

PUBLIC OPINION AND PUBLIC REGARD FOR THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

by

Tom W. Smith*
and
D. Garth Taylor*
with
Nancy A. Mathiowetz

National Opinion Research Center
University of Chicago

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INTRODUCTION

Analyses of public regard for the federal government, trust in government and confidence in government are in great demand. Compared to other opinion measures, the trust and confidence questions are second only to the polls on presidential popularity in the amount of attention they receive by lawmakers and policymakers. In spite of the publicity and scholarly attention, the trends in public confidence are still enigmatic to the policymaker and the professional opinion researcher alike. No one disagrees that the level of public trust was lower in the middle 1970s than it was in the 1960s or early 1970s. Each of us also has a general sense of why. We locate the cause in the exposure of government deception during the Vietnam War and during Watergate, in the "discovery" of deceptive or unsafe business practices by consumer protection groups or in the frustrations of an inflation-recession economy. But a refined, statistical understanding of the recent trends in confidence and trust has so far eluded us. From the point of view of opinion researchers, loss of trust has been an "across the board" shift. The ethnic and demographic subgroups which have normally differed in their interests and competed for success in the political arena do not differ among themselves on the issue of trust and confidence in government (House and Mason 1974). Because of this the constituencies on the "trust" issue have been hard to define politically and the issue has therefore been a difficult one to turn to political advantage. The exception to this rule has been the "fresh faces" who have successfully challenged incumbent officeholders on

the ground that the latter have been tainted by their exposure to the federal bureaucracy.

The loss of confidence has been described as "across the board" in at least one other way as well. The decline in trust in major business corporations has been partly explained by the fact that "things are tough all over" (Lipset and Schneider 1978). By this the authors mean that public confidence in a great many national institutions (e.g., the legislature, the courts, organized religion) is sagging, that the phenomenon is endemic to the social order and that the causes and/or consequences of the decline cannot be placed uniquely at the door of any particular institution.

Not only have the trends in trust and confidence been hard to explain statistically, but the research has not been done to show the effect of a loss of confidence. In other words, we all have a sense that the trends should not be ignored, but we are hard put to say exactly what they mean--what are the consequences of a loss in confidence for the leaders or for the institutions in question. Some say that the confidence questions simply measure a transient national mood (Ladd 1976-77) or the popularity of the president (Citrin 1974). Others write as if fundamental questions of national legitimacy and national purpose were at stake (e.g., Miller 1974).

In this report we address the issues raised in the introduction in as much detail as possible. Our ultimate goal is a description of the trends in confidence and an analysis of the causes and consequences of these trends. We begin in section two (the next section) with a description of trends in the question asking for confidence in the leaders of the executive branch of the federal government. This is the Harris question that has received so much national attention. Section three reports the results from a special study done by / the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) in which we asked people what they meant by their replies to the confidence question. Section four continues the analysis of overall changes in public opinion by examining trends in other items that are related to the meaning of the confidence questions.

The last three sections are concerned with the causes and implications of the trends in confidence. Section five examines the completeness of the most common explanations of trends in confidence-- the "party in power" effect and the effect of the popularity of the incumbent. Section six examines the question of whether or not there are general moods of confidence that affect all national institutions alike. By examining the data for these issues, we come to a more general understanding of the transient and long-term components of the trends in public confidence. In the final section we discuss the implications of the trends in confidence for the society at large.

TRENDS IN PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN GOVERNMENT

According to our search of the General Social Survey (GSS) data archives at NORC, there were twenty-five surveys of the national adult population between 1966 and March, 1977 done by either NORC or the Harris Poll which asked a version of the following question: "I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say that you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?" Then follows a list which typically includes institutions such as Organized Religion, Banks and Financial Institutions, Organized Labor, and The Executive Branch of the Federal Government. Occasionally, more exotic special interests are featured in the Harris list such as Household Cleaner Manufacturers, Local Trash Collectors, and the people running Ralph Nader (sic). One of the barriers to a trend analysis of the confidence questions is that for these surveys it can be said with nearly 100 percent accuracy that no two administrations of the confidence question are alike. Surveys differ in the position of the confidence question in the questionnaire, the introduction to the list of institutions, the number and order of institutions asked about in the list, the timing of the survey (there are only one or two cases where GSS and Harris did surveys during the same field period) and in the mechanics of questionnaire administration (the NORC surveys handed the respondent a card with the response categories printed on it while the Harris surveys did not).

Turner and Krauss (1978) have raised the question of whether these survey questions are too "fallible" to be analyzed as a time series. The statistical analyses which we report here support our belief in the general validity of the construct of "confidence" and in the comparability between the

NORC and Harris data sources. We are conducting further methodological analyses along lines suggested by the Turner and Krauss article, and these will be reported in a subsequent publication.

The conclusion from this research is that we are safe in presenting and interpreting the results from the nineteen surveys described earlier which included the question measuring confidence in the executive branch of the federal government.

In this analysis we concentrate on the trends in confidence between 1972 and March, 1977. This was a turbulent period in American political history and in no way should it be considered a typical time for studying trends in confidence. On the other hand, almost all of the available data points are concentrated in this period. We prefer to concentrate on the detailed pattern of changes corresponding to the sudden emergence of political events rather than on the broader sweep of change since the 1960s which has been discussed by other authors.

