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Views of Congress: Problem Lies with Members, Not  
the System

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## Majority Says the Federal Government Threatens Their Personal Rights

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## Views of Congress: Problem Lies with Members, Not the System

# Majority Says the Federal Government Threatens Their Personal Rights

As Barack Obama begins his second term in office, trust in the federal government remains mired near a historic low, while frustration with government remains high. And for the first time, a majority of the public says that the federal government threatens their personal rights and freedoms.

The latest national survey by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, conducted Jan. 9-13 among 1,502 adults, finds that 53% think that the federal government threatens their own personal rights and freedoms while 43% disagree.

In March 2010, opinions were divided over whether the government represented a threat to personal freedom; 47% said it did while 50% disagreed. In surveys between 1995 and 2003, majorities rejected the idea that the government threatened people's rights and freedoms.

The growing view that the federal government threatens personal rights and freedoms has been led by conservative Republicans. Currently 76% of conservative Republicans say that the federal government threatens their personal rights and freedoms and 54% describe the government as a "major" threat. Three years ago, 62% of conservative Republicans said the government was a threat to their freedom; 47% said it was a major threat.

By comparison, there has been little change in opinions among Democrats; 38% say the government poses a threat to personal rights and freedoms and just 16% view it as a major threat.

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### Majority Now Views Government as Threat to Personal Rights

<i>Federal government threatens your personal rights and freedoms?</i>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>DK</b>
	%	%	%
January 9-13, 2013	53	43	4=100
March 2010	47	50	2=100
October 2003	45	54	1=100
August 2002	32	63	5=100
November 2001	30	67	3=100
June 2000	46	52	2=100
December 1995	42	54	2=100
May 1995	36	62	1=100

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Jan. 9-13, 2013. 2003 & May 1995 figures from ABC News/Washington Post; 2000-2002 from NPR/Kaiser/Harvard; Dec. 1995 from Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.

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People who say they have guns in their households continue to be more likely than those who do not to say that the government is a threat to their personal rights and freedoms. About six-in-ten (62%) in gun-owning households see the government as a threat, compared with 45% of those without guns; this gap is no larger today than it was three years ago.

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. Explore a Pew Research interactive on [Public Trust in Government: 1958-2013](#).

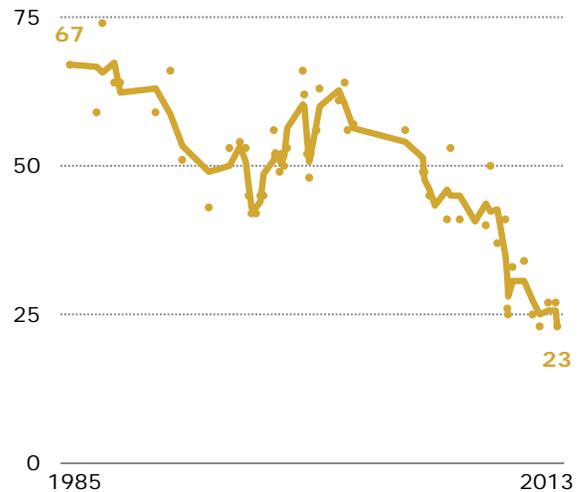
Just 20% of Americans say they are basically content with the federal government; 58% say they are frustrated while 19% say they are angry. For the most part, these views have changed little during Obama's presidency. However, the percentage saying they are content with government sank to a low of just 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.

### Views of Congress: Problem Lies with Members, Not the System

Opinions about Congress, while little changed over the past year, also remain very negative. Just 23% offer a favorable opinion of Congress, while 68% express an unfavorable view. Favorable views of Congress hit 50% in spring 2009 but subsequently have plummeted.

For two decades between 1985 and 2005 Congress was generally viewed more favorably than unfavorably. The low point during that period came in the fall of 1995 – just prior to the government shutdown of that year – when 42% offered a favorable opinion of Congress.

### Congress's Sinking Favorability



PEW RESEARCH CENTER Jan. 9-13, 2013. Q16c. Line represents a moving average of each three consecutive polls.

When asked if the current problem with Congress is a broken political system, or the members themselves, most people continue to point to the lawmakers. A majority (56%) says that the political system can work fine, it is the members of Congress that are the problem. Only about a third (32%) says that lawmakers have good intentions and it is political system that is broken.

