

The Decline of Confidence in American Institutions

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On 15 July 1979, President Carter delivered a dramatic television address to the American people on the subject of the energy crisis. Shortly into his remarks he broadened his topic and drew attention to “a subject even more serious than energy or inflation . . . a fundamental threat to American democracy.” That threat, he said, was a “crisis of confidence . . . that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will.” He pointed to “a growing disrespect for government and for churches and for schools, the news media and other institutions . . .” and emphasized that “the gap between our citizens and our government has never been so wide. . . .”

Jimmy Carter thus became one—albeit the most prominent—of many commentators who have noted and expressed concern over the declining confidence shown by the American public in their political, social, and economic institutions and leaders. The evidence of this decline appears in many public opinion polls; they indicate that a sharp downturn in public confidence in a wide variety of institutions began in the mid-1960s and continues to the present. Political scientist Jack Citrin of the University of California, writing in 1974, foreshadowed a point to be reiterated five years later by Jimmy Carter, then still unknown: “The current decline in trust in government and the public’s seeming loss of confidence in a wide range of social institutions are expressions of a pervasive sense of malaise.”¹ What, then, is the evidence for this decline, and what are its characteristics?

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THE RISE AND FALL OF CONFIDENCE

In 1965 and 1966, Robert Lane, a political scientist at Yale University, published two articles in which he discussed public attitudes toward American social and political institutions from the late 1930s—when scientific polling began—down through the early 1960s. He found that, on a number of different indicators, Americans had become more positive about the operation of their society in general and of their political system in particular. From a relatively low point during the 1930s in the midst of the Great Depression, Americans became increasingly affirmative about their society, until by 1965 the great majority of those interviewed by various pollsters were giving consistently positive evaluations. Lane interpreted the growth of favorable replies as a function of increasing affluence and higher levels of education. As he noted, with the end of the Depression and continuing prosperity on the one hand, and with an increase in the proportion of the population that had completed high school or had gone on to college on the other, more and more Americans said they liked their society and believed its political system was honest, effective, and responsive.²

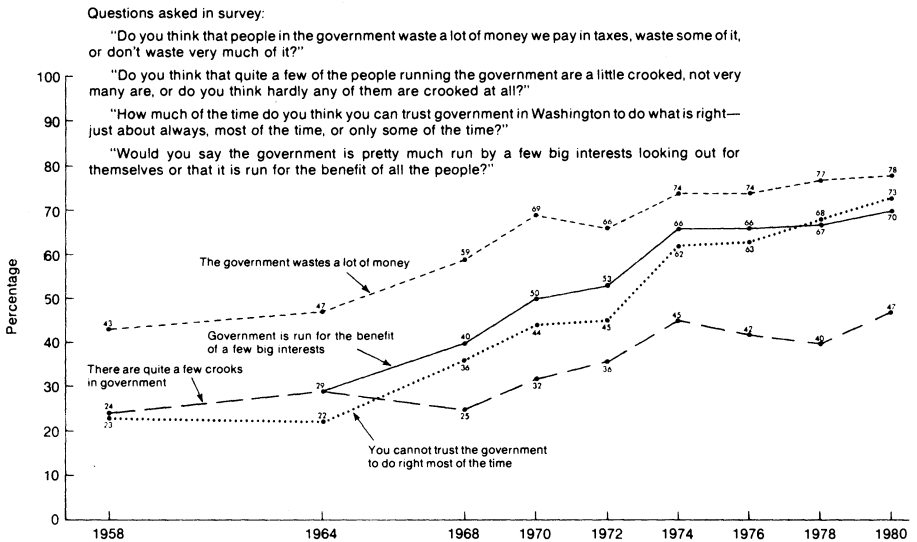
As it happened, the early 1960s turned out to be a high-water mark in the history of the American public's attitudes toward their key social, political, and economic structures. The explosion of protest against U.S. participation in the Vietnam War, as well as other conflicts stemming from the rise of militant social movements concerned with the status of women and various minority groups—blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians—apparently changed the prevailing perception that Americans had of their country. One public opinion survey after another registered a steady decline in the public's confidence in the country's institutions and in the people running them. As one major pollster, Daniel Yankelovich, noted in 1977:

We have seen a steady rise of mistrust in our national institutions. . . . Trust in government declined dramatically from almost 80% in the late 1950s to about 33% in 1976. Confidence in business fell from approximately a 70% level in the late 60s to about 15% today. Confidence in other institutions—the press, the military, the professions—doctors and lawyers—sharply declined from the mid-60s to the mid-70s. More than 61% of the electorate believe that there is something morally wrong in the country. More than 80% of voters say they do not trust those in positions of leadership as much as they used to. In the mid-60s a one-third minority reported feeling isolated and distant from the political process; by the mid-70s a two-thirds majority felt that what they think “really doesn't count.” Approximately three out of five people feel the government suffers from a concentration of too much power in too few hands, and fewer than one out of five feel that congressional leaders can be believed. One could go on

¹ Jack Citrin, “Comment: The Political Relevance of Trust in Government,” *American Political Science Review* 68 (1974): 987.

² Robert E. Lane, “The Politics of Consensus in the Age of Affluence,” *American Political Science Review* 59 (1965): 874–75; and “The Decline of Politics and Ideology in a Knowledgeable Society,” *American Sociological Review* 31 (1966): 649–62.

FIGURE 1
Confidence in Government, 1958-80



Source: Warren E. Miller, Arthur H. Miller, and Edward J. Schneider, *American Election Studies Data Sourcebook, 1952-78* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 257-59. 1980 figures are from Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, 1980 American National Election Study (Wave C-3), distributed by Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

and on. The change is simply massive. Within a ten- to fifteen-year period, trust in institutions has plunged down and down, from an almost consensual majority, two thirds or more, to minority segments of the American public.³

TRENDS OF CONFIDENCE IN GOVERNMENT

It is not difficult to find examples of Yankelovich's generalization from a variety of poll sources. One of the most widely reported shifts has been the level of political trust expressed by the American public. The Survey Research Center (SRC)—since 1970, the Center for Political Studies (CPS)—of the University of Michigan has been asking a series of "trust in government" questions in its biennial national election surveys since 1958. The trend lines for four of these questions are shown in Figure 1. (In each case, the figures show the percentage giving the "distrusting" response.)

³ Daniel Yankelovich, "Emerging Ethical Norms in Public and Private Life" (unpublished paper, University Seminar, Columbia University, 20 April 1977), 2-3.

Political Trust

Trust in government changed little between 1958 and 1964. Over that six-year period, the average increase in “mistrust,” as measured by the four questions in Figure 1, was 5 percent. During the subsequent six years, from 1964 to 1970, there was a virtual explosion of anti-government feeling. Mistrust on the four items increased by an average of 17 percent during this period, up 8 percent between 1964 and 1968 and another 9 percent from 1968 to 1970.

Those years were, of course, a period of intense political controversy and polarization in the United States. The 1964 presidential election was an unusually sharp ideological confrontation, with charges of extremism raised against the Republican candidate. The era of student protest began with the Free Speech Movement at the University of California at Berkeley in September 1964, followed in short order by President Johnson’s decisive escalation of the Vietnam War in February 1965, the first racial disorder in Watts, California, in July 1965, and the Gulf of Tonkin crisis in August 1965. From 1964 to 1970, the percentage of Americans saying that “people in the government waste a lot of money we pay in taxes” rose from 47 to 59; those replying that “the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves” rather than “for the benefit of all the people” increased from 29 to 50 percent; and the proportion who felt that “you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right only some of the time” or “none of the time,” rather than “just about always” or “most of the time,” went up from 22 to 44 percent.