The trends from 1972 to 1977 in the percent having a great deal of confidence in the executive branch of the federal government are shown in Figure 1. This figure shows the results from the Harris and the GSS surveys separately, the Harris results in the solid line and the GSS results in the dotted line. Except for a period in summer

1974 and again in summer 1976, the two lines are quite close together. The general pattern of change is a decline in confidence between 1972 and March 1974; a leveling off (except for some fluctuations) and then an increase in confidence after June 1976.

(Figure 1 here)

To aid in the interpretation of Figure 1 we have constructed a time line showing the political events occurring during the field period or shortly before the field period for each survey. This chart, along with the percent reporting a great deal of confidence in each survey are shown in Table 1.

(Table 1 here)

Table 1 and Figure 1 are well worth a detailed reading. They document several of the characteristics of public opinion (and of the confidence items in particular) that we often believe are true but are sometimes uneasy assuming because of past disappointments which resulted from projecting too much of our own rationality into our speculations about the public philosophy.

The changes in confidence are best understood by dividing Figure 1 into three historical periods. The first period--October 1972 to March 1974-- shows a steady decline in confidence and corresponds to the erosion of Nixon's hold on the presidency after his landslide victory over McGovern in November 1972. In August 1974 the level of confidence is suddenly quite high again and this point corresponds to the inauguration of Gerald Ford as Nixon's successor in the White House.

During the period of Ford's presidency--from August 1974 to July 1976 on our graph--the level of public confidence shows a sudden drop, corresponding to his pardon of Nixon, and then a slower decline

with fluctuations which might be attributed to other national political events (such as the rise in confidence during the weeks preceding the bicentennial).

The third period, the Carter presidency--January 1977 to March 1977 on our graph--begins with a level of confidence that is about as high as any other time measured since 1972.

It is clear from Figure 1 and Table 1 that there are meaningful short-term changes in confidence. The percentages are influenced by changes in the political environment, or to put it another way, confidence is at least partly episodic. The political environment and the level of confidence can change greatly within a brief span of time, which means that surveys of public confidence taken even a month or two apart should not necessarily be considered to be exact replications of the same procedures on the same population.

The fact that the confidence questions are susceptible to short-term influences places them in the category of "volatile" social indicators. In interpreting shifts in confidence, the question naturally arises-- how important are the short-term changes? We attempt to answer this question in various ways in this report. First we examine what people mean when they say they are confident in the executive branch and we compare trends in confidence with trends for other indicators of attitudes toward the government and toward officeholders. Toward the end of the report we study some of the direct and indirect impacts on society of a loss in confidence in government. We begin our study of the meaning of the confidence questions with an analysis of some additional data which were collected in 1978 by NORC.

THE MEANING OF "CONFIDENCE"

On the 1978 General Social Survey a random subsample participated in a post-interview debriefing on the confidence questions. They were asked two questions about the meaning of the concept of confidence:

When we ask about "confidence" in these questions, what does that word mean to you?

Is there a word or phrase that would be more clear than "confidence" but would describe the same idea?

The object of these questions was to see if respondents understood the word confidence and to see how they defined it. In Table 2 their responses are grouped into twelve major categories. Approximately 95 percent

of the respondents were able to give a reasonable definition of confidence. Only 2.2 percent declined to offer a definition--close to the level who give a "don't know" reply to a typical attitude item. Another 3 percent gave a response that could not be considered a reasonable definition, most commonly consisting of attempts to define confidentiality. Of the 95 percent giving appropriate definitions the overall favorite choice was that confidence in the people running institutions means trusting them. Almost 35 percent mentioned the word "trust" in their response. In addition the closely related terms "having faith" or "believing in" the leaders were selected by 10 percent and 12 percent, respectively. Also closely related to the idea of "trust" were 4 percent mentioning "honesty," "truthfulness," or some related term and the 2 percent replying that it meant you could be "sure" or "certain" of the leaders.

(Table 2 here)

Another major emphasis in the definition was on capability. Almost 16 percent stated that having confidence in the people running institutions meant thinking that the leaders were competent and had the intellectual and practical abilities needed to carry out their duties. Related to this notion, as well as to the trust dimension were those definitions emphasizing dependability. This 3 percent tended to blend together the trust and capability dimension and considered these two features to be part of dependability.

A third major distinction was made by the 3 percent that mentioned the common good. They stated that having confidence meant knowing the leaders were acting in the best interest of the country, that they were doing what the common welfare required rather than following either the wishes of special interests or their own personal inclinations.

The final major distinction was in sharp contrast to the common good concept. This group (2 percent) stated that having confidence meant that the leadership was doing things that the respondent approved of, that they were carrying out policies that the respondent personally favored.

These different emphases were not always mutually exclusive. Twelve and a half percent of respondents gave multiple responses. For all categories except miscellaneous and dependability, trust was the category most commonly accompanying other choices. For example, of the people mentioning capability 30 percent also mentioned some other concept with 10 percent of them also using the word "trust." Similarly, of those choosing the common good 42 percent also included another category with "trust" again leading. Of the four major dimensions only the common good and approval did not overlap at all.

When asked for a substitute term for the confidence, the majority (58 percent) replied that there was no preferable word and that confidence was fully satisfactory. Those that offered alternatives gave the same list of terms they had mentioned previously with 20 percent naming trust (or 48 percent of those mentioning an alternative), 4 percent faith, 3.5 percent believing in, 3 percent dependability, 3 percent honesty, 2 percent capability, 1 percent respect, 1 percent approval, and 5 percent miscellaneous and incorrect. Compared to the high level giving an acceptable definition to confidence (95 percent), the low level giving an alternative (42 percent) indicates that confidence is a meaningful and perhaps even preferred term for the evaluation of institutional leadership.

