



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on October 27, 2011

What Does “Distrust of Government” Really Mean?

The New York Times and CBS has come out with a new poll that shows Americans have a strong mistrust of government. Almost 90 percent of Americans do not trust government to do the right thing and almost three quarters say that they believe the nation is on the wrong track. As the poll probes deeper into what Americans believe the government ought to do, partisan differences appear. Nearly nine out of 10 Democrats believe that the distribution of wealth in the country should be fairer, while two out of three independents agree with that, though only one out of three Republicans believe that to be true. This poll also showed that a significant percentage of Americans support the “Occupy Wall Street” movement while a much smaller percentage support the Tea Party Movement.



Gallup came out with a poll last month that may [narrow down discontent with government](#) more. The overwhelming majority of Americans, two out of three, have a “great deal” or a “fair amount” of confidence in *local* government — a percentage that has remained very stable over the last 15 years. A clear majority of Americans, 57 percent, feel the same way about state government, although that confidence did nosedive in 2009. Faith in the federal government, by contrast, is extremely low.

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Another September Gallup Poll sheds light on part of the reason for the low confidence in the federal government. [Since 1979 Gallup](#) has asked respondents, “Of every tax dollar that goes to the federal government in Washington, D.C., how many cents of each dollar would you say were wasted?” In 1979, the the polling data showed that the “average number of cents wasted” was 40 cents. That rose and dropped over the next 22 years. Then in 2002, the amount of believed waste rose to 46 cents then to 50 cents in early 2009 and now, for the first time, Americans responding to this Gallup Poll believe in 2011 that 51 cents out of every tax dollar sent to Washington is wasted.

This is in contrast to how Americans feel tax dollars sent to state and local governments are wasted. Americans, according to this Gallup Poll, believe that 42 cents of every tax dollar sent to state government is wasted and 38 cents of every tax dollar sent to local government is wasted. Regardless of which level of government is viewed, however, Americans seem more and more to believe that their tax dollars are wasted. In 1979, they believed that 40 cents of every tax dollar sent to Washington, 31 cents of every tax dollar sent to state government, and 25 cents of every tax dollar sent to local government is wasted. The perceived level of waste in tax dollars for each of these three levels of government has risen by 11 cents out of every dollar or more during the years since 1979.

Interestingly, although Democrats see less waste in federal tax dollars than Republicans, and liberals



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see less waste than conservatives, the perceived waste seen by Democrats is still very high at 47 cents of every federal tax dollar and the waste seen by liberals is still high at 44 cents. So that even among those political groups least inclined to see wasteful spending in the federal government — Democrats and liberals — these two groups each see more waste out of every tax dollar than the average American did in 1979.

What is curious about this, and related, polling data about the perceived unpopularity of the Tea Party Movement is that the heart of the Tea Party agenda is to reduce the size of government generally and to reduce the size of the federal government in particular. Wasteful extravagance by politicians in using tax dollars and in using the credit of the United States is just what the Tea Party has been talking about and it seems to be just what most Americans believe today.

When liberals believe that 44 cents out of every tax dollar sent to Washington is wasted and when Democrats see that even more of that tax dollar sent to Washington is wasted — and when the direction over the last 30 years has been higher and higher levels of waste seen by Americans in Washington, then it begins to look as if a lot more Americans like the Tea Party message than polling data would indicate.

Photo: The granddaddy of all wasteful federal programs: A 1937 WPA Project plaque.



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