However, political cynicism did not increase very much during this period on the fourth SRC political trust question. The proportion who believed that “quite a few of the people running the government are a little crooked” (rather than “not very many” or “hardly any”) changed only slightly, from 29 percent in 1964 to 32 percent in 1970, an increase hardly comparable to the enormous increase in cynicism measured by the other items. By 1972, the attitude that most government officials are crooked had increased a bit more, to 36 percent. As one might guess, the Watergate affair soon corrected the noticeable lag in this political trust item. By 1974, following the Watergate revelations, the proportion who felt that most government officials are crooked had risen to 45 percent. It then declined slightly to 42 percent in 1976 and 40 percent in 1978. By 1980, however, the figure had reached 47 percent, even higher than the level recorded just after Watergate.⁴

⁴ There is one additional question included by the Michigan Center for Political Studies in its “political trust” series: “Do you feel that almost all of the people running the government are smart people, or do you think that quite a few of them don’t seem to know what they are doing?” This item is not reported in Figure 1 because its evaluative content is less clear than that of the other four questions. Some respondents have offered the cynical reply that the people running the government “know exactly what they are doing,” and it is not clear how these responses were coded in the earlier surveys. This question is the item least strongly intercorrelated with the other four in the series. However, it does show the same general trend as the others, i.e., increasing mistrust after 1964. See Arthur H. Miller, “The Institutional Focus of Political Distrust” (paper presented at the Annual

As for the other three “distrust” attitudes, the marked increases that occurred between 1964 and 1970 were sustained by the Watergate experience. Between 1970 and 1974, the percentage of the public saying that the government wastes a lot of tax money rose from 69 to 74; those replying that the government is run for the benefit of a few big interests grew from 50 to 66 percent; and the proportion saying that the government cannot be trusted to do what is right most of the time went up from 44 to 62 percent. Most of these increases occurred between November 1972 and November 1974, the period of the Watergate revelations.

Nor did the situation improve during the Carter era. The level of distrust remained about the same in 1976 as it had been in 1974. Between 1976 and 1978, despite President Carter’s election pledge that he would restore faith in government, the indicators of mistrust increased again from an average of 61 percent to an average of 63 percent. President Carter’s alarm about the public’s loss of confidence was justified by the fact that, by 1978, the level of mistrust had reached its highest point to date on three of the four indicators in Figure 1. The president’s dire warnings, however, had no apparent effect: in the fall of 1980, every one of the four indicators showed the highest level of mistrust since the series began in 1958. These questions were eliciting a cynical response from an average of 67 percent—two out of every three Americans—just before Jimmy Carter was turned out of office.

On the other hand, it must be kept in mind that most of the increase occurred long before Jimmy Carter took office. The Michigan Center for Political Studies computes its own “Trust in Government” index, which includes the four questions from Figure 1. According to the Michigan index, trust in government fell from +42 in 1964 (i.e., a net trusting attitude) to +2 in 1970 and 1972. The drop between 1972 and 1974 was again severe, from +2 to -26 (net mistrusting). After 1974, things did not get much worse, but they did not get any better either; the Michigan index was -31 in 1976 and -33 in 1978.⁵

Political Efficacy

The Michigan Survey Research Center (SRC)/Center for Political Studies (CPS) has tracked a number of additional items related to political trust since the inception of its biennial election surveys in 1952. Several of these are described as measures of “political efficacy,” or “subjective competence.” These indicators relate to respondents’ estimation of their own personal capacity to comprehend and influence political events. The factor differentiating these items from the pure “political trust” questions described above is that the efficacy questions

Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., 31 August–3 September 1979), Figure 1, p. 6.

⁵ Warren E. Miller, “Crisis of Confidence II—Misreading the Public Pulse,” *Public Opinion* 2 (October/November 1979): 11.

focus on the self. The key phrase, “people like me,” recurs in the standard “agree/disagree” efficacy tests and draws attention to the strongly subjective content of these measures: “*People like me* don’t have any say about what the government does”; “Voting is the only way that *people like me* can have any say about how the government runs things”; “I don’t think public officials care much what *people like me* think”; “Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that *a person like me* can’t really understand what’s going on.” [Emphasis added.]

Political efficacy is strongly correlated with education. This fact was demonstrated cross-nationally in Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba’s “Five Nation Study,” and it has been confirmed in the Michigan series.⁶ As the level of formal education increases, so does the sense of efficacy or subjective competence. In other words, the better educated the individual, the more likely he or she is to *disagree* with each of the four statements above. Philip Converse, for instance, has shown in an analysis of the 1966 SRC survey that the percentage agreeing with the statement, “I don’t think public officials care much what people like me think,” declined steadily with education. Acceptance ranged from 77 percent among those with no formal education to 68 percent among those with some grade school education, 53 percent among those who had completed grade school, 48 percent among those with some high school education, 32 percent among high school graduates, 16 percent among those with some college education, and 10 percent among college graduates.⁷ Apparently education raises a person’s “subjective competence” by raising his or her self-esteem.

If a sense of political efficacy is truly imparted by the educational process, then one would expect the perceived efficacy level of the population to rise as its level of formal education goes up. As the population becomes better educated, more people should feel “efficacious.” Alternatively, if perceived efficacy is not developed in the educational process but is a product of the status system, then the overall level of efficacy should remain fairly constant over time, as *relative* positions in the status order and the political influence system do not change. Converse describes these two hypotheses as the “education driven” model and the “pecking order” model of efficacy. Each yields an empirical prediction: the first, that the sense of efficacy will rise with education, and the second, that efficacy will remain constant as education improves.⁸

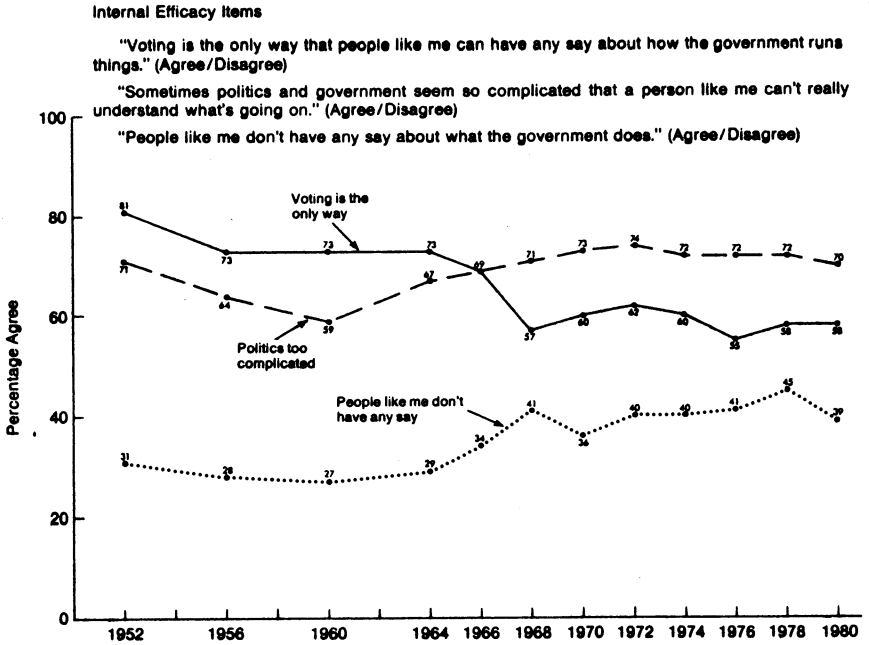
What actually happened is not predicted by either model. The trends from 1952 to 1980 for the four efficacy items noted above, plus two others, are shown in Figures 2 and 3. Figure 2 traces agreement with the three “internal efficacy” measures, as they are labeled by CPS. Figure 3 shows agreement with what CPS

⁶ Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 204–208, and Philip E. Converse, “Change in the American Electorate,” in Angus Campbell and Philip E. Converse, eds., *The Human Meaning of Social Change* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1972), 322–37.