In general, then, confidence means to the vast majority of people trusting or having faith in the leadership, while a secondary group emphasizes competence, and much smaller groups stress the concepts of serving either the common good or personal interests.

CONFIDENCE AND TRUST: THE CHANGING NATIONAL MOOD

Following from our understanding of the public's conception of "confidence", we interpret the trends in Figure 1 to mean that the national mood has changed such that people are less trusting of the objectives and leaders of the executive branch of the federal government. We are less likely to believe that the executive branch (and other national institutions) will govern themselves in a way which is mindful of the common weal and there are even questions as to whether institutions can administer themselves competently.

There are several other time series which are companions to the trends we have observed in confidence in the executive branch. These are the Michigan (SRC) questions on political cynicism, the Michigan questions on political efficacy and the Harris alienation items.

The longest series on political cynicism comes from the election surveys conducted by the Center for Political Studies, Survey Research Center, University of Michigan. Since 1958 these surveys have

included a political cynicism scale comprised of the following questions:

1. Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?
2. Do you think that people in the government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don't waste very much of it?
3. Do you feel that almost all of the people running the government are smart people who usually know what they are doing, or do you think that quite a few of them don't seem to know what they are doing?
4. 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?
5. Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are a little crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked at all?

The wordings vary slightly some years. Except for the change in the crookedness item between 1972 and 1974, none of the variations are notable. (question number 5)

In 1974 and 1976 the crookedness item dropped the phrases "a little" and "at all" thereby making it harder to give a cynical response.

In Table 3 the proportion giving the cynical or mistrusting responses to each of these items is shown. Looking at the individual items in the scale we see that from 1964 to 1976 the proportion believing that special interests rule more than doubled, from 31 percent to 73 percent. The proportion believing that taxes are being wasted climbed from 45 percent in 1958 to 76 percent in 1976. Those thinking that

leaders are not smart rose from 39 percent to 53 percent; mistrust went from 24 percent in 1958 to 66 percent in 1976; and suspicions of crookedness climbed from 26 percent in 1958 to 38 percent in 1972. The revised version of the question hit 47 percent in 1974 before it tapered off to 44 percent in 1976.

(Table 3 here)

Personal political efficacy (a person's sense that he or she can influence the political system and governmental decision making) follows a trend distinct from political cynicism and alienation. Michigan's three-point scale asks:

1. People like me don't have any say about what the government does.
2. Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on.
3. Voting is the only way that people like me can have any say about how the government runs things.

In general this scale shows a slight rise in efficacy in the 1952-1960 period, stability in the 1968-1976 period, but with a major drop in likelihood between. The story line is complicated, however, by the / that the meaning of the vote-only question changed between 1964 and 1968. The

upsurge in civil rights demonstrations, anti-war protests, and other acts of civil disobedience empirically disproved the idea that voting was the only way to influence the government. This may account for the rise in inefficacy shown by the other measures in the mid-sixties at the same time as there is a decline in inefficacy on the vote item.

For further discussion of the problems with this item

see Converse, 1972; House and Mason, 1975; and Wright, 1976 .

In sum, it appears that even though both political cynicism and inefficacy have increased, the pattern and magnitude of the changes have been different. Cynicism has increased dramatically since 1958 with large increases in 1964-1968 due to Vietnam and in 1972-1974 due to Watergate. Inefficacy on the other hand has increased moderately with most of the rise in the mid-sixties and no Watergate effect in the early seventies.

The trends of the political cynicism scale are mirrored by changes in the Michigan questions on governmental responsiveness ("Over the years, how much attention do you feel the government pays to what the people think when it decides what to do: a good deal, some, or not much") and concern ("I don't think public officials care much what people like me think."). Both show increases in alienation since the mid-or early sixties.

Table 4 indicates that the rise in cynicism was paralleled in the seventies by Louis Harris's index of alienation. This five-item scale asks people to agree or disagree with the following statements:

1. The people running the country don't really care what happens to you.
2. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.
3. What you think doesn't count very much anymore.
4. You're left out of things going on around you.
5. Most people with power try to take advantage of people like yourself.

(Table 4 here)

As Watergate unravelled between 1972 and late 1973, the alienation index (the average of responses to the five items) went up 15 percentage points. A slight drop appeared in August 1974 when Gerald Ford assumed office but by September, after Nixon's pardon, alienation moved up again. (Gallup's measure of presidential popularity or approval also fell sharply during this period). Alienation continued to rise into 1976, but sometime between then and 1978 recovered to some extent since the 1978 General Social Survey showed a decline in all measures of alienation. In brief, the alienation index shows the same upward growth in mistrust as the political cynicism scale and likewise shows a large Watergate upsurge.

Each of these trends supports the interpretation we have offered of the meaning and sensitivity of the confidence in government question. When we look at these trends together, we can see that the recent decline in confidence in government is not only registered by the confidence questions: other measures of the national mood show similar changes

beginning much earlier than 1972.

One difference between the items reported in this section and the confidence items is in the volatility of the trends. There is little evidence that the trust or alienation items change as rapidly as the confidence items. (On the other hand they are not asked as often and so we cannot be completely sure of this statement.) We believe that the trust and alienation items are less sensitive to short-term political influences than the confidence questions. The question which remains is: How volatile are the confidence questions? Are they short-term reflections of the popularity of the incumbent or are they somewhere between the presidential popularity questions and the trust/alienation questions in their sensitivity to short-term influences? To answer this question we take a more detailed look at the causes of confidence in government.

