

Question Order and Declining Faith in Elections

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Larry M. Bartels

Princeton University

bartels@princeton.edu

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.

Question Order and Declining Faith in Elections ¹

Repeatedly since 1964, the National Election Study has asked a cross-section of American citizens how much “having elections makes the government pay attention to what the people think.” This question has the virtue of focusing squarely on the key function assigned to elections in democratic theory – ensuring the responsiveness of public officials to the preferences of ordinary citizens. Thus, the NES time series seems to provide a valuable historical record of public faith in the American electoral process over a period of more than three decades – a period marked by political turmoil, partisan change, transformations of campaign technology, electoral landslides, and (soon) the first contested presidential election outcome in more than a century.

Figure 1 displays the trend in public faith in elections, as measured by this NES question, in presidential election years from 1964 through 1996.² The average level of reported faith in elections declined in seven of the eight presidential election years after 1964, from a high of 81.1 (on a zero-to-100 scale) to a low of 60.5 in 1988.³ The steepest decline (8.4 points) occurred between 1980 and 1984, while the only upturn (7.5 points) occurred between 1988 and 1992.

¹ This report was stimulated by joint work with Wendy M. Rahn.

² The data presented here are from the Cumulative Data File on the 1948-1997 NES CD-ROM issued October 1998. These data are also publicly available from the NES website, <http://www.umich.edu/~nes>. The *Faith in Elections* item was also included in some NES midterm election surveys; but to avoid unnecessary complications my analysis is limited to the data from presidential election years.

³ The quantities displayed for each presidential election year in Figure 1 are average values on a zero-to-100 scale, with respondents who claimed that elections help “a good deal” receiving scores of 100, “some” responses receiving scores of 50, and “not much” responses receiving scores of zero. The values in the figure are adjusted for panel status and post-election interview date in order to represent the average level of faith in elections among non-panel respondents interviewed on Election Day in each presidential year; the values (and their standard errors) are reported in the first column of Table A1 in the Appendix.

*** Figure 1 ***

The cumulative magnitude of the decline in faith in elections documented in Figure 1 is substantial, notwithstanding the temporary upturn in 1992. For example, the proportion of the public saying that the electoral process contributes “a good deal” to government responsiveness dropped by more than one-third over the three decades covered by the figure (from 67.5 percent in 1964 to 43.2 percent in 1996), while the proportion saying that it contributes “not much” more than doubled (from 6.8 percent in 1964 to 14.4 percent in 1996).

My aim in this note is to suggest that the apparent decline in public faith in elections in the NES data is, in significant part, an artifact of a change in the standard order in which questions have been asked in the NES survey. Survey researchers have assembled a small but suggestive collection of cases in which differences in the order in which survey questions are asked have produced significant differences in responses. For example, Schuman and Presser (1981) demonstrated that respondents’ willingness to allow communist reporters to work in the United States was significantly affected by whether a preceding question asked whether American reporters should be allowed to work in Russia; Bishop et al. (1984) showed that respondents were less likely to describe themselves as interested in politics after answering (or not answering) a series of difficult questions about political issues; Tourangeau and Rasinski (1988; Tourangeau et al. 1989) showed that respondents’ attitudes toward abortion were influenced by whether the immediately preceding questions were about religion or women’s rights. In the formulation of Tourangeau and Rasinski (1988) and Zaller (1992), these question-order effects reflect the fact that answering one survey question may alter the mix of considerations “available at the top of the head at the moment of confronting” a subsequent

survey question (Zaller 1992, 39).

