



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on March 17, 2011

Americans' Faith in Government Plummet

A new ABC News/Washington Post poll shows that Americans' confidence in their government has plummeted in the last decade. In August 1974, around the time that President Nixon resigned, 15 percent of Americans were pessimistic about their government and 55 percent were optimistic. Over the last 24 years, until 1999, the percentage of Americans who were optimistic about their government was relatively high, ranging as low as 45 percent and as high as 55 percent. The percentage of Americans who were pessimistic about their government hovered in the low 20s during those decades.



Over the last 12 years, the percentage of Americans optimistic about their government has dropped every year from about 55 percent in February 1999 to only 26 percent today. The two lines on the polling chart the one showing the percentage of Americans optimistic about their government and the percentage of Americans pessimistic about their government have until now always been very far apart in this poll. Those two lines are now very close to intersecting: America is very near the point when citizens, for the first time, actually are more pessimistic about their government than optimistic.

The poll explores some of the reasons for the drop. Support for the war in Afghanistan has plummeted just within the last year. Today 64 percent of Americans do not believe that the war in Afghanistan is worth fighting, a whopping 49 percent of Americans strongly believe that the war is not worth fighting, and only 31 percent think the war is worth the effort. The massive shift in public opinion began just about one year ago, in April 2010. By a substantial margin, 73 percent of Americans want our military forces pulled out of Afghanistan this summer, but only 39 percent of them believe that will happen.

Two years ago, 61 percent of Americans trusted President Obama more to handle the economy, while 26 percent trusted Republicans in Congress more. Since then, those two lines on the polling chart have moved increasingly close together, until in mid-December 2010 they crossed, with 45 percent of Americans trusting Republicans in Congress more and 44 percent trusting the President more. Following that poll, trust in Republicans in Congress has dipped to 34 percent today. Obama has done marginally better, but only 46 percent of Americans aver that they trust him more than Republicans in Congress in handling the economy. Saliently, it has been since October 2009 that a majority of Americans expressed trust in either Obama or Republicans.

If Americans are dubious about either Obama or congressional Republicans properly handling the economy, they have even less trust in either of the two properly managing the federal deficit. In the last year of polling, the President has never had the trust of more than 45 percent of Americans on handling the deficit, and trust in Republicans has fluctuated more, reaching a high water mark of 47 percent in December, and currently standing at 36 percent.

Much of the polling data, which are based upon the questions asked, reveal a bias for certain responses.



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As one example, Question 13 asks: Overall, what do you think is the best way to reduce the federal budget deficit by cutting federal spending, by increasing taxes or by a combination of both? The analysis by Professor Arthur Laffer, a member of President Reagan's Economic Policy Advisory Board, demonstrating that the maximization of federal revenue at some level of taxation can only be reached by *cutting tax rates* an economic theory proven with the Reagan tax cuts seems to be outside the intellectual universe of these pollsters.

Other poll questions are focused not on policies, but people. For instance, Question 14 asks: Has the leadership of the Republican Party been too willing or not willing enough to compromise with Obama on the budget deficit? It is far from clear exactly what the response of Americans means 71 percent do not believe that Republicans have been willing enough to compromise with Obama. However, 52 percent of Americans believe that Obama has not been willing enough to compromise with Republican leadership on the budget deficit. How does this jibe with the same poll which reveals that 55 percent of Americans disapprove of how the President is handling the budget deficit and that 42 percent of Americans strongly disapprove of how he is handling the deficit?

As is so often the case with these polls, one ponders the unasked questions. What would be the responses to these questions: Do you believe that the federal government is too big? Or, Do you believe that government programs, by and large, fail to do what they are intended to do? Or, Whom do you trust more your state government or the federal government? All polls are very much affected by the way questions are asked, as well as by the population sample chosen.

[Two other polls](#) covering largely the same subjects were released within days of the ABC poll. CNN several days ago noted that by a 47 percent to 43 percent margin, Americans favored the approach of Republicans in Congress to the approach of President Obama in the tough choices to reduce the budget deficit and still maintain needed federal programs. How does that fit with the ABC Poll, which found that 45 percent of Americans trust Obama more than Republicans in handling the budget deficit? It simply does not. Obviously both polls cannot be right.

The Pew Research Center, in a poll just published, asked American what the top priority of the federal government should be. Fifty-three percent of respondents named reducing the federal deficit, with 33 percent replying that while reducing the deficit was important, it was not the top priority. When asked for more specific responses, 61 percent of Americans favored cutting domestic spending and 67 percent opposed raising taxes as ways of handling the budget deficit. Perhaps the most interesting question is this: Who has the better approach in handling the budget deficit, Barack Obama, Republicans in Congress, or is there not much difference? While only 20 percent of Americans selected Obama, only 21 percent of Americans chose Republicans in Congress; 7 percent were unsure and 52 percent of Americans believed that there really was no difference.

That last poll question is probably the most revealing. The American people do not trust their government. They do not trust politicians. And this trust gap is growing. What should elected leaders do about it? Constitutionalists believe they should ignore the polls and focus on doing what they know is right: working to protect and promote what the Founding Fathers established a constitutionally-limited republic in which the federal government itself has a minor role.

Has anyone asked Americans if they want their Constitution back? That would be an interesting question indeed.



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