WHAT CAUSES CONFIDENCE IN THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH OF GOVERNMENT?

The work that has been published to date has not really explained the causes of change in the level of public confidence. We do not have a well-developed picture of / ^{the particular stimuli} people respond to in gauging their sense of confidence in those running the executive branch of the federal government or in other institutions. Miller (1974) has suggested that confidence is related to policy position, those who disagree with the policies of the incumbent will be less confident in the executive branch. Citrin (1974) puts the issue more simply. He argues that confidence is an alternative measure of presidential popularity.

Citrin, and others who minimize the importance of the confidence questions, base part of their argument on the "party in power" effect--the finding that those who identify with the party in power are more confident. Figure 2 shows the differences in confidence in the executive by political party affiliation. During the Nixon era there are large differences, with Republicans 15 to 25 percent more likely to have a great deal of confidence. During the Ford era the differences are in the same direction but smaller. And during the Carter era the differences are still smaller but they are in the opposite direction--Democrats are more confident in the executive branch.

It is interesting to note, from this perspective, that self-designated Independents are like a party that is continually out of power as far as confidence in the executive is concerned. During the Republican eras they are about as confident as Democrats and during the Democrat eras they are about as confident as Republicans.

(Figure 2 here)

The "party in power" effect also applies to voting behavior. People who voted for the victor are more likely than people who did not to have confidence in the executive branch. The data are shown in Table 5.

(Table 5 here)

Both of these demonstrations of the "party in power" effect support the argument that confidence is a transient mood which responds to the popularity of the President and other momentary frustrations or "issue" dissatisfactions. If this interpretation of confidence is correct democratic theorists should take heart because it suggests that citizens who are disaffected will be brought back into the system if and when their candidate is elected.

The question of the importance of the confidence trends can only be answered if we can control for some of the "transient" factors that affect opinion. One issue that must be studied is the extent to which replies to the confidence question are measures of an incumbent's popularity as an individual. Fortunately, there are data available that address this point directly. Between 1972 and 1976 there are six Harris surveys that contain the confidence-in-government question and also a question about the respondent's confidence in the particular person holding office at the time. The wording of the latter question is: "Let me ask you about some specific things (INCUMBENT) has done. In inspiring confidence personally in the White House would you rate him excellent, pretty good, only fair or poor?" Table 6 shows the percent responding in each of the four categories. The trends in this item closely parallel the trends in the item measuring confidence in the executive branch (see Table 1).

(Table 6 here)

If confidence in the executive branch is really a measure of the appeal of the incumbent, then the rating of the incumbent's personal ability to inspire confidence should be highly correlated with one's level of confidence in the executive branch. The Pearson correlation between these measures is usually about .35. This is a high enough correlation that we cannot deny that it is difficult to disentangle the personal appeal of an incumbent from one's sense of trust in the executive branch of government. There is, however, a great deal of variation in confidence which is not explained by the personal appeal of the officeholder. We can gain some sense of the source of this unexplained variation by examining the crosstabulation of the two confidence measures at each of the six points in time. These data are displayed in Table 7.

(Table 7 here)

The correlations between personal appeal and confidence are higher for Nixon than for Ford. This could be due to the particular nature of the Nixon / ^{presidency} or it could be explained by the fact that the Nixon correlations were taken at the end of a long incumbency and the lower Ford correlations represent the effect of a shorter period of acquaintance with the officeholder. The latter interpretation is supported by the observation that the lowest correlation in the table is the one for August, 1974, the month of Ford's inauguration. This suggests that offices and institutions become personalized during the incumbent's tenure. It also supports the more general argument that issues and personalities become clarified during the course of an incumbency.

In addition to rating the incumbent's personal ability to inspire confidence in the White House, respondents used the same categories

to rate the incumbent's accomplishments in several different areas including working for peace, handling Russia, handling Congress, managing the economy, controlling inflation and cutting government spending. Each of these ratings showed the same pattern of correlation with confidence in the executive as did the rating of Ford's ability to personally inspire confidence. The correlations were all low in August, 1974 (i.e., all around .20) and then all rose quickly during Ford's incumbency, with the economic issues rising further (.35-.40) than the foreign policy issues (.25-.30). It is interesting to note that the correlations rose faster for Democrats and Independents than for Republicans. The increase between August 1974 and September 1974 in the correlations between the evaluation of Ford's efforts and confidence in the executive branch took place only for those who considered themselves Democrats or Independents. The increase in the correlation between evaluation and confidence for Republicans took place between September 1974 and February 1976.

We can summarize this set of findings by saying that public opinion during Ford's reign was generally favorable, confident, and loosely structured at the beginning of his incumbency. His reception was uncritical in the sense that a favorable (or unfavorable) sense of confidence in the executive was only slightly related to one's evaluation of his efforts in particular issue areas. This could be due to a general glow which surrounds incumbents during the early months of their term / (Mueller, 1970, 1973; Stimson, 1976) or to the fact that very few people knew much about Ford when he took office. What happens then is that issues become defined and the standards are set by which people will judge the success of an incumbency and, partly, their confidence in the office. This process is set in motion

faster for those who are "out of power" (or for people who are Democrats and Independents) than for those who identify with the party in power. In time, however, all adopt the same criteria for evaluation, regardless of political affiliation.

Confidence in the incumbent is clearly tied to the confidence people express in the executive branch. It is one of the things people take into account when they arrive at their overall assessment. There are other criteria for confidence, however. In particular, the office will be assessed on the basis of the incumbent's ability to successfully deal with the salient issues of the day. (Smith, 1978 shows that in Ford's day the salient issues were mostly economic.) An incumbent who is sensitive to public opinion would try to manage the image of his administration in such a way that the issues which are strongly correlated with confidence and approval are the ones which he is seen as most successful in handling.

