Sep. 2014	59	30	9
Sep. 2015	60	32	7
Sep. 2016	59	32	8
Sep. 2018	53	38	8
Sep. 2019	56	38	6
Sep. 2021	54	36	9

Note: <sup>^</sup>Question asked of a half sample.

*Q: Next, I am going to read a list of problems facing the country. For each one, please tell me if you personally worry about this problem a great deal, a fair amount, only a little or not at all? How much do you personally worry about the size and power of the federal government?*

Gallup

	Size and power of the federal govt.			
	Worry a great deal	Worry a fair amount	Worry only a little	Doesn't worry at all
Mar. 2011	48%	24%	17%	11%
Mar. 2012	46	25	18	11
Mar. 2013	49	21	19	11
Mar. 2014 <sup>#</sup>	48	20	20	11
Mar. 2015	46	25	16	12
Mar. 2018	40	29	19	11

Note: <sup>#</sup>Question asked of a half sample.

Q: When the government in Washington decides to solve a problem, how much confidence do you have that the problem will actually be solved: a lot, some, just a little, or none at all?

		Confidence in Washington to solve problems			
		A lot	Some	Just a little	None at all
Oct. 1991	ABC/Wash Post	7%	31%	38%	23%
Apr. 1992	ABC	4	46	38	12
Feb. 1993	ABC/Wash Post	5	46	37	12
Jan. 1994	ABC/Wash Post	4	39	40	16
May 1994	ABC/Wash Post	4	31	42	22
Nov.–Dec. 1995	Kaiser/Harvard/Wash Post	4	35	38	23
Jan.–Apr. 1996	UVA	4	35	39	21
May–Jun. 2000	Kaiser/Harvard/NPR	8	43	35	13
Jan. 2002	ABC/Wash Post	14	52	27	7
Sep. 2002#	Wash Post	8	45	38	9
Oct.–Nov. 2005	ABC/Wash Post	7	38	36	18
Jun. 2006	ABC/Wash Post	8	38	33	21
May 2010	Hart/CAP	4	29	35	31

Note: Question wording varied slightly. #Question asked of a half sample.



## Trust in Government

In 1958, pollsters at the University of Michigan started asking Americans how much they trusted the government in Washington. Sixteen percent trusted Washington just about always, 57 percent most of the time, and 23 percent some of the time. The last time the American National Election Studies included this identical question in 2012, the responses were 2 percent, 20 percent, and 76 percent, respectively. Over the years, some people volunteered “none of the time.” This response never exceeded 4 percent. Other pollsters have also asked the question for a long time.

CBS News and the *New York Times* began asking it in 1976. The “only some of the time” response was generally near 50 or 60 percent until 1990, when it hit 70 percent. It has been high ever since, except at the turn of the century, when people felt a lot better about the country’s economic health.

“Never” has consistently been a volunteered response in Pew’s long trend. Since 2015, it has been in the low double digits.

For many years, Gallup also asked a question about trust in Washington. In 1972, the organization started asking about trust in the government in Washington in domestic and, separately, international problems. Confidence in the government to handle international problems typically surpasses domestic ones. These questions are not shown here.

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

University of Michigan/ANES\*

	Trust govt. in Washington to do what is right		
	Just about always	Most of the time	Only some of the time
1958	16%	57%	23%
1964	14	62	22
1966	17	48	28
1968	7	54	36
1970	6	47	44
1972	5	48	44
1974	2	34	61
1976	3	30	62
1978	2	27	64
1980	2	23	69
1982	2	31	62
1984	4	40	53
1986	3	35	57
1988	4	36	56
1990	3	25	69
1992	3	26	68
1994	2	19	74
1996	3	30	66
1998	4	36	58
2000	4	40	55
2002	5	51	44
2004	4	43	52
2008	5	25	68

2012	2	20	76
2016 <sup>^</sup>	2	10	43
2020 <sup>^</sup>	2	14	44

Note: \*In 1977, this series became the National Election Studies with a grant from the National Science Foundation. The current American National Election Studies was established in 2005 as a collaborative effort between the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan and the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences at Stanford University. "None of the time" was volunteered as a response in all askings; it never exceeded 4 percent. <sup>^</sup>Question askings for these years added two additional categories, "about half the time" and "never." The responses for 2016 were 33 percent and 13 percent, respectively. For 2020, they were 31 percent and 10 percent.