⁷ Converse, “Change in the American Electorate,” table 2, 326.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 326–27.

FIGURE 2
Internal and External Efficacy, 1952-80



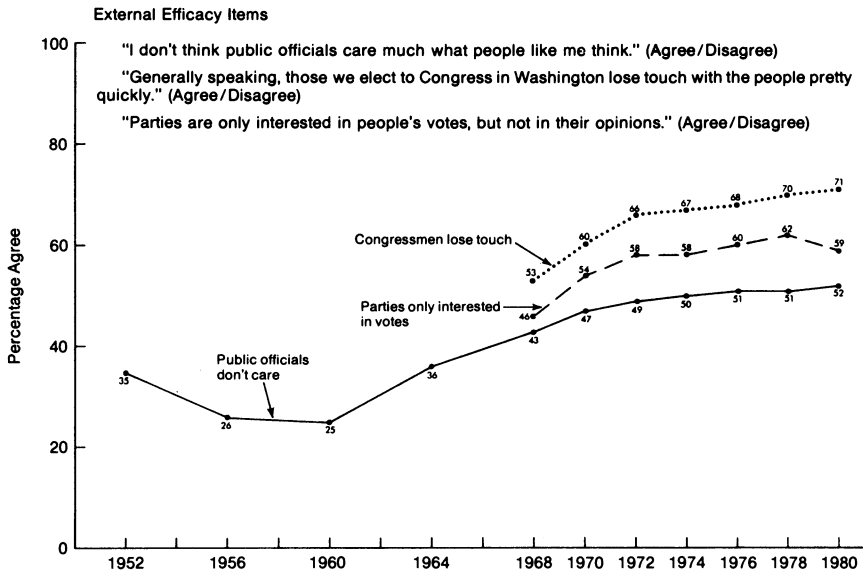
Source: see figure 3.

calls measures of "external efficacy." In all cases, agreement with the statement is assumed to indicate a *low* sense of efficacy.

Between 1952 and 1960, the four original efficacy measures show a slight negative trend, where declining agreement signifies an increasing sense of efficacy. The evidence over this eight-year period is consistent with the "education-driven" model. But three of the four measures reverse direction beginning in 1964. Agreement with the statements that "people like me don't have any say about what the government does," that public officials don't "care much what people like me think," and that politics and government are sometimes "so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on" all *increased* beginning in 1964; that is, the sense of political efficacy in the aggregate declined, despite rising levels of education. (The percentage of respondents who had gone to college rose from 15 percent in the 1952 survey to 22 in 1960, 25 in 1970, and 37 in 1980.) The American public's sense of political efficacy fell after 1960 for reasons apparently independent of education.

Those reasons are probably the same ones underlying the declining levels of political trust in Figure 1. In that figure, political trust fell by an average of 4 percent from 1958 to 1964 and 17 percent from 1964 to 1970. In Figures 2 and 3, the average decline in political efficacy was 3.5 percent between 1956 and

FIGURE 3



Source: Warren E. Miller, Arthur H. Miller, and Edward J. Schneider, *American Election Studies Data Sourcebook, 1952-78* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 259-61. 1980 figures are from Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, 1980 American National Election Study (Wave C-3), distributed by Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

1964 and 8 percent between 1964 and 1970. The political efficacy items seem to be, in Converse's terms, both "cognitive" and "affective." They involve a perception and an evaluation of both the *self* and the *system*. Thus, when respondents are offered the statement "People like me don't have any say about what the government does," their answers reflect the respondent's opinions of (a) people like themselves and (b) what the government does. It is the cognitive component that rises with education. The evaluative one is mostly a response to events and conditions. If "what the government does" seems to bear no relation to how people feel, then more and more people will agree that they have no say.

The most explicitly evaluative efficacy measure, "I don't think public officials care much what people like me think," showed the strongest increase from 1964 to 1970: 11 percent, from 36 percent agreement in 1964 to 47 percent in 1970. On the other hand, the most cognitive efficacy indicator, "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on," moved up by only 6 percent.

The fourth efficacy measure, "Voting is the only way that people like me can have any say about how the government runs things," changed in the opposite direction from the other measures. Agreement with this "internal efficacy" indicator actually fell, from 73 percent in 1964 to 60 percent in 1970. Converse

argues that this item “has pulled out of line rather markedly in response to phenotypic events” and should not be included with the other items in an efficacy scale.⁹ More and more Americans disagreed with the view that “voting is the only way that people like me can have any say,” even though their sense of political efficacy was declining according to the other indicators. This viewpoint seems to reflect the growth in more active forms of political participation, particularly protest, during the 1960s. Notably, disagreement with this item—the view that “people like me have ways other than voting of influencing what the government does”—increased much faster among better educated Americans than among the poorly educated. The “voting” indicator is an efficacy measure that focuses primarily on “inputs” (what citizens do). The other items, which relate more directly to “outputs” (what the government does, whether public officials care), all share a trend of declining trust.

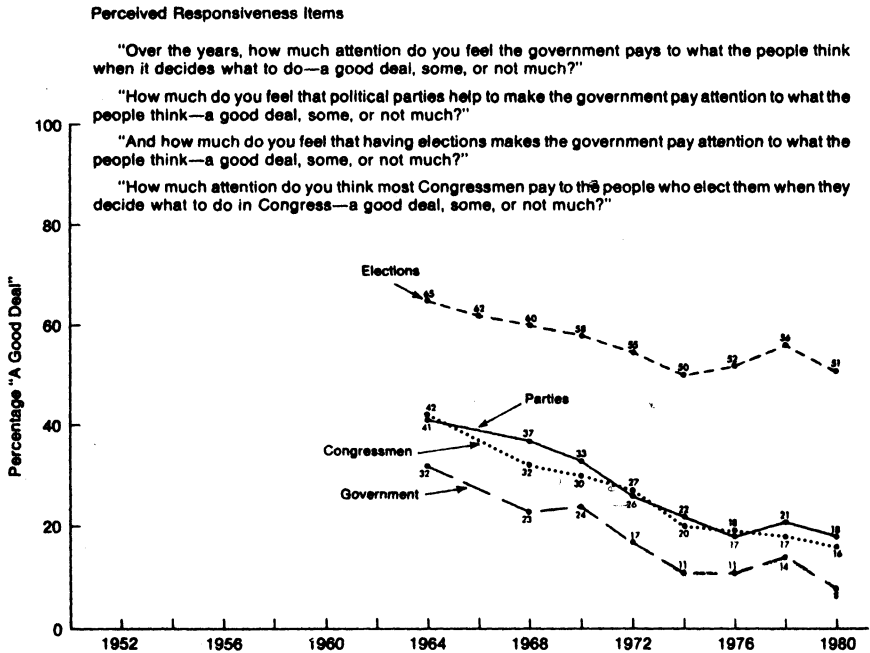
That trend continued into the 1970s. Reactions to the “voting is the only way” and to the “politics is too complicated” statements did not change much between 1970 and 1980. These two measures are, as noted, the most cognitive and the least output-related items. But support for the comment “People like me don’t have any say about what the government does” rose from 36 percent in 1970 to 45 percent in 1978, in tandem with acceptance of the statement that public officials “don’t care much what people like me think,” which increased from 47 to 51 percent over this same period. In 1980, however, the latter figure remained high at 52 percent, while the view that “people like me don’t have any say. . .” declined a few points, to 39 percent, from the high figure reached in 1978.