We believe that Table 7 shows that although the two concepts are related, there is a significant difference between confidence in the President personally and confidence in the executive branch. In addition to the observations in the previous paragraphs, we note that half of those who rate the President as doing a "poor" job in personally inspiring confidence still say that they have at least "some" confidence in the executive branch.

What are some of the other factors besides popularity of the incumbent and issue dissatisfaction which people might respond to in determining their level of confidence in the executive? There is the possibility that political eras are characterized by different levels of confidence in government and possibly by different levels of confidence in most major national institutions. The extreme of this argument is that the confidence in government question is actually an insensitive measure because it merely reflects the national "mood" of confidence toward a great many institutions. Let us consider some of the evidence on this point.

A GENERAL MOOD OR DIFFERENT RESPONSES TO DIFFERENT INSTITUTIONS?

The simplest way to answer this question is to study the level of confidence in several different institutions simultaneously. Table 8 examines trends in confidence in the nine institutions which are most often included in the Harris and NORC lists. For each institution we show the average level of confidence within five different historical periods. Sometimes the average is based on one or two surveys, sometimes on several. Not all of the institutions are named in all of the surveys so it is necessary to pool the results in this way to make maximum use of the data.

(Table 8 here)

By calculating change scores between each historical period we can determine how each institution was affected by the events which occurred. Our general observation is that when one institution goes down, they all tend to be in decline and when one goes up, they are all going up. In this sense there is a general mood of confidence which affects all institutions.

To end the analysis here, however, obscures several important findings. Within the general trends institutions change at different rates and it is not always the same institutions which change the fastest. During 1967 to 1973, which corresponds to the ascendancy of Nixon and the worst years of the Vietnam war, the military, big business and the Congress showed particularly notable declines. During the next era, 1973 to 1974 (Watergate), the Congress and the executive branch lead the decline. Interestingly, the military and the press gained in confidence during this period. During the latter part of Ford's presidency, a period characterized by recession and economic worries, medicine, business and the military show the greatest losses.

It can be argued that during each of these three periods the institutions showing the greatest declines were the ones most nearly responsible for the crisis shaping that period--the "military-industrial complex" in the 1960s, the crooks during Watergate, and the institutions which cost a lot to maintain during the recession. The reasoning here is admittedly ad hoc, but the analysis in the last section provides some further ground for our conclusion. There we found that issues vary in the extent to which they predict confidence in the executive, depending on the salience of the issue. Now we find that institutions vary in the extent to which they are affected by particular changes occurring in the society, depending on the extent to which an institution is seen as responsible for causing or solving a crisis. The picture of public opinion which is probably the most accurate is that there is a general climate of confidence in each period but that institutions play different roles in "leading" or being led by the general trend.

Our argument assumes that the "leading" institutions during any period are the ones that changed the most and that the changes in confidence in these institutions ought to be accounted for before any further analysis is made of the trend in support for the "lagging" institutions. This model raises interesting questions for the Watergate era. During this period some institutions lost greatly while others gained in confidence. It is not difficult to extend our ad hoc reasoning to explain the greater regard for the press. The military presents a greater difficulty. Perhaps it was the military alerts or the visibility of military officials (e.g., General Haig) in the waning moments of the Nixon administration which account for this increase in confidence. We note that during this period the GSS shows an increase in support for military spending. During the early months of the Carter administration there is the "new

incumbent" effect which raises support for the executive branch (the early months of the Ford administration are not shown in Table 9).

The final comment to be made on Table 8 is that not only are institutions differentially sensitive to social changes, but the rank order of institutions in terms of public confidence is substantially different in 1977 than it was ten years earlier. The military, big business and the Congress have suffered substantial declines in trust relative to the other institutions on the list.

The evidence on the determinants of the level of confidence in the executive branch suggests that this measure is of intermediate volatility. It is not as responsive to short-term changes as the Gallup (Kernell 1978a, 1978b; Brody and Page 1975; Monroe 1978; Kensi, 1977) and Harris measures of presidential popularity. On the other hand, it is not as steady or unambiguous in its movement/as the various trust and alienation measures which we have considered. The explanation which we have arrived at is that there are general levels or "plateaus" of confidence which characterize different historical or political periods. Within each period there are fluctuations in the level of confidence in the executive which depend on the "party in power effect", issue satisfaction, personal appeal of the incumbent and the other causes which we have discussed/ (for further discussion see especially Santi, 1978).

In terms of importance to the society, it is probably the long-term changes, the shifts from one plateau/which are of the greatest concern. And, within this perspective, it is not so much the fact of moving to a lower (or higher) plateau which is of direct importance to us as citizens or as social theorists. Rather, we are most interested in observing what changes in social institutions occur when the level of confidence is at a/low (or at a relatively high) level. We consider this argument in more detail in our next, concluding section.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHANGES IN CONFIDENCE

The ultimate test of the significance of the trends in confidence is not necessarily/whether an analysis of the level of confidence fluctuates. The ultimate test is in the implication of changes in confidence for other changes in the political system. There are two ways that changes in public confidence could cause changes in the political system. The first way involves changes in people who change their feelings of confidence. Changes in confidence have a direct effect on the political system if people behave differently because they have changed their level of confidence. For ^{example, various} / authors have attempted to link the changes in electoral participation and political party identification to change in the level of public confidence in the electoral system (e.g., Converse 1972). Another direct effect of a change in confidence would be people ^{withdrawing} / other visible kinds of support because they no longer trusted the decisions and/or decision makers in particular national institutions. An example is the current tax revolt. To what extent are people less willing to be taxed because they no longer trust the government? We have only indirect evidence on this question but Table 9 shows that people who are less confident in the executive branch are more likely to say that they are paying too much in taxes. We recognize the thorny issues in causal direction which are inherent in this analysis. Nevertheless, the issues of confidence and orientation to levels of taxation are related.