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### Partisan Agreement: Political System Can Work Fine, Members of Congress Are the Problem

<i>Which comes closer to your view of Congress these days?</i>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Rep</b>	<b>Dem</b>	<b>Ind</b>
	%	%	%	%
The political system can work fine, it's the members that are the problem	56	58	57	56
Most members have good intentions, it's the political system that is broken	32	30	34	33
Other/Don't know	<u>11</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>11</u>
	100	100	100	100

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Jan. 9-13, 2013. Q23. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.

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At a time when there are wide partisan differences in opinions about government, there is broad agreement that members of Congress are the problem. Virtually identical majorities of Republicans (58%), Democrats (57%) and independents (56%) say that lawmakers, rather than the political system, are the problem with Congress.

## Government Viewed as 'Threat'

Overall, 53% of Americans think that the federal government threatens their own rights and freedoms; 31% say it is major threat, while 22% say it 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.

Among moderate and liberal Republicans, 57% view the federal government as a threat to personal rights and freedoms and just 32% say it is a major threat. These opinions, like those among Democrats and independents, are little changed from March 2010.

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### Most Conservative Republicans Say Government is a Major Threat to Rights

	March 2010		Jan 2012	
	Threat	Major threat	Threat	Major threat
<i>Federal government threatens your personal rights and freedoms?</i>	%	%	%	%
Total	47	30	53	31
Men	52	34	57	35
Women	43	27	49	27
Republican	61	43	70	47
Conservative	62	47	76	54
Moderate/Liberal	55	32	57	32
Independent	50	33	55	33
Democrat	34	18	38	16
Conserv/Moderate	37	19	41	17
Liberal	29	15	34	13
<i>Gun in home?</i>				
Yes	57	38	62	38
No	41	24	45	23

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Jan. 9-13, 2013. Q24.

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## Trust in Government Remains Low

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.

The current survey finds only about quarter (26%) saying they can trust the government always or most of the time, while nearly three-quarters (73%) say that they can trust government only some of the time, or volunteer that they can never trust the government.

Majorities across all partisan and demographic groups express little or no trust in government. However, there continue to be sizable racial, age and partisan differences in these opinions.

More than twice as many Hispanics as whites trust the federal government (44% vs. 20%); among blacks, 38% say they can trust the government always or most of the time.

People younger than 30 have more trust in government than do those older than 30. And far more Democrats (38%) than independents (21%) or Republicans (15%) say they can trust the government at least most of the time.

The Pew Research Center's 2010 study of attitudes toward government found that, since the 1950s, the party in control of the White House has expressed more trust in government than the so-called "out party." But partisan differences in trust in government have been much wider during the Bush and Obama administrations than during previous administrations. For more, see [\*"Distrust, Discontent and Partisan Anger: The People and Their Government."\*](#) April 18, 2010.

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### Broad Distrust of Government

<i>Trust gov't in Washington to do right thing ...</i>	Always/ Most of the time	Only some of the time/ Never (Vol.)	DK
	%	%	%
Total	26	73	2=100
Men	22	75	2=100
Women	29	70	1=100
White	20	79	1=100
Black	38	59	4=100
Hispanic	44	54	2=100
18-29	35	65	*=100
30-49	24	75	1=100
50-64	23	75	2=100
65+	22	74	4=100
Post-grad	27	73	1=100
College degree	22	78	1=100
Some college	25	73	1=100
HS or less	28	70	2=100
Republican	15	85	*=100
Conservative	12	88	*=100
Mod/Lib	21	78	1=100
Independent	21	78	1=100
Democrat	38	59	2=100
Conserv/Mod	41	56	3=100
Liberal	32	67	1=100

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Jan. 9-13, 2013. Q32. Whites and blacks are non-Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.

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## Frustration with Government Is Nothing New

Public frustration with the federal government is not new. Since 1997, only once has a majority said they were “basically content” with the government – in November 2001, two months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Over this 15-year period, majorities have consistently said they are frustrated with government, with smaller percentages expressing anger. The percentage saying they are angry at the government reached a high of 26% in August 2011, following the deal to lift the debt ceiling. Currently, 19% feel angry at government, 58% are frustrated, while 20% are basically content.