The Michigan Center for Political Studies added two new measures of “external efficacy” beginning with their 1968 survey (see Figure 3). Both are explicitly evaluative and showed steadily increasing levels of agreement from 1968 to 1980: “Generally speaking, those we elect to Congress in Washington lose touch with the people pretty quickly” (53 percent agreed in 1968, 71 percent in 1980), and “Parties are only interested in people’s votes, but not in their opinions” (46 percent agreed in 1968, 59 in 1980). Thus, Warren E. Miller of the Michigan CPS has argued that “internal efficacy” hardly changed during the 1970s, while “external efficacy” (“how much others—public officials, congressmen, and the political parties—care about what ‘people like me think’”) has declined along with trust in government.¹⁰

⁹ *Ibid.*, 329. However, Warren E. Miller of the Center for Political Studies continues to include the “voting” item in his “internal efficacy” scale. See Miller, “Crisis of Confidence,” 12. But William M. Mason, James S. House, and Steven S. Martin reach the same conclusion as Converse, “Dimensions of Political Alienation in America: Theoretical and Empirical” (unpublished paper, Department of Sociology, University of Michigan, February 1981): “The voting item is ‘double-barreled’ in its manifest content and reflects a mixture of different dimensions of alienation. Thus it is most appropriately dropped from consideration in future work on political alienation in America” (p. 65).

¹⁰ Warren E. Miller, “Crisis of Confidence,” 12–13.

FIGURE 4
*Perceived Responsiveness of Government, 1964–80,
 and Citizen's Duty, 1952–80*

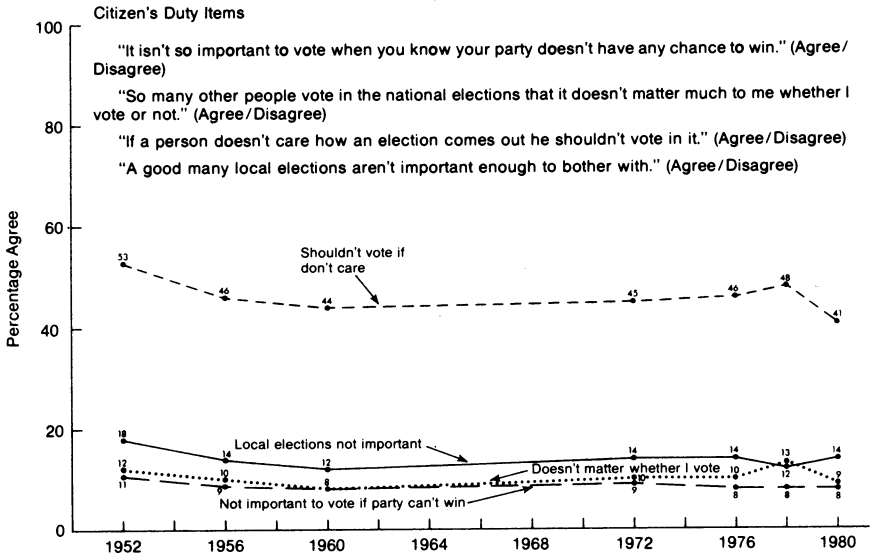


Source: see figure 5.

Perceived Responsiveness of Government

An additional battery of questions asked by CPS since 1964 also shows declining confidence in government. These, dubbed "perceived responsiveness of government" indicators by CPS, are shown in Figure 4. They deal with how responsive political institutions are seen to be to "what people think." These measures involve no self-perception and are, therefore, not cognitive in nature: "Over the years, how much attention do you feel the government pays to what the people think when it decides to do something—a good deal, some, or not much?" The proportion saying "a good deal" declined from 32 percent in 1964 to 11 percent in 1974, while those replying "not much," increased from 24 to 28 percent. Similar trends can be observed from 1964 to 1974 in responses to questions dealing with how much "political parties help to make the government pay attention to what the people think," how much "having elections makes the government pay attention to what the people think" and how much attention "most Congressmen pay . . . to the people who elect them when they decide what to do in Congress." In each case, the proportion answering "a good deal" fell by an average

FIGURE 5



Source: Warren E. Miller, Arthur H. Miller, and Edward J. Schneider, *American Election Studies Data Sourcebook, 1952-78* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 261-64. 1980 figures are from Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, 1980 American National Election Study (Wave C-3), distributed by Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

19 percent over the ten-year period, while the number replying "not much" rose by an average of 7 percent.

Like the trust measures, these "responsiveness" indicators remained about the same between 1974 and 1976. However, between 1976 and 1978, the data show a slight gain in the "perceived responsiveness of government" for all subjects except Congressmen. This is the best evidence that Jimmy Carter's election accomplished something in the direction of restoring confidence in government. By 1980, however, the effect had worn off and perceived responsiveness reached an all-time low on three out of the four measures in Figure 4.

Similar findings were reported by Cambridge Reports, Inc., in response to the statement: "Most politicians don't really care about people like me." Sentiment for this view increased from 56 percent in late 1974 to 63 percent in late 1975. The trend then reversed to 59 percent agreeing in 1976 and 55 percent in 1978.

Citizen's Duty

Finally, Figure 5 indicates almost no change from 1952 to 1980 in the "citizen's duty" items asked by the Center for Political Studies. The vast majority of respondents in 1980, as in 1952, rejected the views that "it isn't so important to vote when you know your party doesn't have any chance to win" (87 percent dis-

agreed in 1952, 92 percent disagreed in 1980), “so many other people vote in the national elections, it doesn’t matter much to me whether I vote or not” (87 percent disagreed in 1952, 91 percent disagreed in 1980), and “a good many local elections aren’t important enough to bother with” (81 percent disagreed in 1952, 86 percent disagreed in 1980). The public continued to be divided over the statement, “if a person doesn’t care how an election comes out, he shouldn’t vote in it” (53 to 45 percent agreement in 1952, 58 to 41 percent disagreement in 1980). Thus, there is no evidence of increasing cynicism about democracy or the citizen’s role in it.

Confidence in the Political System

Nor does it appear that the public has lost its basic confidence in the American political system. In the 1976 CPS survey, several questions dealt with the basic soundness of our political system, as distinct from attitudes about political leaders and public officials. Where trust in the latter two remained quite low (see Figure 1), belief in the soundness of the political system was very high. For instance, respondents were offered a choice between two statements: “I am proud of many things about our form of government,” or “I can’t find much in our form of government to be proud of.” Over three quarters (76 percent) said that they were proud of our form of government, while 19 percent chose the negative response. To be sure, these answers were slightly more negative than they had been in 1972, where CPS asked the question for the first time. In 1972, this question was put to respondents in the pre-election wave of interviewing; the first option (“. . . proud of many things. . .”) was chosen over the second (“. . . can’t find much . . . to be proud of”) by 82 to 15 percent. The choice was presented to most of the same interviewees again in the post-election wave, and the margin was about the same (83 to 13 percent). Since the 1972–76 period included the Watergate scandals, it is not altogether surprising that the number of Americans who said they could not find much in our form of government to be proud of had grown by a few points. But they were still outnumbered four to one by those who said they were proud of many things about our system.

A question asked by the Roper organization revealed a positive trend in attitudes toward the political system during the 1970s. In June 1974, at the peak of the Watergate controversy, Roper asked respondents to select one of four characterizations of “our political system”: “basically sound and essentially good,” “basically sound but needs *some* improvement,” “not too sound, needs *many* improvements,” or “basically *unsound*, needs fundamental overhauling.” Fifty percent said that our political system is “basically sound” (8 percent “basically sound and essentially good” and 42 percent “basically sound but needs some improvement”). Roper repeated the question in February 1977. In the latter poll, the proportion saying that our political system is “basically sound” had grown by fully twenty points, to 70 percent (13 percent “basically sound and essentially good,” 57 percent “basically sound but needs some improvement”). Those replying that the political system is “not too sound, needs many improve-

ments” fell from 28 to 20 percent between 1974 and 1977, while the proportion choosing the most negative response, “basically unsound, needs fundamental overhauling,” declined sharply, from 19 to 7 percent. February 1977 was the first month of Jimmy Carter’s presidency, and the effect of his election appeared to show up in the replies to this question as well as to the other items reported above. The new president alleviated the intensity of Watergate-induced cynicism.