(Table 9 here)

Changes in confidence might also have indirect effects on the political system. It is usually very difficult to trace influences of public opinion on changes in government or changes in policy. However, public opinion creates a climate within which certain types of appeals and certain types of proposals have more or less legitimacy and more

or less likelihood of support if the issues are ever defined in such a way that a referendum or some other public display is in order. A decline in confidence creates a situation where the public sees a greater need for the candidates, leaders, and interest groups which act to insure that the institutions in question behave in a trustworthy manner.

We cannot study this effect by looking at opinion data alone. We need to look at social change which occurred during the time of a decline in trust. Whether or not we believe these changes were the result of the decline in trust depends on how we define the importance and impact of public opinion. It will always be hard to show a direct impact of opinion change on institutional change. On the other hand, we believe that it is unwise to deny that such an impact exists.

Some of the institutional changes which we believe are related to the decline in trust in the executive branch are: a greater public reliance on fact-finding and overseeing commissions such as Congressional committees; a more critical tone in public media and public news reporting; and the fact that it is no longer considered un-American to expose and criticize government actions which might have been considered secrets essential to national security even a few years ago.

These changes are sometimes described as elements of the post-Watergate morality. We believe that this observation does not go far enough in placing the Watergate investigations within the context of the changes in public trust which occurred before 1973.

The Watergate prosecutions and Congressional committees certainly had their impact on the public trust--particularly on the governmental agencies and incumbents most directly involved in the scandal. But the overseeing and investigating activities of the Congress, the press and citizen action groups such as Common Cause would have been pursued with much less vigor (and funding) if the credibility and legitimacy of these

groups had not already been established by the changes in public trust which were taking place before the early 1970s. A falling rate of confidence was both a cause and an effect of the Watergate era. In a social structural sense, a decline in confidence, such as the change which occurred before the Watergate era, creates a need for social institutions (i.e. investigative bodies, Congressional commissions) which monitor and "expose" the workings of government, business, or whatever institutions are losing credibility. One of the consequences of monitoring and exposure, however, is a continued fueling of the sense of a lack of trust in institutions. An indirect effect of a decline in confidence, then, is the creation of new institutions which act so as to ensure a continued lower level of confidence.

In spite of this gloomy prognosis, the data show that institutions can improve their level of public trust. The institutions which are hardest hit by a loss of confidence during any period of time are those which are seen as most directly responsible for causing or failing to solve the greatest social problems of that period. We find that there is an aura of public trust which influences most institutions during any period, but it is not necessarily the case that a decline in support for one institution is equally felt by all. Some institutions, in fact, rise while others fall. At the present time, we are in a period of low trust in government. Furthermore, in the past few years the society has legitimized investigative groups, overseeing groups and political appeals which are based on the premise that government, business and other social institutions cannot be trusted. These groups will surely act so as to achieve their purposes and provide us with daily reminders of the need for their continued existence. Because of this, trends in the near future should show a fluctuating level of confidence in the executive branch which is generally lower than it was in the 1950s and 1960s.

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Table 1

Events taking place during or immediately preceding the field period for surveys measuring confidence in the executive branch of the federal government

Survey Date	Events	Percent "A Great Deal" of confidence ²	Survey ³
Jan 67 ¹		37.2	H1702
Oct 72	Final month of Nixon-McGovern contest	27.2	H2236
Mar 73	Last American troops leave Saigon	29.3	GSS73
Sep 73	Agnew investigation announced, Watergate hearings, Nixon accepts blame for Watergate but refuses to resign	19.4	H2343
Dec 73	18½ minute tape gap testimony	13.4	H2354
Feb 74		11.7	H7482
Mar 74	Mitchell, Haldeman and Erlichman indicted	14.6	GSS74
Aug 74	Ford inaugurated	28.3	H7487
Sep 74	Ford pardons Nixon	20.0	H2430
		17.7	H2434
Mar 75	Ford institutes anti-recession policies	13.3	GSS75
Apr 75	Communist victory in Vietnam	16.5	H7581
Aug 75	Helsinki agreement, government announces largest peacetime fiscal deficit	16.0	H7585
Feb 76	Primaries begin	10.8	H2521
Mar 76		13.5	GSS76
Jun 76	Preparation for bicentennial, primaries end	22.3	H7684
Jul 76	Ford vetoes Humphrey-Hawkins, Carter nominated	14.5	H2630
Jan 77	Carter inaugurated	23.3	H7690
Mar 77		27.9	GSS77

Notes:

1. There is one earlier Harris survey measuring confidence, done in 1966. The data for this study have disappeared so results cannot be replicated or analyzed. Therefore, we do not use this study in our report.
2. Percents calculated on a case base which includes "don't knows" and excludes missing data, no answer, etc.
3. "H" denotes a Harris survey, "G" denotes the General Social Survey by the National Opinion Research Center. All surveys are quota samples of the national population with a few exceptions. In some cases Harris screens people out of the sample if they are not politically active, which changes the percentages slightly. The 1977 GSS was a full probability sample.

