

*The Public Looks at
Politics and Politicians*



NATIONAL OPINION RESEARCH CENTER

UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

Report No. 20



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S U M M A R Y

"I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Politician"

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About seven out of ten American adults in all walks of civilian life would not like to see a son of theirs go into politics as a life work.

Are Politicians Honest?

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Almost five out of every ten persons think it is practically impossible for a man to remain honest if he enters upon a political career.

Satisfaction with Political Office-Holders

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However, somewhat more than five out of every ten persons interviewed are satisfied with the way most people who hold political offices in their own states are doing their jobs.

WHY DO AMERICANS THINK THIS WAY?

The reasons given center chiefly around the graft and dishonesty so often associated with politics, as well as the insecurity of a political life. This report is largely devoted to verbatim comments made by the "man in the street" when questioned regarding his attitudes toward politics and politicians. In many instances respondents who hold or have held political jobs and persons who have had close relatives engaged in political work speak with special conviction.

What Is at the Root of These Attitudes toward Politicians?

The Des Moines Register in a leading editorial on April 1, 1944, makes the following suggestions:

1. "The spoils system in our politics, from the national down to the local level. No other genuinely democratic nation has anything approaching this. . . ."
2. "The actual record of graft and corruption, of bossism and machine rule, in many of our cities and in some larger areas, such as states or parts of states. . . . It is largely based upon the spoils system to which we are habituated."
3. "The American penchant for glorifying money-making. We have tended to measure 'success' chiefly by what a man 'accumulates.' . . ."
4. "Our patterns of thinking have largely been set by those who have led in economic development. One of the patterns has been constant depreciation of 'politics.' The rivalry between economic power and political power has been involved. It has not been uncommon for economic power to 'buy' politicians and then to exhibit steadily a moral condemnation of politicians for being buyable. The same phenomenon has marked the attitude of economic power toward politicians when the politicians were not bought but merely pressured."
5. "Lack of adequate education of our people generally, not as to the democratic ideal but as to the tremendous importance of the processes through which that ideal must express itself. Lack of adequate education also about what constitutes 'the general interest' as against local or minority interests, and as to the vital necessity of making the general interest prevail. Lack of adequate education particularly as to the ABC's of economics; for it is that weakness which gives the minority interests their main strength."

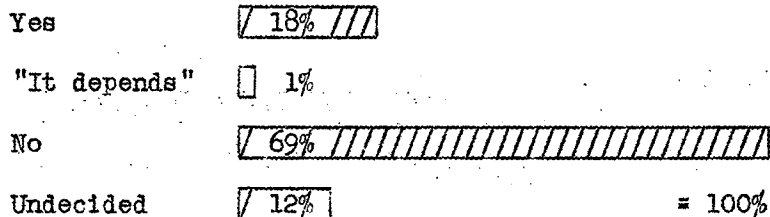
Many of the respondents included in the NORC survey mention the first three points above. Few of the general public, however, go as far in their analyses of the roots of the problem as does the Register in its discussion of basic thought and education patterns.

"I DIDN'T RAISE MY BOY TO BE A POLITICIAN"

Out of every ten Americans, only two would like to see their sons embark upon a political career. Seven definitely oppose the idea, and one isn't sure.

This is the question which NORC interviewers put to persons in all walks of life in every section of the United States:

"If you had a son just getting out of school, would you like to see him go into politics as a life work?"

