

The Transportation Security Administration is a case in point. Mixed in with references to the need for action are repeated attacks on the federal government and its employees. Representative Walter B. Jones (R-NC) said,

Previous experiences with various federal workforces, in particular the Immigration and Naturalization Service, is an example of a federal workforce that faces difficulties performing at acceptable levels of accountability. Time and again taxpayer dollars are spent to fund agencies that talk a good game while training through a difficult learning curve and providing very little in the way of actual services. . . . The American people deserve to feel safe when they fly. They also deserve and demand an accountable federal government. I believe strongly in the free enterprise system and I further believe that the least economical and least efficient way that you can do anything is to give the federal government more power.<sup>5</sup>

### What the Public Wants

This rising tide of distrust is part of what Peri Arnold describes as the role of reform as an instrument of presidential public politics. "Contemporary reform confronts a different, newer problem of regime-level politics, the widespread public doubt about the legitimacy of the big, administrative state," writes Arnold. "From Carter through Reagan to Clinton, executive reorganization's promise is not better governance but, rather, a transformation that promises a government that is less disquieting to the American electorate. Existing government is portrayed as wasteful, incompetent and inexplicable" (1995, 416).

Arnold also notes that the Clinton administration's complaint was different from previous antigovernment attacks. Whereas the Reagan administration operated from the president's famous inaugural statement that government was not the solution but the problem, the Clinton administration's reinventing government program argued that bureaucracy was the problem, not the bureaucrats. According to a content analysis of every slogan uttered during the 1992 presidential campaign, candidate Bill Clinton used the word "bureaucrat" exactly twice in more than 100

speeches, advertisements, and debates, compared with 23 times by his opponent, incumbent president George H. W. Bush (see Light 1999 for a more detailed analysis of campaign rhetoric in 1960, 1980, 1992, and 1996).

Moreover, Clinton only talked about bureaucrats when promising to fire them. "He won't streamline the federal government and change the way it works," Clinton said of President George H. W. Bush when he accepted the Democratic nomination. "Nor will he cut a hundred thousand bureaucrats and put a hundred thousand new police officers on the streets of American cities. But I will." By turning the debate away from the term "bureaucrats" and toward "bureaucracy," which he used 54 times during the campaign, Clinton set the stage for liberation management, albeit liberation with a war on waste justification. Bureaucrats get fired; federal employees get reinvented.

The question is why Clinton decided to streamline rather than dismantle, to trim rather than eviscerate. The answer is that the market for reform contains an inherent contradiction: Americans cannot live with government, but they cannot live without it—government may be wasteful toward others, but not toward them. This leads to a conundrum for reformers, especially those who want a more activist government. How can they justify new programs and agencies when 93 percent of the public says that the federal government in Washington wastes a great deal or fair amount of money and that federal employees are motivated more by pay, job security, and benefits than by pride in their organizations, the chance to help people, and the desire to accomplish something worthwhile?<sup>6</sup>

One answer can be found in public opinions toward the size and scope of government. Asked whether government programs should be cut back greatly to reduce the power of government or maintained to deal with important problems, approximately 55–65 percent of Americans consistently say they want programs maintained to one degree or another. Asked next whether the bigger problem is that government has the wrong priorities or that it has the right priorities but runs its programs inefficiently, approximately 55–65 percent of Americans consistently pick the latter response.

**Table 13.4** Patterns in Public Opinion toward Reform, 1998–2004 (percentage of respondents)

	Dismantlers	Realigners	Downsizers	Reinventors
October 1997	16	14	22	39
August 2001	13	14	21	39
October 2001	7	12	17	43
May 2002	10	17	17	35
October 2003	10	17	19	35

N = 1,782 (1997), 1,003 (August 2001), 1,033 (October 2001), 986 (2002), and 770 (2003).

When the two questions are combined, one can discern four segments of the public, each with a distinct attitude toward reform: (1) the *dismantlers*, who believe that government programs should be cut back and that government has the wrong priorities; (2) the *realigners*, who also believe that government has the wrong priorities but still say that government should maintain programs to deal with important issues; (3) the *downsizers*, who believe that government has the right priorities and is inefficient but should cut back greatly; and (4) the *reinventors*, who believe that government has the right priorities and is inefficient but should maintain its programs to deal with important issues. Table 13.4 shows the relative lack of movement in public attitudes on these combined questions from 1997 to 2003.<sup>7</sup>

The opinion surveys suggest remarkable stability in contemporary public attitudes toward reform—a have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too attitude that would encourage precisely the kind of rhetoric that surrounded the Clinton administration's reinventing government campaign. Despite all of the underlying support for employee empowerment, job enrichment, labor-management partnerships, and liberation, the reinvention campaign also carried a strong dose of downsizing, which allowed the administration to capture the support of roughly 6 in 10 Americans, assuming that these attitudes were similar in the early 1990s.

The opinion surveys also help to explain the second Bush administration's general reluctance to cut government and its modest management agenda built around outsourcing, performance management, and personnel reform. There is simply no support for widespread cutbacks—the administration could claim the support of barely a quarter to Americans (the

dismantlers and realigners) for an aggressive attack on the federal bureaucracy.

### The Congressional Response

The rising tide of public distrust has created electoral incentives for congressional participation in government reform (Fiorina 1977), especially reforms that exploit the sizable majority of Americans who appear to support downsizing and reinventing government. In turn, congressional engagement appears to have generated the rising tides of war on waste and watchful eye. When Congress has been the source of ideas for reform, the institution has usually, though not always, brought its own skepticism and preference for compliance accountability to the debate.

This is not to argue that Congress suddenly discovered government reform when public confidence began to sag during the 1960s and early 1970s. To the contrary, 41 percent of the reform statutes passed in 1945–54 originated in Congress, including the legislation that created the first and second Hoover Commissions, the Administrative Procedure Act, the 1949 Classification Act, and the 1950 National Science Foundation Act.

However, much of this early activity involved legislation that had been deferred during World War II (e.g., the Administrative Procedure Act) or came from a Republican Congress looking for ways to constrain the New Deal and weaken the four-term Democratic hold on the presidency. From 1954 to 1964, the number of congressionally initiated reforms fell dramatically to just 18 percent compared with 51 percent in 1964–74. Congressional initiatives rose steadily thereafter, rising to 60 percent in 1975–84, 83 percent in 1985–94, and 88 percent in 1995–2002.