The four years of the Carter administration and the election of Ronald Reagan had little effect on these attitudes. If anything, positive feelings declined slightly. When Roper presented the same question to a national cross section in February 1981, 67 percent replied “basically good,” (14 percent “basically sound and essentially good” and 53 percent “basically sound but needs some improvement”). The percentage who felt that the political system is “not too sound” was 20, of whom 8 percent chose the “basically unsound” response. Seemingly, neither the Carter “malaise” nor the promises associated with a new president affected the public’s assessment of the “soundness” of the political system. In any case, that assessment remained relatively high.

The 1976 CPS survey also included the following query: “Some people believe a change in our whole form of government is needed to solve the problems facing our country, while others feel no real change is necessary. Do you think a big change is needed in our form of government, or should it be kept pretty much as it is?” About one quarter of the respondents (24 percent) said that we need a “big change” in our system of government, while an additional quarter (26 percent) replied that we need “*some* change” (the latter response was coded on the original questionnaire forms, presumably as a volunteered answer). Almost half (44 percent) felt that the system should be kept pretty much as it is.

The 50 percent of the sample who said that at least some changes were needed was then asked, “What kinds of changes in our form of government are you thinking of?” The answers most frequently given were criticisms of government waste and inefficiency (“let’s streamline the system,” “run government like a business,” “too much spending,” etc., mentioned by 11 percent of those who wanted a change); changes in the types of people involved in politics (“need more blacks in politics,” “get different people in,” etc., indicated by 4 percent); and criticisms of present-day politicians as untrustworthy and insincere (made by 4 percent). Thus, the reforms in the “system” that critics wanted were mostly changes in leadership and in the way the system is run, not changes in the underlying institutional structure. It appears that the trend of declining trust in government is focused on the performance of government and the behavior of public officials, and not on the system itself or the institutions and norms associated with it.

CONFIDENCE IN BUSINESS: TRENDS

What was happening to attitudes toward business as trust in government was declining? Were government and business perceived by the public as naturally

opposed forces, so that as faith in the one declined, confidence in the other went up? Or did they both share the general trend of declining trust in institutional leadership?

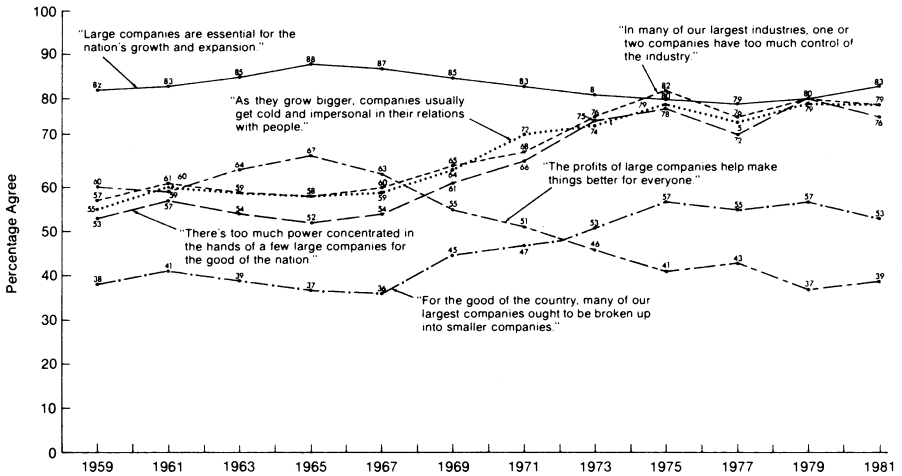
One polling organization, the Opinion Research Corporation (ORC), has been tracing attitudes toward business for about as long as the Michigan CPS has been dealing with trust in government, that is, since the late 1950s. ORC has administered a battery of six questions concerning large companies every two years since 1959. No other series of questions about business has been asked so regularly over such a long period of time. Two of the statements in the ORC series are worded favorably to business and four are worded unfavorably. Figure 6 shows the trends in the percentages agreeing with each statement.

The trend lines indicate that there was no significant increase in anti-business sentiment in the early 1960s. Indeed, there is evidence of a slightly pro-business trend between 1959 and 1965, as agreement with the two positive statements rose: “Large companies are essential for the nation’s growth and expansion” (from 60 percent in 1959 to 67 percent in 1965), and “the profits of large companies help make things better for everyone who buys their products or services” (from 82 percent in 1959 to 88 percent in 1965). The period 1961 to 1965 also witnessed a slight decrease in the expression of anti-business sentiment on the four negative indicators.

The period from 1965 to 1975, however, was one of enormous growth in anti-business feeling. Every biennial ORC survey during this period saw a significant increase in the percentage of the public agreeing with each of the anti-business statements. By 1973, a majority of the public had come to feel that “for the good of the country, many of our largest companies ought to be broken up into smaller companies.” And, in 1975, about 80 percent agreed with statements that “in many of our largest industries, one or two companies have too much control of the industry,” “as they grow bigger, companies usually get cold and impersonal in their relations with people,” and “there’s too much power concentrated in the hands of a few large companies for the good of the nation.” In 1965, by contrast, these same statements met with agreement from only 52–58 percent of the public. The two positive statements about business showed a corresponding trend of declining agreement. This was particularly true in the case of the statement that “the profits of large companies help make things better for everyone,” where agreement fell from 67 percent in 1965 to 41 percent in 1975.

The year 1977 saw a bit of relief from the post-1965 anti-business trend. For the first time in ten years, i.e., in five sequential polls, the percentages expressing anti-business attitudes declined, albeit only slightly (about 5 percent). Other survey questions about business, for which the trend lines do not go back as far as those in Figure 6, also reveal a positive shift around 1977; the evidence on these questions will be considered below. This modest recovery appears to parallel the slight improvement in sentiments about governments in 1977, the first year of Jimmy Carter’s presidency, as documented above. But as the 1979 ORC data reveal, the recovery did not persist. The slight increases in public support

FIGURE 6
Attitudes Toward Business, 1959-81



Source: Opinion Research Corporation.

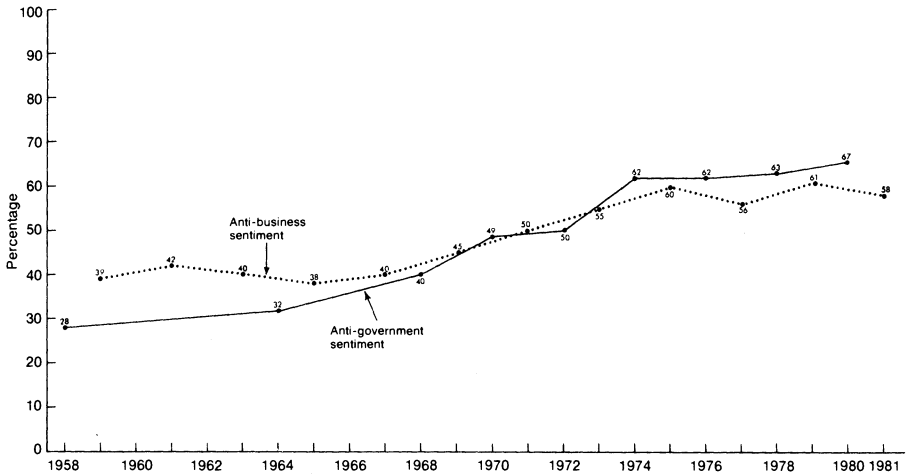
for business between 1975 and 1977 were reversed in 1979, and in most cases attitudes were more negative than they had been in 1975.