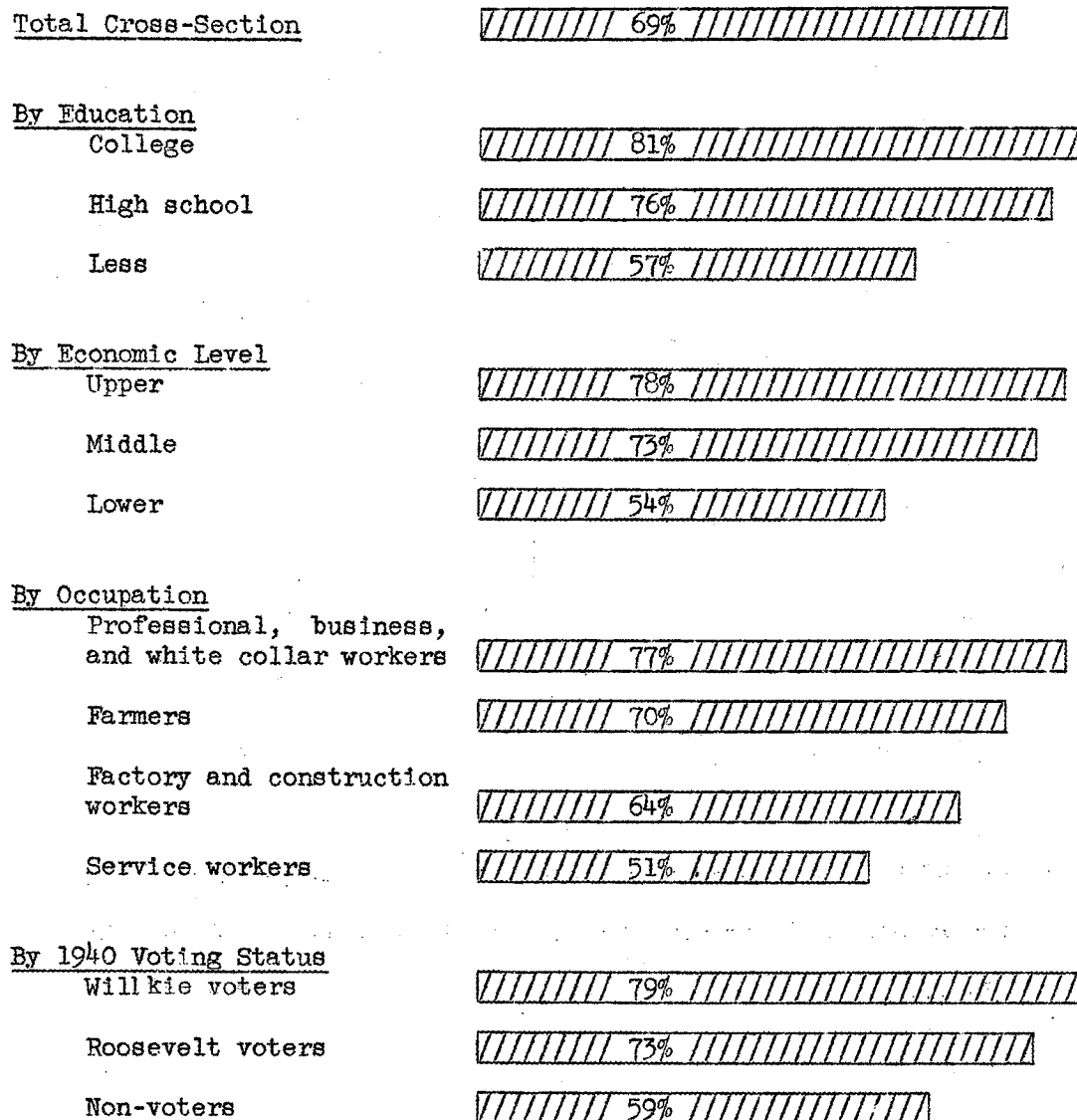


Of persons with opinions 79 per cent say "Yes," 20 per cent "No," and the remaining 1 per cent qualify their answers by saying "It depends ..."

Differences by Population Groups

While a large majority of every group frown upon politics as a career, the highest degree of disapproval is found among the more privileged groups -- educationally, economically, and vocationally.

"I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Politician"
(Percentage Answering "No")



The "Undecided" vote varies considerably from group to group. Among persons of various educational backgrounds, for example, 5 per cent of the college group, 10 per cent of the high school, and 18 per cent of the remainder are "Undecided."

Why a MAJORITY OPPOSE a Political Career for Their Sons

Those who would NOT like a son of theirs to enter upon a political career were asked to give their reasons.

Almost half believe that politics is fundamentally DISHONEST, beset with temptations, "crooked" and involving "graft," "dirty," "rotten," "corrupt":

"If he is a good Christian man, politics will ruin him. I believe no man in politics remains honest."	Widow with income property, Altus, Oklahoma*
"There is so much <u>graft</u> in politics and it makes a dishonest man out of an honest one."	Wife of construction foreman, Dickinson, Texas
"I'd rather have my son do anything in the world except be in politics. It's <u>crooked</u> and I'd want him to stay honest."	Farmer and storekeeper, Franklenton, North Carolina
"Just so rotten and dirty, I don't want anything to do with it."	Farmer's wife, Talladega, Alabama
"Sort of an American prejudice that political life is tainted."	Real estate man, Cornelius, Oregon
"There's too much temptation to do the wrong thing. Too much graft."	Woman church secretary, Denver

