

Public Sours on Officialdom

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By William Chapman
Washington Post Staff Writer

In 1964, a cross section of American voters was asked a series of questions testing the degree to which they had confidence in their government.

"How often can you trust the government?" they were asked by public opinion samplers from the Institute for Social Research.

That year, about two-thirds said they thought they could trust the government most of the time.

Last fall the same question was asked. Less than half—45 per cent—were as trusting.

As that and other measurements suggest, the Watergate scandal comes at a time when public confidence in government already is at a low point.

Declining trust is one of the most persistent phenomena of the past decade. The pattern appears in several public opinion polls which record increased cynicism about how the government operates and whether it tells the truth.

Fast Change

Does the government waste a lot of tax money? In 1964, less than half believed that it did. By last fall, however, two-thirds believed it.

Do you think the government is run for the benefit of a few big interests? About a fourth thought so nine years ago. Now about half believe it.

The consistent findings have surprised some social scientists who rarely find so fast a change in such a basic public attitude. Public opinion frequently swings wildly on single issues—such as abortion or gun control—but not usually on a fundamental question like

whether one trusts one's government.

"A situation of widespread, basic discontent and political alienation is the existing condition in the U.S. today," Arthur H. Miller of Ohio State University wrote last fall in an analysis of responses to questions measuring cynicism.

"That some segment of American society believes that officials violate legal procedures in dealing with the public or in arriving at policy decisions is not surprising," he observed.

"What is startling, and somewhat alarming, is the rapid degree of change in this basic attitude over a period of six years."

Tide Turned

Until the latest Gallup Poll was taken earlier this month, there had been no indication that the Watergate case was having much of an impact on public opinion. It did not figure prominently in the election campaign last fall, despite Sen. George McGovern's efforts to make it a major issue.

Public opinion polls taken then found the vast majority of Americans were writing off Watergate as a piece of petty politics, a kind of Katzenjammer episode involving bungling burglars.

The tide apparently was turned by the assertion of Watergate conspirator James McCord that pressures had been applied to prevent him and other conspirators from disclosing more details.

The expansive media coverage of the trial and subsequent disclosures focused public attention on Watergate. More than four out of five Americans—an unusually high proportion—are now aware of the case, according to the Gallup Poll.

The long-term decline in

trust in government, however, began in the mid-1960s. No one has measured precisely why the disenchantment set in then, but it is usually associated with two issues—the war in Vietnam and conflicts over civil rights.

In both cases, surveys show, the government's behavior failed to satisfy people of opposite persuasion. Neither hawks nor doves were pleased with the way the United States fought the war in Vietnam and both civil rights activists and segregationists were unhappy with the government's course in race relations.

Confidence Fell

Miller's study, for example, found one paradoxical trend of opinion in the field of civil rights legislation and enforcement.

As laws were passed and enforcement machinery developed, the level of cynicism increased among those in the population who favored them. On a "cynicism index" Miller developed, the confidence of blacks fell more sharply than any other group in the population—during the precise period when civil rights legislation was benignly used to increase black voting, open up restaurants and hotels, and provide better education.

Some public opinion analysts see the decline of trust in government as merely one facet of an overall disenchantment with all institutions, public and private. Recent polls show that during the late 1960s almost all institutions—medicine, the press, business—lost public support.

The polls of Louis Harris and Associates record a dramatic decline among those who say they have "a great

deal of confidence" in American institutions.

Forty-one per cent had "a great deal of confidence" in the executive branch of government in 1966, when Harris began the surveys; only 27 per cent expressed a great deal of confidence in it last year. Support for Congress fell from 42 to 21 per cent in those six years. Less than a fifth of Americans today say they have a great deal of confidence in the press and television.