Most convincing demonstrations of question-order effects involve experimental research designs in which respondents are randomly assigned to answer alternative sequences of survey questions. The example provided here is from a large-scale quasi-experiment in which more than 15,000 NES survey respondents were non-randomly assigned to answer alternative sequences of questions over a period of more than three decades. The quasi-experimental nature of the data makes inference less straightforward, but also gives the analysis more substantive and historical significance than is typical in question-order experiments.⁴

Table 1 displays the question wording and response options for the NES *Faith in Elections* item along with related items on attitudes toward the electoral process and the political system. From 1964 through 1980 the first three questions in Table 1 were consistently asked in the order shown – first the general item on *Government Attention*, then the more specific follow-ups on *Faith in Parties* and *Faith in Elections*. The items preceding this set varied from year to year but generally seem to have been innocuous, while the subsequent questions on trust in government shown in Table 1 appeared in other parts of the questionnaire. However, in 1984 and all subsequent years the question order was changed in a potentially important way. The battery of four questions on *Trust in Government*, *Government Waste*, *Big Interests*, and *Crooked Politicians* in Table 1 was asked just before the item on *Faith in Elections*, which was followed by the more general item on *Government Attention*. (The item on *Faith in Parties* was dropped from the NES survey after 1980.)

*** **Table 1** ***

⁴ For a comparable analysis of question order effects in NES surveys see Eubank and Gow (1983) and Brehm (1985) on the sensitivity of congressional vote reports to the placement of questions about contacts with incumbent members of Congress.

The relevant point in this question wording history is that the context in which respondents answered the *Faith in Elections* item changed at precisely the same time that public faith in elections seems to have declined most precipitously, between 1980 and 1984. This temporal correspondence is certainly suspicious, especially in light of the nature of the survey items that immediately preceded the *Faith in Elections* item in 1984 and subsequent years. It would not be surprising if answering a series of questions about government waste, big interests, and crooked politicians created a sort of “verbal expressive momentum” (Bartels 2000, 28) that produced more negative evaluations of the electoral process than would have been evoked by a different survey context. (Of course, *rejecting* the notions that government is wasteful, corrupt, and dominated by big interests might make respondents feel more *favorable* toward the electoral process; but responses to the trust in government items were generally negative, and increasingly negative, over the period considered here.)

More specific evidence that the new question order produced a significant change in responses is provided by the observed relationship between faith in elections and the *Trust in Government*, *Big Interests*, and *Crooked Politicians* items before and after the change in question order.⁵ Table 2 displays the parameter estimates for the effects of these trust items on faith in elections in a regression model including a variety of demographic control variables (age, education, race, and gender), strength of partisanship, and votes cast for the winning and losing presidential candidates; the other parameter estimates (including year-by-year intercepts) are reported in the third column of Table A1 in the Appendix.⁶

⁵ The *Government Waste* item is not included in this analysis because it is only weakly related to faith in elections regardless of the order in which the questions were asked.

⁶ In more detailed analysis, not reported here, I used panel data to test the relative impact of voting on

*** Table 2 ***

The first column of Table 2 reports the parameter estimates – positive for *Trust in Government*, negative for *Big Interests* and *Crooked Politicians* – for the period from 1964 through 1980, before the change in question order. The second column of the table reports the corresponding parameter estimates for the period from 1984 through 1996, after the change in question order. For each of the three trust items, the strength of the relationship with *Faith in Elections* is significantly greater after the change in question order, just as one would expect if the proximity of the trust items changed the way respondents thought about and responded to the *Faith in Elections* question. The apparent impact of *Trust in Government* and *Big Interests* on faith in elections is between 30 and 35 percent greater after the change in question order, while the apparent impact of *Crooked Politicians* – the item immediately preceding the *Faith in Elections* item in the revised question order – is more than 60 percent greater.

The change in the relationships among responses evident in Table 2 seems quite consistent with the notion that the change in question order changed the mix of considerations at the top of respondents' heads when they answered the *Faith in Elections* question. However, the evidence presented in Table 2 does not shed much light on the impact of the change in question order on the *mean* level of public faith in elections. Reported faith in elections was noticeably lower in 1984 (and after) than it had been previously; but the average level of faith might be expected to vary from year to year for a wide variety of reasons -- and, moreover, had been declining consistently for almost twenty years before the change in question order.

faith in elections and faith in elections on voting. The former effect appeared to be a great deal stronger than the latter effect, which is therefore ignored in the analysis reported in Table A1.