Ronald Reagan's first half-year in office was associated with a second improvement in attitudes toward business, but the recovery in 1981 was even more modest than in 1977, an average decline in anti-business sentiment of 3 percent. Thus, the view that "the profits of large companies help make things better for everyone" gained 2 percent support between 1975 and 1977, lost 6 percent between 1977 and 1979, and then regained 2 percent in 1981. Backing for the opinion that "there's too much power concentrated in the hands of a few large companies for the good of the nation" went down 6 percent from 1975 to 1977, moved up 8 percent between 1977 and 1979, and subsequently fell off 3 percent in 1981.

COMPARISON OF ANTI-BUSINESS AND ANTI-GOVERNMENT SENTIMENT

With the data that are available, it is possible to compare anti-business and anti-government trends. An index of anti-government sentiment was calculated by taking the average percentage expressing such attitudes on the four SRC/CPS questions shown in Figure 1. (These four trust-in-government questions were asked by SRC/CPS in 1958, 1964, 1968, and in every even-numbered—i.e., federal election—year thereafter.) An index of anti-business feeling was developed by taking the average anti-business percentage for the six ORC items in Figure 6. For the two items expressing views favorable to business, the percentage disagreeing was used. For the four negative statements, the anti-business

FIGURE 7
Average Trends in Anti-Business and
Anti-Government Sentiment, 1958-81



Source: Anti-Business Sentiment: Mean, Six Items (ORC, Odd Years).

Anti-Government Sentiment: Mean, Four Items (SRC/CPS, Even Years).

response was to agree. (The ORC questions were asked every two years, in odd-numbered years, from 1959 through 1981.) The resulting trends are shown in figure 7.

This figure illustrates how anti-business and anti-government sentiment have been rising together for fifteen years. Massive increases in hostility toward both institutions began to appear in the 1960s. As indicated earlier, anti-government sentiment rose sharply between 1964 and 1970 and then moved up slightly in 1972. The Watergate period witnessed another burst of hostility between 1972 and 1974. The anti-government trend leveled off in 1976, then rose a bit in 1978 and quite a bit more in 1980, to reach an all-time high of 67 percent.

Anti-business sentiment in Figure 7 tends to lag just behind anti-government sentiment. Attitudes toward business were, as noted, improving slightly until 1965. They fell a bit in 1967 and then became substantially worse after that. Anti-government feeling reached 62 percent in 1974, the year of Watergate; anti-business feeling peaked a year later, in 1975, during the mid-decade recession. The leveling-off of antipathy to government in 1976 was matched by a modest recovery in attitudes toward business in 1977. Both effects quickly wore off in 1979 and 1980, as inflation intensified. In 1979, anti-business sentiment was at its highest level since 1959. And in 1980, anti-government feeling was higher than at any time since 1958. Antagonism to business, however, fell off slightly in 1981.

Overall, anti-government sentiment climbed from an index number of 28 per-

cent in 1958 to 67 in 1980. That represents a 139 percent rate of increase over twenty-two years. The rise in anti-business feeling was less severe, from an index number of 39 percent in 1959 to 58 percent in 1981, a 49 percent rate of growth over twenty-two years. The notable parallelism in the two trends suggests that feelings about business and government may have been part of the same syndrome, an apparently broad loss of confidence in the leadership of our major political and economic institutions.

ATTITUDES TOWARD INDUSTRIES AND FIRMS

Further evidence of the generality of the decline may be found in the shift in attitudes toward many specific industries and major firms. Historically, levels of public confidence have tended to differ considerably from industry to industry and from firm to firm; but the trends in support over the last two decades have moved in tandem with the larger changes in the public mood that have just been examined.

The best evidence of this comes again from the Opinion Research Corporation, which has been doing regular polls on corporate and industry reputations for over twenty years. The biennial ORC studies have been probing company reputations since 1957 and industry images since 1965. The eleventh survey, taken in 1977, included data on thirty-two industries and sixty-nine companies. Respondents were first given a pack of cards with names of industries on them (aerospace, airline, aluminum, automobile, etc.). The interviewers then made the following request:

You probably know some of these industries better than others. Would you sort them on this card according to how well you feel you know each industry. In making your choice, take into account any of the ways you may have learned or heard about the industry.

The alternatives included "know very well," "know a fair amount," "know just a little," and "know almost nothing." A second request was then made of the respondents:

Now I'd like to know how favorable or unfavorable your opinions or impressions are of each industry. Would you please sort the cards here according to your overall impression of each industry. Take into account any of the things you think are important. Keep in mind we want your overall opinion.

Responses were coded "very" or "mostly" favorable, "very" or "mostly" unfavorable, "half and half," or "no opinion."

Finally, the same two requests were made about the considerably larger group of companies: how familiar the respondent was with each company, and whether respondents felt favorable or unfavorable, on the whole, toward each one. The only difference between the company and the industry inquiries was that the response, "never heard of the company," was allowed, and those totally

FIGURE 8

Industry and Company Familiarity and Favorability Ratings

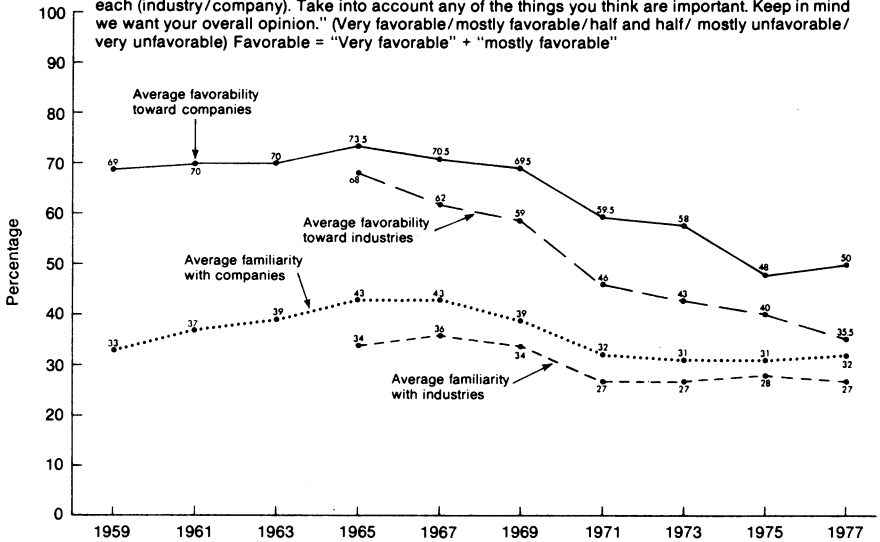
Average Familiarity and Favorability Ratings: 8 Industries and 22 Companies, 1959-77*

Familiarity question:

"You probably know some of these (industries/companies) better than others. Would you sort them on this card according to how well you feel you know each (industry/company). In making your choice, take into account any of the ways you may have learned or heard about the (industry/company)." (Know very well/know a fair amount/know just a little/know almost nothing) Familiar = "Know very well" + "Know fairly well"

Favorability question:

"Now I'd like to know how favorable or unfavorable your opinions or impressions are of each (industry/company). Would you please sort the cards here according to your overall impression of each (industry/company). Take into account any of the things you think are important. Keep in mind we want your overall opinion." (Very favorable/mostly favorable/half and half/ mostly unfavorable/ very unfavorable) Favorable = "Very favorable" + "mostly favorable"



*Industries: Aluminum, Automobile, Chemical, Electrical Equipment and Appliances, Food and Food Products, Oil and Gasoline, Steel, and Tire and Rubber. Companies: Amoco, Dow, du Pont, Eastman Kodak, Exxon, Ford, General Electric, General Motors, Goodyear, Gulf, IBM, Mobil, Monsanto, RCA, Reynolds, Sears, Shell, Texaco, Union Carbide, U.S. Steel, and Westinghouse.