Conservative Republicans are more likely to say they are angry at the government: 31% say they are angry, compared with 17% of moderate and liberal Republicans and much smaller percentages of Democrats.

In October 2006, during George W. Bush’s second term, those at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum – liberal Democrats – were most angry at government. At that time, 44% of liberal Democrats said they were angry at the federal government, far higher than the share of conservative Republicans expressing anger today.

### Most Are Frustrated, Not Angry, with the Federal Government

<i>Feeling about the federal government</i>	Oct 1997	Feb 2000	Nov 2001	Mar 2004	Oct 2006	Mar 2010	Mar 2011	Aug 2011	Jan 2013
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Angry	12	10	8	13	20	19	14	26	19
Frustrated	56	54	34	52	54	56	59	60	58
Basically content	29	33	53	32	21	21	22	11	20
Don't know	3	3	5	3	5	5	5	3	3
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Jan. 9-13, 2013. Q31. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.

### Partisan Shift in Anger at Gov't Since Bush's Presidency

<i>% "angry" with federal government</i>	Oct 2006	Jan 2013	Change
Total	20	19	-1
Republican	7	27	+20
Conservative	6	31	+25
Moderate/Liberal	10	17	+7
Independent	21	19	-2
Democrat	28	12	-16
Conserv/Mod	22	13	-9
Liberal	44	8	-36

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Jan. 9-13, 2013. Q31. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.

## About the Survey

The analysis in this report is based on telephone interviews conducted January 9-13, 2013 among a national sample of 1,502 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia (752 respondents were interviewed on a landline telephone, and 750 were interviewed on a cell phone, including 369 who had no landline telephone). The survey was conducted by interviewers at Princeton Data Source under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates International. A combination of landline and cell phone random digit dial samples were used; both samples were provided by Survey Sampling International. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. Respondents in the landline sample were selected by randomly asking for the youngest adult male or female who is now at home. Interviews in the cell sample were conducted with the person who answered the phone, if that person was an adult 18 years of age or older.

The combined landline and cell phone sample are weighted using an iterative technique that matches gender, age, education, race, Hispanic origin and nativity and region to parameters from the 2011 Census Bureau's American Community Survey and population density to parameters from the Decennial Census. The sample also is weighted to match current patterns of telephone status and relative usage of landline and cell phones (for those with both), based on extrapolations from the 2012 National Health Interview Survey. The weighting procedure also accounts for the fact that respondents with both landline and cell phones have a greater probability of being included in the combined sample and adjusts for household size among respondents with a landline phone. Sampling errors and statistical tests of significance take into account the effect of weighting. The following table shows the sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey:

<b>Group</b>	<b>Unweighted sample size</b>	<b>Plus or minus...</b>
Total sample	1,502	2.9 percentage points
Republicans	403	5.7 percentage points
Democrats	473	5.2 percentage points
Independents	557	4.8 percentage points

Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request.

In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

**PEW RESEARCH CENTER FOR THE PEOPLE & THE PRESS**  
**JANUARY 2013 POLITICAL SURVEY**  
**FINAL TOPLINE**  
**January 9-13, 2013**  
**N=1,502**

**QUESTIONS 1-2, 9-12, 16-18, 20-22 PREVIOUSLY RELEASED**  
**NO QUESTIONS 3-8, 13-15, 19**

**ASK ALL:**

Q.23 Which comes closer to your view of Congress these days? **[READ AND RANDOMIZE]**

Jan 9-13 <u>2013</u>		Dec 7-11 <u>2011</u>	Mar 11-21 <u>2010</u>
32	Most members of Congress have good intentions, it's the political system that is broken	32	38
56	The political system can work fine, it's the members of Congress that are the problem	55	52
4	Both <b>(VOL.)</b>	6	3
1	Neither <b>(VOL.)</b>	1	1
6	Don't know/Refused <b>(VOL.)</b>	7	6

**ASK ALL:**

Q.24 Do you think the federal government threatens your own personal rights and freedoms, or not?  
**[IF YES ASK:]** Is this a major threat or a minor threat?

