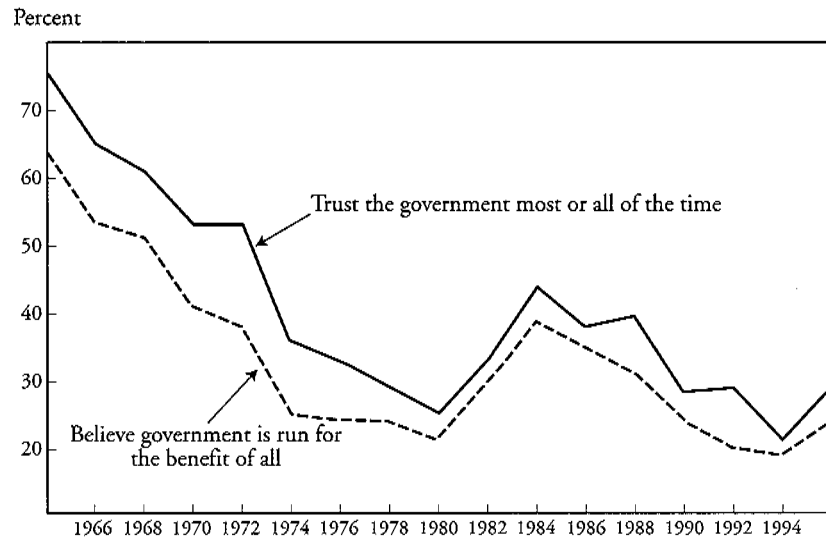


Figure 11-2. *Americans' Level of Trust in the National Government, 1964-96^a*



Source: American National Election Studies, website: www.umich.edu/~nes.

a. The original questions read: (a) "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?" and (b) "Would you say that the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?" Responses to the first question in this figure include those who answered "just about always" or "most of the time." Data on 1986 responses to the second question do not exist.

validity of that observation, but it has not affected the analyses and theorizing of most students of the subject, so I claim a similar privilege, at least for now.¹²

Why has trust declined? There are a number of possible explanations. One is the economy. Inflation soared in the late 1960s, and the great postwar expansion came to an end in the early 1970s. Trust headed south during this period, recovering somewhat during the prosperity surrounding Ronald Reagan's reelection and again during the Clinton prosperity of the 1990s. Analyses that focus specifically on economic correlates of the trust series conclude that economic conditions matter but fall considerably short of a complete explanation.¹³

12. The argument to follow may well have relevance to other institutions and countries, but I am not prepared to attempt such generalizations at this time.

13. For a recent survey of the evidence see Lawrence (1997).