

66% Feel Distrust in Government

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Public cynicism toward government has risen so sharply in the past year that two-thirds now feel they can trust it only some of the time and one-half believe that quite a few people running the government are crooked, according to a new public opinion survey.

The survey was conducted in November by the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. Its polls have charted a gradually rising distrust of government since the early 1960s but never has registered so drastic an increase it did last year.

Among the key findings:

- Sixty-six per cent of the people said they felt they could trust the government only "some of the time." The proportion choosing that answer was 20 percentage points higher than it was a year earlier when a similar survey was taken during the 1972 presidential election.

- Seventy-two per cent now say they believe the government is run in behalf of a "few big interests" instead of for all the people. A year earlier, 59 per cent had given that response.

- Over half—53 per cent—believe that "quite a few" of the people running the government are crooked. In November, 1972, 38 per cent had believed that.

The survey turned up an unusual surge of distrust of elections. In the past, cynicism had extended to the conduct of government and of its leaders but elections themselves had been widely admired.

This question was asked: "How much do you feel that having elections makes the government pay attention to what the people think—a good deal, some, or not much?"

In 1972, only 7 per cent responded with "not much." Last fall, that had increased to 29 per cent.

There was no indication, however, that the spreading disenchantment affected public feelings about the political parties or about the form of American government.

The percentage of people identifying with the Republican Party was relatively unchanged during the year when a Republican administration was under fire because of the Watergate scandal.

Nor was there any great change in the proportion that wants to change the form of government. If anything, people were a little more inclined to keep the government as it is. The proportion which feels the need for "some change" fell from 26 to 21 per cent.

There was a drastic change, however, in attitudes toward the national government compared with state and local governments. Historically, the national government has been the more popular. Now it is tied with state and local governments in peoples' affections.

In 1972, 44 per cent chose the national government as the one in which they had the most faith and confidence. Last fall, 27 per cent felt that way.

Almost half said they felt that they had the least faith in the national government.

The survey did not include questions on Watergate or on President Nixon. But responses to one question showed how confidence in the presidency eroded during the 12 months that spanned the major Watergate revelations.

Those interviewed were asked, "Which part of the government . . . do you most often trust to do what's right?" In 1972, 41 per cent had said they most trusted the President. That fell to 24 per cent in 1973.

Trust in Congress remained generally stable in the mid-30s. But confidence in the Supreme Court increased significantly. In 1972, 26 per cent had said they trusted the court most often. That rose to 39 per cent last fall.

The survey registered strong sentiment in favor of trimming the power of the presidency and in adding to the influence of Congress. Forty-four per cent believed the President should have less influence. Forty-six per cent said Congress should have more influence.