

**POLITICS & GOVERNMENT**

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unemployment compensation system solvent.

Nationwide, Democrats control both legislative chambers in 34 states, Republicans in only 11. The GOP is finding it hard to convince potential candidates to give up lucrative careers in law or business to try to join an underpaid, frustrated legislative minority. In Rhode Island, a Republican comeback in the 1983 special state senate elections provided a possible portent of things to come: Half of the 14 new Republican senators are women, mostly young professionals or housewives willing to settle for a modest second income.

### *Explaining the American 'Malaise'*

"The Decline of Confidence in American Institutions" by Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider, in *Political Science Quarterly* (Fall 1983), 2852 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10025-0148.

"Americans are losing confidence in the federal government" has become a political cliché. Yet, according to Lipset and Schneider, political scientists at Stanford and the American Enterprise Institute, respectively, it is not that simple.

The downward trend is well documented by public opinion surveys. [For evidence of a possible recent turnabout, see *WQ* Autumn 1983, p.10.] Between 1958 and 1964, for example, the percentage of respondents who believed that Washington could not be trusted "to do what is right" remained steady at about 22 percent. By 1970, amid America's Vietnam involvement, the percentage had doubled. It was up to 63 percent in 1976 and 73 percent by 1980.

Such attitudes do not stem from political apathy, the authors argue. If anything, Americans now take a slightly more activist view of political life than they did two decades ago. In 1964, 73 percent of those polled said that voting was the *only* way they could influence Washington; in 1980, 58 percent took this pessimistic view. (Ironically, however, only eight percent felt that the government pays "a good deal" of attention to "what the people think," down from 32 percent in 1964.) Nor have Americans' views of their duties as citizens soured: In 1980, only eight percent of those polled believed that it is not important to vote if your party has no chance of winning, down from 11 percent in 1952.

What Americans seem to be saying, the authors argue, is that "the system" works, but "it is not performing well because the people in charge are inept and untrustworthy." Yet there is another twist: Poll data on other institutions suggest that the public's antipathies vary. In a 1977 survey, for example, only 25 percent of the respondents expressed favorable views toward Big Oil, but *individual* oil firms—Exxon, Texaco—scored about 15 percentage points higher.

Indeed, a 1981 poll showed that even as citizens' trust in Washington was languishing, their faith in American institutions, overall, was intact. Two-thirds believed that "the system" was basically sound; those who disagreed generally favored standard remedies, such as running the government "more like a business."