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Abstract

The National Election Study time series shows a significant decline in public faith in the American electoral process from 1964 through 1996. The largest single decline from one election year to the next occurred between 1980 and 1984. At exactly the same time, there was a potentially significant change in the standard order of questions in the NES survey. Before 1984, the NES item on faith in elections was always immediately preceded by a more general question about governmental responsiveness and a related question about the role of political parties in ensuring responsiveness. Since 1984, the item on faith in elections has been immediately preceded by a battery of questions about government waste, domination of government by big interests, and crooked politicians. The change in question order has significantly increased the impact of these attitudes on faith in elections. It also seems to have reduced significantly the overall level of public faith in elections; indeed, the change in question order appears to be responsible for about half of the apparent decline in faith in elections over the whole period since 1964, and almost all of the apparent decline since the mid-1970s