Fortunately, in one instance the impact of the change in question order can be isolated more precisely. The 1972 and 1984 NES surveys both included the *Faith in Elections* item in both the pre-election and post-election interviews. In 1972, both the pre-election and post-election versions of the question were immediately preceded by the items on *Government Attention* and *Faith in Parties*, as was the standard NES practice before 1984. In 1984 the pre-election question order was similar, while the post-election version of the *Faith in Elections* question was immediately preceded by the items on *Trust in Government*, *Big Interests*, and *Crooked Politicians*, as became the standard NES practice after 1984. Thus, a comparison of the pre-election and post-election data in 1984 should shed some light on the impact of the new question order, with 1972 providing a useful benchmark regarding the relationship between pre-election and post-election readings in the absence of any change in question order.

The relevant evidence is presented in Table 3, which reports the results of three separate regression analyses of post-election faith in the electoral process as a function of pre-election faith. The first column of the table presents the regression results for 1972; the second column presents the results for 1984; the third column presents the results when data from both years are pooled, but with an indicator variable for 1984 (and thus for the revised question order introduced in the 1984 post-election survey and continued thereafter). The impact of pre-election faith in elections on post-election faith in elections is similarly modest in all three regressions, with no significant difference between the coefficients for 1972 (.282) and 1984 (.307). But the estimated intercepts for the two years are significantly different, and the pooled analysis in the third column of the table suggests that post-election faith in elections was more than eight points lower in 1984 than the corresponding relationship in 1972 would have led us to expect.

***** Table 3 *****

Of course, there are possible alternative explanations for this discrepancy. Events intervening between the pre-election and post-election surveys could simply have produced a marked decline in faith in elections in 1984 but not in 1972. However, any substantive explanation for such a large shift in attitudes over such a short period of time in one year but not the other seems to strain credulity -- especially in view of the general similarity in political circumstances (with incumbent Republican presidents reelected in landslides) in those two election years. Clearly the most natural interpretation of the results in Table 3 is that the new question order introduced in the 1984 post-election survey was responsible for the changed pattern of responses, reducing reported faith in elections by a little more than eight points.

If we accept the coefficient for the 1984 post-election decline in faith in elections in Table 3 as the best available estimate of the impact of the change in question order, we can adjust the time series of public faith in elections shown in Figure 1 to reflect that impact. The revised time series is presented in Figure 2. Whereas the visual impression in Figure 1 is of a fairly steady decline in public faith in elections over the whole period from 1964 to 1996 (with the notable exception of 1992), the revised time series in Figure 2 displays a much shallower decline through 1988, most of which is erased by the upturn in 1992. The unadjusted trend line (in Figure 1) suggests a 17-point drop between 1964 and 1996, with most of that decline occurring after 1972. The adjusted trend line (in Figure 2) suggests an 8-point drop between 1964 and 1996, with less than one-fourth of that decline occurring after 1972.

***** Figure 2 *****

The appearance of little or no systematic trend in adjusted faith in elections over the past 25 years is reminiscent of McDonald and Popkin's (2000, 19) finding that "the apparent steady decrease in the turnout rate in recent decades is an artifact of increasing disparities between the estimates of voting-age population provided by the Bureau of the Census and the actual number of eligible voters." Appropriately adjusted for changes in eligibility, turnout in presidential elections declined gradually through the 1960s, dropped significantly with the extension of the franchise to 18-year-olds in 1972, and remained fairly constant thereafter, with a noticeable peak in 1992. By comparison, the adjusted trend in faith in elections in Figure 2 shows the same gradual decline through the 1960s, the same leveling-off beginning in the early 1970s, and the same noticeable peak in 1992.

The adjusted trend shown in Figure 2 does not support the claim that "public satisfaction with campaigns and elections – as with the political system more generally – has been declining almost steadily for more than three decades" (Bartels 2000, 5-6). Once the change in NES question order is taken into account, the rebound in public faith in elections in the 1990s more than offsets the very gradual decline through the 1970s and '80s.