A number of respondents speak of the UNPLEASANT phases of political work-- "mud-slinging," making enemies, lack of independence, and other "headaches":

"My father was a politician for 25 years, and all he got out of it was bad luck and no friends."	Wife of truck driver, Pitts- ton, Pennsylvania
"There is too much mud-slinging at election time. It's a thankless job."	Office manager, Los Angeles, California
"No one in politics lives their own life. They're subject to the dic- tates of the taxpayers."	Mechanical engineer, Toledo, Ohio

*Respondents are men and white, unless otherwise designated.

Why a MAJORITY OPPOSE a Political Career for Their Sons (continued)

"There is too much responsibility."	Farmer, Tanner, Alabama
"Too much strain, worry, insecurity."	Business woman, Sloan, Iowa
"I feel that if you go into politics you aren't fit for anything else. Your life is not your own."	Loan company executive, Dallas, Texas

Others consider politics as a profession INSECURE and UNPROFITABLE, one not generally appealing to the highest type of individual:

"I've been in politics practically all my life. There's no security or future in it."	Wife of retired contractor, Ankeny, Iowa
"For the amount of work a politician does, it doesn't pay enough."	Film technician, Los Angeles
"Political jobs are too unstable. A person might lose his job every time the administration changes."	Wholesale oil distributor, Louisburg, North Carolina
"I hope he would be smarter than that. A man with brains makes more money in some kind of profession."	Meat cutter, Dyersburg, Tennessee
"Anybody educated should do better than that. One day you have a job and the next you don't. It's uncertain."	City fireman, Minneapolis
"Other occupations allow more individual advancement and more opportunity for service to humanity."	Wife of mining engineer, Oakland, California

A few parents have SPECIFIC PROFESSIONS in mind for their sons:

"I would prefer a profession. We have too many politicians now."	Marine engineer, Lorain, Ohio
"A good trade is better than politics."	Machinist, Newark, New Jersey
"I'm a working man. I feel that a son should follow in my footsteps."	Defense worker, Kearney, New Jersey

Why a MAJORITY OPPOSE a Political Career for Their Sons (continued)

"I want my son to be a doctor and serve humanity. Politicians serve themselves."	Wife of film technician, Los Angeles
"He wants to be a farmer. We need farmers more than politicians."	Farmer's wife, near Wichita, Kansas

A number of respondents express a GENERAL DISLIKE for politics:

"I just don't like politics."	Woman newstand clerk, Meadville, Pennsylvania
"I Don't like the word 'politics.'"	College professor, Charleston, South Carolina
"I've been no lover of politics from my close association."	Lawyer, Buffalo, New York

Others consider politics an almost USELESS occupation:

"Everybody ought to have to work for a living."	Mother of tenant farmer, Marshall, Indiana
"I believe in work, not politics."	Woman teacher, Waltham, Massachusetts
"There are many types of work more useful than politics."	Accountant, West University Place, Texas
"I feel there's a greater field for sincere work in a good many other lines of endeavor."	Tooling engineer, Seattle

A few UNCLASSIFIED comments are also of special interest:

"I think after he establishes himself and he wants to enter politics, all right, but not as his life's work."	Lawyer, New Iberia, Louisiana
"If he could be a trained government official, but not politics as the American people know it. We have too few statesmen and a surplus of politicians."	Woman teacher, Stockton, California

Why a MAJORITY OPPOSE a Political Career for Their Sons (continued)

"The average politician is socially and mentally inferior to a professional man. They also have a very low code of ethics."

Personnel manager in factory, Buffalo, New York

"I don't think there's any future in politics for colored people."

Negro stock clerk, New York City

Why a MINORITY FAVOR a Political Career for Their Sons

Those persons who WOULD like a son of theirs to "go into politics" were asked their reasons.

A number believe that good men in political office can be of use to THEIR OWN COMMUNITIES, the UNITED STATES, and the WORLD:

"He might be able to improve conditions in our community."

Woman textile worker, Chester, South Carolina

"If he seemed fitted for that sort of thing. I think they need good men trained to help our country run its business."

Signal Corps inspector (civilian), Chicago

"Our country is what our politicians are. We speak through them."

Wife of steel mill superintendent, Lorain, Ohio

"Politics is the vital thing back of democracy."

