



Written by [James Heiser](#) on February 5, 2013

Poll: Majority of Americans Believe Gov't Threatens Liberties

In the American [Declaration of Independence](#), the Founding Fathers stated that "Governments are instituted among Men" to secure the fundamental rights of the people, and that governments derive their "just powers from the consent of the governed."

But now, a clear majority of the American people distrust the federal government and believe that it "threatens their own personal rights and freedoms."



Pew Research Center for the People and the Press has tracked public opinion regarding trust in the federal government across the span of several presidential administrations, and the level of distrust has steadily grown. In a January 31 release accompanying the latest poll results ("[Majority Says the Federal Government Threatens Their Personal Rights](#)"), the Pew Research Center noted that an overwhelming majority of citizens operate on the assumption that the federal government will not do the "right thing":

The survey finds continued widespread distrust in government. About a quarter of Americans (26%) trust the government in Washington to do the right thing just about always or most of the time; 73% say they can trust the government only some of the time or volunteer that they can never trust the government....

Just 20% of Americans say they are basically content with the federal government; 58% say they are frustrated while 19% say they are angry. For the most part, these views have changed little during Obama's presidency. However, the percentage saying they are content with government sank to a low of just 11% in August 2011, following protracted negotiations between the president and congressional leaders over raising the debt ceiling. [The same survey](#) found that the percentage expressing anger at government had reached 26%, and just 19% said they trusted the government at least most of the time.

The poll emphasizes that Americans do not view the federal government as an abstract threat, but as a concrete danger to their liberties; even 34 percent of self-described "liberal Democrats" view the federal government as threatening their "personal rights and freedoms." And a majority of Americans share that assessment:

Overall, 53% of Americans think that the federal government threatens their own rights and freedoms; 31% say it is a major threat, while 22% say it is a minor threat. Roughly three-quarters (76%) of conservative Republicans say that the government threatens their personal rights, and most (54%) say the government poses a major threat, by far the highest percentage of any ideological group.

Reporting on the poll results, [the Washington Post noted](#) that the public's view of the federal government has fluctuated over the years:



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Overall, the percentage of Americans who view the federal government as a threat has increased from 36 percent in May 1995 to 53 percent today. It rose late in the 1990s and then dropped again after 9/11, down to 30 percent. Today, most Americans now feel at least somewhat scared of what the government could do to them, and 31 percent see Washington as a “major threat.”

Sentiments that might have seemed extreme to a majority of Americans a few years ago are now self-evidently mainstream, and this level of fundamental distrust of the federal government could easily influence the public debate over proposed federal gun control measures. As Aaron Blake wrote for the *Washington Post*:

This is an important piece of data to keep in mind as Congress debates new gun legislation. While polls show broad support for expanding background checks and limiting the manufacture and sale of certain types of so-called assault weapons, the flip side of that is that many Americans are wary of their government going too far in restricting their constitutional rights — be it on guns or anything else.

The psychology is simple: When people are afraid, they seek to protect themselves, and they will only become more afraid if the perceived source of the threat attempts to deprive them of the means of self-defense. When a majority of citizens are already afraid that the federal government is a “threat” to their fundamental freedoms, the notion that the same federal government would attempt to abridge those freedoms by attacking the free exercise of a fundamental right enumerated in the Bill of Rights is likely to only increase the number of people who view the federal government as a “threat” to their liberties. Thus, according to the Pew poll, 62 percent of those individuals who acknowledged having a firearm in their home saw the federal government as a “threat” to their liberties, while only 45 percent of those who did not admit to possessing a gun saw the federal government as a “threat.”

When R.J. Rummel’s book *Death by Government* was published in 1994, the author’s careful documentation of a record of government-sponsored murder and genocide around the world and across the generations might have seemed to many Americans as little more than an academic exercise. When a majority of the public already views the federal government as a “threat” and the president defends the use of drones against American citizens, the juxtaposition of presidential policies seems likely to further alienate the people from their representatives.

Horrific crimes such as that which was perpetrated in Newtown, Connecticut, on December 14 are terrifying for their seemingly random character — and gun control advocates have attempted to exploit the fear generated by such events to alienate public opinion from the vigorous defense of their civil liberties. But when the policies of the federal government appear to many observers in the United States and abroad as inclined to lethal results according to criteria that seem almost as random or capricious, the very same sentiments may further alienate the people from their government.

For example, Olivia Ward wrote in a February 3 article for the *Toronto Star* that the Obama administration’s drone attacks “descend like the fist of a vengeful god — on the enemies of America.” But when the idolatry directed toward that “vengeful god” begins to wane, the result is not worship, but horror. In Ward’s words:

But while the indiscriminate casualties of traditional warfare elicit horror, there’s a particular revulsion to a sci-fi assassin that’s the psychological equivalent of an alien from outer space. It is to hear, in the background, the hollow chuckle: “earthlings, there is no place to hide.”

In 2003, the Defense Department began describing civilian casualties in Iraq as “[bugsplat](#)” and that



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language allegedly carried over to the terms used by drone operators.

According to the Pew poll, “For the past seven years, a period covering the final two years of the Bush administration and Obama’s entire presidency, no more than about three-in-ten Americans have said that they trust the government in Washington to do the right thing always or most of the time” — a breathtaking level of distrust in a form of government that ostensibly relies upon the consent of the governed.



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