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

		Trust govt. in Washington to do what is right		
		Just about always	Most of the time	Only some of the time
Feb. 1976 <sup>^</sup>	CBS/NYT	7%	29%	56%
Jun. 1976 <sup>^</sup>	CBS/NYT	4	30	58
Aug.–Sep. 1976 <sup>^</sup>	CBS/NYT	6	35	53
Apr. 1977	CBS/NYT	6	29	62
Oct. 1977	CBS/NYT	4	28	62
Oct. 1979	CBS/NYT	3	26	64
Mar. 1980	CBS/NYT	3	22	69
Nov. 1980 <sup>^</sup>	CBS/NYT	4	35	56
Jun. 1983	NYT	7	43	46
Nov. 1983	NYT	6	38	51
Nov. 1984 <sup>&amp;</sup>	CBS/NYT	5	42	51
Feb. 1985	CBS/NYT	5	41	49
Nov. 1985 <sup>^</sup>	CBS/NYT	8	41	42
Dec. 1985	NYT	6	40	50
Jan. 1986	CBS/NYT	5	37	54
Nov. 1986	CBS/NYT	7	42	46
Jan. 1987	CBS/NYT	7	37	52
Feb.–Mar. 1987	CBS/NYT	6	35	54
Oct. 1987	CBS/NYT	5	35	55
Nov. 1988	CBS/NYT	4	40	52
Jan. 1989	CBS/NYT	6	38	53
Jun. 1989	CBS	4	31	57
Apr. 1990	NYT	6	32	53
Oct. 1990	CBS/NYT	3	22	70
Mar. 1991	CBS/NYT	7	40	50
Oct. 1992	CBS/NYT	2	20	72
Dec. 1992 <sup>^</sup>	CBS/NYT	2	24	64
Jan. 1993	CBS/NYT	2	22	73
Dec. 1993 <sup>^</sup>	CBS	1	15	70
Oct.–Nov. 1994	CBS/NYT	2	20	76
Feb. 1995	CBS/NYT	2	16	77
Aug. 1995	CBS/NYT	3	17	75
Oct.–Nov. 1996	CBS/NYT	2	23	70
Jan. 1997	CBS/NYT	1	22	72
Jan. 1998	CBS/NYT	3	23	71
Oct. 1998	CBS/NYT	2	24	70

Oct.–Nov. 1998	CBS	3	21	70
Jan. 1999	CBS	4	30	64
Jan. 1999	CBS	4	33	59
Sep. 1999	CBS	4	34	59
Oct. 1999	CBS	3	27	66
Oct. 2000*	CBS	5	35	57
Jan. 2001	CBS	3	28	64
Oct. 2001	CBS/NYT	10	45	42
Dec. 2001	CBS	5	42	49
Jan. 2002	CBS/NYT	5	41	51
Jul. 2002	CBS/NYT	5	33	57
Sep. 2002	CBS/NYT	5	33	57
Jul. 2003	CBS/NYT	4	32	60
Jul. 2004	CBS/NYT	4	36	56
Sep. 2005	CBS/NYT	3	26	63
Dec. 2005	CBS/NYT	2	30	65
Jan. 2006	CBS/NYT	5	27	63
Sep. 2006	CBS/NYT	1	26	65
Oct. 2006	CBS/NYT	2	26	66
Jul. 2007	CBS/NYT	2	22	71
Oct. 2008	CBS/NYT	1	16	74
Jun. 2009	CBS/NYT	3	17	73
Feb. 2010	CBS/NYT	3	16	74
Apr. 2010	CBS/NYT	4	16	70
Oct. 2010	CBS	1	17	73
Oct. 2010	CBS/NYT	2	19	67
Oct. 2011	CBS/NYT	1	9	77
Feb. 2013	CBS	3	17	70
May–Jun. 2013	CBS/NYT	3	17	70
Nov. 2013	CBS	3	14	73
Oct. 2014	CBS	3	13	73
Mar. 2016	CBS/NYT	3	15	70

Note: “Never” or “none of the time” was volunteered as a response in most askings; it never exceeded 12 percent. \*Question asked of registered voters. ^Question askings for these years included the response, “never” or “none of the time”—the responses never exceeded 13 percent. &Question asked of those who had voted in that election.