At the same time, the connection between "public satisfaction with campaigns and elections" and public attitudes toward "the political system more generally" seems to be more than incidental. Indeed, virtually all of the "real" decline in faith in elections since 1964 can be attributed to the relationship, evident in Table 2, between faith in elections and broader attitudes toward the political system. The year-by-year intercepts reported in the third column of Table A1 in the Appendix represent the predicted level of reported faith in elections in each year for a respondent with constant (overall average) demographic characteristics and constant (overall

average) attitudes on the *Trust in Government*, *Big Interests*, and *Crooked Politicians* items.⁷

Further adjusting those year-by-year intercepts for the question-order effect suggested by Table 3 produces the time series of “election-specific” faith shown in Figure 3.

*** **Figure 3** ***

In sharp contrast to the unadjusted time series in Figure 1, the doubly-adjusted time series in Figure 3 shows no significant trend in public faith in elections since 1964. Whereas adjusting the survey responses for the estimated impact of the change in question order (in Figure 2) wipes out most of the apparent decline in faith in elections after 1972, controlling for aggregate changes in more general attitudes toward the political system (in Figure 3) wipes out most of the apparent decline before 1972. The result is that “election-specific” faith seems to have remained virtually constant through the 1960s and ‘70s before declining slightly in the 1980s, reaching a peak in 1992, and subsiding in 1996; the 1996 level is almost identical to the level prevailing from 1964 through 1980.

By this calculation, the concerns of would-be reformers that bad candidates, negative campaign ads, cynical news coverage, party decline, and other real or perceived imperfections of the contemporary electoral process have eroded public faith in elections seem to be almost wholly without foundation. To the extent that declining public faith in elections is not simply an artifact of a change in the order of questions in the NES surveys, it seems to be “a manifestation of more general public dissatisfaction with the political system” (Bartels 2000, 28) rather than a specific reaction to the conduct of contemporary electoral politics.

⁷ These predicted levels of faith in elections reflect the differential impact of the *Trust in Government*, *Big Interests*, and *Crooked Politicians* items before and after the change in question order, since the regression model reported in the third column of Table A1 includes the separate estimates of those

Whether the extraordinary aftermath of the 2000 election will erode Americans' faith in their electoral process remains to be seen. But the evidence of the past four decades, properly interpreted, seems to suggest that that faith is remarkably durable.

Appendix

Table A1 presents the results of three alternative regression analyses of the 1964-1996 NES data on faith in elections. The analysis reported in the first column of the table includes indicator variables for each of the nine presidential election years, plus a variable measuring how many days after the election each respondent was interviewed and an indicator variable for multi-year panel respondents; thus, the parameter estimates for the indicator variables correspond to average levels of faith in elections in each year (on the zero-to-100 scale) for a non-panel respondent interviewed on Election Day.⁸ The analysis reported in the second column of the table adds a series of control variables, including age, education, race, gender, strength of partisanship, and reported presidential vote, all measured as deviations from their sample means. The pattern of parameter estimates for the indicator variables remains essentially unchanged, suggesting that the time trend in public faith in elections shown in the first column of the table (and in Figure 1) is not attributable to differences in the characteristics of the respondents in each year's NES survey.

*** Table A1 ***

effects reported in Table 2.

⁸ Panel status had no significant effect on reported faith in elections; but respondents interviewed

The third column of parameter estimates in Table A1 represents a regression analysis in which the *Trust in Government*, *Big Interests*, and *Crooked Politicians* items are added to the list of explanatory variables. These variables are allowed to have distinct effects on reported faith in elections before and after the change in question order in 1984. Their parameter estimates are reported in Table 2, while the parameter estimates for the election year indicator variables and control variables are reported in the third column of Table A1. A comparison of the parameter estimates for the election year indicator variables in the second and third columns of Table A1 suggests that almost all of the ten-point decline in faith in elections between 1964 and 1980 was a reflection of broader trends in public trust in government. Once we allow for the impact of the question-order change beginning in 1984, the “election-specific” level of faith in elections in the third column of Table A1 is essentially constant over the whole period from 1964 to 1996, except for the notable upturn in 1992. The relevant time trend, adjusted for the question-order effect, is shown in Figure 3.

shortly after Election Day registered significantly higher levels of faith than those interviewed later.

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Table 1
**Wording of NES Survey Items on Faith in Elections
and Trust in Government**

Response options are shown in italics.

