Scandals and Voter Apathy

Video Transcript

Since the mid-1960s, Americans have become increasingly frustrated with their government. The current trend toward negativism can be traced to the disillusionment engendered by the government's handling of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. President Lyndon Johnson was accused of lying to the public about the war's progress, while President Richard Nixon was caught in a web of deception around the 1972 break-in cover up at the Democratic Party's campaign office in the Watergate building. Similarly, President Ronald Reagan's administration was tainted by the Iran-Contra Scandal, and President Bill Clinton was impeached for obstructing evidence in a civil suit brought against him.

But, earlier presidents have also made mistakes. Why do these more current events seem to have such long-lasting effects? Some observers believe that the media’s growing political influence is largely responsible for public skepticism about government and politics. For example, the complete 1974 Watergate hearings were broadcast on television. Millions of Americans followed the proceedings and anticipated the answers to important questions. "Were top aides in the White House a part of the deception?" "How much did [Nixon] know?" "Is he lying to us?" Public opinion so overwhelmingly condemned Nixon that he was forced to resign.

Others blame investigative reporting because it emphasizes sensational, high interest stories. According to this view, the media almost never report anything good that politicians do, so they feed and extend the influence of negativism.

Others believe that we expect too much of government. With the dramatic increase of government responsibilities since the New Deal era, how can politicians live up to such high expectations? Others contend that voter indifference is on the rise because times are good; if Americans are content with the economy’s progress, why should they bother following every political issue?

Although Americans share some broad agreements on basic political values, such as liberty, equality, and justice, they also reflect a wide range of political attitudes, from highly conservative ideologies to very liberal ones. Despite their differences, modern Americans share one other political view — they are highly critical of politicians and have high expectations for their government and elected leaders.