

Background

Two Field Institute reports issued earlier this year have shown that Californians' view of their own personal economic condition and the state's overall well-being had rebounded somewhat from lows earlier in this decade.

There are other important areas which also affect the public's sense of well-being and outlook on life. One is the degree of confidence people have in society's social, educational, business and governmental institutions. Previous research in this area has revealed that only a handful of society's institutions engender relatively high degrees of public confidence. A few are seen in a somewhat more positive than negative light. However, a large number, about one half of the institutions measured, are viewed more negatively than positively.

This issue of the *California Opinion Index* provides a current assessment of the public's confidence in thirty-four institutions and a comparison with previous measurements.

A representative cross-section of California adults was asked whether they had a lot of confidence, some confidence, or not much confidence in each of these various institutions. From the responses, a confidence index was computed based on the ratio of positive to negative opinions (i.e., for a given institution, the proportion of people reporting a lot of confidence vs. the proportion who report having not much confidence). A confidence index of 100, for example, indicates that there is an even balance of people with positive and negative views of that institution. A score of 200 indicates that the extent of positive impressions is double that of negative impressions, while a score of 50 indicates that negative impressions are twice that of positive impressions.

The Field Institute commenced this series of measures in 1973 and from time to time different institutions have been added to the list. The current measurements were made in August 1997. The chart on the right ranks the thirty-four institutions according to the confidence index scores achieved this year.

	Confidence Index	Degree of confidence in this institution		
		A lot %	Some %	Not much %
High technology companies	(750)	45	44	6
Research scientists	(500)	45	42	9
Local police departments	(325)	39	47	12
Universities and colleges	(308)	37	48	12
NASA, the U.S. space agency	(300)	42	41	14
The military	(269)	43	37	16
Hospitals	(229)	32	53	14
The medical profession	(200)	36	45	18
The U.S. Supreme Court	(200)	32	51	16
Gas and electric companies	(141)	31	46	22
The FBI	(123)	27	45	22
The Presidency	(112)	28	46	25
Consumer protection groups	(105)	20	58	19
Environmental protection groups	(100)	28	44	28
Food companies	(100)	19	59	19
Local government	(96)	22	54	23
Manufacturing companies	(94)	16	63	17
Organized religion and churches	(81)	25	39	31
Banks	(80)	20	52	25
The U.S. Congress	(68)	17	56	25
Newspapers	(57)	17	52	30
Judges and the courts	(55)	17	51	31
The CIA	(50)	15	40	30
Health maintenance organizations	(49)	19	38	39
Television and radio news	(48)	16	50	33
Labor unions	(46)	17	42	37
The public school system	(33)	14	42	43
Federal gov't regulatory agencies	(32)	11	51	34
State government	(29)	10	54	34
Gov't health and welfare agencies	(27)	12	40	45
Oil companies	(24)	10	40	42
Criminal justice system	(20)	11	32	56
The legal profession	(20)	9	44	45
Insurance companies	(16)	8	42	49

(In this and succeeding tables, differences between the sum of percentages and 100% for each item represent the proportion with no opinion.)

Much variance in current confidence levels in government institutions

The public's levels of confidence in thirteen different national, state and local government institutions vary greatly. Currently, the *local police department* (CI=325) rate highest in public esteem. This means that more than three times as many people say they have a lot of confidence in their local police department than say they have not much confidence.

Confidence levels are nearly as high for *NASA, the U.S. space agency* (CI=300). *The U.S. Supreme Court* (CI=200) has twice as many people having a lot of confidence as having not much confidence.

With *the FBI* (CI=123) and *the Presidency* (CI=112) a few more people have a lot of confidence than have not much confidence. For *local government* (CI=96) about as many people have a lot of confidence as have not much confidence.

In seven of the thirteen other government institutions rated more people say they have not much confidence in them than say they have a lot of confidence, resulting in confidence index scores of less than 100: *U.S. Congress* (68), *judges and the courts* (55), *the CIA* (50), *government health and welfare agencies* (27), *federal government regulatory agencies* (32), *state government* (29), and *the criminal justice system* (20).

The public appears to distinguish between the *local police department* and the much larger entity of the *criminal justice system*. The former has a CI of 325, sixteen times higher than the latter (CI=20).

Another seemingly anomalous comparison exists between the appraisal of the *U.S. Supreme Court* (CI=200) — a rating four times greater than that achieved by the country's vast multi-layered *judges and the courts* (CI=55).