<p>Government Attention – Over the years, how much attention do you feel the government pays to what people think when it decides what to do – <i>a good deal, some, or not much?</i></p>
<p>Faith in Parties – How much do you feel that political parties help to make the government pay attention to what the people think – <i>a good deal, some, or not much?</i></p>
<p>Faith in Elections – How much do you feel that having elections makes the government pay attention to what the people think – <i>a good deal, some, or not much?</i></p>
<p>Trust in Government – How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right – <i>just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?</i></p>
<p>Government Waste – Do you think that people in government waste <i>a lot</i> of the money we pay in taxes, waste <i>some</i> of it, or <i>don't waste very much of it?</i></p>
<p>Big Interests – Would you say the government is pretty much run by <i>a few big interests</i> looking out for themselves or that it is run <i>for the benefit of all</i> the people?</p>
<p>Crooked Politicians – Do you think that <i>quite a few</i> of the people running the government are crooked, <i>not very many</i> are, or do you think <i>hardly any</i> of them are crooked?</p>

Table 2
Estimated Impact of Trust in Government on Faith in Elections,
Before and After Change in Question Order

Regression parameter estimates (with standard errors in parentheses)
for presidential election years.
Control variables and goodness-of-fit statistics reported in Table A1.

	1964-1980	1984-1996	Difference
<i>Trust in Government</i>	+ .179 (.021)	+ .241 (.022)	+ .062 (.031)
<i>Big Interests</i>	- .081 (.009)	- .106 (.009)	- .025 (.013)
<i>Crooked Politicians</i>	- .056 (.012)	- .091 (.013)	- .035 (.017)

Table 3
Determinants of Post-Election Faith in 1972 and 1984

Regression parameter estimates (with standard errors in parentheses).

	1972	1984	Pooled
Pre-Election Faith	.282 (.026)	.307 (.029)	.295 (.019)
Intercept	55.9 (2.1)	46.0 (2.1)	54.9 (1.7)
1984	---	---	-8.2 (1.4)
standard error of regression	29.0	33.0	31.0
adjusted R-squared	.10	.11	.13
N	1035	952	1987

Table A1
Determinants of Faith in Elections, 1964-1996

Regression parameter estimates (with standard errors in parentheses)
for presidential election years.

Control variables measured as deviations from sample means.

	Years Only	Plus Control Variables	Plus Trust in Government
1964	81.1 (1.0)	80.2 (1.0)	75.3 (1.1)
1968	77.2 (1.0)	77.8 (1.0)	74.7 (1.0)
1972	74.7 (0.9)	75.1 (0.9)	74.4 (0.8)
1976	72.1 (0.9)	72.8 (0.9)	74.4 (0.9)
1980	70.1 (1.0)	70.4 (1.0)	73.4 (1.0)
1984	61.7 (0.8)	61.9 (0.8)	61.2 (0.8)
1988	60.5 (0.9)	60.3 (0.9)	61.6 (0.8)
1992	68.0 (1.1)	67.9 (1.1)	71.8 (1.1)
1996	64.1 (1.3)	63.0 (1.3)	65.8 (1.3)
Age (in years)	---	-.002 (.017)	.013 (.017)
Education (in years)	---	.85 (.10)	.76 (.10)
Black	---	-0.3 (0.9)	0.6 (0.9)
Female	---	-1.5 (0.5)	-1.3 (0.5)
Partisan Strength	---	9.1 (0.9)	7.7 (0.8)
Voted for Winner	---	9.5 (0.7)	8.4 (0.8)
Voted for Loser	---	2.7 (0.7)	3.5 (0.7)

Trust in Government	---	---	Reported in Table 2
Big Interests	---	---	
Crooked Politicians	---	---	
Panel Respondent	0.9 (1.2)	0.9 (1.2)	0.8 (1.2)
Days Post-Election	-.029 (.019)	-.037 (.019)	-.050 (.019)
standard error of regression	34.3	33.7	32.8
adjusted R-squared	.03	.06	.11
N	15,759	15,759	15,759