Source: Opinion Research Corporation.

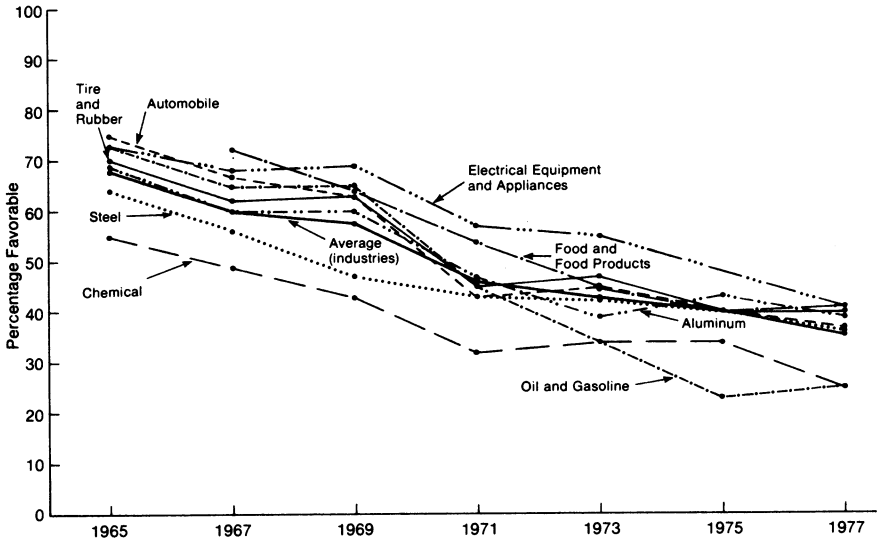
unfamiliar with a company were not asked their favorability toward it. The results are shown in Figures 8, 9, and 10.

Eight industries were included in virtually every ORC poll from 1965 to 1977: aluminum, automobile, chemical, electrical equipment and appliances, food and food products, oil and gasoline, steel, and tire and rubber. Similarly, ORC has inquired about twenty-two companies on a regular basis from 1959 to 1977, including the following major national firms: Alcoa, American Telephone and Telegraph, Amoco, Dow Chemical, du Pont, Exxon, Ford, General Motors, IBM, Mobil, Sears, Shell, Texaco, and Union Carbide.

Figure 8 shows the average familiarity with and favorability toward these eight industries and twenty-two companies in each survey. The most striking impression from this figure is the sharp decline in popularity of both industries and companies after 1965. Average favorability toward the eight industries fell from

FIGURE 9

Industry Favorability Ratings, 1965-77



Source: Opinion Research Corporation.

68 percent “very” or “mostly” favorable in 1965, to 62 percent favorable in 1967, 59 percent in 1969, then a steep decline to 46 percent favorable in 1971 and 35.5 percent in 1977. Fully one-third of the public, or half of those favorable to these industries in 1965, had lost confidence by 1977.

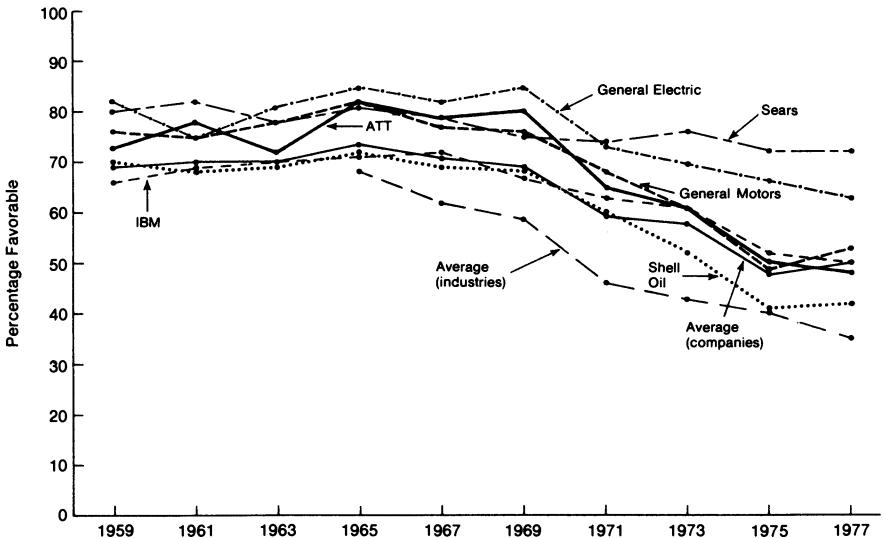
Since sentiment toward companies can be traced back further, to 1959, the timing of the loss of confidence in them can be more precisely specified. Approval of the twenty-two companies referred to above remained high for the first four biennial surveys: 69 percent “favorable” in 1959, 70 percent in 1961, 70 percent in 1963, and a high of 73.5 percent in 1965. The decline began after 1965: 70.5 percent positively inclined in 1967, 69.5 percent in 1969, 59.5 percent in 1971 (a drop of ten points), 58 percent in 1973, 48 percent in 1975 (another ten-point decline), and then a slight increase to 50 percent favorable in 1977.

Thus, a significant loss of faith in industries and companies took place between 1965 and 1975—precisely the same years when anti-business attitudes, as shown in Figure 6, and political distrust, as shown in Figure 1, were increasing most rapidly. The collapse of confidence in business appears to have been quite broad; it applied to business in general and to every major part of the business community.

The familiarity trends in Figure 8 show a surprising decline between 1965 and 1971 in the percentages of the public who claimed to know the average industry and company “very well” or “a fair amount.” It suggests that familiarity is partly a “confidence” measure. The decreasing sense of acquaintanceship on the part

FIGURE 10

Company Favorability Ratings, 1959-77



Source: Opinion Research Corporation.

of the public may indicate an increasing sense of remoteness from business and industry. Knowing little or nothing about a firm or industry may be a result of increasing disfavor, not a cause of it.

It is no accident that the trend line showing average favorability toward companies in Figure 8 is always higher than the line showing average positive feeling toward industries. The public tends to be more sympathetic toward specific firms than toward industries as a whole, as Figures 9 and 10 show. Thus, in 1977, 25 percent of the public felt positively toward the oil industry. But 39 percent expressed positive attitudes toward Amoco, 40 percent toward Texaco, 41 toward Exxon, 42 toward Shell Oil, and 43 toward Mobil and Gulf. The favorability rating of the automobile industry was 37 percent in 1977. But over half of the public, 53 percent, had a positive impression of General Motors and 54 percent felt the same way about the Ford Motor Company. The electrical appliance industry won a 41 percent favorability rating; the comparable figures for General Electric and Westinghouse were 63 and 61 percent, respectively. Thirty-nine percent of the public were positive about the aluminum industry, but 47 percent liked Alcoa and 52 percent approved of Reynolds. The chemical industry was near the bottom of the popularity list in 1977, with 25 percent favorable; but the figures for Dow Chemical (45 percent), Monsanto (49), and du Pont (51) were about twice as high.

Since almost every one of these companies had been heard of by over 90 percent of the public in 1977, the difference in these reactions is not likely to have been caused by the exclusion from the favorability ratings of those who had

never heard of the companies. These figures testify to the generality of the confidence phenomenon. It does not seem that negative experiences with specific companies have produced bad feelings about entire industries and about business in general. Such a causal ordering would require that favorability be lowest in the case of specific firms; that is clearly not the case. Instead, the more general the category, the lower the level of approval.