Woman teacher, Honey Brook, Pennsylvania

"I think there is no public service better than an honest politician."

Retired professor, Chicago

"We need some career politicians with a little background to help us in our post-war plans."

Department store buyer, Raleigh, North Carolina

Why a MINORITY FAVOR a Political Career for Their Sons (continued)

"We Negroes need some politicians of our own race. I know if my son could get a chance to get into politics, he would get a chance to help his own people."

Negro farmer, Lewis Turnout, South Carolina

Other parents would like to see their sons go into politics with the idea of REFORMING it, cleaning it up, making it honest:

"I think politics are important. I feel we need good politicians."

Woman Spanish instructor, Oberlin, Ohio

"It's a profession that needs some good men in it."

City fireman, Detroit

"If there was ever a time we need clear-thinking people, it's now. I'd hope he'd reform politics."

Real estate insurance broker, Forest Grove, Oregon

"I'd rather see a trained man than one who came up by petty graft. I'd want him to take special courses for it. I'd like to see more people get into politics of their own free will than pushed in by ward leaders."

Sales manager, Buffalo, New York

"If he had a clear-cut purpose and a good political philosophy -- yes. Primarily to guard against public office abuse, we need decent, well-trained people in office."

Psychologist, Chicago

Some respondents believe that politics as a career offers not only a "GOOD JOB" with a future and many worthwhile opportunities, but prominence and respectability as well.

"Well, there's no end of opportunities in politics."

Wife of statistician, Forestview, Illinois

"I think there's a good future if he chooses the right job."

Janitor, Chicago

Why a MINORITY FAVOR a Political Career for Their Sons (continued)

"He would have just as much of a chance to get ahead in politics as he would in business, if he was interested."	Wife of factory supervisor, Orange, New Jersey.
"It's more or less a profession. They don't have to worry so much; they have a better chance in life."	Office girl in laundry, Oberlin, Ohio
"It's power."	Negro chipper in shipyard, Chester, Penn.
"Some day he might be president."	Inspector's wife, Cleveland

Others consider politics PROFITABLE and STEADY employment -- easy work and good pay:

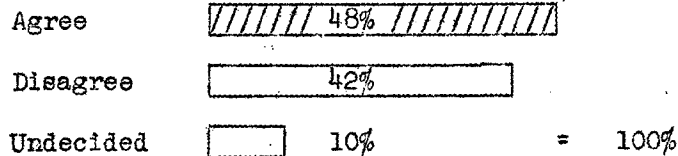
"He'd make more money and be sure of having a job."	Negro mill worker, Dyersburg, Tennessee
"I think it's a dern good way to make a living."	Mechanic, Dallas, Texas
"My husband has had a very successful life in politics."	Wife of city fireman, Nashville, Tennessee
"I have worked all my life and haven't anything, so let my son go into something where he can make easy money."	Machinist, Detroit

ARE POLITICIANS HONEST?

The public is divided in its estimate of politicians. Of every ten persons, five think it is impossible for a man in politics to remain honest, four think a politician can remain honest, and one is undecided.

NORC asked:

"It has been said that it is almost impossible for a man to stay honest if he goes into politics. Do you agree or disagree?"



When the "Undecided" vote is eliminated, opinion divides 53 per cent to 47 per cent. This distribution holds true, with only negligible variations, among all the population groups covered in the survey.

COMPARISON

Responses to the two questions indicate a seeming lack of consistency. Of the 69 persons in 100 who would NOT LIKE their sons to become career politicians:

- 36 think "it is almost impossible for a man to stay honest if he goes into politics."
- 28 think it is possible for men in politics to remain honest.
- $\frac{5}{69}$ are undecided.

Of the 18 persons in 100 who would LIKE their sons to become politicians:

- 6 think "it is almost impossible for a man to stay honest if he goes into politics."
- 10 think it is possible for men in politics to remain honest.
- $\frac{2}{18}$ are undecided.

Why People Think Politicians CAN'T Stay Honest

In general, people who think it's almost impossible for a person who goes into politics to remain honest, give reasons very similar to those suggested by persons who would not want a son of theirs to go into politics.

The largest group of respondents -- more than a third of those who think politicians can't stay honest -- place emphasis upon the "MONEY MOTIVE" in terms of graft, bribery, and easy money.