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

Pew

	Trust govt. in Washington to do what is right			
	Just about always	Most of the time	Only some of the time	Never
Sep.–Oct. 1997 <sup>^</sup> #	2%	36%	60%	2%
Feb. 1998 <sup>^</sup>	5	29	61	4
Oct.–Dec. 1998 <sup>^</sup>	4	22	60	11
Feb. 1999 <sup>^</sup>	4	27	64	4
May 1999 <sup>^</sup>	3	28	62	5
Feb. 2000 <sup>^</sup>	5	35	56	3
Feb.–Mar. 2001	5	26	62	–
Jun.–Aug. 2003	7	33	56	–
Nov.–Dec. 2003	7	29	58	–
Mar. 2004 <sup>^</sup>	4	32	59	4
Sep. 2005 <sup>^</sup>	3	28	63	4
Feb. 2006 <sup>^</sup>	4	30	59	6
Dec. 2006–Jan. 2007 <sup>^</sup>	3	28	63	5
Nov.–Dec. 2008 <sup>^</sup>	3	17	65	10
Mar. 2010 <sup>^</sup>	3	19	65	11
Apr. 2010 <sup>^</sup>	5	20	61	13
Aug.–Sep. 2010 <sup>^</sup>	3	21	65	10
Feb.–Mar. 2011 <sup>^</sup>	4	25	65	4
Aug. 2011 <sup>^</sup>	3	16	72	8
Sep.–Oct. 2011 <sup>^</sup>	3	17	72	7
Jan. 2013 <sup>^</sup>	3	23	67	6
Oct. 2013 <sup>^</sup>	3	16	68	12
Jan. 2014	2	12	67	14
Feb. 2014 <sup>^</sup>	3	21	68	7
Aug.–Oct. 2015 <sup>^</sup>	3	16	67	13
Apr. 2017	3	25	61	10
Apr. 2017 <sup>^</sup>	4	16	68	11
Nov.–Dec. 2017 <sup>^</sup>	3	15	67	14
Mar. 2019 <sup>^</sup>	3	14	71	10
Apr. 2020	2	24	60	12
Jul.–Aug. 2020	2	18	65	14
Jul.–Aug. 2020 <sup>^</sup>	5	15	66	12
Apr. 2021	2	22	61	14

Note: <sup>^</sup>“Never” was volunteered as a response. #Question asked of a half-sample.

## Government's Impact

The last time CBS asked the first question below was more than two decades ago. CBS asked first whether the government could have a positive impact on people's lives and then whether it actually was doing so. Large majorities believed government *could* have a positive impact. Only in November 2001, in a separate question asked after the 9/11 attacks, did a majority believe it was actually doing so. Unfortunately, these questions have not been updated recently.

The rest of the questions in this section provide an assessment of how the government is doing its job. The questions go back roughly 20 years. At the turn of the century, as suggested above, people were positive, and strong majorities expressed satisfaction with our system of government and how well it works. In 2008, in a poll taken before the financial crash, 53 percent told Gallup they were satisfied. Confidence dropped to 42 percent when Gallup next asked the question in 2011. In Gallup's January 2022 question, it was 30 percent.

*Q: Do you think the government can have a positive impact on people's lives, or not?*

		Govt. can have positive impact	Govt. cannot have positive impact
Feb. 1995	CBS	89%	10%
Jan. 1996 <sup>&amp;</sup>	CBS	85	11
Feb. 1996	CBS/NYT	87	10
Aug. 1996*	CBS	89	8
Sep.–Oct. 1996	CBS	88	9
Jan.–Feb. 1997	CBS	88	9
Jan. 1998	CBS	87	11
Sep. 1999 <sup>^</sup>	CBS	75	22
May 2000 <sup>^</sup>	CBS/NYT	83	15

Note: \*Question asked of registered voters. <sup>^</sup>Question wording read, "... positive impact on your own life?" &Question wording read, "... the government in Washington can ..."

*Q: These days, what kind of impact do you think government has on most people's lives – a positive impact, a negative impact, or doesn't the government have much impact on most people's lives?*

		Govt. impact on most people's lives		
		Positive impact	Doesn't have much impact	Negative impact
Aug. 1996*	CBS	33%	13%	46%
Sep. 1996*	CBS/NYT	32	16	42
Jan.–Feb. 1997	CBS	28	22	41
Jan. 1998	CBS/NYT	31	22	40
Sep. 1999	CBS	30	24	38
May 2000	CBS/NYT	37	24	30
Nov. 2001	CBS	55	17	15
Jul. 2006	CBS/NYT	30	20	43
Sep.–Oct. 2011	CBS	13	17	64

Note: \*Question asked of registered voters.

Q: Next, I'm going to read some aspects of life in America today. For each one, please say whether you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied. How about our system of government and how well it works?