Table 2

Results from an open-ended question asking people to say what they mean by the word "confidence".

Key Word or Concept	Proportion of Responses In Each Category
Trust	34.5
Capability	15.9
Believe in	12.4
Faith	10.0
Misc.	5.4
Honesty	4.3
Common Good	3.7
Dependability	3.4
Approval	3.0
Incorrect response	3.0
Sure	2.2
Don't Know, Nothing	2.2
	<u>100.0</u>
N = 830 responses from 738 cases	

Data are from the 1978 NORC General Social Survey

Table 3

Trends in political trust, political efficacy and other measures of public attitudes toward the federal government, 1952-1976

Survey Questions	Percent Agreeing With Each Statement, Year										
	1952	1956	1958	1960	1964	1966	1968	1970	1972	1974	1976
<u>Political Trust</u>											
1 Special interests rule					30.9	38.5	43.6	55.1	58.6	72.9	73.4
2 Taxes wasted			45.1		48.1		60.6	69.7	67.0	75.8	76.4
3 Leaders not smart			39.3		27.8		39.2	46.2	42.2	48.0	53.0
4 Untrustworthy			24.3		22.3		37.3	45.3	45.9	63.1	65.5
5 Crooked			25.6		30.0		26.3	32.7	37.7	46.8	44.1*
<u>Political Efficacy</u>											
1 Have no say	31.5	28.3		27.4	29.6		41.2	35.8	40.5	41.3	42.2
2 Politics too complicated	71.3	63.8		58.8	67.9		71.3	73.8	73.9	73.3	72.7
3 Voting is only recourse	82.7	74.5		74.3	74.0		57.4	60.6	62.3	61.5	56.5
<u>Other Measures</u>											
1 Government does not listen a good deal of the time					66.0		75.4	75.5	82.2	90.6	89.2
2 Government doesn't care	35.8	27.0		25.0	37.0		43.7	48.7	50.1	52.2	53.7

For question wordings and data sources see text.

* See discussion in text of change in wording of the Michigan "crooked" question in 1976.

Table 4

Trends in the Harris alienation index, 1972-1978

Survey Questions	Percent Agreeing, Survey, Date						
	H2236 10/72	H2343 9/73	H7487 8/74	H2430 9/74	H2434 9/74	H2521 2/76	GSS78 3/78
1 Public officials don't care	38.6	54.9	47.7	55.2	53.3	61.2	51.3
2 Rich get richer	60.3	75.4	77.0	77.6	77.4	77.3	73.8
3 Your thoughts don't count	45.1	61.0	53.6	58.2	57.0	64.0	55.1
4 Feel left out of things	17.8	28.1	31.6	39.2	39.9	42.1	28.3
5 Powerful take advantage	36.6	54.1	55.9	60.4	59.3	63.1	55.6

For question wordings see text. For a discussion of data sources see the notes to Table 1.

Table 5

Confidence in the executive branch of the federal government by voting preference in previous presidential elections

Election	Voted for . . .	Percent expressing a great deal of confidence
1968 ¹	Humphrey	15.0
	Nixon	47.1
	Wallace	26.8
	Did not vote	26.9
1972 ²	McGovern	14.1
	Nixon	43.5
	Did not vote	27.4
1976 ³	Carter	34.8
	Ford	22.6
	Did not vote	28.3

Notes:

1. Data are from the 1972 NORC General Social Survey
2. Data are from the 1973 NORC General Social Survey
3. Data are from the 1977 NORC General Social Survey

Table 6

Trends in the evaluation of the president's personal efforts to inspire confidence in the White House

Evaluation	Percent, Harris survey number, Date					
	2236 10/72	2354 12/73	7487 8/74	2430 9/74	2521 2/76	7684 6/76
Excellent	13.6	3.4	31.2	10.6	3.5	5.9
Pretty Good	34.4	12.2	44.2	41.6	25.4	29.8
Fair	26.8	17.9	12.0	26.5	35.8	34.3
Poor	16.3	61.7	2.3	12.6	27.0	21.8

For question wording see text.

Table 7

Percent reporting "a great deal" and "only some" confidence in the executive branch for those with different evaluations of the president's personal efforts to inspire confidence in the White House

Personal Evaluation of President	Percent "Great Deal" and "Only Some", Harris Survey Number, Date											
	2236 10/72		2354 12/73		7487 8/74		2430 9/74		2521 2/76		7684 6/76	
	Great Deal	Only Some	Great Deal	Only Some	Great Deal	Only Some	Great Deal	Only Some	Great Deal	Only Some	Great Deal	Only Some
Excellent	51.6	38.1	56.0	26.0	40.9	47.4	43.1	46.2	29.4	52.9	45.2	45.2
Pretty Good	36.5	47.7	30.6	48.3	26.2	55.9	25.2	60.2	19.3	64.4	31.1	53.7
Fair	18.4	57.6	18.9	63.0	15.5	60.8	13.0	58.6	7.6	64.8	19.5	57.3
Poor	8.1	40.5	5.9	35.7	20.0	34.3	3.9	48.1	4.5	40.2	10.9	39.4
Pearson correlation between evaluation and confidence	.44		.42		.21		.37		.37		.33	

Table 8

Percent with a great deal of confidence in nine selected institutions during recent historical periods