	(Net) <u>Yes</u>	<u>Major</u> <u>threat</u>	<u>Minor</u> <u>threat</u>	<u>No</u>	<b>(VOL.)</b> <u>DK/Ref</u>
Jan 9-13, 2013	53	31	22	43	4
Mar 11-21, 2010	47	30	17	50	2
<i>ABC News/Washington Post, October 2003<sup>1</sup></i>	45	18	27	54	1
<i>NPR/Kaiser/Harvard, August 2002<sup>2</sup></i>	32	13	18	63	5
<i>NPR/Kaiser/Harvard, November 2001</i>	30	14	14	67	3
<i>NPR/Kaiser/Harvard, June 2000<sup>3</sup></i>	46	23	23	52	2
<i>Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard, December 1995</i>	42	20	22	54	4
<i>ABC News/Washington Post, May 1995</i>	36	12	24	62	1

**QUESTIONS 25, 30 PREVIOUSLY RELEASED**  
**NO QUESTIONS 26-29**

**ASK ALL:**

Q.31 Some people say they are basically content with the federal government, others say they are frustrated, and others say they are angry. Which of these best describes how you feel?

	Basically <u>content</u>	<u>Frustrated</u>	<u>Angry</u>	<b>(VOL.)</b> <u>DK/Ref</u>
Jan 9-13, 2013	20	58	19	3
Sep 22-Oct 4, 2011	17	58	21	3
Aug 17-21, 2011	11	60	26	3
Feb 22-Mar 1, 2011	22	59	14	5
Aug 25-Sep 6, 2010	21	52	23	4
Apr 1-5, 2010	23	52	21	4
Mar 11-21, 2010	19	56	21	5
Early January, 2007	21	58	16	5
Early October, 2006	21	54	20	5
March, 2004	32	52	13	3
Mid November, 2001	53	34	8	5

<sup>1</sup> For the October 2003 and May 1995 trends, the follow-up question was worded "Is this a major threat or a minor threat to your personal rights and freedoms?"

<sup>2</sup> For the August 2002, November 2001, June 2000 and December 1995 trends, respondents who volunteered "Don't know" or "Refused" to the follow-up question are included with those who said "Minor threat".

<sup>3</sup> The June 2000 trend was asked as part of a list that also included state government and local government.

**Q.31 CONTINUED...**

	<u>Basically content</u>	<u>Frustrated</u>	<u>Angry</u>	<b>(VOL.) DK/Ref</b>
June, 2000	28	53	13	6
February, 2000	33	54	10	3
October, 1997	29	56	12	3

**ASK ALL:**

Q.32 How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right? Just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?

	<u>Just about always</u>	<u>Most of the time</u>	<u>Only some of the time</u>	<b>(VOL.) Never</b>	<b>(VOL.) DK/Ref</b>
Jan 9-13, 2013	3	23	67	6	2
Sep 22-Oct 4, 2011	3	17	72	7	2
Aug 17-21, 2011	3	16	72	8	1
Feb 22-Mar 1, 2011	4	25	65	4	2
Aug 25-Sep 6, 2010	3	21	65	10	1
Apr 1-5, 2010	5	20	61	13	1
Mar 11-21, 2010	3	19	65	11	2
January, 2007	3	28	63	5	1
February, 2006	4	30	59	6	1
Mid-September, 2005	3	28	63	4	2
Mid-March, 2004	4	32	59	4	1
February, 2000	5	35	56	3	1
May, 1999	3	28	62	5	2
February, 1999	4	27	64	4	1
November, 1998 <sup>4</sup>	4	22	61	11	2
February, 1998	5	29	61	4	1
October, 1997	3	36	59	2	*

**NO QUESTION 33, 37-39, 44-49, 52****QUESTIONS 34-36, 40-43, 50-51, 53-54 PREVIOUSLY RELEASED****ASK ALL:**

PARTY In politics TODAY, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat, or independent?

**ASK IF INDEP/NO PREF/OTHER/DK/REF (PARTY=3,4,5,9):**

PARTYLN As of today do you lean more to the Republican Party or more to the Democratic Party?