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| "I believe every man in politics has his price." | Postman, Baltimore |
| "The money spoils them. They get chances to get graft and they can't resist taking it. I know; my husband was an alderman once." | Wife of Diesel employee,
Chicago suburb |
| "Our system of politics has been based on deals and graft that almost make it necessary to pay back with favors. It takes a lot of money to get elected in this country. Most honest men get out of politics." | Insurance company executive,
Dallas |
| "People value money and position more than honesty." | Farmer's wife, Clarion, Iowa |
| "There's too much easy money floating around." | Wife of war plant executive,
Detroit |
| "Politicians are bribed so much by business men." | Farmer, Crestwood, Kentucky |

A number speak in terms of TEMPTATIONS and CROOKEDNESS of politicians:

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| "There's so many temptations, and there's so many people to take advantage of a man's weaknesses -- a man has to be mighty strong to resist." | Wife of stock farmer, Orange,
Texas |
| "Politicians are all crooked." | Retired wood finisher, Philadelphia |

Why People Think Politicians CAN'T Stay Honest (continued)

Many persons lay political dishonesty to the MACHINE POLITICS and the pressure brought to bear upon political office holders:

"There is too much graft and not enough will-power. They are led on by others in their party and a desire to keep their jobs." Wife of railroad engineer, Newark, New Jersey

"There are machines running politics and one has to subordinate principles to the political machine." Civil engineer, Kent, Washington

"A politician has to obey the bosses, or he don't get anywhere." Janitor, Middleton, Connecticut.

"A politician in the performance of his duties is bound to certain party commitments." Negro newspaper man, New York City

"The pressure of political groups and their greed for power finally dominate an elected official." Business man, New Iberia, Louisiana

"Because of paid lobbyists and small pressure groups -- labor, capital, and religious." Marine machinist, Santa Ana, California

Other respondents mention the difficulty of keeping CAMPAIGN PROMISES and returning favors and obligations incurred:

"A politician is bound to make pledges that he knows he cannot keep." Woman Red Cross worker, Louisburg, North Carolina

"On election years they'll tell you what they'll do, and after they get in they do as they please." Retired farmer, Dickinson, Texas

"Success in politics is based on patronage, which is next door to dishonesty and graft." Advertising representative, Chicago

"If a man is put into office, he has to help the people that put him in." Mother of laborer, St. Joseph, Missouri

Why People Think Politicians CAN'T Stay Honest (continued)

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| "Very few political office-holders are able to keep themselves from being obligated to others. This leads to dishonest acts on the part of the obligated." | Oil company executive, Nashville |
| "To get anything for his constituents, he has to vote with the crowd to get them to vote with him." | Office manager, Los Angeles |
| "Well, politicians try to please everybody, and they can't do that and be honest. They want the job for the money that is in it." | Farmer's wife, near Ganner, Alabama |

A number suggest the desire for POWER as a motive for dishonesty:

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| "Politicians all want more power and will get it if they have to cheat to do it." | Business man, St. Joseph, Missouri |
| "Oftentimes politicians forget their constituents back home and try to get more power and higher offices." | Wife of mechanic, Chatham, Pennsylvania |

Some people speak of PERSONAL EXPERIENCE with political dishonesty:

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| "An honest man doesn't get anywhere. Father had to get out of politics because he would not be dishonest." | Foreman's wife, Charleston, South Carolina |
| "Being dishonest is the only way one can get promoted. I know. I was with the city for years." | Machine operator, Detroit |
| "I Know. I used to be a constable." | Laborer, central Iowa |
| "I think there are exceptions, but I do agree. My father was an honest politician, and it killed him trying to stay honest." | Wife of real estate man, Santa Ana, California |

Why People Think Politicians CAN Stay Honest

About eight out of ten of those who hold this belief imply that a man can be just as honest in politics as in any other profession. The following comments are typical:

