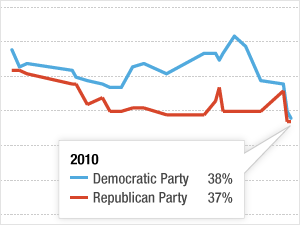
**Pew Poll: Trust In Government Hits Near-Historic Low**

by [Liz Halloran](http://www.npr.org/people/101266638/liz-halloran) *April 18, 2010*

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Americans' trust in government and its institutions has plummeted to a near-historic low, according to a sobering new survey by the Pew Research Center.

Only 22 percent of Americans surveyed by Pew say they can trust government in Washington "almost always or most of the time" — among the lowest measures in the half-century since pollsters have been asking the question.

And an increasing number — almost 1 of every 3 people — say they believe government is a major threat to their personal freedoms and want federal power reined in.

Pew asked people to say whether they were content, frustrated or angry with the federal government — and 3 of every 4 people said they were either frustrated or angry.

The public's unalloyed hostility flows from what Pew Center Director Andrew Kohut characterizes as a perfect storm of conditions: a bad economy, backlash against Washington partisanship and "epic discontent" with elected officials that found fuel in this year's bitter health care debate. "Health care reform contributed in the second half of last year to this growing concern about the power of government," Kohut tells NPR. "The public," he says, "wants a less activist government."

Kohut says measures of trust typically decline during Democratic administrations. Indeed, some of the previous lows in trust of government, as measured since 1958, were recorded during the Clinton and Carter administrations. But the trust numbers were even lower at the close of the George W. Bush administration, dipping below 20 percent.

The current sour mood is expected to favor out-of-power Republicans in the fall midterm elections. But there's a caveat that should give pause to those on both sides of the aisle: Pew also found that the number of Americans who view Congress favorably declined by half over the past year, to 25 percent, the lowest Pew has ever recorded.

**How Bad?**

The results of the Pew survey, conducted in March, were so startlingly grim that Kohut says the organization did three follow-up surveys to verify its findings. "We were concerned that we were getting a misread," Kohut told NPR's Steve Inskeep, because the original sample was taken during the height of the health-care debate in Congress. But Pew's additional surveys showed largely the same results: a disaffected and increasingly angry populace, disillusioned with state and federal government, as well as with federal departments ranging from the Food and Drug Administration to the Department of Education. The mistrust that is permeating the electorate, Kohut says, is "about government writ large."

**Measuring Anger**

Pew surveys dating from 1997 show that an average of about 55 percent of Americans typically express frustration about the federal government, with the exception of a temporary spike in trust after Sept. 11. In the current survey, 56 percent say they feel frustrated by the federal government. The big difference this time, according to the Pew survey, is the growing numbers who expressed "intense anti-government views." The proportion of Americans who say they are angry has doubled since 2000. Now at 21 percent, it tops the previous high of 20 percent in 2006. "The percentage who are angry is still small," Kohut says, "but it's twice as much as it was back in the late 1990s."

Pew found that intense anti-government sentiment is concentrated among Republicans, independents and others who lean Republican, as well as those who agree with the Tea Party movement. Anti-government animus is particularly intense among the 30 percent of those surveyed who say that "government is a major threat to my personal freedoms," Kohut says. Those numbers among people who identify with the Tea Party movement "go through the roof," he says. 57 percent in that group say the government is a major threat to them, and 43 percent say they are angry with the federal government.

Those negative feelings far outpace the view of traditional Republicans, 43 percent of whom said government is a major threat, and 30 percent who described themselves as angry. By contrast, 18 percent of Democrats view the government as a major threat, and only 9 percent say they are angry with the federal government.