Gallup	System of govt. and the way it works			
	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
2001	16%	52%	21%	9%
2002	25	51	16	7
2003	19	45	25	10
2004	17	44	26	13
2005	18	42	24	15
2006	18	41	25	16
2007	17	39	25	18
2008	14	39	27	20
2011	8	34	29	27
2012	7	28	33	31
2013	10	30	29	31
2014	7	28	31	34
2015	8	29	28	32
2016	7	27	31	33
2017	10	30	31	28
2018	8	30	30	31
2019	11	29	27	32
2020	11	32	29	28
2021	7	20	29	44
2022	8	22	29	42

Q: Now thinking about some groups and organizations...is your overall opinion of the federal government in Washington very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?

Pew	Opinion of the federal govt. in Washington			
	Very favorable	Mostly favorable	Mostly unfavorable	Very unfavorable
Oct. 1997	4%	34%	41%	18%
Oct. 2000*	7	47	30	10
Nov. 2001	17	65	12	3
Dec. 2002	11	53	20	7
Apr. 2003	14	59	17	5
Feb. 2004	10	49	25	11
Oct. 2005	6	39	32	16
Dec. 2005	7	39	31	18
Feb. 2006	6	37	34	16
Jan. 2007	7	38	31	15
Apr. 2008	6	31	37	21
Jul. 2009	4	38	31	18
Feb. 2010	6	38	34	16
Feb. 2011	6	32	37	19
Apr. 2012	7	26	37	25
Mar. 2013	4	24	35	30
Apr. 2014	7	26	36	27
Oct. 2015	6	26	34	28
Mar. 2018	5	30	40	21

Note: \*Question asked of registered voters.

## Anger with Government

Starting in 1992, ABC News and the *Washington Post* began to ask a different kind of question about satisfaction with the government in Washington. They asked people which of four phrases they thought best described their feelings about how government worked. The categories were enthusiastic, satisfied but not enthusiastic, dissatisfied but not angry, and angry. Other pollsters picked up the question. Seven percent or less have ever been enthusiastic, and in recent years, more than two in 10 (and in a few cases, three in 10) have said they were angry. The responses seem generally consistent across pollsters. A plurality usually suggests they are dissatisfied but not angry, although anger has also inched up. Pew offers three response categories, and in its most recent askings, around two in 10 say they are angry. Majorities say they are frustrated, and nearly 30 percent are basically content.

In exit polls of voters conducted in 1994, 2010, 2016, and 2020, between 20 and 26 percent said they were angry.

*Q: Overall, which comes closest to your feelings about the way the federal government is working? Would you say you feel . . . ?*

Fox

	The way the federal govt. is working			
	Enthusiastic	Satisfied, but not enthusiastic	Dissatisfied, but not angry	Angry
Oct. 2010	2%	22%	51%	25%
Oct. 2014	3	25	46	23
Jan. 2016	2	22	47	27
Sep. 2016	2	25	46	26
Oct. 2016	3	21	50	26
Nov. 2016	3	23	46	27
Feb. 2018	5	25	41	26
Sep. 2018	7	25	37	25
Sep. 2019	7	24	36	29
Oct. 2021	7	27	37	27

Note: Question asked of registered voters.

*Q: I am going to mention four phrases and ask you which one best describes how you feel about the way the federal government works. Do you feel enthusiastic, satisfied but not enthusiastic, dissatisfied but not angry, or angry?*

		The way the federal govt. works			
		Enthusiastic	Satisfied, but not enthusiastic	Dissatisfied, but not angry	Angry
Mar. 1992	ABC	1%	17%	51%	25%
Mar. 1992	ABC/Wash Post	1	21	54	23
Apr. 1992	ABC	1	20	55	24
Jun. 1992	ABC/Wash Post	1	20	58	21
Jul. 1992	ABC/Wash Post	1	22	53	23
Oct. 1992*	ABC/Wash Post	1	16	56	25
Feb. 1993	ABC/Wash Post	4	29	50	16
Mar. 1994	ABC/Wash Post	1	29	48	20
Sep. 1994	ABC	2	25	53	20