Government institution	Confidence Index	Degree of public confidence in this institution		
		A lot	Some	Not much
Local police dept.	325	39%	47	12
NASA, the U.S. space agency	300	42%	41	14
U.S. Supreme Court	200	32%	51	16
The FBI	123	27%	45	22
The Presidency	112	28%	46	25
Local government	96	22%	54	23
The U.S. Congress	68	17%	56	25
Judges and the courts	55	17%	51	31
The CIA	50	15%	40	30
Federal government regulatory agencies	32	11%	51	34
State government	29	10%	54	34
Government health and welfare agencies	27	12%	40	45
Criminal justice system	20	11%	32	56

Trends in confidence levels in government institutions

Nine of the thirteen federal, state, and local government institutions included in the current survey were measured in previous surveys conducted by The Field Institute.

The current *local police department's* score (CI=325) is on a relative par with previously established norms, as is the *U.S. Supreme Court* (CI=200).

The FBI's (CI=123) is the lowest score that organization has achieved over the years.

The view that the public has of the office of *The Presidency* (CI= 112) as an institution is obviously and inextricably linked to the person holding the office. Thus, there has been a great deal of variance over the years in the confidence index scores accorded to it. It registered a low of 50 in 1976 when Gerald Ford was in office, then jumped to 370 during the first year of Jimmy Carter's presidency, but dropped to 90 during the second year of Carter's term. In 1981 when Ronald Reagan was President the confidence index score rebounded to 290.

Local government (CI=96) is about on the same level found in earlier surveys. *U.S. Congress* (CI=68) is somewhat lower than what was found in 1984 (CI=75) and much lower than its 1981 score (175).

The current relatively low appraisals of *judges and the courts* (CI=55), the *CIA* (CI=50), *federal government regulatory agencies* (CI=32) and *government health and welfare agencies* (CI=27) are not much different than previous findings.

Government institution	Confidence Index scores — Trend							
	1997	1984	1981	1978	1977	1976	1975	1973
Local police dept.	325	270	370	370	430	330	290	730
NASA, the U.S. space agency	300	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
The U.S. Supreme Court	200	170	220	200	140	120	170	150
The FBI	123	140	170	130	160	150	160	330
The Presidency	112	130	290	90	370	50	70	110
Local government	96	100	100	*	*	*	*	*
The U.S. Congress	68	75 ¹	175 ¹	*	*	*	*	*
Judges and the courts	55	40	60	30	*	*	*	*
The CIA	50	40	50	*	*	*	*	*
Federal government regulatory agencies	32	40	30	50	40	40	*	*
State government	29	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Gov't health and welfare agencies	27	20	20	30	*	*	*	*
Criminal justice system	20	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

¹ 1981 and 1984 indices are averages of separate scores found for the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives.

* Not measured

Confidence levels in corporate institutions

There is a huge gap between the confidence index scores of the first and last place types of corporate institutions among the eight measured. *High technology companies* (CI=750) receive an extremely high rating, while *insurance companies* (CI=16) are at the bottom of the list.

Gas and electric companies (CI=141) are rated more favorably than unfavorably. *Food companies* (CI=100) and *manufacturing companies* (CI=94) have about as many engendering a lot of confidence as not much confidence.

Banks (CI=80) follow. *Health maintenance organizations* (CI=49) are rated rather poorly, but *oil companies* (CI=24) are viewed even more poorly.

Corporate institution	Confidence Index	Degree of public confidence in this institution		
		A lot	Some	Not much
High technology companies	750	45%	44	6
Gas and electric companies	141	31%	46	22
Food companies	100	19%	59	19
Manufacturing companies	94	16%	63	17
Banks	80	20%	52	25
Health maintenance organizations (HMO's)	49	19%	38	39
Oil companies	24	10%	40	42
Insurance companies	16	8%	42	49

Trend in confidence levels in corporate institutions

High technology companies were first measured in 1984 achieving a relatively high confidence index score of 290. Now its score has zoomed to 750.

Gas and electric companies (CI=141) has risen from sub-par scores ranging well below 100 in the 1970's and 1980's. The same is true of *food companies*, whose previous scores were in the 40 to 60 range, but now is at 100. There is not much difference in the current score for *manufacturing companies* (CI=94) compared to previous years.

Banks' confidence index score (CI=80) is down from earlier measures, which at one time was as high as 280.

Oil companies and *insurance companies*, which have been rated very poorly compared to other institutions, continue to be negatively rated — currently receiving scores of 24 and 16 respectively.

Corporate institution	Confidence Index scores — Trend							
	1997	1984	1981	1978	1977	1976	1975	1973
High technology companies	750	290	*	*	*	*	*	*
Gas and electric companies	141	30	30	50	80	80	*	*
Food companies	100	50	40	40	60	40	30	30
Manufacturing companies	94	80	90	70	70	40	40	30
Banks	80	100	100	280	250	140	80	90
(HMOs) Health maintenance organizations	49	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Oil companies	24	10	10	*	*	*	*	*
Insurance companies	16	30	40	50	40	40	*	*

* Not measured

Professional and public interest groups

Research scientists, with a confidence index score of 500, clearly lead the field of professional and public interest groups. This score is achieved when 45% say they have a lot of confidence in this group while only a relatively small proportion (9%) maintain not much confidence.