Figure 1
Trend in Reported Faith in Elections, 1964-1996

NES sample averages for presidential election years,
adjusted for panel status and date of interview

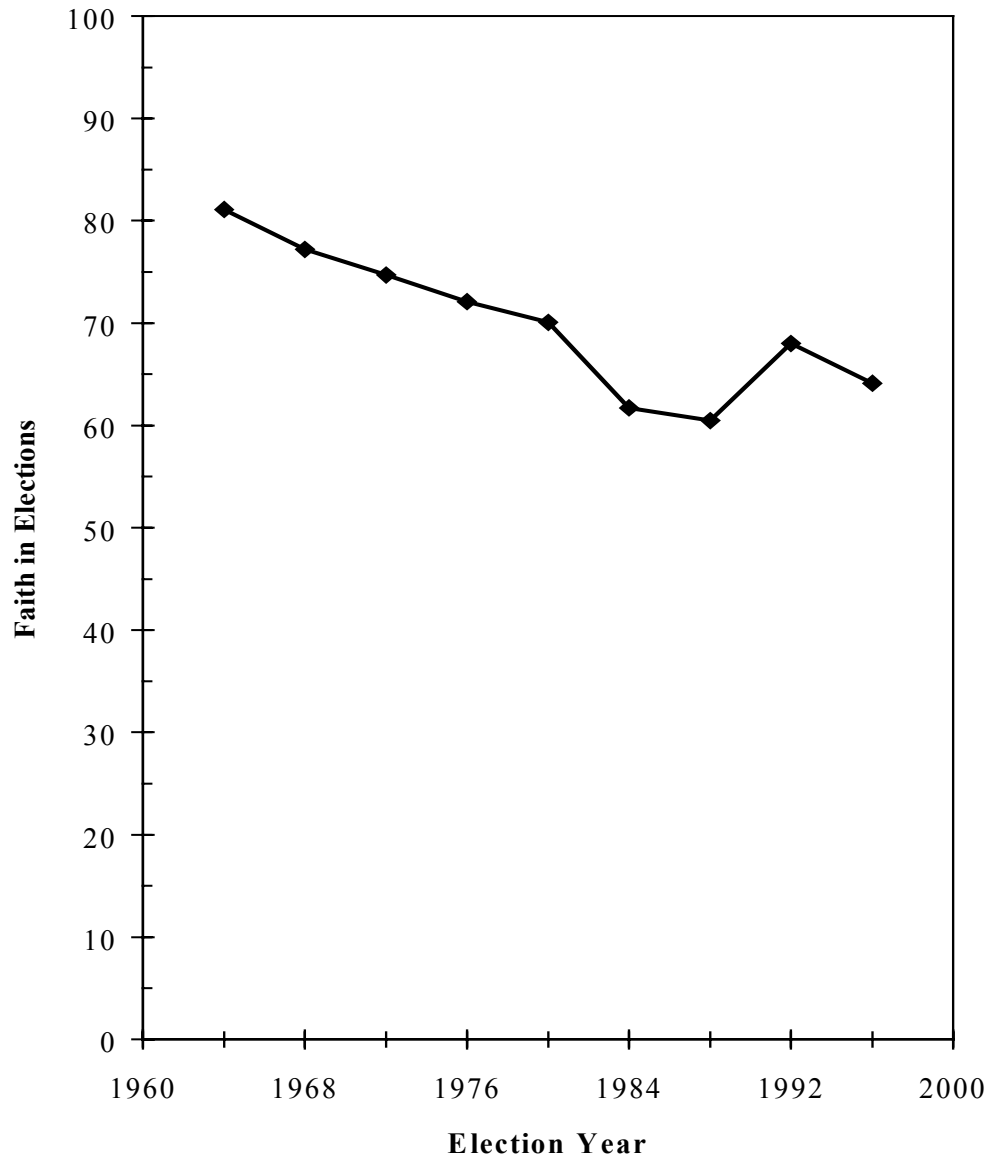


Figure 2
Adjusted Trend in Faith in Elections, 1964-1996

NES sample averages for presidential election years,
adjusted for question order, panel status and date of interview