Oct. 1994	ABC	2	24	53	19
Oct. 1994	ABC/Wash Post	2	26	52	20
Oct. 1994	ABC/Wash Post	1	25	55	18
Nov. 1994*	ABC	2	26	50	21
Jan. 1995	ABC/Wash Post	2	27	53	16
May 1995	ABC/Wash Post	3	45	41	9
Mar. 1996	ABC/Wash Post	2	28	54	16
Aug. 1997	ABC	2	33	52	11
Jan. 1998	ABC/Wash Post	2	43	45	8
Jul.–Aug. 1998	Kaiser/Harvard/Wash Post	2	39	46	11
Sep. 1998	ABC/Wash Post	4	46	36	12
Dec. 1998	Wash Post	3	41	40	14
Feb. 1999	Wash Post	3	48	35	12
Dec. 2000	ABC/Wash Post	4	55	34	6
Feb. 2002	Wash Post	7	49	36	7
Oct. 2002	ABC	4	47	42	7
Oct. 2002^	ABC	6	45	40	9
Oct.–Nov. 2002^	ABC	5	45	40	9
Oct. 2003	ABC/Wash Post	2	41	42	15
Feb. 2010	ABC/Wash Post	4	29	48	19
Apr. 2010	ABC/Wash Post	4	26	51	18
Jun. 2010	ABC/Wash Post	2	28	45	25
Jul. 2010	ABC/Wash Post	4	32	43	21
Aug.–Sep. 2010	ABC/Wash Post	2	20	52	25
Sep.–Oct. 2010	ABC/Wash Post	4	25	46	25
Oct. 2010	ABC/Wash Post	4	23	51	21
Jun. 2011	ABC/Wash Post	3	27	44	25
Jul. 2011	ABC/Wash Post	2	18	54	25
Oct. – Nov. 2011	ABC/Wash Post	2	18	49	31
Feb. 2012	ABC/Wash Post	2	22	49	26
Sep. 2012*	ABC/Wash Post	4	25	44	27
Oct. 2013	ABC/Wash Post	2	19	47	32
Sep. 2014	ABC/Wash Post	1	23	49	25
Aug. 2015*	Quinnipiac	2	21	49	27
Jan. 2016	ABC/Wash Post	2	25	47	24
Mar. 2016	ABC/Wash Post	4	25	48	21
Jan. 2018*	Quinnipiac	2	19	45	32
Jan. 2019*	Quinnipiac	3	18	48	29

Note: \*Question asked of registered voters. ^Question asked of likely voters. #Question asked of a half sample.

Q: 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?

		Feelings toward federal govt.		
		Basically content	Frustrated	Angry
Sep.–Oct. 1997	Pew	29%	56%	12%
Feb. 2000	Pew	33	54	10
Jun. 2000	Pew	28	54	13
Jun. 2000	Pew	28	53	13
Nov. 2001	Pew	53	34	8
Mar. 2004	Pew	32	52	13



Sep.–Oct. 2006	Pew	21	54	20
Dec. 2006–Jan. 2007	Pew	21	58	16
Mar. 2010	Pew	19	56	21
Apr. 2010	Pew	23	52	21
Jun. 2010	<i>Newsweek</i>	21	52	24
Aug.–Sep. 2010	Pew	21	52	23
Sep. 2010*	<i>Newsweek</i>	20	54	23
Feb.–Mar. 2011	Pew	22	59	14
Aug. 2011	Pew	11	60	26
Sep.–Oct. 2011	Pew	17	58	21
Jan. 2013	Pew	20	58	19
Sep. 2013	Pew	17	51	26
Oct. 2013	Pew	12	55	30
Jan.–Mar. 2014	Pew	17	62	19
Aug.–Oct. 2015	Pew	18	57	22
Mar. 2016#	Pew	20	57	21
Mar. 2016#	Pew	13	64	21
Oct. 2016	Pew	23	55	19
Feb.–Mar. 2017	Pew	18	60	21
Apr. 2017	Pew	19	55	22
Nov.–Dec. 2017	Pew	17	55	24
Mar. 2019	Pew	18	57	21
Jul.–Aug. 2020	Pew	18	57	24
Apr. 2021	Pew	29	52	17

Note: \*Question asked of registered voters. #Question asked of a half sample.

**Exit Polls of Voters**

*Q: Which of these best describes your feelings about the way the federal government is working . . . Enthusiastic, satisfied, but not enthusiastic, dissatisfied, but not angry, angry?*

		The way the federal govt. works			
		Enthusiastic	Satisfied, but not enthusiastic	Dissatisfied, but not angry	Angry
Nov. 1994	VNS	4%	25%	51%	20%
Nov. 2010	NEP	3	21	48	25
Nov. 2016	NEP	6	23	46	23
Nov. 2020	NEP	13	27	32	26

Note: The responses for the 2018 online and telephone pre-election and Election Day AP VoteCast poll were 5, 25, 46, and 24 percent, respectively.

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An older AEI Public Opinion Study looks at a related topic: [government regulation](#).