While a sizeable proportion (43%) of the public also says it has a lot of confidence in *the military*, another 16% have not much confidence. This ratio produces a score of 269. Twice as many people say they have a lot of confidence in the *medical profession* than claim not much confidence (36% to 18%), resulting in a confidence index score of 200. Confidence appraisals of *consumer protection groups* (CI=105) and *environmental protection groups* (CI=100) are somewhat evenly balanced. Confidence index scores for *labor unions* (CI=46) and the *legal profession* (CI=20) are quite negative.

Professional or public interest group	Confidence Index	Degree of public confidence in this institution		
		A lot	Some	Not much
Research scientists	500	45%	42	9
The military	269	43%	37	16
The medical profession	200	36%	45	18
Consumer protection groups	105	20%	58	19
Environmental protection groups	100	28%	44	28
Labor unions	46	17%	42	37
The legal profession	20	9%	44	45

Professional or public interest groups — trend analysis

No large scale changes in confidence ratings or in their relative rankings are observed for the seven professional or public interest institutions. *Research scientists* (CI=500), while down from peaks found during the 1970's, have recorded extremely high confidence scores in all previous measures.

Confidence in *the military* (CI=269) has improved somewhat since 1981. The public's appraisal of the *medical profession* (CI=200) has not changed much over the years.

Scores for *consumer protection groups* (CI=105) have drifted downward during the past twenty years or so.

The rating for *environmental protection groups* — now at CI=100 — is not a great deal different than what was achieved in previous years. *Labor unions'* low score (CI=46) is only slightly better than was found in previous surveys. *The legal profession* has always been given low scores and now its rating (CI=20) is the lowest it has ever received.

Professional or public interest group	Confidence Index scores — Trend							
	1997	1984	1981	1978	1977	1976	1975	1973
Research scientists	500	410	590	430	630	650	1080	1160
The military	269	220	180	*	*	*	*	*
The medical profession	200	190	210	160	190	220	180	330
Consumer protection groups	105	120	170	190	180	180	160	260
Environmental protection groups	100	80	70	110	100	90	120	180
Labor unions	46	20	30	30	30	20	40	40
The legal profession	20	40	50	60	70	60	70	*

Universities and colleges rate high in public confidence. Public schools rate low.

Six other institutions were listed in the current and previous surveys. Scoring highest in public confidence in this group are *universities and colleges* (CI= 308). This contrasts sharply with the rather low score given *the public school system* (CI=33). *Hospitals* (CI=229) have more than twice as many people saying they had a lot of confidence in them as have not much confidence.

Three other public institutions all have confidence index scores of less than 100: *organized religion and churches* (CI=81); *newspapers* (CI=57); *television and radio news* (CI=48).

Other public institutions	Confidence Index	Degree of public confidence in this institution		
		A lot	Some	Not much
Universities and colleges	308	37%	48	12
Hospitals	229	32%	53	14
Organized religion and churches	81	25%	39	31
Newspapers	57	17%	52	30
Television and radio news	48	16%	50	33
The public school system	33	14%	42	43

Other public institutions — score trend

The level of confidence in *universities and colleges* (CI=308) had climbed steadily in earlier years but has dropped off currently. Confidence in *hospitals* (CI=229) is up from previous years, but the public's confidence in *organized religion and churches* is down somewhat (CI=81). Scores for *newspapers* (CI=57) and *television and radio news* (CI=48) are also down from previous levels. The public's rating of the *public school system* (CI=33) is not much different than the relatively low scores found previously.

Other public institutions	Confidence Index scores — Trend							
	1997	1984	1981	1978	1977	1976	1975	1973
Universities and colleges	308	420	350	320	250	150	120	230
Hospitals	229	180	190	*	*	*	*	*
Organized religion and churches	81	90	100	110	160	160	100	90
Newspapers*	57	60	70	100	90	100	120	150
Television and radio news*	48	80	120	100	90	100	120	150
The public school system	33	40	30	50	40	50	40	90

* Between 1973 and 1978, these categories were combined under the more general designation, "the news media."

About the Survey

The results in this report are based on a survey conducted August 14-24, 1997, among a representative statewide sample of 1007 Californians. The survey was completed by telephone in either English or Spanish using random digit dialing methods.

In order to cover a large number of institutions and still minimize possible respondent fatigue the overall sample was divided into two approximately equal sized subsamples of approximately 500 adults with each subsample questionnaire listing one-half of the total number of institutions measured. According to statistical theory, 95% of the time results from each subsample would have a sampling, error of +/-4.5 percentage points. Previous findings come from other statewide surveys conducted in a comparable manner.