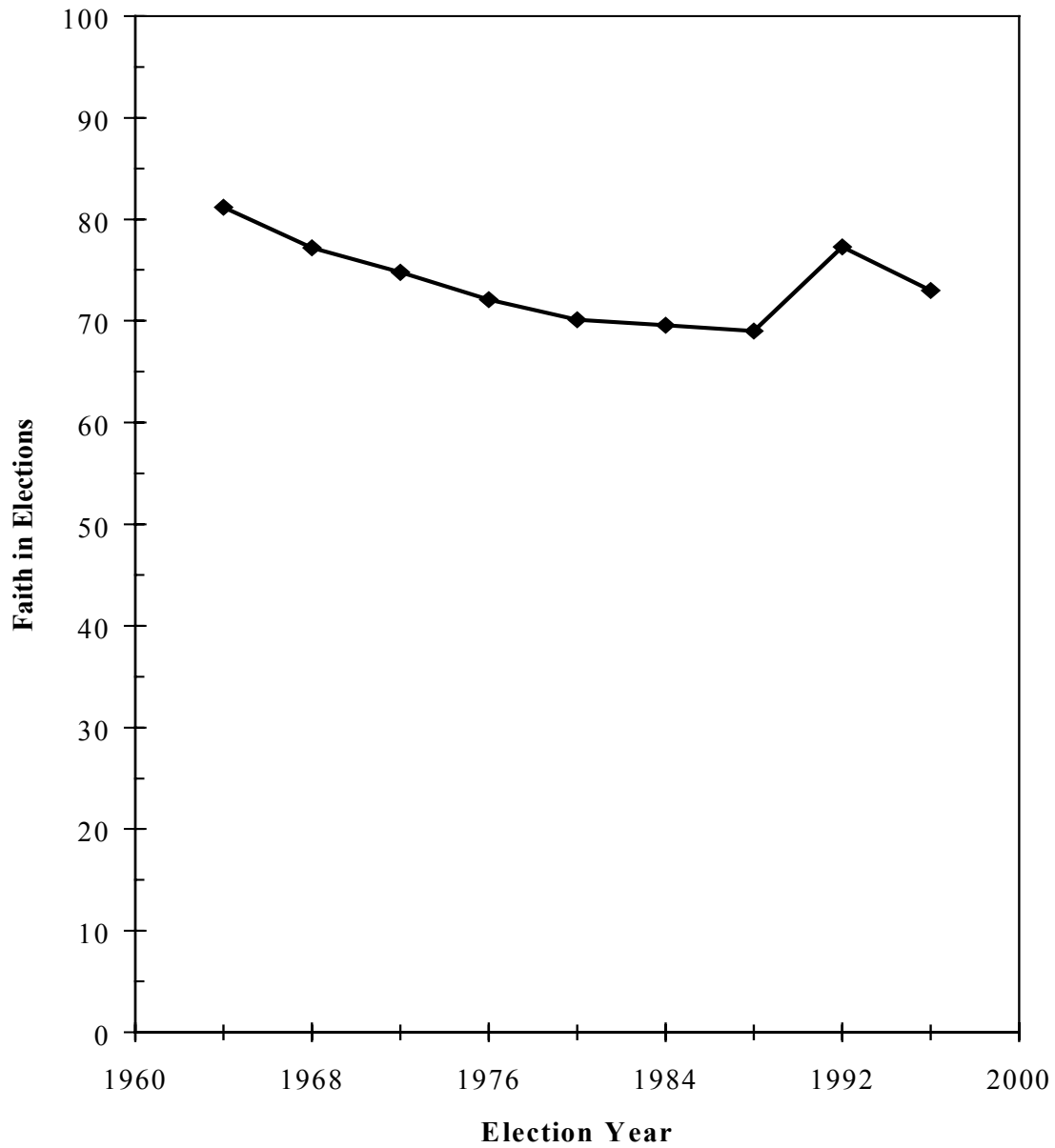


Figure 3
Adjusted Election-Specific Trend in Faith in Elections, 1964-1996

NES sample averages for presidential election years, adjusted for attitudes toward government, question order, panel status and date of interview