Institutions	Percent, Period, Dates Included ¹					Total Change 1967 - 1977
	Early Vietnam 1/67	Pre- Watergate 5/72-3/73	Fall of Nixon 6/73-6/74	Ford & Recession 6/75-7/76	Early Carter 3/77	
Medicine	60.5	55.1	57.6	50.0	51.5	- 9
Military	55.5	33.9	40.1	31.7	36.3	-19
Major Companies	46.6	30.0	28.2	19.8	27.2	-19
Congress	40.9	22.3	17.1	13.1	19.1	-21
Organized Religion	39.6	32.5	36.3	30.0	40.0	0
U.S. Supreme Court	39.5	30.0	33.3	30.9	35.7	- 4
Executive Branch	37.2	28.3	14.5	15.6	27.9	- 9
Press	26.5	22.2	28.0	24.5	25.1	- 1
Organized Labor	19.6	17.9	18.1	13.2	14.8	- 5

Notes:

1. Data are pooled from all available sources during each historical period. Each percent shows the combined results of at least two surveys--one Harris and one NORC. Some percents are based on between three and six surveys depending on the number of surveys done during each period and whether or not the list in any particular survey included the institution in question.

Table 9

Percent who consider the amount of federal income tax they pay "too high" by levels of confidence in the executive branch of the federal government

Confidence	Percent	
	"Too High"	(N)
Great Deal	59.7	(578)
Only Some	67.0	(1593)
Hardly Any	72.5	(552)

Data are from the pooled 1976 and 1977 NORC General Social Surveys. The wording of the tax question was: "Do you consider the amount of federal income tax which you have to pay as too high, about right or too low?"

Figure 1
Recent Trends in Confidence in the Executive Branch of the Federal Government

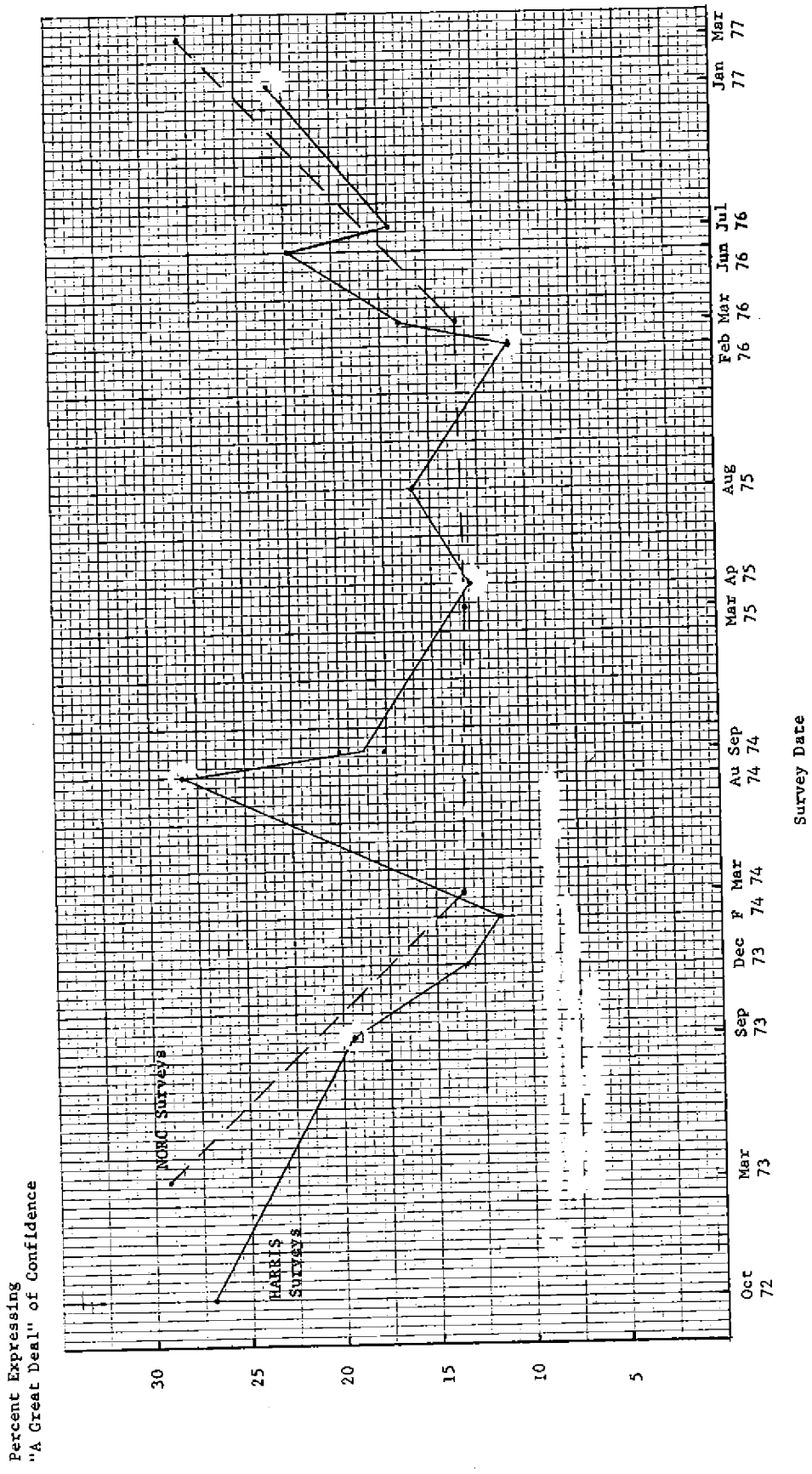


Figure 2
Trends in Confidence in the Executive Branch of the Federal Government, by Political Party Identification