Although specific companies tended to be more popular than their respective industries, the fall-off in support over the period studied was still universal. Texaco, Shell, Exxon, Amoco, and Sunoco all went down 20–30 percent in the favorability ratings between 1967 and 1977. General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler lost 15–25 points. General Foods, Quaker Oats, Campbell's Soup, and Kellogg's declined 12–20 percent. Such familiar trade names as IBM, Xerox, Westinghouse, and General Electric fell by 15–22 percent. Such less familiar ones as Allied Chemical, Monsanto, and Union Carbide also lost favor, by 15, 10, and 17 percent, respectively. Even "Ma Bell," AT&T, saw its positive rating drop by 31 points between 1967 and 1977, while its minor competitor, General Telephone, also went down in public esteem by 24 percent. The company that usually was the most highly regarded firm on the list—Sears, Roebuck—fell from 81 percent favorable in 1965 to 72 percent favorable in 1977. Not a single industry out of twenty-five and not a single firm out of fifty actually improved its public reputation between the late 1960s and the late 1970s.

ATTITUDES TOWARD LABOR UNIONS

There is some evidence to indicate that labor also shared in these trends. Unfortunately, no survey organization has regularly asked a large battery of questions concerning the labor movement comparable to those asked about government and business over the past twenty years. Four polls, those of Gallup, Harris, National Opinion Research Center, and Opinion Research Corporation, have inquired from time to time about approval or disapproval of labor unions and about confidence in labor leaders. These surveys show a by-now familiar drop-off in support after 1965. The Gallup question is: "In general, do you approve or disapprove of labor unions." Approval declined continually from 71 percent in 1965 to 55 percent in 1981, while the proportion disapproving rose from 19 to 35 percent. Those expressing "a great deal of confidence" in the leaders of organized labor in twenty-four Harris and NORC surveys taken between 1966 and 1981 fell from 22 percent in 1966 to 12 percent in 1981. On the average, labor leaders ranked lower in the Harris—NORC surveys than leaders of all the other major institutions.

CONCLUSION

The evidence examined so far reveals a sharp decline of public faith in government, business, and labor since the mid-1960s. The marked parallelism of the

confidence trends indicates that the loss of faith occurred most rapidly between 1964 and 1975 and that it applied very broadly to all three institutions and their leaders. Nor has the situation improved significantly since 1975. The business recovery and the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976–77 seemed to lift public spirits a bit, but only temporarily. Negative feelings resumed at the end of the decade as hyperinflation set in. By 1981, anti-government, anti-business, and anti-labor sentiment had all reached record high levels and most polls taken during the ensuing economic recession indicated a continuation of the trend.

National surveys conducted between 1981 and 1983 measuring confidence in institutions have produced contradictory results, although they all agree that confidence has remained low. Harris and National Opinion Research Center (NORC) polls reported a continuing decline, while one taken by the Center for Political Studies (CPS) indicated an upswing. Responding to five questions designed to measure alienation from the society and polity, Harris reported as of February 1983 that “a record high 62 percent of Americans have expressed sad and bitter alienation toward those running the society and feel powerless to do anything about it.”¹¹ Similarly, confidence in the leadership of ten major institutions, both public and private, surveyed by Harris since 1966 and by NORC since 1973 using the same format, reached all-time lows in surveys taken by Harris in late October and early November 1982 and by NORC in February to April 1983. The average level dropped by two percentage points in Harris between the fall of 1981 and 1982, and by the same percentage in NORC between the spring of 1982 and 1983.¹² The proportions expressing “A great deal of confidence” in “the executive branch of the federal government,” fell much more than the average in both polls, down from 24 percent in 1981 to 16 percent in 1982 in Harris and from 19 percent in 1982 to 13 percent in 1983 in NORC.

These results are countered, however, by a poll taken by CPS in November 1982. In response to four questions designed to measure confidence in government, the Michigan pollsters found an increase in trust in government, which, with the exception of blacks, “occurred equally across most demographic groups.”¹³ It is difficult to explain the variations in the findings between Harris and NORC and CPS other than the fact that they asked differently worded questions and that CPS focused on evaluations of the way the federal government operates, while the others dealt with confidence in institutions or the way respondents felt themselves treated by society. Still, it should be noted that the

¹¹ Louis Harris, “Alienation Rises to Record Highs,” *The Harris Survey*, 17 March 1983, 1. For a full text of the Harris questions and a discussion of the earlier results, see S. M. Lipset and William Schneider, *The Confidence Gap: Business, Labor and Government* (New York: Free Press, 1983), 110–11.

¹² For a review and analysis of the studies of confidence studied by Harris, NORC, and other polls, see Lipset and Schneider, *The Confidence Gap*, 13–96. See also Louis Harris, “Public Confidence in Institutions is Down,” *The Harris Survey*, 25 November 1982, 1–3.

¹³ Arthur Miller, “Is Confidence Rebounding?” *Public Opinion* 6 (June/July 1983):17.

proportion giving cynical responses compared to trusting ones in the 1982 CPS survey remained lower than that found in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Those expressing cynicism about government continued to far outnumber those voicing trust, by an average of 24 percent, compared to 10 percent in 1972.

Public criticism appears to be directed at the performance of these institutions and their leaders: their competence, trustworthiness, and integrity. There is no evidence of any serious downturn in people's evaluation of their own political competence ("internal efficacy") or any loss of faith in the structure and norms of the political system as a whole ("civic duty," confidence in the political system). The business data suggest that people's hostility is directed at the performance of institutions generally (large companies and industries) rather than specific companies and firms. Thus, the decline of confidence appears to be general in nature but not fundamental or systemic: the system is good, but it is not performing well because the people in charge are inept and untrustworthy.

What, if anything, can be done to improve confidence in government? Americans have not turned against the political system itself. They still see it as fundamentally good. The problem in their eyes lies in inadequate, inept, and even corrupt leadership. Such sentiments suggest that any effort to change the low level of confidence in government must focus not on changing public attitudes, as President Carter proposed in his July 1979 speech, but on making government more responsive and effective in dealing with the key problems of society. As Arthur Miller has pointed out:

Current distrust of authorities and institutions does not necessarily mean that citizens want a change in the basic democratic form of government. On the contrary, their discontent means that government is perceived as functioning in a manner which deviates from their normative expectations of honesty, competence, efficiency, equity and responsiveness.¹⁴

In other words, the problem is not primarily attitudinal. It is essentially substantive. More intelligent and skillful leadership and more effective government are necessary before confidence in government can be restored. The problem is, they may not be sufficient. That is because a number of important interests in our society have a stake in maintaining public doubts about government. These interests include the press and especially the broadcast media, which have found that "bad news" is more effective than "good news" in competing for the attention of the mass audience. Politicians may also try to foster a defeatist attitude as a form of self-justification: "I haven't done particularly well in solving the nation's problems because they are complex and beyond the control of *any* political leader." Finally, if the ideological polarization of our two major parties continues—Democrats to the left, Republicans to the right—they will be less and less likely to find areas of consensus, to agree on solutions, or to accept each other's apparent successes.

¹⁴ Arthur Miller, "Institutional Focus of Political Distrust," 47.

Even if things do get better, we are saying, the political system has developed certain inhibitions against spreading the news that it is really so; indeed, certain groups may have an incentive to sustain the belief that things are worse than they really are. As Warren Miller has put it: "The continuing sense of malaise may also flow from the rather pervasive mood of concern, if not pessimism, that has been consistently conveyed both by the elected leaders and by the articulate, self-selected activists and spokespersons for various causes over recent years."¹⁵ Thus, in order for the trends in political confidence to reverse, things will not just have to get better; they will have to get better in such a clear and palpable way that the public will pay no attention to the inevitable voices of cynicism and disbelief.

¹⁵ Warren Miller, "Crisis of Confidence," 60.