	<u>Republican</u>	<u>Democrat</u>	<u>Independent</u>	<b>(VOL.) No preference</b>	<b>(VOL.) Other party</b>	<b>(VOL.) DK/Ref</b>	<i>Lean Rep</i>	<i>Lean Dem</i>
Jan 9-13, 2013	25	32	38	2	*	2	15	16
Dec 17-19, 2012	21	32	38	4	*	4	15	14
Dec 5-9, 2012	23	33	38	3	1	2	14	19
Oct 31-Nov 3, 2012	26	34	34	3	1	3	13	16
Oct 24-28, 2012	28	33	33	4	*	2	12	16
Oct 4-7, 2012	27	31	36	3	1	3	15	15
Sep 12-16, 2012	24	35	36	2	*	2	14	16
Jul 16-26, 2012	22	33	38	4	*	3	14	15
Jun 28-Jul 9, 2012	24	33	37	3	*	3	15	17
Jun 7-17, 2012	24	33	39	2	*	2	17	17
May 9-Jun 3, 2012	24	32	36	4	*	4	13	14
Apr 4-15, 2012	24	31	39	3	*	2	15	15
Mar 7-11, 2012	24	34	36	3	1	2	16	17
Feb 8-12, 2012	26	32	36	4	1	2	13	17
Jan 11-16, 2012	22	31	42	3	*	2	17	16
Jan 4-8, 2012	26	31	35	4	*	4	14	14

<sup>4</sup> The November, 1998 survey was conducted Oct. 26-Dec. 1, 1998. The question asked, "How much of the time do you trust the government in Washington to do the right thing? Just about always, most the time, or only some of the time?"

## PARTY/PARTYLN CONTINUED...

				(VOL.)	(VOL.)	(VOL.)	Lean	Lean
	<u>Republican</u>	<u>Democrat</u>	<u>Independent</u>	No	Other	<u>DK/Ref</u>	<u>Rep</u>	<u>Dem</u>
<i>Yearly Totals</i>				<u>preference</u>	<u>party</u>			
2012	24.7	32.6	36.4	3.1	.5	2.7	14.4	16.1
2011	24.3	32.3	37.4	3.1	.4	2.5	15.7	15.6
2010	25.2	32.7	35.2	3.6	.4	2.8	14.5	14.1
2009	23.9	34.4	35.1	3.4	.4	2.8	13.1	15.7
2008	25.7	36.0	31.5	3.6	.3	3.0	10.6	15.2
2007	25.3	32.9	34.1	4.3	.4	2.9	10.9	17.0
2006	27.8	33.1	30.9	4.4	.3	3.4	10.5	15.1
2005	29.3	32.8	30.2	4.5	.3	2.8	10.3	14.9
2004	30.0	33.5	29.5	3.8	.4	3.0	11.7	13.4
2003	30.3	31.5	30.5	4.8	.5	2.5	12.0	12.6
2002	30.4	31.4	29.8	5.0	.7	2.7	12.4	11.6
2001	29.0	33.2	29.5	5.2	.6	2.6	11.9	11.6
2001 Post-Sept 11	30.9	31.8	27.9	5.2	.6	3.6	11.7	9.4
2001 Pre-Sept 11	27.3	34.4	30.9	5.1	.6	1.7	12.1	13.5
2000	28.0	33.4	29.1	5.5	.5	3.6	11.6	11.7
1999	26.6	33.5	33.7	3.9	.5	1.9	13.0	14.5
1998	27.9	33.7	31.1	4.6	.4	2.3	11.6	13.1
1997	28.0	33.4	32.0	4.0	.4	2.3	12.2	14.1
1996	28.9	33.9	31.8	3.0	.4	2.0	12.1	14.9
1995	31.6	30.0	33.7	2.4	.6	1.3	15.1	13.5
1994	30.1	31.5	33.5	1.3	--	3.6	13.7	12.2
1993	27.4	33.6	34.2	4.4	1.5	2.9	11.5	14.9
1992	27.6	33.7	34.7	1.5	0	2.5	12.6	16.5
1991	30.9	31.4	33.2	0	1.4	3.0	14.7	10.8
1990	30.9	33.2	29.3	1.2	1.9	3.4	12.4	11.3
1989	33	33	34	--	--	--	--	--
1987	26	35	39	--	--	--	--	--