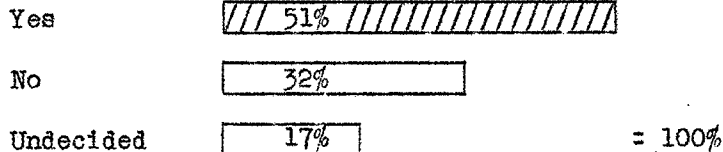
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| "If a man desires to, he can stay honest in politics or any business." | Farmer, near Belpre, Ohio |
| "Any man can stay honest if he's honest at heart. We have more dumb-bells than crooks in politics." | Business executive, Phoenix, Arizona |
| "It would be a mighty poor reflection on our country if politicians couldn't be honest." | Wife of lumber company executive, Forest Grove Oregon |
| "A politician <u>can</u> stay honest and get his name in history -- even if he doesn't make as much money as dishonest ones." | Farmer's wife, near Arcadia, Texas |
| "It wouldn't be impossible if he was honest before he went in. Can be honest if he wants to and is strong enough. If too <u>weak</u> and they are overpowered and bribed, then they shouldn't be in politics." | Woman, keeper of rooming house, California |
| "It's <u>possible</u> , but there are more dishonest politicians than honest ones." | Wife of grocer, Livingston, Texas |
| "It's possible, but I wouldn't say how long a man would last if he stayed honest." | Shipfitter, Stockton, California |
| "I knew some men in politics and I know they were honest and on the square." | Cigar maker, Buffalo |
| "That's the kind of question that I think is bad. It conditions people against politics. Jefferson, for instance, was a great and honest politician, and we can have more like him if we keep that ideal in mind and not expect our politicians to be crooked." | Retired professor, Chicago |

SATISFACTION WITH POLITICAL OFFICE HOLDERS

In spite of an attitude of distrust toward politicians in general, slightly over half the people are satisfied with the way local and state political office-holders are doing their jobs. One person in six, however, is not sure just what he thinks about local politicians.

This is the question NORC used to ascertain opinion on the issue:

"Are you satisfied with the way most people who hold political offices in this state are doing their jobs?"



If only persons with opinions on the subject are considered, the vote divides: "Yes" -- 68 per cent; "No" -- 32 per cent.

Differences among population groups are not great. However, persons in the lower educational and economic brackets and those in less skilled occupations tend to be somewhat more satisfied with the political regimes in their localities than are the more privileged groups. No significant party differences appear between 1940 Roosevelt and Willkie voters.

Sectionally, residents of the Midwest, Pacific, and Mountain states are somewhat better satisfied with their politicians than are Southerners, New Englanders, and persons living in the Middle Atlantic states. Residents of large metropolitan districts are least satisfied, small town dwellers most satisfied.

What People Say about Their LOCAL and STATE Politicians

Persons who are satisfied with the political office-holders in their locality tend to give rather non-committal comments. Some political office-holders among those interviewed defend themselves. For example, a county sheriff in northern Iowa remarks: "We all make mistakes, but we do try to do our best."

Those who are dissatisfied with politicians in their own states tend to make rather caustic criticisms. County officials in particular are termed dishonest and inefficient.

The following comments are typical of GENERAL DISSATISFACTION:

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| "They're out for all they can get." | Machinist, Scranton, Pennsylvania |
| "I think they work for the side that pays the most." | Farmer's wife, Louisburg, North Carolina |
| "They put too much stress on the next election instead of the term they're serving." | Railroad executive, Ogden, Utah |
| "Most politicians are neglecting their jobs and don't pay enough attention to their work." | Farmer, near Goshen, Indiana |

A number of respondents cite examples of individual and party graft in their own states. SPECIFIC CRITICISMS include the following:

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| "They make taxes entirely too high." | Farmer, near Belpre, Ohio |
| "They're partial to races." | Negro mortician, Alabama |
| "Whiskey and rotten politics control things here in our state." | Jeweler's wife, South Carolina |

What People Say about Their LOCAL and STATE Politicians (continued)

That the same group of politicians may not be held in the same regard by all their constituents is indicated by these three different comments from Baltimore:

"Satisfied. Under the conditions now they are doing the best they know how."
Wife of public utility employee

"Dissatisfied. Baltimore city at this time is in a worse mess than it has been for a long time."
Wife of policeman

"Undecided. I know so little about politics that I don't feel qualified to answer."
Negro woman teacher

This report is based on a nation-wide survey by the National Opinion Research Center. The cross-section consisted of a typical miniature of the population with the proper proportion, in each geographical section, of young and old, men and women, rich and poor, farm, town, and city dwellers, whites and Negroes. This survey included 2,560 personal interviews. Statistically these are sufficient to be within 3 per cent 997 times in 1,000.

PUBLICATIONS

The most recent publications of the National Opinion Research Center are:

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- F-1. Percentage of Citizens in Each State Voting in 1940 Presidential Election.
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- F-3. How Each State Voted in 4 Presidential Elections.
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